

## “QUI VAL DI FIASTRA”: A TERRITORY EDUCATION PROJECT WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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### Abstract

In accordance with the national trend, Le Marche region is facing a depopulation of the so-called "inland areas" that are characterised by lack of services, poor job and education offer, and other difficulties caused by earthquakes hitting the region regularly. Thanks to the bustle already in place in the last few years, a project called "Qui Val di Fiastra" is being implemented with the long-term aim to reverse the tendency towards the abandonment of small villages. The project concerns the activation of processes of shared participation between local communities to raise awareness regarding sustainability issues. Moreover, the project involves the organisation of local administrations and educational institutions in the four municipalities included. The present study encompasses an exploratory investigation that aims to apprehend if and how the territory's understanding can be improved from both a quantitative and qualitative point of view, through the experiential comprehension of the material and non-material environment. All students attending a lower secondary school and of the third and fifth grades of a primary school were involved and invited to answer to a questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the project, after 6 months. They responded to a questionnaire of 6 open-ended questions in which they were asked to indicate three places that deserve to be visited for the built heritage, the natural heritage, the knowledge heritage and traditions. They were also asked to indicate the best aspect of the landscape surrounding their city and what to do or to say to convince someone to visit it. Content analysis was performed for each question. Results show a fairly significant increase in the number of answers to the questions. Regarding the built heritage, there was an increase from 70.28% to 76.80%; the natural heritage went from 35.43% to 55.80%; the knowledge heritage and traditions rose from 44.57% to 57.46% and finally, the one related to the panorama ascended from 42.86% to 67.96%. Before and after every activity in the area, in addition to questionnaires, other surveys were carried out using various tools to give the opportunity to acquire further details adopting different kinds of languages. The data collected improved the responses, mainly from a qualitative point of view as revealed during the class discussions, the greater details showed in the drawings and descriptions, the acquisition of technical and new terms. A clear consolidation of knowledge is appreciable.

**Keywords:** *Inland areas, environmental education, territory education project, adolescents, children.*

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, in Italy, political and academic debate has returned to the so-called "inland areas" that, due to an acceleration of depopulation and impoverishment of local businesses, due to long-term dynamics intertwined with more recent phenomena, find themselves in a situation of abandonment and marginality (Paternariato, 2014; Dezio, et al, 2021; Giacomelli & Calcagni, 2022). For this reason, the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) was promoted in 2012 in order to identify the areas that are characterised by a strong long-term demographic decline and by their physical distance from the main "Poles" or "Intermunicipal Poles", which are those areas or groups of areas that possess within them at least one high school and at least one among technical and professional institutes, at least one hospital providing comprehensive patient care and at least one railway station with direct connections and long-distance routes (Paternariato, 2014; Istat 2020).

In line with the national trend, depopulation of the "inland areas" is also occurring in Le Marche region: those who live in these areas, in addition to having fewer opportunities in terms of education, work and health services, have to deal with the difficulties caused by the seismic events that periodically strike the region. These areas therefore suffer a significant gap compared to the "Poles", which Le Marche are mostly concentrated in the coast (Istat 2020), In order to reduce this gap and fight against the widespread uprooting that globalisation has brought and to give back centrality to the places of the inland areas, in the municipalities of the upper Macerata in 2020, Borgofuturo+ (Giacomelli & Calcagni, 2022), a participatory

process aimed at territorial valorisation through socio-cultural regeneration, will be launched in the provincial territory belonging to the "Val Di Fiastra" area. Inspired by the concepts and guidelines of the European Landscape Convention (2000) and the Faro Convention (2005), Borgofuturo+ relies on the involvement of communities in the co-creation of a strategic imaginary, which is then translated into a local project of territorial and socio-ecological inspiration. Borgofuturo+, through territorial tables characterised by a multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral approach initiated a process of shared participation among the area's communities and raising awareness on sustainability and quality of life issues in a participatory manner.

From the ferment arose by Borgofuturo+, the "Qui Val di Fiastra" social and cultural regeneration project was taking shape. Its long-term objective is to counter the dynamics of abandonment of historical centres, increase social and cultural participation, while activating the socio-economic fabric of the valley.

## 2. Design

The 'Qui Val di Fiastra' project has the municipalities of Colmurano, Loro Piceno and Ripe San Ginesio as implementing bodies, with Ripe San Ginesio as lead partner, and is coordinated by 'Inabita, Laboratorio territoriale', together with the Department of Humanistic Studies of the University of Macerata, as scientific-cultural partner, the Istituti comprensivi and 'Legambiente Marche'. The municipality of Urbisaglia, on the border of the area of interest, is also involved in some of the activities.

In order to counter the widespread sense of uprooting that also seems to characterise the inhabitants of the Val di Fiastra, territorial education paths have been created, dedicated to the youngest generations, which take into account the resources of the place in which they are to be developed and aim at active community participation, the recovery of traditions, values and knowledge, and the collective recognition of material and immaterial heritage (Giorda & Puttilli, 2011). The youngest inhabitants of the area are at the centre of the project. For this reason, all schools of all levels in the municipalities of Colmurano, Loro Piceno, Ripe San Ginesio and Urbisaglia have been involved: from the last year of kindergarten to the third grade of secondary school.

Bearing in mind that outdoor education has positive effects on children's moods, enhances their concentration (Crudeli, 2021) and allows one to take care of children's quality of life without being overwhelmed by the learnification that manifests itself in the habit of referring to students, pupils, children, and adults as "learners" (Biesta, 2020), leading to the marginalisation of the educational aspects of teaching. (Di Pietro, 2022), a project was developed as follows. In these outings, villages, rivers and parks, businesses, workshops and everything related to the culture and tradition of the area have been transformed into open-air classrooms in which to create pre-texts to foster the acquisition of new skills and knowledge related to the territory, understood both as a spatial order and as a dimension of meaning, a network of symbols and values. For each school year, a theme was identified as the leitmotif of the field trips. Water has been the theme for the 2023/2024 school year, so the focus of the organised visits have been the places that have something to do with this element: the Ripe San Ginesio springs, the Colmurano springs, the Urbisaglia purification plant, the former watermill at Passo San Ginesio and the Fiastra river that runs through the valley. In order to develop a shared path of coexistence, growth, and valorisation of human and environmental resources, all members of the educating community were involved in the organisation of each outing: teachers, managers, administrators, experts, and people from the valley who made their time and skills available (Del Bene & al., 2021). They also made their contribution during the outdoor experiences.

## 3. Objectives

The aim of this study is to understand whether and how knowledge of the territory can be improved both quantitatively and qualitatively through an experiential understanding of the material and immaterial environment in which they live. A long term objective is to create a link with their everyday contexts and developing an attitude of care towards the living space made up of nature and relational, cultural, value and physical artefacts.

## 4. Method

Thanks to constant consultation between all the parties involved in the 2023/2024 school years, four outings lasting one and a half hours were organised for nursery, kindergarten and primary school children. Two hours visits were organized for secondary school pupils. In each of the visits, workshops and outdoor lessons were organised by experts and those from the valley community who made themselves available to tell the story and traditions of the area. In order to design the most suitable teaching and training

intervention and to foster learning processes, it is important to start from what students already know. To this end, activities have been planned to understand what knowledge is already available. This step is necessary in order to deal with new topics, to adapt them and gradually transform them into knowledge shared by the community and scientifically validated (Nicolini, 2012).

Each proposal was accompanied by a collection of data aimed both at monitoring the process of knowledge development and at understanding how this relates to the learner's body of knowledge.

The theoretical assumptions on which the planned activities are based are:

- the recognition of the more or less organised wealth of information prior to each event
- the use of tools for the detection of naive theories
- the use of scientific methodology
- group discussion for the co-construction of knowledge

For the detection of the knowledge already possessed by the pupils, keeping in mind H. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983), various tools were used to enable different languages to be adopted: drawings, concept maps, storytelling, sense-motor games, questionnaires, group discussions, dramatisation, musical performances. The method of ecological observation was also used, with situational data collection and the proposal of real situations, following a learning by doing approach (Dewey, 1938).

#### **4.1. Measures and analyses**

The data collected in the third and fifth classes of the primary school of Colmurano, Loro Piceno and Ripe San Ginesio, and the first, second and third classes of the secondary school of Loro Piceno and Urbisaglia will be presented. An open-ended questionnaire was proposed and administered to the children to find out what they knew about their place of origin. They were asked to indicate three places that are worth visiting regarding the built heritage, the natural heritage, and the heritage of knowledge and traditions. They were also asked to name three elements of the landscape around their city that strike them the most and what they would do or say to convince a person to visit it. The first questionnaire (t0) was administered at the beginning of the school year, before any activities were carried out. The second questionnaire (t1) was administered at the end of the project, after the last activity had been completed. The aim was to find out if and how all the activities carried out were helpful in promoting knowledge about the place where the children live. Further data collection was carried out before and after the third field visit with all participating pupils. In addition, before and after the fourth field visit, children in grades three, four and five of primary school and all classes of secondary school were involved in the data collection.

### **5. The activities**

The first outing was in October to the springs of Ripe San Ginesio. It consists in a tour guided by Legambiente Marche experts and some local inhabitants. Stopping at the most significant places, their characteristics were described and their story told, enriched by anecdotes and legends. The route to the springs, immersed in nature, provided an opportunity to have a sensory experience and talk about the typical fauna and flora of the area.

The second tour in November consists of a walk from the village to the Colmurano springs. In addition to the guided tour of the village, there was a workshop on the red apple, a typical local product, organised by the 'Le Paccucce' association. At the 'Allungo spring', some of the locals, after having shown the 'Madonna della Fonte', recounted their experiences of going to the spring to fetch water and showed how they washed their clothes. Following this, artist Mario Migliorelli held a landscape painting workshop.

In March the tour was to the Giansanti mill in Passo San Ginesio for the children from nursery to fourth grade of primary school, and Urbisaglia purification plant for the fifth grade of primary school and the first grade of secondary school. At the mill, after a brief moment of guided meditation with the sound of flowing river water in the background and playful-theatre activities preparatory to the visit, held by an expert, the owners demonstrated the operation of the mill. At the purification plant, the visit was guided by the manager who described and showed what steps the water has to go through to be purified. Afterwards, experts from Legambiente held a workshop on the topic of conscious consumption and water pollution.

The fourth outing was in to the Fiastra river. The children, from nursery to second primary class, took a sensorial walk into the river, guided by experts from 'La Meridiana' association and a workshop held by the photographer Marco Gatta. The students, from the third primary class to the third secondary class, cleaned up the river: with the support of Legambiente experts, they separated and catalogued the waste, then handed it over to COSMARI, the waste management service of the province of Macerata.

At the end of the activities, before returning to school, there were moments of discussions and reflection where students, teachers and experts could share thoughts and emotions: a very important step in order to have the opportunity to gather information to reshape the experience and improve the knowledge.

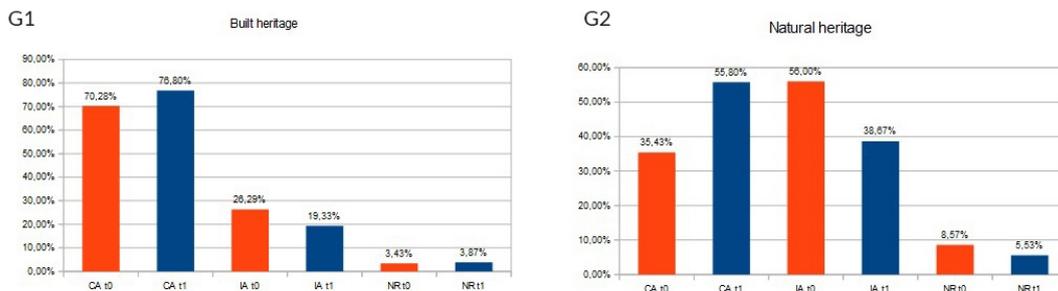
## 6. Results

The questionnaires were administered in class during the school time, which is why the numbers of children between t0 and t1 are different, as there were absentees in both sessions. The intended sample size was 200 students of which 69 were primary school students and 131 secondary school students. The t0 questionnaire was completed by 175 students (m: 85, f: 90) 64 of which from the primary schools and 111 from the secondary school. Questionnaire t1 was completed by 181 students (m: 90, f: 91) of whom 63 from the primary schools and 118 from the secondary school. To enable a comparison between t0 and t1, the numbers were considered in percentages.

In a first analysis, the change in the number of complete responses (CA), incomplete responses (IC) and no responses (NR) between the first and second questionnaire was counted. The answer is complete when three places/elements have been indicated, as required; the answer is incomplete when only one or two have been indicated. No place/element indicated is considered a non-response. Adopting a descriptive statistical analysis, there was an increase in the number of answers. As is evident in the following graphs, there was a 6.52% increase in complete answers in the question on built heritage (G1): from 70.28% to 76.80%. Consequently, incomplete answers decreased by 6.96%, from 26.29% to 19.33%. Non-response had a very slight increase of 0.44%: from 3.43% to 3.87%.

Compared to the question on natural heritage (G2), complete answers had an even greater increase: 20.37%, from 35.43% to 55.80%. Both incomplete responses and non-responses decreased by 17.33%, from 56% to 38.67%, and 3.04%, from 8.57% to 5.53%, respectively.

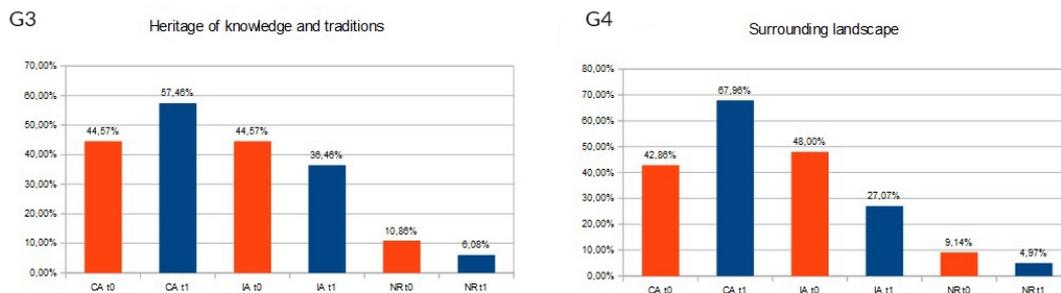
Figure 1.



In the question on the heritage of culture and traditions (G3), there was a 12.89% increase in complete answers: from 44.57% to 57.46%. Incomplete answers went from 44.57% to 36.46%, showing a decrease of 8.11%, while non-answers decreased by 4.78% from 10.86% to 6.08%.

Finally, in the answers to the question asking which elements of the surrounding landscape (G4) strike one most, there was a 25.1% increase in complete answers: from 42.86% to 67.96%. Incomplete answers went from 48% to 27.07%, a decrease of 20.93%. Non-responses went from 9.14% to 4.97%: a decrease of 4.17%.

Figure 2.



## 7. Discussions

From this data, it seems to emerge how effective outdoor lessons are for learning and how important it is to experience the area in order to get to know it. This is also confirmed by the interviews conducted with the children and adolescents during the field visits and in the classroom meetings. Learning about the history and functions of the Leonina Tower of Ripe San Ginesio inside the tower itself, from an expert, made the experience meaningful and favoured learning. The same thing happened at the “Fonti Allungo” in Colmurano, where members of the town’s community made themselves available to tell the story of how the place was once used for washing clothes. The story and, above all, the representation of how soap was made, how one arrived at the springs with a basket on one’s head full of clothes and what the stages of washing were probably moved those present to the point of making the experience unforgettable.

A few months later, when asked to recall what had remained most impressed from that outing, most recalled this very moment. The pre and post surveys show change both quantitatively and qualitatively with a progression in knowledge construction. Indeed, the experts' intervention enabled the students to better define their knowledge and learn a number of specific, technical and new terms. For example, before the third outing, the children of the first three primary classes were asked to draw a mill, imagining it, since hardly anyone had ever seen it. After the visit, the same request was made. From the analysis of the drawings, it was interesting to see how the children were able to use this tool to rethink and re-elaborate the experience: most of the drawings made before the visit simply showed a house with a wheel, located near a river; in the second drawing, the interior of the mill is shown, with machinery, grain and flour. The wheel disappeared, and this outcome is because the children learned that the mill no longer runs on water but on electricity.

## 8. Conclusion

Analyses of the data collected show how the activities carried out outside school were effective in improving knowledge of the area. But that's not all, the classroom interviews, carried out after the outings, also showed how a change in the children's and adolescents' outlook towards the places they belonged to is taking place: the experience at the river, in particular, first shocked them, no one imagined there could be so much waste. Then it aroused in them the desire to take care of it, creating the conditions to foster attachment. Very important was the involvement of the entire educating community, from associations to local residents, from teachers to the members of the municipal administrations involved, both in the planning phase and in the field: thanks to their expertise and enthusiasm, they were able to give valuable indications for the planning and, above all, they were able to enthuse children and adolescents, encouraging learning. In conclusion, it can be said that, although the project is still in its initial stages, it seems that all the interventions implemented so far with the involvement of the entire educating community are creating good conditions for improving a knowledge of the area that is also functional in fostering attachment to it and the desire to remain there, taking care of it.

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