

Agricultural education and Italian primary school teachers: the Romagna in the late nineteenth century

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This article examines the dissemination of agricultural education in primary schools in the Romagna, an important rural area in post-unification Italy. The topic is explored within a wider perspective, analysing the impact of institutional changes – at both the national and local levels – on the transmission of agricultural knowledge in primary education during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Two particular elements of the process are examined: students, as the intended beneficiaries of the educational process; and teachers, who as well as having a key role in reducing the extent of illiteracy were sometimes also involved in disseminating agricultural knowledge. The transfer of that knowledge appears to have been a very challenging task, not least because of the scant interest that Italy's ruling class showed towards this issue. However, increasing importance seems to have been given to agricultural education in primary schools during the economic crisis of the 1880s, when the expansion of this provision was thought to be among the factors that might help to prepare the ground for the hoped-for 'agricultural revolution'.

Keywords: agricultural education; literacy; post-unification Italy; primary schools; teachers.

Agricultural education and illiteracy in post-unification Italy

Within the broader picture of the history of education during Italy's Liberal era, the theme of agricultural education has been given a certain amount of attention at the secondary and university level (Bevilacqua 1989; Zaninelli 1990; Biagioli and Pazzagli 2004; Pazzagli 2008) but at the primary level does not yet seem to have been adequately explored. The relative neglect of this topic in the historiography relates to a range of factors, starting with the meagre interest that the Liberal ruling classes showed, at least until the late 1870s, in what they saw as a peripheral aspect of primary education.¹ This attitude had a negative impact on both the nature and quantity of the documentation, which was very unsystematic and fragmented, and therefore, indirectly, on consideration of the topic by historians (Soldani 2001). In addition, the theme of agricultural education in primary schools has proved more attractive to historians of educational science than to scholars in the history of agriculture, and in consequence has remained largely separate from the various other studies in this field.

To properly understand the sphere of agricultural education in primary schools, we need to examine all the interactive elements that contributed to the educational process, including not

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only its end users – pupils in primary schools – but also its suppliers: primary school teachers.² The system that was intended to give primary school pupils agricultural knowledge principally consisted of three closely connected educational strata: in the first, agricultural education would be delivered by the regular teaching staff in teacher training institutions to their students; in the second, classes in agriculture, generally arranged by other bodies, would be given by lecturers or experts to teachers already in post; and the third involved the teaching given by some primary school teachers to their pupils.

Within these arrangements, the primary school teacher seems to have been a key figure meriting investment if agricultural education was to be developed. During the first 20 years after Italy's unification, however, the country's ruling classes appear not to have been sufficiently interested in investing in primary education (Pruneri 2019a). The basic legal arrangements for Italian state education during the Liberal era had been established by the 'Casati Law'.³ Paolo Russo, amongst others, has drawn attention to its priorities:

In reality, the law ... was somewhat peripherally concerned with primary education and the training of its teachers, which should instead have been the fundamental strategic focus at its heart. It is not unreasonable ... to argue that the Casati Law seems only to have included primary education in its considerations out of a need for completeness, given that it was presented as comprehensive legislation for the entire educational system of the nascent nation, but the real interests of the law were reserved for university education, for secondary education in the classical and humanistic mould, and for administrative arrangements of a centralising and bureaucratic type: in short, in setting out an educational system of the state and for the state. (Russo 1996, 42)

This emphasis appears to have been partially at odds with Casati's supposed intention to widen the spread of a popular education system that could combat the plague of illiteracy (De Fort 1995, 1996); this objective included provision for the improvement of primary education in the countryside, given that the 'rural' school clearly seemed to be the most appropriate focus for the attempt to make the peasant classes literate.⁴

Illiteracy constituted a formidable obstacle to the dissemination of agricultural education. Even some shrewd commentators of the period highlighted the importance of basic education as an essential requirement for the spread of agricultural knowhow (Fanti 1883). A major limiting factor in this regard was the quality of primary school teaching, which was in turn affected by the levels of teacher remuneration.

In the context of the complex picture of national policies on primary education that were pursued in the second half of the nineteenth century (Scotto di Luzio 2007), and the parallel process of the struggle to disseminate agricultural expertise (Landi 1990), the issue of conveying principles of agriculture to primary school pupils in fact long remained a matter of minimal interest to Italy's ruling classes (Banti 2004). At the start of the 1880s, however, economic, social and political changes provided the conditions for fostering agricultural awareness in primary schools, although this phase only lasted for the length of the decade: it opened with the crisis in agriculture and coincided with the spread in Italy of a positivist approach to education, whose success had major implications for the way that the discipline was organised; it then came to an end with a gradual change in the cultural climate and legislative reforms that steered primary schooling towards a less experimental period.⁵

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, partly as a consequence of the ineffectual attempt by the Coppino reform to bolster primary education by raising the duration of compulsory schooling to three years and introducing penalties for non-attendance, the policies of the Ministry for Public Education were influenced by a positivist 'educational revolution' (Meda 2019) that had been spreading at the European level.⁶ In this new approach, the methods of induction and

experimentation employed in the fields of physical and natural sciences were extended to the sphere of social sciences. This provided the inspiration for the reform of the *scuole normali* – the training institutes for schoolteachers – presented in 1880 by Francesco De Sanctis, the minister at the time: the observation of pupils' responses was to be made central to the teaching of educational science, while practical training was to be allotted more importance (De Fort 1996, 146–147).

In reality, the main obstacles to the delivery of agricultural teaching to the rural classes were the dramatic delay in the acquisition of literacy by the peasant masses and the inadequacy of state funding. In this context, it was argued that effective action by primary school teachers could make an important contribution to the transmission of the basic ideas of agricultural science to the next generation of farmers. Nicola Miraglia, the Director of Agriculture within the Ministry for Agriculture, Industry and Commerce (MAIC), voiced this view in a speech to the eleventh Italian Pedagogical Congress in Rome in 1880, in which he described this key element of the much-discussed process of disseminating agricultural knowledge in Italy:

Agricultural teaching in primary schools must above all be directed at informing the young person that the occupation that awaits him, and to which he will apply himself later, is not exclusively governed by practices and traditions that cannot rightly be changed, but has laws and principles; that agriculture is not the exclusive concern of those who work the land but has involved, alongside the class of manual labourers, those who study, experiment, and explore every avenue in the quest to discover ways of decreasing the efforts and trials of these same labourers and rendering the land more productive; that it is not only wrong to not learn the basic principles of this science, but it causes material harm, the outcome of the ignorance and stubbornness of those who look only to the past. (Miraglia 1880, xxx–xxx)

Agricultural teaching and teachers in the Romagna

By the time that Miraglia was expressing these important considerations, the idea of inserting agricultural principles in primary school teaching programmes had already found its partial realisation in various areas of Italy. This can be deduced, for example, from the reported increase in the number of 'schools' in which this teaching was delivered, which rose to 979 in the school year of 1880–1 from 474 in the previous year (see Table 1).⁷

Emilia-Romagna made an important contribution to the numerical increase in these 'schools': in one school year, 1880–1, they jumped from 16 in the region to 58. Within Emilia-Romagna, the province of Forlì (which at that point included the Forlì, Cesena and Rimini districts) had the highest number of classrooms in which agricultural teaching was delivered, although it was overtaken by the province of Modena the following year. Forlì's brief supremacy seems to somewhat contradict the figures relating to trends in illiteracy at the provincial level. From Italian unification right up until 1901, this province continued to have the highest illiteracy rate in the region: in 1861 it was recorded as 86.8%, as against a regional average of 81.2% and a national average of 78.8%; 40 years later, the figure had fallen to 59.0%, but the regional and national averages were now 46.3% and 48.5% respectively (Bergonzini 1966). This enduring negative primacy can be related to the unfavourable inter-relationship between institutional factors, economic conditions and physical geography that made the province a special case within northern Italy (Preti 1993; Fornasari 2014). A significant part was played by the limited number of municipalities in which the compulsory nature of primary education could be effectively enforced thanks to an adequate supply of teachers, a problem that was especially acute in the extensive Apennine area. Of similar importance was the number of children who could legally be excused from compulsory schooling because they lived in isolated houses more than two kilometres from a school: a fifth of the Romagna's school-

Table 1. Distribution of ‘schools’ delivering agricultural teaching at primary school level: numbers by Italian region or regional area, highlighting provinces in each region with the highest number, 1879–80 and 1880–1.

Region/regional area	Schools (no.)		Province with highest no.			
	1879–80	1880–1	1879–80		1880–1	
Piedmont	44	56	Cuneo	40	Cuneo	36
Lombardy	115	185	Milan	40	Milan	71
Veneto	77	209	Verona	56	Verona	86
Liguria	21	21	Genoa	11	Genoa	11
Emilia	16	58	Forlì	9	Modena	25
Marche and Umbria	4	28	Pesaro	4	Ancona	12
Tuscany	38	124	Pisa	22	Florence	65
Lazio	1	1	n.d.	-	n.d.	-
Adriatic Southern Region	11	29	Aquila	4	Foggia	14
Mediterranean Southern Region	132	172	Caserta	80	Caserta	68
Sicily	4	69	Siracusa	2	Caltanissetta	36
Sardinia	21	27	Cagliari	15	Sassari	15
Total	484	979				

Source: MAIC, *Annali di agricoltura, 1881* (1882, 73–74, selected data)

age population could not in fact gain access to compulsory primary education because they simply lived too far away. Non-attendance for compulsory schooling was also linked to important economic factors relating to the organisation of employment, which varied between urban and rural settings. In towns and cities, school-age children were pushed towards choosing a trade; in the countryside, the school attendance of peasant children meant that the family lost a supplementary source of income from their deployment in the fields (Pivato 1982; Carboni, Fornasari and Mazzotti 2018, 56–60).

The spread of educational positivism led to the formulation of new guidelines; these were absorbed by the primary school teachers in the performance of their routine teaching activity (De Fort 1995, 113–197) and indirectly influenced agricultural education, which was seen as an important area for testing the validity of inductive and experimental methods.

The teaching of agricultural science enabled young people to grasp the rudiments of agronomy, and could at the same time counter the traditional prejudices and age-old beliefs that were widely held within their families. It is therefore hardly surprising that teachers were regarded with mistrust by the heads of rural families; on the one hand, they seemed to be undermining their authority in the children’s orientation towards work in the fields, and, on the other, they were putting forward ‘scientific’ agricultural practices that challenged the customs that had emerged from experience and had been handed down over generations (Gregorini 2004; Fumi 2015; Ferrari, Fumi and Morandi 2016). Over time, this mistrust was overcome, at least in part, by action taken by the *comizi agrari* (local agricultural boards), which managed to create opportunities for the dissemination of agricultural knowhow using practical demonstrations, conferences, training courses and

shows, albeit with variable success.⁸ Moreover, from the early 1880s onwards, the professional image of the primary school teacher, from being of scant or modest social importance, became more 'magisterial'. This improvement in the teachers' reputation, social standing and sense of their own class identity was not without its setbacks: on the eve of the twentieth century, a national enquiry found that only one primary school teacher in three could provide evidence that they had been properly trained, and that it was rare for the best teachers to pursue their profession in rural schools (Chiosso 2007).

Development of the *scuole normali* in the Liberal era has been the object of some substantial research (Covato 1994). The Scialoja enquiry of 1872 into male and female secondary education had made it clear that a new approach was needed to these institutes and the delivery of teacher training (Montevecchi and Raicich 1995): there was a need to challenge the notion that this sector had a less important role than either the *licei* (grammar schools) or the institutes for technical education. The perception had prevailed that primary school teacher training was a sort of post-primary course that often served as 'a repository for students who were abandoning their studies in other types of school and taking refuge in the *scuola normale* as a makeshift solution' (Chiosso 2007, 91). Recognition of the need for reform was complemented by an increase in the number of *scuole normali* in the early 1880s, boosted by the Coppino law's introduction of compulsory school attendance at the lower level of primary education. This legislation reflected the commitment of the Sinistra storica, the new left-wing governing coalition, to strengthening the population's basic education, and was one of the distinctive features of its political programme (Sorge 1994).

The increased provision of agricultural education in primary schools had its place within a larger process of public investment in agricultural training at several levels; this had started to take shape right at the start of the 1880s, stimulated not least by the effects of the crisis in agriculture (Cafaro 1993; Fumian 1996).⁹ The investment was subsequently directed towards benefitting the many young people who had left primary school, in particular by means of the proliferation of '*scuole pratiche e speciali di agricoltura*' (practical schools and specialist schools in agriculture), and to the progressive detriment of the primary schools themselves.¹⁰

Progress in primary education and teacher training was, however, only one of the conditions necessary for the dissemination of agricultural knowledge in primary school classes. For this to be adequate, the teachers themselves also needed to acquire a modest understanding of some essential agricultural principles, and the legislation on education needed to make the teaching of these principles compulsory. In this regard, an earlier provision, based on a formal agreement between the MAIC and the Ministry for Public Education (Bidolli 2001, 82), had been adopted in 1868. This had envisaged the potential inclusion of agricultural issues in the programmes of the *scuole normali*, but had proved ineffective because of the haphazard manner of its implementation.

The optional nature of the teaching of agronomy, the main obstacle to the realisation of agricultural awareness in the *scuole normali*, was finally overcome by the reforms undertaken in 1880 by De Sanctis, the minister, which made it compulsory in the *scuole normali* for young men, and by the introduction in 1886 of instruction in horticulture and silkworm breeding in the *scuole normali* for young women. Moreover, the complex issues raised by the educational and organisational aspects of teaching agriculture at these institutes had led Tito Pasqui, then lecturer in Agronomy at the *scuola normale* in Forlì and later head of the Agriculture Department in the MAIC, towards some important reflections:

Dismissing the lofty language of science and leaving aside the formulas of chemistry and mathematics, we must teach the students in the *scuole normali*, in an easy and clear manner, the principles for growing, in particular, those plants typically offered by the agricultural flora of their region. They must also

be taught what are the most urgent needs of Italy's rural economy, and what are the most suitable and economical foodstuffs, machinery and implements for our countryside. Nor should summary concepts of stock raising, silkworm farming and winemaking be omitted.¹¹

In a report on the teaching of agronomy at Forlì's *scuola normale* for young men in the 1882–3 school year, it was emphasised that the programme drawn up should not and could not 'be fashioned on one single model': room to manoeuvre was therefore left to individual lecturers, who were supposed to prepare courses tailored to their specific geographical location, thus hopefully avoiding complaints about any disconnection between the teaching topics and the agricultural environment of that particular territory. Bartolomeo Moreschi, a lecturer at the city's Royal Technical Institute, followed a particular programme based, for Year 1, on botany, weather and climate conditions, and geographical and soil conditions; for Year 2, on man's role in crop cultivation; and for Year 3, on specialised crops and secondary agricultural production, animal husbandry, and the rural economy and farm accounting.¹²

On all the courses in Forlì, the nature of the teaching was practical: students looked at examples of living and dried plants, analysing their structure by directly examining fresh samples. Classroom teaching was complemented by frequent trips outside, for the purposes of 'instructional plant collection'. In addition, they used the equipment and specimens in the well-stocked Agricultural Laboratory at the Royal Technical Institute. The theoretical and practical teaching approach envisaged instruction in the main agricultural practices, especially for students in their final year: these included the use of farming implements, pruning, grafting and silkworm breeding. Much of this training took place outside classroom hours, taking up the time allocated for recreation and rest, and relied on the students' voluntary involvement. The classes in silkworm care, for example, had both a theoretical element, delivered in the classroom, and an element involving practical application, which took place in the early morning and early evening in the silkworm nursery owned by the teacher.

The teaching model applied to the *scuole normali*, for both men and women, was accompanied by training courses particularly intended for primary school teachers already in post. Conferences and seminars led by experts allowed them to acquire formal accreditation in the teaching of principles of agriculture. The state, and primarily the MAIC, provided funding for these initiatives and subsidised the prizes awarded to teachers who passed the final exams. At the local level, the sponsors of these initiatives were very often the *comizi agrari*, which had long been encouraged to invest in teacher development. In the Forlì area, this encouragement bore fruit during the 1880s when they promoted a series of conferences on a range of agricultural themes.¹³ Courses in agricultural chemistry, given mainly by Alessandro Pasqualini, the director of Forlì's *stazione agraria* (agricultural research centre), president of the local *comizio agrario* and a chemistry lecturer at Forlì's Royal Technical Institute, were an integral part of this training programme, which made the teaching of chemistry a preparation for the teaching of agronomy. Pasqualini recalled their impact:

The first classes given in Agricultural Chemistry, aimed at disseminating agricultural knowledge, first among rural primary school teachers and then, from them, among country people, had good outcomes. If the *Comizio* continues along this path, it will soon see those principles, and that understanding of the laws of many natural phenomena, spread amongst the farmers, including those without any education; until now, for them, these principles have been wreathed in mystery, or accompanied by prejudices. (Comizio agrario di Forlì 1881, 24–26)

Some *comizi*, such as those of Cesena and Forlì, established special prizes, with financial support from the Ministry and the province, to reward teachers who had demonstrated their proficiency in conveying the thinking on agronomy (Comizio agrario di Forlì 1886, 122–123).¹⁴ Suitable

commissions were also established to inspect and check the schools where the teachers who took part in the competition worked; these often consisted of a ministry official and a local expert (normally the director of the *comizio agrario*), and were charged with assessing the level of the pupils' learning using an exam based on the programme undertaken during the year (Comizio agrario di Forlì 1894, 124).

In the 1883–4 school year, agricultural teaching was only delivered in five 'schools' in the Cesena area, to 79 pupils in total. The commission responsible for monitoring drew up a ranking list of the classes that had proved to be the most receptive in regard to this field, and also ranked the different teachers based on their teaching skills: the ability to involve pupils and convey information was a key factor in the process of disseminating agricultural knowledge to primary school children. One among them, Arturo Lunedei at the school in Gambettola, a small municipality near Forlì, had especially distinguished himself, not just for his qualities as a teacher but also for his materials:

[He uses] numerous wall posters on natural history, and on agriculture; he keeps a small collection of models of rural implements made in wood; and in the school he has two display cabinets containing a large range of agricultural produce, a small collection of wood samples, a modest entomological collection, and some soil samples from characteristic local terrain.¹⁵

The conferences on teaching methods and agriculture, and progress in primary school agricultural awareness

By the end of the 1884–5 school year, the number of classes in the Cesena area had tripled, to 15, and the number of pupils involved had more than doubled, to 166.¹⁶ The context for these increases was the strengthening of policies pursued by local institutions in support of agricultural training, reflecting national trends. A crucial juncture in this process was the establishment in Cesena, in 1882, of the Regia Scuola pratica di agricoltura 'Filippo Re' ('Filippo Re' Royal School of Practice in Agriculture).¹⁷ This institution, whose launch had the direct involvement of the province, took in students between 14 and 17 years old with the objective of training future land agents and farm managers; over time, it became a reference point for agricultural training both in the Romagna and beyond (Mazzotti 2017, 169–186).

The increased spread of agricultural teaching in primary schools was in fact the result of a strategic choice taken by the province for the development of the whole educational chain, in which the 'Filippo Re' school was the second link. This interpretation is confirmed by the provincial executive committee's launch in August 1882 of a series of conferences, to be staged in Cesena and lasting 10 or 12 days in total, on 'pedagogical and agricultural themes' for the benefit of the province's primary school teachers.¹⁸ This was a novel initiative for this province, as is clear from the precautionary qualification, 'as a simple experiment', included in the committee's resolution, although the context was a range of policies addressing training. Although similar initiatives had first been launched in 1866 at the instigation of the Minister for Public Education Domenico Berti, it was only in the early 1880s, when Guido Baccelli was the minister, that they really took off; the intention was to generate productive exchanges between primary school teachers on a range of themes, often put forward by the ministry itself (Catarsi 1996).

Forlì was one of 12 Italian cities, and the only one in Emilia-Romagna, to host the conferences on education established by decree in 1881 (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione 1884). Baccelli expressed his high regard for the initiative taken by the province of Forlì in 1882, promising to support it financially and making various suggestions about the instructional approach. The teaching had to 'demonstrate the close connection between the study of phenomena of agricultural production and the more general study of natural sciences', while the lecturers were urged to point out

‘the possible inconsistency of many practices and beliefs without going into too much detail on individual crops, instead emphasising fundamental and more general principles that can be demonstrated with arguments simply needing common sense to be understood’.¹⁹

The conferences on teaching methods and agriculture drew in a healthy number of participants. The launch year saw the enrolment of 69 schoolteachers, a number replicated the following year, while the total number of attenders ‘considerably exceeded a hundred ... among whom were recorded young people from the *scuole pubbliche [normali]*, landowners, farmers and others’.²⁰ These participants were actively involved: some were in fact presenters on specific themes suggested by the Ministry. The funds set aside by the province were intended for the primary school teachers who enrolled for the full series, either on their own initiative or sent by their respective local areas, alongside a further 40 or so colleagues who came specifically from the area around Cesena. This investment in local ‘human capital’ was believed to be of great importance, although its effectiveness depended both on the ability of the lecturers to convey knowledge and on the continuation of financial and organisational support from the bodies involved.²¹

Among those who played an important part were Filippo Marinelli (Bedei 2014) and Bartolomeo Moreschi.²² Marinelli, the director of Forlì’s primary school provision, coordinated the part on educational methods, while Moreschi, mentioned earlier, organised the seminars on some of the main agricultural themes at both the local and national level. The seminars addressed cultivation of the three main cereals grown across the Romagna area: wheat, maize and rice. The themes explored included crop rotation, the drying process for maize kernels, the health and nutritional aspects of cereal consumption, and the problem of pellagra. There was no shortage of reflections from Moreschi on the impact of the current agricultural crisis, which had been caused by the competition from American and Asian cereals (Frascani 2012; Cerrito 2003); in particular, he suggested various strategies for limiting its most severe consequences, primarily based on containing the costs of production.²³

The second part of the programme of agricultural conferences centred on methods for growing and harvesting flax and hemp, with particular exploration of provisions for limiting the effects of the crisis affecting hemp growers. Only ‘basic concepts’ were offered in regard to cotton growing, illustrating the fact that the teaching programme had a purely practical function and therefore focused on the typical features of agriculture in the Romagna. Moreschi subsequently published a small book (1885) providing an account of the agronomic experiments completed during the period 1881–4.

Meanwhile, basic agricultural education in primary schools showed signs of further improvement. Over a one-year period, from the 1884–5 to 1885–6 school years, the number of primary school classes competing for the prizes for teaching quality rose to 19, while at the same time there was a notable increase in the number of pupils involved, from 166 to 267, especially in the municipalities of Cesena, Cesenatico, Gambettola and Sogliano.²⁴ The classes were from the first and second years of primary school, often with both years taught together, and sometimes single-sex. The only exception was Sogliano’s weekend school, attended by peasants and small landowners and taught by Antonio Garavini: a successful experiment, subsequently replicated by similar ventures in the Forlì area, which, it was thought, could usefully be extended to other schools. It was also suggested that a small museum of rural implements could be established.

The process of disseminating agricultural knowledge in the Romagna territory, thanks to Moreschi, continued through the 1880s. In 1886, in the provincial capital, he gave 16 lectures in the presence of 46 schoolteachers, with prizes of 20 lire per person, allocated from Ministry grants and *comizio agrario* funds, awarded to the best participants (Comizio agrario di Forlì 1889, 25–7). Complementing the direct teaching activity, copies of Moreschi’s book *Memoriale di agricoltura pratica per i coltivatori* (1878) were distributed.

Additional financial resources were allocated for reimbursement of the travel expenses of schoolteachers who came from outside the city, thus ensuring that those who lived in poor or remote areas could take part. One obstacle that teachers often faced in acquiring professional qualifications was in fact the excessive distance between their schools and the main provincial centres; this was a problem shared with other parts of Italy (De Fort 1995), to the extent that it prompted a request to the Ministry for a special exam session.

In Forlì, too, a significant effort was therefore made to support the teachers, although the practical outcomes of this were not as good as in the Cesena area. From a quick check, it can be seen that of the 19 teachers competing for the teaching quality prizes announced by Cesena's *comizio agrario* in 1886 at least six had taken part in the conferences on teaching methods and agriculture, demonstrating the positive effects of the training activity funded by the province. There was a similar experience, although a little later, in the Rimini area, in large part thanks to the organisational dynamism of Dino Sbrozzi, the director from 1886 of the city's '*cattedra ambulante*' (mobile agricultural training service): the year 1889 saw the initiation of a series of lectures on agriculture for primary school teachers, reinforced by courses in theory and practice for Rimini's *scuola normale* students, and supported by a system of prizes for the best teachers.²⁵

New regulations for primary school teachers

Midway through the 1880s, regulatory changes helped to clarify the professional profile of primary school teachers in the agricultural sphere. A Ministry circular of 28 June 1885 decreed that the teaching of agriculture in primary schools would be dependent on teachers acquiring an appropriate certificate: from the next school year onwards, the ministry would only award grants and authorisation 'to teach elements of agricultural science' to teachers who had passed the relevant examination at a *scuola normale* where this teaching was delivered (Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio 1885). An alternative was possession of the certificate awarded to teachers after they had taken part in a full series of teaching conferences on agricultural themes, or had attended similar courses promoted by the local *comizio agrario* or one of the province's non-profit organisations.

At the point when its circular of 1885 was issued, however, the MAIC's approach to financial support for agricultural teaching in primary schools was gradually changing. This was substantially reduced, while preference was given instead to agricultural education delivered at a higher level; this related to the reorganisation and promotion of the network of practical schools and specialist schools in agriculture (Bidolli 2001, 83).

While in the mid 1870s the Scialoja inquiry had concluded that the *scuole normali* were inadequate for Italy's educational needs (Miceli 2013), during the second half of the 1880s important changes in the Romagna made the system of institutions for training primary school teachers more effective. Forlì's *scuola normale* for young men, the only one in the province, which dated back to the era of papal rule and had then been adopted by the new Kingdom of Italy (Provincia di Forlì 1867, 150), was closed in 1886. At the same time, the *scuola superiore femminile* in Forlì was converted into the *Regia scuola normale femminile* (Royal *scuola normale* for young women), and then just a few years later another *scuola normale* for young men was established in Forlimpopoli (Carboni, Fornasari and Mazzotti 2018, 85–114). At the provincial level, this period saw a marked growth in the number of girls enrolling in urban schools in general, by 1887 apparently matching the number of boys, while in rural schools there continued to be significantly more boys than girls (Comune di Forlì 1888). Changes in the local configuration of *scuole normali* reflected more general trends at the national level: the transfer of these schools from towns and

cities to rural centres, and an increased demand for women teachers that was driven not only by the wider distribution of *scuole normali* for young women but also by the financial advantages of employing women teachers, on lower salaries, rather than men.²⁶

Subsequently, in the early 1890s, the dissemination of agricultural awareness at the primary school level in the district of Forlì was to experience a significant decline. The signs of this were apparent in the number of schools where agriculture was taught, which was low in relation to the Ministry's expectations, and in the progressive numerical decline of both teachers and pupils taking part in the prize competitions. In 1890, there were only three schoolteachers who had earned the certificate in agricultural teaching and were engaged in two strands of instruction, in the primary schools by day and with adults in the evening (*Comizio agrario di Forlì 1894*, 68–72). Turning to the pupils, there were 229 entrants for the competition in the Cesena area in 1892, of whom only 185 actually took the examination: these numbers represented a sharp drop from those of the previous five-year period, while the reduced number of teachers competing, at half that of 1886, was also significant. The commissioners provided their analysis of this trend:

The teachers, or some of them at least, who initially used to teach the primary principles of agriculture throughout the year, have increasingly cut back on this useful teaching, and ended up limiting it to the brief period prior to the final test, and only teaching this topic to the few pupils who might better, and more diligently, be able to respond to their solicitude.²⁷

The main reason for the increasing lack of interest in taking part in the prize competition was said to be the reduction in grants from the *comizio agrario*. However, this could not really have been the reason, because although the value of prizes for the highest ranked had been reduced, the total sum available for prizes was higher; in other words, the *comizio* intended to distribute the rewards to a broader range of beneficiaries. This means of providing an incentive for participation in the competitions in fact proved ineffective, insofar as it had a negative impact on the extent of commitment from teachers and thus, indirectly, on the number of pupils who sat the final examination.

Inadequate remuneration for the schoolteachers involved in teaching agriculture, which required an additional commitment, was a further deterrent to improvements in the quality of the instruction; this was recognised by the governmental inspectors, who declared their willingness to support, within the Ministry, potential requests for the allocation of financial incentives to deserving teachers. The issue was in fact important at the national level. In the Forlì area, it raised questions about the ways of funding teacher development: it was argued that this should not fall only to local public and private institutions, or to fundraising activity by the *comizi agrari*, but should involve the state directly. Moreover, the system of financing established by the provincial executive committee, whereby only those trainee teachers who were resident in the province had received direct funding, was revised at the start of the 1890s with a significant rationalisation and reduction in grants, to the detriment of every type of local educational establishment except Forlì's *scuola normale* for young women, which was held to be an excellent institution capable of responding to the growing need for teaching staff (*Deputazione provinciale di Forlì 1892*). At much the same time, running counter to the wishes expressed locally, financial support from the MAIC came to an end: it was held to be too burdensome in view of the economic crisis that Italy faced in the 1890s. The government's shift in position led to a hiatus in the development of agricultural awareness, with negative repercussions for primary schools in the Romagna.

Agricultural education: the unresolved issues

The national picture thus seemed to be evolving, in response to the socio-economic and legislative changes under way in Italy during the 1890s. Increased popular unrest and the growing strength of

the labour and peasant movements, from the North to the South, led part of the liberal ruling class into expressing open hostility towards the new teaching programmes put forward by the ministerial commission that in 1888 was given responsibility for reorganising primary education. These new programmes were drawn up by Aristide Gabelli and Pasquale Villari, who were leading figures in the positivist approach to education (De Fort 1996, 147–8; Bonetta 1997). In the views of some people, exemplified by parliamentary deputy Emilio Bianchi's comments of June 1893, they seemed too advanced:

Our people need to be educated rather than instructed, but education is not what our primary schools give them. The little that they learn there serves only to stimulate the drives that stir in the depths of the mental life of our populace, which turns itself over to the service of these drives, giving increased vigour to individual impulses to the detriment of its very rudimentary social ones.²⁸

The issue of practical and manual work in primary schools remained central to the debate between educationalists both in Italy and elsewhere, in tandem with considerations of a political nature expressed by some parliamentary deputies on the subject of education for the working classes.²⁹ The different views saw manual work as either a means for the pupil's development from the educational perspective, or a way of developing their skills prior to entering employment. In various parts of Europe experiments had been launched that had not, however, had satisfactory outcomes, at least in regard to the teaching of technical subjects. Professor Paolo Luotto, speaking at the prizegiving for primary schools in the Cesena area for the school year of 1890–1, emphasised that in the case of agricultural teaching, in his view, many of the issues relating to poor skills development and the limited educational benefit of manual work had been resolved (Luotto 1892).

The plan for reform that Education Minister Baccelli presented in 1894 had as its cornerstone the motto 'instruct the people as much as is needed, educate them as much as is possible'. The intention was to boost the education sector but at the same time protect the status quo, encouraging 'social reconciliation'. The concluding report, compiled by the commission responsible for implementing the plan, recalled the approach expressed in earlier years by Nicola Miraglia, based on the idea that agricultural education for primary school pupils should encourage them to both welcome and generate innovation in the economy's primary sector. Central, once again, were the themes of dissemination of agricultural knowledge in primary schools, manual work, and, linked to this, the use of small patches of land – '*campicelli*' ('mini-fields'), as they were known – where primary school pupils, guided by their rural schoolteachers, could perform practical activities and experiments (Catarsi 1990, 220–4). This controversial plan, which some called the '*progetto dei campicelli*' ('mini-field plan'), became law in 1899, generating a fair amount of support but also a degree of puzzlement. According to Ester De Fort, 'the *campicelli*, without the necessary equipment, remained an isolated experiment with no real potential' (1996, 159).³⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that while the action taken in support of agricultural education in the primary schools of the Romagna resulted in its expansion during the early years of the agricultural crisis, this phase and the contraction that followed were influenced both by economic developments and by the social and cultural change under way in Italy. The latter affected decisions made by the ruling classes: initially these favoured greater efforts to encourage agricultural awareness, because of the rise of educational positivism and the centrality of issues regarding the economy's primary sector in public debate; subsequently the direction was reversed, with the return to a conservative vision in ministerial policy on primary school education. When compared to more

general trends, the situation in the Romagna discussed above demonstrates a degree of divergence, which relates both to the specific features of the territory and to variations in the degree and quality of involvement by local bodies in training and education. Further research, including more in-depth comparative work on a broader range of local case studies, will help us to reach a more nuanced understanding of the distinctive aspects of developments in agricultural education in primary schools.

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Notes

1. For a notable exception, see Lupo 2013.
2. On the parallel developments in agricultural education in France and England, see, respectively, Charmasson 2004 and Collins 2004.
3. For a recent critical assessment of the Casati law, see the special issue of *Annali di storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche*, 'La difficile attuazione della legge Casati' (Pruneri 2019b), with articles by Angelo Gaudio, Mirella D'Ascenzo, Matteo Morandi, Evelina Scaglia, Caterina Sindoni and Paolo Marangon. See also Bianchi 2001.
4. The first, second and third categories of 'rural' schools were those established in areas where the population was above 3,000, 2,000 and 500 residents respectively; in contrast, using the same categorisation, 'urban' schools were those present in areas where the population exceeded 40,000, 15,000 and 4,000 residents respectively. On rural schools, see Montecchi 2015.
5. Although there was a growing division of educational positivism into two main strands of enquiry, these continued to share some typical features: secularism as an essential central element in the development of the modern citizen; education as a political tool; and the importance of teaching methods based on scientific principles and rational organisation (Cambi 2003, 243).
6. Educational positivism (sometimes termed 'pedagogical positivism' in the literature) first developed in France, thanks to the crucial contributions of Auguste Comte and, to a lesser degree, Edouard Séguin and Émile Durkheim, and subsequently in Britain, particularly due to the thinking of Herbert Spencer and contributions from Alexander Bain, John Tyndall and Thomas Huxley (Cambi 2003, 237–42; Bertagna 2010).
7. In statistics for the years prior to 1883–4, the term '*scuola*' (school) was used to indicate the classroom; then, until 1886, it referred to 'the totality of classes or sessions that constituted a full course of primary school teaching and were held in the same building'; subsequently, it went back to signifying the original idea of a physical location. From 1907 onwards, '*scuola*' was usually used to describe 'the set of pupils attending a class session or a single class, or also several classes, as long as these were entrusted to one teacher within the normal daily timetable' (De Fort 1995, 12).
8. The *comizi agrari*, established by Royal Decree no. 3452 of 23 December 1866, were private organisations with public functions, including representing the interests of the agricultural sector to the government, collecting statistical information, operating as advisers on agricultural issues, promoting the

- development of the local agricultural economy and local specialist training. Their membership included representatives of the landed aristocracy and bourgeoisie, but also experts.
9. On the relationship of Europe's ruling classes to the agricultural crisis, see Aldenhoff-Hübinger 2006.
 10. The schools of agriculture came into being in much of the Italian peninsula thanks to a combination of investment both from local councils and from the government, following a trend that had already become apparent elsewhere in Europe (Boulet and Stéphan 2003, 61).
 11. Archivio di Stato di Forlì (hereafter ASFo), *Prefettura generale*, b. 977, Serie 1, Cat. 7, Fasc. 33, 1877. Letter dated 22 December 1876. A populariser of science who contributed to numerous local conferences on agronomy and agricultural machinery, Tito Pasqui was principally known as a lecturer at the technical institutes in Ravenna and Forlì, and subsequently as a representative of the Italian government, from the 1870s to the 1900s, at the Universal Expositions in Europe, as director of the MAIC, and also as a parliamentary deputy (Mazzotti 2017, 80–81).
 12. Archivio Centrale dello Stato, *Ministero Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale Scuole Primarie e Normali*, b. 176, report by Bartolomeo Moreschi dated 29 June 1883. Subsequently, agronomy manuals specially written for this type of school were distributed (Calamani and Munerati 1899).
 13. *Bollettino del Comizio Agrario del Circondario di Cesena* (hereafter BCACC), year 12, no. 3 (July–September 1882): 46–8. This publication can be consulted in the Biblioteca dell'Istituto Tecnico 'Garibaldi – Da Vinci' di Cesena (hereafter BITC).
 14. See also BITC, BCACC, year 14, no. 4 (October–December 1884): 52–3.
 15. BITC, BCACC, year 14, no. 3 (July–September 1884): 35–8.
 16. BITC, BCACC, year 16, nos. 3/4 (July–December 1886), 'Concorso per l'insegnamento agrario elementare nel Circondario di Cesena nell'anno scolastico 1885–86': 43–8.
 17. On the development of agriculture in the Cesena area during this period, see Magalotti 2004.
 18. ASFo, *Provincia di Forlì*, b. 665, *Conferenze pedagogiche agrarie*, letter dated 21 August 1882.
 19. ASFo, *Provincia di Forlì*, b. 665, *Conferenze pedagogiche agrarie*, letter dated 7 September 1882.
 20. ASFo, *Provincia di Forlì*, b. 665, *Conferenze pedagogiche agrarie*, letter dated 21 August 1882. The largest number of enrolments came from the province's main towns.
 21. ASFo, *Provincia di Forlì*, b. 665, *Conferenze pedagogiche agrarie*, letter dated 24 August 1882. On the relationship between human capital and economic development in Italy, see Cappelli 2018.
 22. On the role of urban elites, see Hertner 1998.
 23. ASFo, *Provincia di Forlì*, b. 665, *Conferenze pedagogiche agrarie*, letter dated 7 September 1882.
 24. BITC, BCACC, year 16, nos. 3/4 (July–December 1886), 'Concorso per l'insegnamento agrario elementare nel Circondario di Cesena nell'anno scolastico 1885–86': 43–8.
 25. ASFo, *Provincia di Forlì*, b. 725. For further discussion, see Catolfi 1992, 273.
 26. On the evolution of this issue at the national level, see Soldani 1993 and Vigo 1993.
 27. According to the report from the commissioners overseeing the competition, '[t]he ample and enthusiastic activity that was widely evident in the teaching in the early years of the competition had subsided, and the teaching had not proceeded entirely as the Comizio had wished'. See BCACC, year 18 (1892), 'Relazione della commissione di vigilanza delle scuole rurali, i cui docenti concorsero ai premi del Comizio nell'anno scolastico 1891–92, 2 luglio 1892': 57. This particular issue can be consulted in the Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale di Agricoltura, Bologna.
 28. Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, *Discussioni*, leg. XVIII, sess. 1892–1894, 22 June 1893, quoted by De Fort 1996, 153.
 29. BITC, Comizio agrario circondariale di Cesena, 1892, *Sulle condizioni agricole del circondario di Cesena. Parole del prof. Filippo Barbato* (Cesena: Società Cooperativa Tipografica).
 30. De Fort refers to earlier observations on this issue by Dina Bertoni Jovine (1958, 48).

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Italian summary

Il paper esamina le modalità di diffusione dell'educazione agraria nelle scuole primarie del Regno d'Italia in un'importante area rurale, la Romagna postunitaria. Il tema, scarsamente indagato dalla storiografia economica, è inserito in una prospettiva più ampia, che intende valutare l'impatto – a livello nazionale e locale – delle innovazioni istituzionali sulla disseminazione delle conoscenze agrarie nella scuola di base nel corso dell'ultimo quarto del XIX secolo. In particolare viene approfondito lo studio di due componenti chiave di quel processo: gli studenti, destinatari del processo educativo, e gli insegnanti che, oltre a svolgere un ruolo basilare nella riduzione dell'analfabetismo, furono in parte coinvolti nella diffusione delle conoscenze agricole. Il trasferimento di quella particolare tipologia di conoscenze fu un'impresa controversa e di difficile attuazione, anche a causa dello scarso interesse che la classe dirigente italiana mostrò inizialmente verso il tema. Solo durante la crisi agraria degli anni Ottanta dell'Ottocento all'istruzione agricola nelle scuole primarie venne attribuita un'importanza crescente, quando si ritenne che quel processo avrebbe potuto preparare, insieme ad altri, il terreno per la auspicata 'rivoluzione agricola'.