BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION:

School Choice and the Geographies of Experimentation in the Italian School System

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes an exploration of the geographies of alternative and experimental forms of education in mainstream schools for the first time. The research revolves around two main contributions: in the first instance, it investigates the circuits which guide parents' choices on public schools, private schools, or schools with alternative experimentation; in the second instance, it analyses the experiences of the teachers and students in three school networks with experimentation which operate on a national scale. As such, it sits at the intersection of three wider areas of scholarship: children's geographies, geography of education, geographies of alternative education.

In order to do this, a mixed method qualitative research programme conducted in Italy was implemented. It began in the spring of 2020, and after being modified due to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, it concluded in the spring of 2021. The methodological programme involved three components: (1) 'The School Of My Dreams', an in-depth interview composed of open questions for parents who chose alternative learning sites, private schools or state schools with alternative experimentation for their children (n=40). (2) 'All About Your School', a programme for children from the ages of 6 to 10 which proposed the production of a lapbook through which the children expressed their own school experiences (n=75). (3) 'What's Education For', interviews with key adults who work as teachers and school directors in schools with alternative experimentation (n=28).

Appropriately the research offers four key contributions: (1) Parents choose a school with experimentation, a private school, or a school outside of the public school system in the hopes of finding a solution which reflects their values and encompasses their vision of education consisting of various dimensions (2) Experimentation within the public school system must tackle dated buildings which impact on the implementation of the experimentation, and forge creative and co-productive relationships between the various social and spatial process which define these approaches. (3) The relationship between teachers and students has an organisational function in the establishment of the teaching practices. (4) The collaboration with informal education associations, alternative learning sites and communities which exist in the area is fundamental in the establishment of experimentation in the public-school sector, and has a double-function: on one hand, it acts as a complement to the training offer, supporting the privatisation of certain processes of the public school, on another, it operates as network of social support, increasing the solidarity and connections of the social fabric with the educational community.

Thanks to the field research conducted in Italy, the thesis adds to the amplification of knowledge of the circuits of choice marking the training offer in Italian primary schools, which are in constant evolution. It also offers a glimpse of some attempts at experimentation within the mainstream and the relative experiences of the children and teachers who inhabit these schools. Therefore, it contributes to the literature on the geographies of education, on children's geographies and, at the same time, it offers critical issues from an Italian perspective, providing ideas and insights to educational policy makers and those who handle building the school of tomorrow.

A NOTE OF THANKS

Five years have passed since I began this adventure as a PhD student at the University of Birmingham and many things have changed in my life. The world itself has become a different place over these years and it has been re-shaped by a pandemic which significantly changed the society we live in, the way we work and our view of the future. In the midst of all these changes in the world, I find myself writing some words of thanks for this thesis: I have dreamt of this moment many times. I still remember the thrill of excitement that January morning in 2018 when I got off the train at New Street Station, looking for the bus to take me to Edgbaston Park. How wonderful it was to meet Peter and Sophie, my supervisors, in person for the first time. My first thanks goes to them. If there is anything I have learned through my work as a teacher, it is that true professionalism in this field is developing your students to their full potential. When I started my PhD, I did not know a lot about the geographies of education, and I wrote in an amateur academic style. Peter and Sophie taught me how to create this thesis. They also believed in an unpublished work, my work, and in developing it to the best of my abilities. Above all, they inspired passion in me for this field of research; at this point, I see and question the spatialities wherever I go!

Sophie and Peter also involved me in various groups of research. Firstly, the Geographies of Children, Youth and Families Research Group (GCYFRG), which throughout these years accompanied me and helped me meet brilliant researchers from all over the world with whom I was able to discuss visions of academic work, and with whom I could also share precious hours of study and writing in the Cotswolds, baking cakes and playing badminton. The same goes for the GCYPE of the University of Birmingham: I learned a lot about my field of research, at times listening to interviews and to fields of research which were very different to my own. It is not a forgone conclusion that considering that I am a distance-learning PhD student and a great deal of my field work was inevitably conducted in Italy. Therefore, I thank all the researchers I have crossed paths with over the years while going on this adventure (there are really too many to name and I don't want to forget anyone). Finally, I cannot go without thanking my English teachers: Rachel and Richard I would not have been able to study English language so quickly without their help. I also officially thank my proof-reader, Simon Anthony Patterson for his competent eye in revising this thesis for linguistic, orthographic and grammatical conventions.

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A final, and possibly the most important thanks goes to my life partner, Andrea. Every day, he chooses to pass the time with me. During my days of writing and waiting, his strength has grown. He keeps me alive with his creative and intricate mind, he is always easy-going and he encourages me when I feel low. I am especially thankful for the fact that he cooks for me every day: ever since I have been with him, the wanderer I used to be has preferred to stay at home. I feel so lucky to have such a capable man at my side, and to be able to share our hopes for the future together. We have experienced some very harsh winters in life, but this spring, apart from finishing my PhD, we have another reason to be happy: meeting our baby boy, Adelio. I hope to be able to offer him a better school than mine, and I hope this thesis contributes to that. I especially hope that he can enjoy this extraordinary life adventure with wonderful people like the ones I mentioned in this acknowledgement.

Of course this thesis is dedicated to Adelio and all the children of tomorrow.

PUBLICATIONS

A part of the research results of this thesis have been presented at several international conferences; feedback and questions were welcomed. Further discussions were carried out in meetings with research groups and shared work. As a result:

- A brief overview of Chapter 2.2 appeared in Ceresa G. (2018). Children's Geographies: un settore sempre più importante della geografia umana. *Ambiente Società Territorio – Geografia nelle Scuole*. 4, 34–40.

- Aspects of Chapter 2 appeared in Kraftl, P., Holloway, S., Johnson, V., Andrews, W., Beech, S., White, C., & Ceresa, G. (2022). Geographies of education: A journal. *Area*, 54, 15–23. Available from: https://doi-org.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/area.12698

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAPT	Associazione Amici del Parco Trotter (Friend's Association of Trotter Park)
ANT	Actor Network Theory
ASL	Azienda sanitaria locale (Local health authority)
CA	Catchment areas of residence
CERI	Centre for Educational Research and Innovation
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CV	Curriculum vitae
EDU-LARP	Educational live action role-playing
EFCF	European Federation of City Farm
EU	European Union
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points
IBBY	International Board on Books for Young People
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ILE	Innovative Learning Environments
INDIRE	Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa (National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research)

INPS	Istituto nazionale della previdenza sociale (National Social Insurance Agency).
INVALSI	Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione (Italian National institute for the evaluation of the education and training system)
ISEE	Indicatore della Situazione Economica Equivalente (Equivalent Financial Situation Index)
ISTAT	Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Italian National Statistics Institute)
KET	Key English Test
LODLNB	L'Ora di Lezione Non Basta (Lesson Hour Is Not Enough)
MIUR	Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Iniversità e della Ricerca (Ministry of Education, University and Research)
MoMo	Mondo Montessori (Montessori World)
NoLo	North of Loreto
NSSC	New Social Studies of Childhood
OAE	Outdoor Adventure Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OL	Outdoor Learning
ONB	Opera Nazionale Balilla
PAD-LAB	Pedagogy architecture design laboratory
PAS	Science and environments park
PC	Personal computer
PE	Physical education
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
POF	Piano dell'offerta formativa (training offer plan)
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USA	United States of America
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This thesis was written at a decisive time in the debate over the transformation of learning environments in the Western world in which academia is participating in an ever more interdisciplinary perspective, in open dialogue with policy makers and authorities which deal with educational policies (Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; OECD, 2008, 2013, 2015). There is a creative debate due to the complementarity and interaction between various study and research disciplines which range from education, architecture, the geographies of education and political and social sciences. On an institutional level, over the past decade, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has focused on the relationship between educational architecture and learning processes, highlighting the importance of putting teaching practices at the centre of the analysis and planning of the school environments. Similarly, UNESCO collected the work of tens of academics (Kraftl, McKenzie & Gulson 2022; Scott, 2015) in order to examine the role of different types of learning spaces and observe how they can be actively modelled, perceived and conceptualised through the processes which take place within and around them. In the Italian landscape – the context for this thesis – the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research developed the manifesto "1+4 learning spaces for schools of the new millennium" (INDIRE, 2016) which highlights that current training requirements need polyfunctional, flexible and modular spaces, a topic which has been widely discussed in academic literature (Barrett et al., 2015, 2019) and analysed by large-scale quantitative studies which have undertaken the evaluation of the

impact on student and teacher performance (Higgins et al., 2005; Keep, 2002; Lackney & Jacobs, 2002).

For obvious reasons, this study does not aim to be all-encompassing of everything that has been written or is being said on the topic of the expansion and transformation of learning spaces; however, it aims to create a grounded, situated and rich critical analysis of the Italian landscape of alternative and experimental spaces and practices within mainstream education, offered by an intersection of three areas of scholarship: children's geographies, school choice, the geography of education and alternative education. It is an approach which has been identified among the infinite list of possibilities offered by this creative field of investigation and selected in order to share the experience of the parents, teachers and children who collaborate and live each day within this world of change. Transformations of learning spaces have also had an impact on alternative education – which in Italy is situated differently from many other countries and often operates in close contact with the mainstream school system – creating experimentation spaces within public school. Some examples of this are the synergy between the Opera Nazionale Montessori / Fondazione Montessori Italia and public schools or urban farms cited in the case studies of this thesis.

Indeed, an innovative aspect of this research is the fact that it extends its lens to the circuits of choice which guide parents towards alternative education. In the light of burgeoning scholarly interest in alternative education spaces (Kraftl, 2013; Lees et al., 2016; Woods & Woods, 2009), which revolve around criticism of mainstream school, alternative education is accumulating a renewed popularity, especially in terms of numbers. For example, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the number of pupils in Italy who were educated by parents has tripled over the course of three years. Minister of Public Education data, issued by the main Italian economics newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, show that in fact, 5,126 homeschoolers

between 2018–2019 has now become 15,361 from 2020–2021. With an interval of 6,212 pupils in 2019–2020. Despite this growth, in Italy alternative education is a phenomenon of limited dimensions if compared to that of other countries: for example, England with 5% of the student population engaging in alternative education and the USA where the figure is greater than 10%.

To date, in academic literature, there is no standard definition for alternative education, the term '*fragmented landscape*' is more often used (Sliwka, 2008, p.1), and this encompasses anyone operating outside of the mainstream school system. At the same time, the expression is often used to describe programmes dedicated to vulnerable children who are not able to attend traditional schools (Aron, 2006). Given these premises, education is not to be understood as a '*monolithic entity but varies in its form between and within countries and contains differences and alternative perspectives*' (Woods & Woods, 2009, p. 3), in such a way that it is often difficult to have official lists validated by academia. In the case of Italy, at the time of writing this thesis, there are no peer-reviewed texts which conduct a census of alternative education; among the attempts to describe the phenomenon, a mother belonging to the Italian network, EDUpar (Bosoni, 2018), created a map which aim to identify forms of alternative education in Italy (see Research Context, Chapter 3). For example, among the most popular options, especially in the North of Italy, the global networks based on specific educational philosophies stand out. These are the Montessori or Steiner networks, which today coexist with some new forms of non-traditional education (for example, forest schools, farm schools, democratic/ human scale schools). It may be the case that these experiences are integrated or mixed: it is not unusual to find homeschoolers who use Montessori materials, or forest schools inspired by Steiner concepts. In particular, the forms of parental education are school experiences which operate outside of the school system and are not subject to the Italian Ministry of Public

Education's control of quality standards. Only families who desire so can take exams as external candidates to gain access to the subsequent grade but doing this every year is not mandatory. Besides this, as previously mentioned, in Italy there are many experimentation networks in the public school system like Montessori, Outdoor School and No Backpack; these were established thanks to the law on autonomy (Article 5 Italian Presidential Decree no. 275/99), and their conduct is continuously monitored and supervised by the universities and training entities with which they are affiliated.

These experimentations often offer an alternative to the traditional curricula but, as shall be demonstrated later, as these schools are public schools, they can rarely represent forms of alternative education. A similar discussion was held regarding the American magnet schools (Lees et al., 2016), where the term '*magnet*' refers to public schools, characterised by specialised curricula, which attract students from outside the normal confines defined by authorities. In Italy, when discussing experimentation in the mainstream, this is referred to as spaces in constant change which also adhere to networks formed by multiple institutes and sanctioned practices, with difficulty, they are all equal because they belong to pre-existing traditional schools. In this sense, each institute carries a different story which models the experimentation itself. They represent the leading strategy in teaching innovation in Italian public primary school. Even though in a few years they may already have taken on new forms, it is worth investigating which processes make up these approaches, because they offer an important point of observation on the transformation of the learning environments which characterise the Western world.

Given the backdrop mentioned here, which shall be looked at in greater depth in the third chapter on research context, the need to listen to those who choose the forms of non-traditional education has been emphasised: it is an emerging phenomenon which cannot be ignored. Therefore, I decided to begin the analysis with the circuits of choice which

move students within, and outside of, the mainstream system. Over the last forty years, a vast and eclectic literature concerning school choice has been in constant growth and evolution (Jeynes, 2014) and today covers many sectors of public and private schools in all their forms (Osborne, Russo & Cattaro 2012). The most recent data available, related to enrolment in the academic year of 2020–2021 in the United States, demonstrate that the pandemic caused a significant change in the attendance of students with regard to public, private and domestic learning options (Butcher & Burke 2021). It is well known that Coronavirus restrictions have impacted on the daily life of schools (Gil-Baez et al., 2021; Robertson, Thomas & Bailey 2022; Victorino et al., 2022) all over the world. This has led to schools re-thinking teaching, amplifying spaces and recovering less used spaces, imagining new elements of furnishing and planning more activities outdoors and outside of the school wall. At the same time, however, it is possible to observe how the pandemic was an accelerator in the diffusion of the network of experimentation within the public school system which has grown and seen an increase in numbers of adhering institutions over recent years. Of these learning spaces in constant evolution, Italian academic literature is still scarce, and for this reason, I decided to dedicate a substantial part of the field research to these school experiences (see Chapters 6 and 7), making them a point of special observation to investigate the boundaries between alternative and traditional education.

1.2 Introducing the Geography of Education in Experimentation

On one hand, this study revolves around the choices of parents, on the other, the thesis proposes to provide insight into the emerging realities within the mainstream system through the voices of the students and adults who live their daily life in experimental and alternative spaces. Through the voices of the teachers, facilitators and head teachers, a

dialogue was opened surrounding the processes with make these educational spaces different from the mainstream, with particular focus to material aspects, practices and spacings (Horton & Kraftl, 2006). Pupil participants were asked to discuss their schools and share their opinions and class-life experiences through writing a lapbook. Promoting, therefore, an idea of children as *'social'* (Prout, 2002, p. 67) and *'knowing'* actors (Holt, 2011, p. 2), the thesis contributes to the field of studies of children's geographies, a prolific and expanding branch of human geography. Through the many and often non-linear paths it has travelled over the course of time: from the work of pioneers of the '60s, to contemporary academic studies, passing through some of its landmark moments, such as feminist geography, the relationship with the New Sociology of Childhood and recent studies of non-representational geographies (see Chapter 2 for a literature review). In this fascinating journey, schools have been at the centre of the discipline right from the beginning, both in terms of its normative and material aspects, as well as its centrality to the internal and external network of relations that characterise any specific territory. Many of the studies of children's geographies tend to think of the schools as environments of socialisation, defined as spaces *'through which differences between children are reinscribed'* (Holloway & Valentine, 2000, p. 11). This is because the possibility of attending one school over another can significantly change the daily life, vision and future of the child. A similar vein was taken up by the sister sub-discipline of the geography of education, a field of research that rose rapidly during the first decade of the twenty-first century, which explored the complex social and spatial processes that inform school spaces from various angles (see also Section 2.2 for the literature review). In particular, the aim of this analysis is to respond to the call of some of the geographies (Nguyen, Cohen & Huff, 2017) which have highlighted the importance of investigating the transformations of educational landscapes following the neoliberal restructuring.

The case of experimentation in Italian public school is important and (compared with most other countries) unusual and instructive because it increases, although in a limited way, the possibility of choice and allows families who cannot afford a private school, to attend school outside the traditional model. Another noteworthy aspect is that these schools have been learning spaces in transformation from the start as most of them were originally founded as traditional state schools. The study opened a dialogue with the most recent contributions that pay particular attention to formal school spaces (Holloway, 2000), alternative school spaces (Kraftl, 2013) and informal school spaces (Dunkley & Smith, 2019; Hickman Dunne, 2019; Morris, 2019), bringing them together into the chorus of those who criticise the gulf between formal and informal education (Holloway & Kirby, 2020; Mills & Waite, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019) as a means of analysing the use of alternative approaches in the mainstream school system. The thesis provides insight into the complex establishment of these hybrid forms at the boundaries between the mainstream and alternative systems, typical of the Italian landscape, adding a valuable perspective to the understanding of these spaces of experimentation within the neoliberal context.

1.3 Research Focus

To critically analyse the geographies of alternative and experimental education in Italian mainstream schools, as indicated above, the research design was planned surrounding two key arguments: (see Tab.1)

O 1: To explore the factors which lead a family to choose a non-traditional school

Research question 1:
What are the reasons which lead a family to choose an alternative school? What are the reasons for choosing a private school? What are the reasons for choosing a public school with experimentation?

O 2: To examine the spatialities of some of the educational spaces that are classed as 'experimentation' in mainstream

Research question 2:
How have the physical spaces transformed and how do they differentiate from the mainstream?

Research question 3:
What are the emerging spatialities which make this experimentation possible?

Firstly, it starts off from the analysis of needs and the context which emerges in the decisions of the parents who face the choice of a non-traditional primary school for their children.

Explicitly, the first objective of the thesis is:

To explore the factors which lead a family to choose a non-traditional school.

This first research objective was pursued through the programme, 'The School Of My Dreams' (for a detailed description see Chapter 4) which was carried out over the months of April and May 2020. The programme comprised an in-depth interview composed of open questions for parents who chose alternative learning sites, private schools or state schools with alternative experimentation for their children (n=40). Participants were adults sampled from different socio-economic groups, coming from different regions throughout the North, South and Centre of the Italian Peninsula, recruited through members of the Facebook group 'Tutta un'altra scuola', or coming from the schools with

experimentation under investigation. On an operational level, this first objective was broken up into a three-fold research question:

What are the reasons which lead a family to choose an alternative school? What are the reasons for choosing a private school? What are the reasons for choosing a public school with experimentation?

After being analysed and compared, the reasons were extracted and subsequently organised into wider topics which outline the circuits of choice leading the parents to choose a non-traditional school.

Subsequently, the focus shifted to a more defined sample in order to investigate some of the social and spatial processes which characterise three of the major school networks with experimentation in Italy: Outdoor Public School, No Backpack School, and Montessori Public School.

The second objective of the thesis can be outlined as follows:

To examine the spatialities of the educational spaces that are classed as 'experimentation' in mainstream.

By analysing the ways in which experimentation in the mainstream system is established within the unique Italian context, the thesis aims to offer a new perspective on the ways in which traditional and alternative educational spaces are evolving within the neoliberal reorganisation. A premise is mandatory: all three case study schools were originally established as traditional schools. Research questions 2 and 3 have therefore taken into account the transformative characteristic of these spaces. Research question 2 is brought about by this premise:

How have the physical spaces transformed and how do they differentiate from the mainstream?

The thesis identifies the features of the physical spaces of the schools with experimentation and how they are reorganised or adapted during teaching time in order to give life to more fluid and flexible learning settings. In doing this, the study confronts a key gap in the literature, understanding the characteristics of the school spaces where the children and teaching staff operate and live their daily lives, and maps how these environments mediate their experiences. The need for the third research question arises from here:

Research question 3

What are the emerging spatialities which make experimentation possible?

The aim of the research question 3 is to identify some of the social and spatial processes which characterise the three schools under investigation and make them spaces for experimentation. The analysis includes all that takes place within, and outside of the school walls, through relationships with stakeholders and the community.

The second research objective was pursued through two different methodological programmes, carried out in the spring of 2021, which used different tools: 1. 'All About Your School', a programme for children from the ages of 6 to 10 which proposed the production of a lapbook through which the children expressed their own school experiences (n=75). All the children were briefed by the postgraduate researcher through a remote meeting and they subsequently received an outline to inspire them, which they worked on in class with their teachers, in collaboration with the postgraduate researcher. The participants of this programme were children belonging to the three schools with experimentation located in three different Italian regions (Piedmont, Lombardy and

Tuscany). 2. 'What's Education For', interviews with key adults who work as teachers and school directors in schools with these alternative experimentations (n=28). The participants were adults involved in the experimentation network to which each of the three schools under investigation in the previous programme adhere, and adults belonging to the children's schools themselves. (For a detailed description, refer to Chapter 4 on methods).

In closing, the thesis examines the motives leading families to choosing a non-traditional primary school, within or beyond the Italian school system. Subsequently, it examines the three case study schools with experimentation within the Italian school system in greater depth, attempting to describe and discuss, through the voices of the children and teachers, the social and spatial processes which make up these approaches and how they try to disconnect from the mainstream. By doing this, it positions experimentation schools within the geography of education, offering a new perspective on the relationship between formal and informal education within the public school system.

1.4 Terminology Used in the Thesis

Considering the inherent complexity in defining the varied landscape of alternative education and the spaces under transformation within mainstream school, this thesis uses some terms to differentiate the various typologies. It refers to 'alternative learning sites' as the settings outside of the mainstream system where alternative education takes. 'Non-traditional' is instead referred to as a general and vast container of all the forms of education with an innovative curriculum and can belong to alternative education, the private school system, equivalent to experimentation within the public school system. The term itself, 'experimentation' is used as a broad umbrella under which the networks of schools operating within the public school system are grouped. These schools are referred

to in the case studies, in the 'All About Your School' and 'What's Education For' programmes. These network contracts have different durations and varying numbers of participating schools, as well as a regulated relationship with the Ministry of Public Education according to their own methods. Therefore the term, 'experimentation' groups together experiences of different methods and dimensions but with the common denominator of operating within the Italian public school system. The schools with experimentation featured in the case studies have been translated as 'No Backpack' School ('Senza Zaino' in Italian), Outdoor School (Scuola all'aperto' in Italian), Montessori School. Regarding this last expression, although in Italy there are many private schools inspired by the Montessori method, for convention and ease, 'Montessori Experimentation' or 'Montessori Public School' refers to those within the public school system. Instead, when discussed in the context of private schools, which require payment of a fee to attend, 'Montessori School' is used. More generally, to refer to the private schools operating within the Italian school system using the same curriculum as the public system, the term 'equivalent' (which corresponds to the Italian term 'paritario') is used.

1.5 Thesis Structure

After this first introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents the conceptual frameworks which guide the study of the geographies of experimentation through the exploration of the boundaries of traditional and alternative education. It begins with an analysis of the history of children's geographies which illustrates the range of different scholarships to which this thesis offers a contribution. It then explores the development of the sister sub-discipline of the geographies of education and positions the study within the more recent geographies of alternative and informal education. After this, it tackles the theories and critiques of education, highlighting where its analyses intersect and expand upon these

theories. Focus is then shifted to the topic of school choice, observing it from the perspective of the geographies of education and the offerings of recent urban studies; subsequently following this is the discussion of some noteworthy points in the interdisciplinary research on educational spaces under transformation, with particular reference to flexible learning spaces and outdoor education.

Chapter 3 offers a look into the research context in which the research operates. To begin, landmark moments in the history of Italian schooling are highlighted, as well as the normative framework that gave way to the development of experimentation within the mainstream system. The following section explores the background of the experimentation networks and introduces the specific schools under investigation. After this, comes a presentation of the current configuration of alternative education in Italy which outlines the scale and reach of the phenomenon.

Chapter 4 illustrates the methodological approach and the modification of the research design due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The recruitment processes are also discussed and analysed within the three research programmes which compose the multi-method approach: 'The School Of My Dreams', 'What's Education For', 'All About Your School'. The chapter ends with the ethical considerations and challenges encountered during the fieldwork experience at the schools, with particular reference to the difficult circumstance of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Chapter 5 marks the beginning of the empirical research and is the first of three. Here, the thesis takes on the first research objective, attempting to outline the factors which lead parents to choose a non-traditional school for their children. It analyses the fine link between place of residence and school, the possibility to choose private equivalent schools and the main themes that emerge from the parent-interviews with those who opted for

non-traditional education. In the final section, focus us placed on the relationship between parental lifestyle and alternative education, shedding light on some of the ways in which this choice impacts on their lives.

In Chapter 6, the focus is on the second research objective. Here, the transformative nature of the school spaces changing from the traditional curriculum to experimentation is investigated. Subsequently, the main physical characteristics aiding the creation of flexible learning settings are illustrated. The practice of appropriating space is defined in collective and individual terms, as well as some of the affordances that emerge from the furnishings and school materials. The section concludes with a discussion of the nature of flexible space and development of outdoor education which emerges in the case studies.

Chapter 7 concludes the analysis, also addressing the second research objective, and some of the spatialities which characterise the spaces with experimentation are identified. The thesis offers a reflection of the role of creativity and imagination, autonomy, heterogeneous learning and uncertainty. The next section deals with the relationship between informal education and its double-function: on one hand, it acts as a complement to the training offer, supporting the privatisation of certain processes of the public school; on the other it operates as a network of social support, increasing the solidarity and connections of the social fabric with the educational community. The final part analyses the relationship with alternative spaces and some of the ways in which the curriculum of schools is shaped through them.

The final chapter is the conclusive section: recalling the principal research objectives, the Chapter 8 illustrates its key contributions in terms of the key areas of scholarship outlined in this introduction. The final section also considers possible future fields of research, in the Italian context, and on a wider scale, in the development of the growing geographies of experimentation in the mainstream school system.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

School is the cornerstone of the spatial experience of children. Contemporary research on education is a huge field, in constant evolution thanks to the opening of a lively interdisciplinary dialogue between different academic disciplines: from the various facets of pedagogic studies, to human sciences, from school policies to economic sciences. This study, written by someone who is not an education scholar, positions itself at the intersection of three areas of scholarship which deal with theoretical issues according to a geographical and social perspective: children's geographies, geography of education and, more specifically, geographies of alternative education. This chapter therefore focuses on the conceptual frameworks on education spaces that are classed as 'experimentation in the mainstream' and, at the same time, on alternative schooling and school choice within the Italian context. The hope is that this thesis can provide academics from different backgrounds with a new perspective on the ways in which traditional and alternative learning spaces are evolving shaped by geographical thinking on.

Among the various approaches proposed by the geographers of education which shall be presented in the following sections (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Hanson Thiem, 2009; Holloway & Jöns 2012) I chose to include the perspective of children's geographies in order to observe the school as a key place in the spatial experience and social protagonism of the students. Therefore, ample space is given to this field of studies in the literature review as it inspired and guided the research design. The discipline is presented through the history of the sub-discipline along the many, and often non-linear paths it has travelled over the

course of time. The first section concludes with a discussion of the lines of children's geographies which are of major interest to this thesis.

The thesis shall demonstrate how for schools with experimentation, it is also influenced by the communities surrounding the schools; and how these communities, through their activities, often contribute to the creation of the social processes which make these spaces alternative and innovative from a teaching point of view. Reflecting on this, I have positioned the study within the recent geographies of informal education and alternative education, illustrating the conceptual frameworks most relevant to this discussion while also opening a dialogue with the radical geographies of education. In parallel, I highlighted three lines of research which intersect in the analysis: the theories and critiques of education; an introduction to school choice, on an international level, and in the Italian context; interdisciplinary research on transforming educational spaces, with a particular focus on the flexible class and outdoor education. In particular, Gibson's theory of affordances is reconsidered and expanded in order to study the experimentation spaces. The section concludes with a macro-level summary of the positioning of the thesis and the complex landscape in which the study navigates.

2.2 Introducing Children's Geographies

Children's geographies are a sub-discipline of human geography that seeks to understand the recursive and co-producing relationship between space and childhood. Its goal is to bring to light to the articulated system of subjective and collective relationships that children establish with the places of their everyday lives, and the ways in which they themselves produce space. In this research area, children, teenagers, and young people under twenty-five are conceived as *'dynamic and social actors'* (Horton & Kraftl, 2006, p. 67), inasmuch as they are creators, *'colonizers of small spaces'* (Ward, 1978, p. 76) and

mediators of the social significance of those places (Christensen & Allison, 2008). As shall be demonstrated in the methodological chapter (see Chapter 4), the field research design found roots in this assumption: giving the children, as competent subjects, the possibility to discuss their own school.

Sarah Holloway (2014) observes that the sub-discipline does not have a single origin, nor does it follow a linear development. In fact, its path has taken it down various roads, with some crucial deviations that include studies of children's games, identity, spatial cognition, mapping abilities and feminist studies of the family. In a work from 2018, the American geographer Stuart C. Aitken identifies three distinct phases: an initial 'impression', born in American geography and influenced by developmental psychology and the environment (from the '70s to the '90s); a concept developed through British and Scandinavian geography, conditioned by factors such as the development of critical feminist and Marxist approaches, as well as the new global initiatives on children's rights (from the '90s to the '00s); a challenge with global aspirations of what we think we know about children's geographies. Without losing sight of the central topic of the spatial experience of children, this last phase (from the '00s to today) – the most copious in terms of literature produced – took it upon itself to move into new interdisciplinary directions and angles, occasionally giving birth to veritable new sub-disciplines, such as, for example, geographies of education and geographies of alternative education, the pillars of this research.

Recent examples of empirical research in the various areas of Children's geographies can be found in the two main academic journals that register the changes and developments of the sub-discipline. 'Children, Youth and Environments', founded in Colorado in 1984, publishes studies of an interdisciplinary nature that concern the relationship between children and physical environments in various countries around the world; 'Children's Geographies', founded in England in 2003 by Hugh Matthews, brings together

contributions that investigate children's places and spatial experiences from a geographical as well as interdisciplinary point of view. Since there is no single manual of children's geographies that covers the entire history of the ascent of the sub-discipline, one must refer to the work of various authors (among the most recent works are Freeman, 2020; Holt et al., 2020; Skelton & Aitken, 2019).

In Italy, the literature on geography demonstrates a lack of contributions dealing with the specific area of research. Nevertheless, noteworthy is Stefano Malatesta's volume 'Geografie dei bambini (Children's geographies)' (2015), which acts as an invitation and introduction to children's geographies. Through a selection of monographed texts, it offers a set of tools for a first contact with the sub-discipline and its immense theoretical framework. Before him, Cristiano Giorda decided to dedicate a chapter of the book, 'Il mio spazio nel mondo (My Space in the World)' (2014, pp. 43–46) to the geographies of children, proposing different points of contact between epistemological topics of the sub-discipline and the major topics of the geography of education, on the contrary known and studied by the Italian academic world. Among these, attention is given to the social and political protagonism of children using the body, orientation in space, the importance of material components of places and various ways of representing the space on the children's behalf. While in educational studies, there are many empirical studies involving children (Mortari, 2009), in the case of the rising Italian children's geographies it is a theoretical literature which is becoming more prevalent. Therefore, this thesis inserts itself within the Italian empirical research context in children's geographies which is still partially unexplored.

In the next two subsections (2.2.1 and 2.2.2) the noteworthy moments of the history of the sub-discipline shall be developed, while in the final subsection (2.2.3) the theoretical tool kit of children's geographies which guides this thesis shall be outlined.

2.2.1 Children's Geographies: First Steps – From Marxist Geography to the Influence of Feminism and New Social Studies of Childhood

A point of departure in the history of children's geographies can be found in the work of William Bunge. The American geographer, famous as the co-founder, together with Gwendolyn Warren, of the Detroit Geographical Expedition in 1968, as well as the Society for Human Exploration in 1971, engaged in what was then particularly innovative work with children. With the aim of visually representing and communicating the disquieting inequalities so evident in the city of Detroit, he constructed maps using unusual units of measurement such as the number of car accidents that resulted in fatalities, or the number of children bitten by rats. Bunge's work adopted a great variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches. He provocatively named his book 'Fitzgerald: geography of a revolution'. *'Like canaries in a coalmine, for Bunge, children were a barometer to measure the wellness of society and spatial statistics revealed the patterns of that sickness'* (Aitken, 2018, p. 9); this idea has been recently repeated through the notion of children as '*indicators species'* by Tim Gill, who observes that the number of children seen playing outside in any suburb can be considered a '*measure of the quality of neighbourhoods'* (https://rethinkingchildhood.com/, site managed personally by Tim Gill).

The term, children's geographies, was coined in the late '70s in the United States. It was used in print for the first time by Roger Hart, who was also famous for introducing detailed interviews and ethnographic methods into research involving children. From the early '80s onwards, the adoption of feminist perspectives and geographical studies of women had a significant influence on the reformulation of the disciplinary concept. One thread of feminist research has explored the ways in which women reconcile raising children with waged work, whilst others have explored geographies of childhood services, the ethics of welfare policies, the representation of motherhood, and, to a lesser extent, of parenthood,

both in physical and digital space. Specially for the Children's Geographies Keynote Lecture 2013, Holloway affirmed that the work on parental geographies has been particularly important because it saved children's geographies from too narrow a focus on the micro-worlds of children, expanding it to include, not only the lives of children, but the ways in which the lives of adults are shaped by their presence or absence. As this feminist climate was sweeping children's geographies, in 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNCRC) was laid out. Political debates in the '90s dealt with the meaning of the concept of childhood, exploring ideas around its biological, social, and psychological nature, but also the political participation of children and their rights. The rise of children to a prominent position in the political agenda favoured a change of paradigm within children's geographies, with the advent of a social approach with the ambition of comprehending the experiences of children as subjects of the world, rather than their ability to perceive space (Horton, Kraftl & Tucker, 2008). In these years, the sub-discipline began a dialogue with childhood studies, and especially with the discipline of so-called New Social Studies of Childhood (NSSC), a wide research field with a sociological, anthropological, and interdisciplinary character, the subject of which was childhood and youth in diverse contexts. At the same time, renewed attention within the field of geographical research was placed upon the everyday life of children (Aitken, 1994; Philo, 1992). This was facilitated by the process of expansion of the geographical subject underway in cultural geography. There is, in fact, a unspoken consensus in the literature in placing children's geographies within New Cultural Geography, a current developed by English geographers '*as a consequence of the so-called 'cultural turn' during the 1980s and 1990s'* (Horton & Kraftl, 2014, p. 12).

2.2.2 From the Stabilisation of the Term Children's Geographies to the Influx of Emotional Geographies

For the first time, the volume, 'Putting children in their place' (1994) by Aitken attempted to draw a map of the history of the geographical study of children. Contributions analysed their everyday spaces (the home, the playground, and most importantly, the school) and placed attention on the material and regulatory conditions that were active in those spaces, demonstrating the coercive forces exercised on children. If, at the birth of the discipline, there was a focus on the perceptions and experiences of children within their environment, many studies from this period proposed to supersede the local scale: geographers such as Valentine, Janeset and Katz began to interweave descriptions of everyday life with a political and economic analysis of globalisation.

The term 'Children's geographies' was truly consolidated in the work of Matthews and Limb, who, in 1999, defined a research programme for the field, which at the time was fragmented due to the absence of guidelines. In 2000, geographers Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine published a volume that collected the decade-long work of various scholars around life experiences, play, and children's learning from various parts of the worlds, with the aim of exploring the mechanisms that legitimise children's role as socio-spatial actors. The diverse case studies ranged from a historical analysis of the gender relations in North American playgrounds in the 19th century, to the experiences of after-school assistance for children in contemporary Great Britain, to street culture amongst homeless children in Indonesia at the end of the 20th century.

In the last eighteen years, academics from around the world, as well as the hardcore of Anglo Saxon scholars have produced a significant quantity of case studies and theories that move in different directions and perspectives: from social to cultural, from political to

economic. Aitken defines this as the third phase of development of the concept of children's geography. Some terms return with frequency, such as the sense of exclusion that children sometimes experience in public places; the modalities of rule negotiation and the roles that every socio-spatial system requires of children, as well as knowledge and interpretation of this system. Due to this insistence, children's geographers have been frequently criticised for an alleged lack of theoretical innovation. Nevertheless, since 2005, children's geographies has reached a turning point: geographers have begun to look into children's emotional geographies and non-representational theory (for instance Blazek, 2019; Blazek & Kraftl, 2015; Horton & Hadfield-Hill, 2014; Valentine, 2004), investigating intergenerational relations, children's emotions, and attempting to satisfy the emerging request for an understanding of spaces as dynamic, politicised, and co-constructed by agents who are co-present and multi-form (Hackett et al. 2015). In this climate of change, in 2006, John Horton and Peter Kraftl take on the task of producing a programme for the future development of the sub-discipline, inviting scholars to think through some contemporary ideas that hold potential for the future of children's geographies. According to them, research should commit to investigating everyday life, the material objects that accompany children's lives, the practices that model them, bodily experiences, geographies of affect, but also rhythms, temporalities and repetitions that permit learning and education.

It should be noted, however, that despite this turning point towards affective geographies, studies of children's geographies have predominantly maintained a preference for geographies of the everyday. This choice has often been criticised, prompting a series of debates around the confines of the sub-discipline. Aitken for example, underlines the need for research that has a higher commitment to discovering the most common impacts of globalisation. Ansell, similarly, explains the predominance of the micro-scale as a

throwback to the precursors of children's geographies, who concentrated on children's perceptions and experiences of their environment, and as a consequence of the dominance of NSSC, so that children are treated as social actors and childhood was for a long time intended as a social construction. In this sense, starting from the first decade of the 21st century, there has been the first true critical examination of the founding principles of NSSC, also called the New Wave (Ryan, 2012). A necessary note of caution: it must be clarified that not all scholars recognise this as a new wave. Nevertheless, on many levels, the theorisations grouped under the umbrella term 'New Wave' offer a more radical conceptualisation of the child and seek to take distance from the idea itself that the child has to be the principal object of analysis of studies on childhood. In particular, a first key premise of this New Wave is that childhood not be seen merely as a social construct. Kraftl observes that few geographers have taken on Prout's challenge to form a new wave of childhood studies that goes beyond the nature-culture dualism, and he seeks to kickstart this programme. Taking inspiration from non-representational theory, he seeks to demonstrate the possibilities of more-than-affective geographies of children. In fact, this spatial turn shares a great deal of terminology and conceptual intent with well-developed geographic approaches, such as those of non-representational theory.

2.2.3 The Children's Geographies Tool Kit in this Thesis

Following the proposals of Horton & Kraftl's development plan (2006), I intend to contribute to the literature on children's geographies by exploring the classroom which is considered as the place where children face the complexity of their spatial experience. In fact, the school experience occupies a large portion of the children's daily lives, therefore their ability to operate carries out a crucial role in the construction of the personal geographies (Hadfield-Hill & Horton, 2014); as explained on various occasions in the literature, within the class there is an authentic social system made of materials, roles,

habits, emotions, strongly spatialised practices and more-than-social processes (Kraftl, 2013). For the purpose of this thesis, I adopt a geographical concept to which Horton and Kraftl propose paying renewed attention: spatialities (*'to capture the ways in which the social and spatial are inextricably realized in one another'*: Pile & Keith, 1993, p. 6, cited in Kraftl, 2013, p. 1). This idea helps to orient oneself among the folds of the theoretical framework represented in the analysis chapters with particular reference to materials, habits and practices (see Chapters 6 and 7). The objective is to identify and describe examples of the spatialities that characterise the spaces with experimentation under examination.

Regarding the influence of emotional geographies, the thesis proceeds by focusing on how the various school places with experimentation make the children feel. In this case, reference is made to the concept of emotions as a *'rich moral array through which and with which the world is thought, and which can sense different things even though they cannot always be named'* (Thrift 2004, p. 60). Through the field research, it was possible to come into contact with the mechanisms through which the child relates to the places of their everyday life, and how they attribute these subjective social preferences and functions. While emotions and perceptions often feature in the stories and drawings from the 'All About Your School' programme, there was no real focused research on how the children characterise the spaces of the school from an emotional point of view. Due to COVID-19, the physical undertaking of some of the research programmes could not be completed as originally planned (see Chapter 4) and in consequence, it caused substantial modifications to the focus of the research of the thesis itself (see Chapter 1). In the creation of the lapbook, great importance, however, was afforded to the sphere of experiences and personal perceptions within the mechanisms through which the group construct places,

for example socially recognised codes, negotiations and practices (Hadfield-Hill & Horton, 2014).

While this research is focused on spaces allocated to the children, I have aimed to go beyond the idea of the child as the main object of study and to give equal attention to the parents' choices (see Chapter 5), the experiences of teachers and head teachers, material aspects and the spatialities that make up the spaces in which the schools with experimentation take shape (see Chapters 6 and 7). In the same way, even if I do not take inspiration from theoretical system linked directly to feminism, in the programme of interviews with the parents, 'The School Of My Dreams', I discuss how the choice of a non-traditional school for children can shape the lives of the parents in various ways. Therefore, I use different scales offering a perspective which not only observes what occurs within the schools, but also observes what occurs on the outside (Collins & Coleman, 2008). In doing this, the work has been inspired by some educational geographers who shall be referenced in the next section in order to enhance my tool kit through the perspectives of this vibrant sister sub-discipline.

2.3 The Geographies of Education

The geographies of education focus on the contribution geography can offer to our understanding of education (Taylor, 2009) and to the modalities in which the everyday school experience can be conceptualised in spatial terms. As the most recent literature reviews demonstrate (Kraftl et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2017; Waters, 2017) the perspectives through which education is observed come from various fields of the geographical disciplines: urban (for example Boterman, 2022; Butler & Hamnett, 2011; Johnston et al., 2008), social (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Holt et al., 2017), cultural (Mills & Kraftl, 2016), political and economic (Mitchell, 2018; Pykett, 2012; Waters, 2017).

Given this plurality between the paths and traditions, Kraftl (2014) observes that it is not a coincidence that when referring to geographical research on education, the plural is used: geographers have investigated education using different methods and scales which are often very distant to one another. A simple example of this would be the following: some urban geographers use quantitative methods such as statistical, technical, and geodemographic in order to analyse the central role of an area in accessing education, and the relationships between residential choices, school choice and urban segregation (Boterman, 2018, 2019); on the other hand, social and cultural geographers prefer mixed methods, but especially qualitative methods when studying immeasurable variables in great depth. An example of which is when geography scholars explored schools as areas where the gender identities were (re)produced (Ansell, 2002; Holloway et al., 2000). Due to these different approaches, over the course of time a debate has opened up regarding the disciplinary statute: can the geographies of education be considered as an autonomous field of studies? For Collin's and Coleman, the answer is yes. In an undoubtedly dated work, but from a theoretical reach, it is still important and current (2008), academics consider the establishment of the school confines to be a distinctive characteristic of the spatialities produced within and outside of schools. In terms of scale, according to this argument, two strands of work can be distinguished in the geographies of education: a micro-level, which involves studies that deal with practices, habits, routines within school environments; and a macro-level, which includes studies that focus on educational systems, especially the neoliberal restructuring of education. A year later, Hanson Thiem (2009) observe that a great deal of existing work was however carried out using an internal focus and they underline the need for a different approach *'a strategically decentred and outward-looking geography of education'* (2009, p. 155) which refers to education as a transversal topic for several debates. According to this perspective, it is not important that the geography of

education has an autonomous disciplinary statute, but that it operates as a tool for conceptualising the contexts in which educational institutions operate and create, with particular reference to the great global processes such as neoliberalism, globalisation and the knowledge economy. In fact, some geographers have identified education as a key element in analysing the social reproduction of cities and social struggles (Katz, 2009). On another note, the review by Holloway, for whom the geographies of education should focus less on the political and economic aspect and more on putting social and cultural geographies at the centre of research while maintaining an internal and external point of observation. Looking within does not mean the exclusion of the body of research on the development and planning processes of schools and the impact that school experiences have on students, for example, the reproduction of social inequalities and the way in which they shape the future life opportunities of the students (Hamnett & Butler, 2011; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). This review harmonises with my work and part of my research design was inspired by this approach; however the observations of Hanson Thiem are still crucial to my work in lending attention to a larger scale, a position which significantly inspired subsequent research on geographical education, for example, in the discussion between neoliberalism and the sectors of traditional and alternative education (Kraftl, 2013; Mitchell, 2018). In this field, Finn (2016) observes, through the strong use of data and evaluation indicators, monitoring, improvement in schools, how the concern of maximising productive conditions of schooling is a direct consequence of the restructuring of capitalist education. Other scholars have highlighted social cost and the impact that this restructuring has brought of the lives of students with migrant backgrounds (Cahill et al., 2016). These papers are some examples of how the approaches can overlap. In fact, in the last decade, geographers of education have begun to focus on the relationships between different branches of geography (Kraftl et al., 2022) with the consequence that the

disciplinary confines within the geographical research on education remain blurred and cannot always be categorised.

2.3.1 Broadening the Research Agenda of the Geographies of Education.

The studies in children's geographies and the rising geography of education, especially in the first decade of the 2000s focused on traditional school; some of these studies covered the importance of formal and informal educational programmes (Hemming, 2007; Valentine et al. 2002) while maintaining a division between the two. The value of shifting attention to external activities connected to school space is recognised in feminist research, for example, the journey the children and parents take to get to school (Kearns et al., 2003; Ross, 2007; Schwanen, 2007) or after-school activities (Smith & Barker, 2004). In their literature review, Holloway and Jöns (2012) underline the importance of expanding the typologies of learning sites considered by research as beyond the mainstream with the aim of also mapping spaces which are not represented at times. In this perspective, the most significant and original contributions come from the geographies of alternative education and informal education.

i. Geographies of Alternative Education

In the UK and Italy, alternative spaces include Farm schools, Forrest schools, Montessori Schools, Steiner Schools, and forms of parental education like homes-schooling and unschooling, as well as libertarian schools. As shall be explained in the research context chapter, alternative education takes on various different forms according to the country and type of school system (for an in-depth explanation, see Chapter 3); to date, in academic literature, there is no standard definition for alternative education, the term *'fragmented landscape'* is more often used (Sliwka, 2008, p.1), and this encompasses learning sites operating outside of the mainstream school system. That which occurs in the UK, also

applies to Italy, these learning spaces are not directly financed by the government and they do not follow the national curriculum directions set out by the Minister of Public Education; often they are not even schools but itinerant groups of children whose activities are managed by facilitators in different locations each day, as is the case with parental schools (Fazioli, 2020). These are spaces that can be seen as alternatives to neoliberalist school and education known in the mainstream (Kraftl, 2015). The field of studies of the geographies of alternative education starts off from the results of a twenty-year research programme by Peter Kraftl (2006, 2013, 2013b, 2014, 2018, 2020) with the subject of contemporary alternative learning sites in the United Kingdom. This research has subsequently inspired geographers from various backgrounds who have widened the field. For example, exploring how the spaces of alternative education can be conceptualised in non-western contexts, like the Pioneer Academy, an international clandestine Christian school in urban China (De Silva, Woods & Kong, 2020), and sometimes using the tools of historical geography: the work of Fairless Nicholson (2018) focused on black educational spaces which were part of the movement for black education in London from the end of the '60s to the '80s while the Italian geographer, Ferretti investigated the teaching experiences of the historical anarchist schools at the of the nineteenth century (2016).

The premise from which the work of Kraftl takes life is that not only is it impossible to separate the spatial processes from the social processes (Lefebvre, 1974), it is also especially important to investigate the ways in which they can be productive among themselves (2013). As such, it begins with the research of spatialities, in the sense already mentioned by Pile and Keith (1993) and adapting the concept in an innovative way to the spaces of alternative learning with the aim of analysing them comparatively. In this discussion, great importance is reserved for the connections and disconnections with the external (a topic which shall be analysed in greater detail in subsection 2.3.3) as well as

the materiality which shall be investigated through the assistance of Actor Network Theory (ANT). It rests in particular on how the different combinations between order, disorder and temporality can create different effects and feelings. One example comes from the Steiner School, where the home atmosphere experimented is created through a combination of various elements such as simple wooden furnishings, the aroma of bread, and the calm voice of the teacher. A second aspect is the identification of a range of practical strategies through which facilitators of alternative school manage to variate bodily movements and extend mobility through manual work, playing, art, down time, the variety of places to conduct lessons. Some of these themes will be investigated in the analysis chapters of this thesis and used as models to describe the spatialities of the spaces in experimentation within public schools. A further contribution by Kraftl which inspired my work is the role of personal relationships and research on visions of life itself which emerge from these alternative learning spaces. In this last thread, the connections with the work of feminist geographers, Gibson and Graham (2006; Roelvink, Martin & Gibson-Graham 2015) are evident and clearly stated. This last topic discussed by the author is very important in understanding how the alternative spaces can truly make a difference within the neoliberal system and why they are important. I will return to this point in the concluding chapter (see Chapter 8).

ii. Geographies of Informal Education

In the same years in which studies on the geographies of alternative education were developed, another trend emerged bringing to light the importance of the geographies of informal spaces which refer to *'a range of perspectives on how informal educational practices operate in, through and as spaces'* (Mills & Kraftl 2014 p. 5). Informal learning spaces include associative spaces, music clubs, gymnasiums and religious institutions but also everyday places such as squares, street corners and parks. This temporal and spatial

link with the places of everyday life and free time has been repeatedly underlined (Falk et al., 2009; Mills & Kraftl, 2014), even considering that informal learning can take hold in various ways. For example, the geographical literature has questioned youth work spaces (Bradford, 2014; Davies, 2014; Dickens & Lonie, 2014; Spence, 2014) and the potential of youth-led spaces as catalysts of cultural change (Ditton, 2014); the supplementary education sector has also recently been looked at, reflecting on how it can be used in a socially differentiated way in order to increase achievement in mainstream contexts (Holloway & Kirby, 2019). In fact, this field of study immediately began to be interested in the role of informal education in the public (Jeff, 2007; Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019) and spaces of care and solidarity (Cheng, 2016) and political activism (Mills, 2014) that can arise within it. This theme will be relevant in Chapter 7, especially in the case of the Outdoor School 'Trotter Park'. One of the topics repeatedly discussed, and pertinent to this thesis, are informal natural spaces (Bannister, 2014; Mills, 2014) which have given way to a profound reflection on the interconnections between indoor and outdoor spaces of informal education (Kyle, 2014) and on the materiality of outdoor education (Dunkley & Smith, 2019; Hickman Dunne, 2019; Morris, 2019). These environments have points in common with some alternative learning sites which will be discussed in the next sections.

The next section shall outline the critiques of traditional school which contribute to the development of the alternative and the expansion of informal education in Italian public schools. It is important to provide a premise: the geography of alternative and informal education does not propose giving a judge of value to these critiques but it has the aim of forcing reflection on how they are incorporated in the social and material establishment of the educational spaces (Kraftl, 2015).

2.3.2 The Critiques of Traditional School with Particular Focus on the Italian Perspective

Alternative education is supported by various streams belonging to the vast intellectual and political movement of school criticism. In the first place, some criticism comes from critical pedagogy where teaching activities and standardised grading favour students coming from upper class families and they are not adapted to all learning styles, even in the student protests of '68 and in contemporary activism. The context of this research is the Italian landscape, and therefore, the work of Don Lorenzo Milani in the 1960s stands out. His work promoted an experience of public pedagogy in Barbiana, a small, forgotten village in the mountains of the diocese of Florence.

In 1967, Milani published his famous work 'Lettera ad una professoressa (Letter to a teacher)', an alternative education manifesto, and an indictment of Italian public school of the period, which was guilty of reproducing and reinforcing the socio-economic and cultural inequalities within society, preventing social mobility and providing no means for less fortunate students to succeed in their education. In opposition of this system, Don Milani and his students put forward some radical proposals: '*In order that the dream of equality does not remain a dream, we propose three reforms. 1. Do not reject. 2. Those that seem stupid, give them full-time school. 3. The listless, just give them purpose*' (Don Milani, 1976, p. 80). Don Milani is, along with Montessori, the best-known Italian educator in the world. However, some scholars have been able to give it a critical re-reading. A particularly significant work, 'Don Milani, a lesson in utopia' (Santoni Rugiu, 2007), analyses the complexity and scale of the pedagogical figure of the Barbiana parish priest, without negating his limits, such as his extremist, argumentative self-referential tone, and his rudimentary teaching methods which were sometimes of little content, and his quickness to resort violence '*we also use the whip in extreme cases*' (Don Milani, 1976 p. 82). What

emerges from the provocative 'Lettera ad una professoressa', however, is a call for greater state commitment to normal education and social intervention of organisations towards the introduction of more educational activities in the afternoon.

> *'You know fine well that to get everyone through the entire programme, the current two hours a day of school is not enough. So far you have solved the classist problem. Make the poor repeat the year. Tutor the petty bourgeoisie. For the highest class it doesn't matter, everything is tutoring. [...] After-school care is a fairer solution. The child repeats their work, but they do not fail the year, if they do not work hard, and you are stand united with them in guilt and punishment'* (Don Milani, 1976, p. 84)

Don Milani's proposal was not executed after his death. However, the need to strengthen the network of informal education, which up until the last century in Italy had mainly been managed by religious institutions, became increasingly more urgent and was also felt by the middle class. After the Sessantotto protests in Italy, a number of legislative measures were aimed at supporting families in the most industrialised areas, where both parents worked, including Law no. 820/1971, which approved the first full-time education experiments in elementary and middle schools. Despite the aforementioned limits, Don Milani has some knowledge of the critical history of neo-Marxist sociology and economics which accuse schools of having the reproduction of social inequality as their main objective rather than education itself; this criticism accuses the school system of reproducing social hierarchies, pushing the students obey the hierarchy and conform to discipline (Bowles & Gintis, 1979).

Much cited in studies on education, and relevant to this topic too is the criticism of control of the body which takes root in the work of philosopher and sociologist, Foucault. In *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, 1975, Foucault describes the school through the metaphor of the panopticon as a place organised in a capillary way to govern children in the body, mind and self-awareness itself. The idea behind the panopticon design (from

ancient Greek, 'pan' – παν meaning 'all', 'opticon' – ὀπτικός meaning' visual', literally 'total vision', my translation), is allowing a sole supervisor to observe the subjects without allowing them to realise whether they are being controlled or not (Bentham, 1995). In this view, the bodies receive their status from their position and they can be rewarded or punished. But Foucault's school of reference is that of Jesuit origin which served as a model in Europe in the centuries of the Counter-Reformation (Cambi, 2003). Despite this, the idea has often been linked to traditional school and is taken up again by children's geographers (Philo, 2011) while other scholars have reflected on the rules over children's bodily functions (Conroy 2010; Pike 2008), for example, the control of food or the use of the toilet, and up to what point the State must undertake in educating students.

A final criticism of school which derives from neo-Marxist economics (Bowles & Gintis, 1979), is fundamental not so much for alternative education, but for understanding the cultural substratum from which experimentation in the mainstream moves, the subject of this thesis, concerns the fragmentation of school subjects; this process continues in the curriculum of high schools which, in the Italian system are still influenced by the Gentile Reform of 1923, presenting different pathways to students in the world of work corresponding to their social standings (see the subsection of Research Context 3.2). This fragmentation mirrors a society divided by class, convincing students of the legitimacy of existing power relations (Ballarino & Panichella, 2021). The criticism of neo-Marxist school is in turn, echoed in the romantic criticism of modernity, an important thread for which urbanisation, industrialisation and bureaucracy have negative effects on the construction of solidarity and community relations (Ballarino & Panichella, 2021). From here there is a need to rethink a different school organisation which values diversity and spontaneity of children's behaviours (Rousseau, 1762). In one of his works, the founder of the No Backpack network, Marco Orsi, formalises the global curriculum approach, a

contrast to the curriculum divided into the typical subjects of traditional Italian public schools, where the schools' participants, as well as the disciplines, have separate competency fields and rarely promote a real interdisciplinary dialogue. With this type of approach, there is no systemic vision on the complex matter of the school experience. Orsi criticises not only the clear symbols of a segmented curriculum, but also the vision of education itself which this fragmented form of curriculum reveals:

> *'The backpack – however, this applies also to objects such as the bell, an ode to the sirens of Taylor-like factories, where, upon its ringing, everyone must enter and exit work at that exact moment – also sheds light on those 'basic assumptions' which highlight an organisational act, and a parcelled out, fragmented and divided teaching model. These basic assumptions are formed on the fundamental duality between learning and teaching: the territory of the pupils, the territory of the teachers, the former are passive and the latter are active, the former are spectating listeners and the latter are speaking protagonists. The sterile, logically divided space, the inter-disciplinary disintegration, the control of bodies, the division between directives (the teaching delivered by teaching staff) and the enforced (the learning done by the others), the individualism of the teacher in contrast to that of the pupil as well as the division of times, standardised teaching, and planning by objectives are all elements which echo an organisation following the commandments of a Tayloristic model which, while in crisis in Western factories, appears to be dominant in schools.'* (Orsi, 2015, p. 35)

The school bag is presented in its symbolic and practical form, a bag in which objects and tools which are not available on-site are placed. He is entrusted with a new reading plane which leads the founder of the Network to outline the backpack as a symbol of a fragmented curriculum:

> *'The segmented curriculum is, emblematically, reproduced inside the backpack, inside of which, each teacher wishes to be represented by their own 'subject' with their books, their texts and photocopies, their jotters, their tools. The backpack is a place of power which becomes a concrete weight, balanced upon the shoulders of the children. It also poses a psychological weight due to the daily struggle experienced by pupils as they attempt to find a common thread of knowledge which should lie beyond the single subjects which follow one another behind the teacher's desk.'* (Orsi, 2015, p. 76)

According to Orsi, the lack of a shared vision and common goal causes the school to split into many little units, each independent from the other. Therefore it is important to rethink the curriculum in order to establish the school experience and harmonise the various units into a common vision with shared values and objectives, not only among the school staff, but on all matters which factor in on the production of the school experience. It can be observed that the same law of autonomy (Presidential Decree 275 of 1999) commented on in the research context proposes following a similar perspective in the construction of the training offer plan (POF). It is in fact an idea that on a theoretical level is promoted by the policy makers of the Ministry of Education but which on a practical level is not at all easy to apply with only the resources available within the public school.

2.3.3 Intersections across Alternative, Informal and Mainstream Education

In the geographical literature, some studies have tried to define the boundaries and contexts of informal education in different ways (Mills & Kraftl, 2014), underlining from time to time the practical and political links with the formal, non-formal and alternatives. The character of connection and disconnection, dealing with places that often arise in the public space and cannot be completely autonomous, is evident. They are by nature intrinsically and extrinsically connected to each other. This process is equally present, even if sometimes less evident, when it comes to alternative education. It is no coincidence that some theories of alternative education have different points of view on this issue. Fielding and Moss (2011) highlight the social engagement of alternative spaces in society but do not emphasise the connection character with other institutions (Kraftl, 2013, Tannock, 2014); Woods and Woods (2009) try and fail to classify alternative spaces as separate, engaged and active with other social spaces. Similarly Ferguson and Seddon (2007) recognise the intersections of alternative spaces with other social spaces through theorisation of the idea of 'learning bubbles'. Along this line Kraftl, inspired by the theory

of autonomous geographies (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006) defines as autonomous the spatialities of alternative learning space, setting aside the exception of purely alternatives. According to the argument advocated by Kraftl these are indeed spaces that over time can '*negotiate and combine many forms of connections and disconnections'* (2013, p. 113), observing for example how forest schools and care farms emphasise their relationships with local communities more than others. These connections allow for the creation of a bridge between alternative practices and society. Here, some important work of Pimlott-Wilson and Coates (2019) can be used as an example to understand the various levels of intersections between formal and alternative/informal education. The case study is not so different from what in Italy is called 'experimentation in the mainstream'. It analyses two English public primary schools that adopt a Forest School programme, involving students in activities based on practical and cooperative experiential learning. However, this occurs in two different ways: one case in outsourcing, that is through the outsourcing of school activity in the form of informal education thanks to the collaboration with facilitators who operate in the field of alternative education; in the other case through training in the forest school approach by a teacher within the school. However, these are experiences that take place in precise periods of the semester and have nothing to do with the daily life of children, as happens instead in the Italian experiments that involve the curriculum of public schools in an integral and continuous form. Despite this, they are crucial for observing the boundaries between alternative, informal and mainstream education, offering important insights within a global context and in continuous geographical development. Similarly, the experiments in the public school that this thesis deals with translate into an expansion of the long-term educational offer that makes the geographies of education and alternative education more complex. They have the advantage of increasing insight into the transformations that are taking place in the way children are

educated and prepared for the future job market. The field research of Chapters 6 and 7 intends to contribute to this specific area.

2.4 School Choice

As has been seen in the previous sections, the geographies of education have over time discussed a number of international and institutional bodies of work (Puttick, 2022). Among these, school choice has assumed a leading role, defined by scholars as a *'global phenomenon'* (Ball & Nikita, 2014, p. 82). In fact, there are many countries in the world which, within their scholastic system, are increasing choice for families in various ways. Jeynes (2014) underlines that the attractiveness of this concept derives from the fact that it triggers three common aspirations among parents in the Western world – freedom of choice, educational quality, control understood as *'a sense by the parent of the possession of more power to determine the kind of school atmosphere and curriculum their child is exposed to'* (p. 1). In fact, many parents think that they can make a difference with their choices in offering the best possible education to their children (Lankford & Wyckoff, 2006). At international level the reading on school choice has a tendency towards the quantitative as in Italy. However, in most comments there were no general theoretical predictions about student sorting with choice (Hoxby 2003) and often a lot depends on the structure of the choice mechanism itself and the analysis method used in the study (Burgess et al., 2007; Neal, 2002).

If in the western world extending choice in education is becoming popular policy (Burgess et al., 2007), in Italy, outside the big cities, when discussing mainstream school there is no such thing as the true possibility of choice for all. As observed in the next chapter (Research Context), beyond the Catholic-oriented private schools, there are only a few hundred public schools which conduct experimentation within the curriculum, and they are

irregularly spread throughout the Italian Peninsula. Similarly, alternative education is a small-scale phenomenon, around which at the time of writing this thesis there are no official data from the MIUR and on which it would be difficult to conduct quantitative studies. In fact, at the moment there is no Italian academic literature on the subject. It is interesting, however, to observe in which forms school choice is developing in Italy and to compare it with the existing literature. This discussion has started from the perspective of what sociologists define as the *'global middle class*' (Ball & Nikita, 2014. p. 83), on which the attention of many international studies has focused as it is characterised by parents who make more active choices (Van Zanten & Obin, 2010); this particular social group in fact differs from the working class which tends to make more passive choices, attending the nearest school or directly entrusting children with greater power in influencing choices in families (Reay & Ball, 1996). In the field research of this thesis, parents who belong to the Italian middle class were therefore selected (see Chapter 4, Research Methods), which represent, in any case, the great majority of those who joined the programme 'The School Of My Dreams'.

2.4.1 The Influence of Urban Studies

Most of the contributions on school choice come from urban studies, which have repeatedly analysed the relationships between school choice, residential choices (Hamnett & Butler, 2011; Harris & Johnston, 2008), mobility and segregation (Boterman & Lobato, 2022). In respect to North European countries there is much less reading available on these subjects in Southern countries (Maloutas & Lobato, 2015; Santangelo et al., 2018). As occurs in other European and USA cities (Boterman, 2021; Burgess et al., 2011; Hamnett et al., 2013), in Italy too the parents tend to choose the schools for their children, based on proximity to home (Ballarino et al., 2009; Barone 2011), especially in the case of public schools. Nechyba (2003) notes that when admission to a school depends on residence a

school system based only on public schools amplifies the spatial segregation more than that in the private system. At the same time, however, some studies have shown how the existence of a possibility of choice aggravates school segregation (Boterman, 2019, 2020; Kosunen et al. 2016), with particular reference to those families that have limited or no economic and social means and they may not possess the intellectual faculties to inform themselves. The question is therefore very complex and even in critical literature there are different and sometimes conflicting points of view on the subject.

In the field of education geographies, an original contribution is that of Boterman (2022) who uses a relational perspective to illustrate educational inequalities, combining a geographical framework with the approach of sociology of education. Boterman explores the strategies in which parents take mixed forms of capital, above all cultural and economic, in education and housing to ensure access to preferred primary schools, adopting criteria for choice that mainly concern social homogeneity and a good school climate (Boterman, 2013). In the Italian context, the study by Cordini, Parma and Ranci (2019) offers a surprising quantitative analysis. It shows that 56% of primary school students in Milan, a city that is also part of the research sample for this thesis, do not enrol to local government schools. The vectors of choices in fact move families towards private schools or towards public schools in the centre, reproducing the phenomenon of the *'white flight'* (p. 3229). The movement generally starts from the most disadvantaged peripheral areas, where there are quotas of foreign students exceeding the 30% threshold. The study observes that only 3% of private school students in Milan are of foreign origin and only a few come from a disadvantaged social background. The private schools in Milan therefore present a homogeneous and basically white social environment. However, the study does not investigate the educational qualities of the schools that attract students: it is based on criteria strictly related to users. However, the study assumes further importance when

compared to the academic literature which sees Italian private schools as less attractive in terms of education quality than state schools (Bertola, Checchi & Oppedisano, 2007; Brunello & Rocco, 2008), leaving one question open: why are private schools in Milan so attractive for upper-middle class families?

These studies are resumed in Chapter 5 'Primary school choice in Italy', extending the view on how private schools and public schools with experimentation attract students outside the assigned catchment area. Another aspect that characterises the body of literature on school choice is that there are many comparative analyses of choices made but few studies that focus on how decisions are made within families (for exceptions, Reay & Ball, 1998). To fill this gap, Chapter 5 will focus on this issue, enlarging the field to non-traditional schools.

2.4.2 Radical Geographies of Education and Alternative School Choice

Some studies of education geographies have shown the crucial role of formal and informal curriculum in moulding young people's future (Holloway et al., 2010), how aspirations can be shaped through the curriculum (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011), how they can influence experiences in the present and in the future (Holt, 2007; Riley & Ettlinger, 2011). In the book 'Making Workers – Radical Geographies of Education', Mitchell observes that '*choice is a key component of neoliberalism because it rests on ideas of both individual freedom and individual responsibility*' (2018, p. 26). In fact, it cannot be ignored that, in many contexts, this expansion of choice has already transformed mainstream education into a market that responds to the logic of '*supply and demand*' (Ball & Nikita, 2014). Other studies show that in reality alternative education is also a form of privatisation of education as well as a direct consequence of the capitalist market (Katz, 2008). As is the international mobility of students, encouraged by parents who strive to find the best

schools in order to make their children compete better in the global job market in the future (Waters, 2017). In his argument, however, Mitchell observes how the developments of globalisation and new technologies have changed the physical and spatial processes of work, questioning how children are raised and educated and which skills are most in demand in this new global scenario. Today's parents are called to make these choices in an ever-changing context. If once competitiveness, effectiveness and efficiency were the most requested skills on the labour market, today new skills have appeared such as, for example, the importance of being a flexible worker in a constantly changing economy (Mitchell, 2018). The scholar also observes how the very spirit of multiculturalism has changed, passing from a conception in which society was concerned with forming tolerant citizens to another more utilitarian and less civic conception, in which diversity becomes strategic in order to create a competitive advantage in the global market (Mitchell, 2003). In this sense, school choice, which arises above all in sociological studies, turns out to be a profoundly geographical and political theme. The majority of the literature reviews on the topic of alternative schooling and school choice come from the academic world of the United States, a very different educational scenario to the European context (for example, Osborne, Russo & Cattaro, 2012). Therefore, beyond the alternative education landscape, there are different options within the state system, such as charter schools, technical schools and magnet schools, the model most similar to Italian experimentation schools within the mainstream system. Such alternative learning spaces are important because they increase educational opportunities for children and, in some cases, optimise their life chances. They do this by interconnecting in different ways with the mainstream. To give a practical example, what the research by Pimlott-Wilson and Coates (2019) reveals unexpectedly is that an alternative education programme such as that of the Forest School in public schools, which by definition should act as a challenge in traditional contexts,

develops 'soft' skills in children that could be valued by neoliberal states. These skills are for example the development of teamwork, flexibility, self-efficacy and problem solving. Chapter 7 of this thesis will return to these issues, opening a dialogue with the geographies of alternative education and showing how not all the processes of experimentation in the Italian public school follow the logic of individualism and competitiveness but are sometimes inspired by different visions and versions of life itself (Gibson & Graham, 2006; Kraftl, 2013). In fact, some parents choose alternative schools to develop different skills and to detach themselves from the conformity to dominant ideas which instead guides choices in the mainstream (Van Zanten & Kosunen, 2013). An example is homeschooling, for some scholars a response to the neoliberal restructuring that has changed the roles that institutions take part in in children's lives (Henley, 2021). In this regard, the study by Collom and Mitchell summarises the work of some previous researchers by trying to outline four categories that guide the choice circuits of those who choose parental education: '*(a) religious values, (b) dissatisfaction with the public schools, (c) academic and pedagogical concerns, and (d) family life*' (2007, p. 207). These criteria can sometimes be extended and combined with other alternative learning sites, with the difference that those looking for a forest school or a farm school choose a school that has a different relationship with the outdoors and with movement, as shall be seen in the next sections. The circuits of choice that guide the choice towards a non-traditional school are in fact very complex and require different levels of reading which sometimes overlap with each other.

2.5 From the Geographies of Education to Learning Spaces from an Interdisciplinary Perspective

Over the past thirty years, the construct of the learning environment has found itself at the centre of the interdisciplinary debate encompassing the geographies of education,

pedagogical reflection, architecture and social policies. This section shall present some models which resonate with the analysis of this thesis, and which shall be referenced throughout the discussion. As seen in the previous section, with the development of the geography of education, an eclectic literature on educational spaces has accumulated (for further reading, refer to Kraftl et al., 2020; Kučerová, Holloway & Jahnke, 2020), responding to the need to expand on the interpretation of what counts as an educational space (Holloway 2010), the geographies have observed how there are numerous learning spaces in today's world which are in constant evolution. A further expansion on the geographical conceptualisation of learning spaces has been argued, focusing on the analysis of four emerging areas (Brooks, Fuller & Waters, 2012): 1. International and transnational spaces, paying particular attention to the international mobility of students; 2. Spaces of political debate for example, the redesigning of school buildings; 3. spaces for permanent learning, in accordance with the perspective of continuous learning which is now present in the professional and business worlds; 4. Cybernetic spaces and virtual learning, which are supported by the most recent EU policies. In this discussion, the most interesting aspect of the Brooks, Fuller and Waters study is the second point, because in some way, non-traditional schools are aimed at innovating the current school policies which struggle to accept a paradigm change in the face of different needs in an ever more complex society. These connections with the Italian political space shall be discussed particularly in Chapter 6 which focuses on the study of school buildings and physical space. On a supranational scale, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), through the dedicated entity CERI (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) has recently proposed a reference framework within the ILE project (Innovative Learning Environments) in order to re-design the school spaces and education through innovation. Among the various publications on the various phases of the project

(OECD, 2008; Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; OECD, 2013, 2015), there is one publication, *Innovative Learning Environments* (OECD, 2013) which proposes an identification of the key characteristics of learning environments through the analysis of more than 100 case studies. The need for approaches rooted in the complexity of 21st century society emerges from this analysis. The publication discusses the learning environment in terms of a '*learning ecosystem'*, meaning '*an organic and holistic concept which includes the methods of learning and the context in which the learning takes place: a learning ecosystem which includes learning activities and outcomes*' (OECD, 2013, p. 27). This idea has been taken up several times in the literature (for example Goodwin, 2018; Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010) and has several points in common with the socio-material structure of the geographies of education previously discussed (see subsection 6.2). In the same vein, the work by Kraftl, McKenzie and Gulson (2022) for UNESCO collects studies on three types of learning spaces (built, digital, natural space) by observing how these can be modelled and conceptualised through practices and policies that occur around them. This work is important because it is not limited to the material, functional or aesthetic conditions that favour the use of the spaces for learning but emphasises their impact on the development of skills, relationships, well-being and behaviour.

In the Italian context the work of the pedagogist, Marco Castoldi (2020) shed lights on how rethinking the learning environment beyond the spreading of new working methods, means questioning the school organisational model and the learning setting. The pedagogist identified twelve experiences in the Italian school system by investigating basic principles, meanings and values, operating methods and examples of application. These range from the flipped classroom to modular time, learning differentiated by outdoor education, the need for disciplinary laboratories and continuous experiences which bring about the creation of evermore interdisciplinary lessons in open dialogue with one

another. Inspired by the models mentioned above, a theme will be taken up and expanded in the next section, the flexible classroom, which is important for navigating through the analysis of spaces undergoing transformation in Chapters 6 and 7 and for better understanding the circuits of choice discussed in Chapter 5.

2.5.1 The Flexible Class in Italian Models

Following a trend that has long since spread internationally (Barrett et al., 2015, 2019; Niemi, 2020), a phase of redesign of school classrooms has also started in Italy, whereby the traditional classrooms surrounded by walls and rows of desks are replaced by more flexible, multifunctional and informal spaces. A flexible classroom can, for example, be devoid of desks and desks and, in their place, have coloured circular tables, soft and modular seats, suitable for use for group work. On the walls there may be large writeable and magnetic panels or signs. Instead of the black slate board with chalk, there can be large interactive boards with a video projector connected to a computer. The ways to build a flexible classroom are many and continuously explored in the literature, as evidenced by the empirical research of the PAD-LAB of the University of Bolzano which has recently proposed a path to rethink and redesign school buildings by opening a dialogue between teaching, architecture and design (Weyland & Prey, 2020). Alongside this, the trend towards a participatory or co-design process in school architectures has been replicated (Blackmore et al., 2011; Woolner & Cardellino, 2019) in order to support pedagogical practices and the needs that new educational models require. In the Italian context, among the most significant works there are two useful experiences for this thesis. Firstly, the 'No Backpack' model, a case study of which will be analysed in the next chapters, which is very important for having been one of the first and most widespread experiments in Italy to have rethought the organisational model of the school and the learning environment. As has already been mentioned in the section on school criticism, this network is the only one

of those examined to be able to count on a real critical literature, by the founder Marco Orsi who presents the basic principles starting from a rethinking of the classroom to arrive at a new curriculum and overall organisational model. It does so through the theorisation of a training environment that arises from the combination of intangible elements and resources that it calls '*software*' such as objectives, knowledge, methodologies and material elements that it calls '*hardware*' such as spaces, furnishings, teaching materials, technologies, panels and so on (Orsi, 2006, p. 85).

Despite being a public school subject to the regulations of the Italian Ministry Of Public Education, No Backpack is not organised in the traditional way, instead it is a polytopic space (an environment with multiple places). A polytopic space of this kind welcomes the contemporary development of several teaching activities, unlike the typical monochronic time spent in a monotopic space in traditional schools. The concept of monochronic time is not a new idea however. Hall & Hall (1990) distinguish two different systems of the perception of time, that is, monochronic time and polychronic time. In monochronic cultures, the perception of time is linear, time is divided into compartments, one task is concluded before starting another and in this way, students concentrate on a single task. In polychronic cultures, it is the opposite, time is flexible and is not divided into compartments. In contrast to monochronic systems, in polychronic cultures, many things are done simultaneously. This type of time space management has been noted by several academics in the field who have approached the panorama of alternative schools (Kraftl 2013; Woods & Woods 2009) with special reference to literature concerning the Montessori Schools (Montessori 1966) that in certain ways has inspired the No Backpack network. Carrying out different activities at the same time, students can benefit from teaching which is personalised, dynamic and varied; with multiple activities on offer, it becomes easier to develop, reinforce or recuperate the skills at play in a specific discipline.

A second important contribution to the theory of flexible space in Italy is the manifesto *'1+4 educational spaces for the new millennium'* promoted by INDIRE (National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research) which bears witness to the institutional commitment to give increasingly widespread life to a paradigm shift in Italian school architecture. In the image below the presentation of the poster, source: INDIRE. In this proposal, the number 1 represents the '*group space'*, an environment heir to the traditional classroom which is set up according to a polytopic perspective. The number 4, on the other hand, indicates the other spaces to be introduced into the school building envisaged by the model: the Agora, a large meeting place where everyone can gather to follow events of common interest. The informal space, which makes areas habitable that were previously only passageways through cushions, sofas, chairs or other furnishings capable of accommodating students during breaks; the individual space, where the student can concentrate on his/her activities without being disturbed by the surrounding context; the exploration space, generally connected to laboratories: all those areas where students go when they have to carry out activities that require specific tools, such as, for example, a language laboratory or a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) classroom for activities with high technological potential. These environments are not only designed to be flexible but also adaptable, multifunctional in various educational scenarios as well as supportive and able to stimulate new solutions (Tosi, 2022). These characteristics, however, can be both objective and subjective and much depends on how they are used in daily teaching. For this reason it becomes important to reflect on flexible learning spaces as a socio-material component of school interaction (Orlikowski, 2007; Kraftl, 2013) and to open research to an interdisciplinary perspective.

2.5.2 Reading Flexible Learning Spaces through the Affordances

To evaluate the characteristics of flexible learning spaces, the contribution of environmental psychology is useful, a field that studies the psychosocial aspects of the relationship between people and living environments (Inghilleri, 2021). The first model that inspires is that of Kaplan (1989) according to which an environment is pleasant when it is instantly understood and it is easy to attribute a sense to it. More specifically, it indicates four elements that can be co-present in the structure of places: coherence, complexity, mystery and legibility. In particular, the last two are useful for the analysis of this thesis: The mystery can induce an exploratory activity, the readability must have information that allows students to connect to the mental categories available. The second model drawn on is that of the cognitive psychologist Donald Norman, the first to develop the idea of emotional design, taking into account both biological factors and emotions (Norman, 1988). The scholar distinguishes between three levels of brain processing (visceral, behavioural, reflexive). In the second of them, which is the level linked to experience, he identifies three main elements: the function, i.e. what is expected, the performance, i.e. how well it performs the functions and finally identifies a key characteristic which can be particularly useful even for the classroom: usability (Norman, 1988; 2004), i.e. the degree of ease with which the interaction between the student and the materials takes place. Alongside these two models, Chapter 6 recurrently refers to the theory of affordances (Gibson, 1979). In the vision of the American psychologist, objects in the environment present affordances that directly indicate their possibilities of use. In this way Gibson emphasises the constructiveness of the mind through visual perception. However, the major criticisms of the concept derive from this point: Gibson does not provide any analytical way of identifying affordances. One of these observations comes from Norman, Gibson's former classmate, who criticises the non-univocal legibility of the

concept. Indeed, for Norman, affordances can be both real and perceived, but they do not necessarily correspond to each other. In the same vein, in 1991, William Gaver creates a framework for separating the affordances from the available perceptual information (see Tab. 2). In the classifications, he points out the hidden affordances, which become evident and are repeated only after a certain condition is proposed for the first time:

Table 2 – W. GAVER'S AFFORDANCES MODEL. Source: William Gaver, 1991
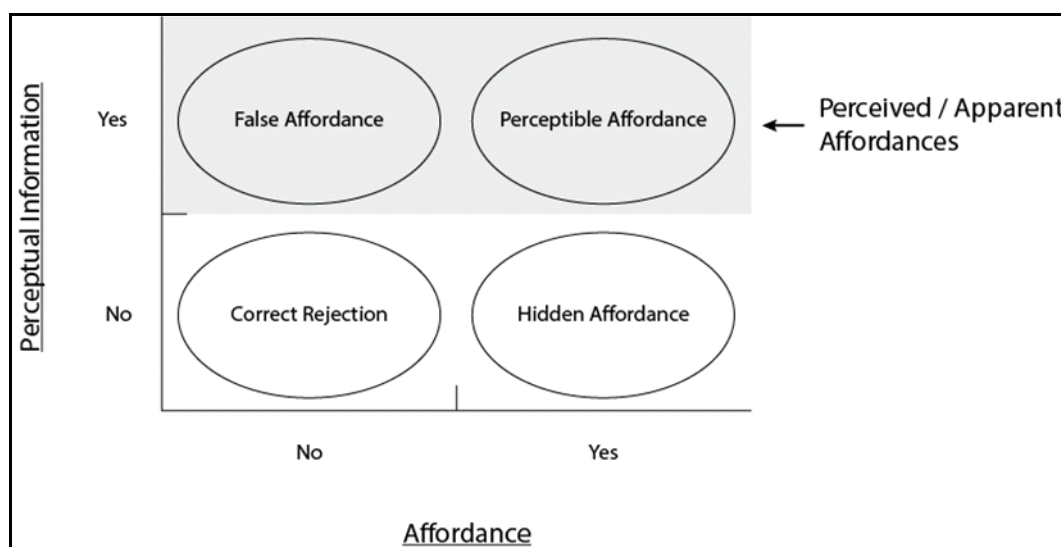
Some scholars do not share the enlargement of the meaning by subsequent studies and think the concept of affordances is distorted and confused; Oliver (2005) even questions that it has any analytical value in the realm of technology and learning. The biggest flaw in his vision lies in the fact that Gibson gives primacy to the environment and recognises people as mere tools. Oliver then decides to bring attention back to the person: it is not necessary to focus on the possibilities offered by the environment but on what the individual imagines could be possible through them. Inspired by these approaches, in Chapter 6 this thesis attempts to try to bring to light the importance of the teacher-student relationship to discover the affordances and hidden affordances of school environments. Thus it reinterprets the very concept of affordance by putting it into question and in dialogue with the social and spatial processes that take place in schools with

experimentation. In doing so, it further broadens the exception of the term by embracing the one proposed by the geographer Kyttä (2008) for which affordances are not only perceived functional opportunities but also contemplate the social and emotional opportunities that that environment offers and produces (Kyttä, et al., 2018). Through this framework the impact of flexible learning spaces on school interaction and teaching is analysed, in order to identify the affordances that characterise each space examined. In the case of mainstream experiments, this thesis does not only focus on the internal space but it attempts, in the footsteps of Harris (2018) and Waters (2017), to explore the affordances of outdoor learning spaces, to which the last section of Chapter 6 will be dedicated.

2.5.3 The Expansion of Outdoor Education Programmes in Schools

In the last thirty years, the international academic community, also through the contribution of the mass media, has produced a vast and eclectic literature to document the habits that characterise the lifestyle of children in Western societies. Among the authors who have made a major contribution in pedagogy in this direction, Richard Louv in his book 'The Last Child in the Woods' (2005) theorises the concept of 'Nature Deficit Disorder', hypothesising that the decrease in experiences in contact with nature in the daily life of children is the cause of a lower psychophysical well-being, not only in terms of physical problems, such as increased obesity, the appearance of allergies and weakness of the body structure, but also on the cognitive level, for example undermining the ability to concentrate and increasing behavioural and emotional problems. Ten years after Louv's work, Peter Gray published 'Free to learn' (2013) in which, among the various theses that reflect his double experience – in the family as a father and work as a psychobiologist, he makes a strong complaint against the traditional school; in his opinion, it does allow the development of children's creative side through play, the activity which comes most naturally to children. Together with these types of pedagogical strands, the global diffusion

of the practices of Nature-Based Therapy (Annerstedt & Wahrborg, 2011; Song, Ikei & Miyazaki, 2016), starting from the assumption that experiences in nature can increase the sense of psychophysical well-being, favour the development of this cultural climate. Agostini and Minelli (2018) divide these practices into two macro-categories: activities that are part of gardening activities (garden therapy, horticultural therapy) and those that benefit from the characteristics of natural environments (forest therapy, adventure therapy, wilderness therapy). The common goal is to take care of one's mind and body, the first tools with which people relate to the environment. However, it has been observed that these trends, despite being increasingly widespread also by the mass media and not always supported by solid empirical evidence, are based on a certain concept of childhood construction that is gradually being reconsidered (Aitken, 2001; Valentine, 2003; Kraftl, 2020). Various studies of the geographies of education, based on empirical research, also reveal how these practices are, in reality, already a part of the daily habits of different schools and informal education experiences (Dunne & Mills, 2019). The highly cited article by Helena Pilmott-Wilson and Janine Coates (2019) considers the curriculum of a forest school which, among the various skills desired in the neo-liberal market, enhances creativity through play; in the same vein, Harris (2018), in the context of research on a forest primary school, observes greater freedom and imagination in children in the use of the affordances and natural objects outdoors. In the Italian context, Bortolotti (2018), one of the main scientific supervisors of the Italian Outdoor Schools Network, observes however how the outdoor experiences provided by the school become fewer and fewer as children get older. It is enough to consider how easy it is to find children's forest schools more and more often, also outside Northern Europe, while for those in the category of high schools and further education it becomes difficult to find projects of this kind. The research

context of the aforementioned studies, as well as the case studies of this thesis, refer to primary schools.

On a pedagogical level, among the most recent studies, 'The Handbook of Outdoor Play and Learning' (Waller et al., 2017), the result of the work of more than fifty international authors, offers an overview of scientific and cultural reflection on the themes of outdoor education, evaluating critical developments, research paths, experiences and methodological approaches. It has been observed that from the very beginning, depending on the type of students it is aimed at, outdoor education has developed different options, defined as Outdoor Learning (OL) when referring to the formal school sector and Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) when they refer to informal activities after school (Farnè et al., 2018). It should also be noted that outdoor learning is not limited to external environments related to nature, but often involves leaving the classroom to enter different internal environments such as museums, churches, libraries. The thesis shall analyse these topics further in the coming chapters, particularly in subsections 6.5.2 and 6.5.3.

2.6 Conclusion: Looking Forward

This thesis aims to study and question the boundaries of traditional and alternative education via a geographical lens in order to offer a new way of our understanding of the relationship between neoliberalism, the knowledge economy and educational systems. Various studies have in fact highlighted education as a means for social inclusion (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017), self-improvement and social mobility (Holloway, 2011) as well as the crucial role played by schools in producing the citizens and workers of the future (Mitchell, 2018). Citizens who are urged to navigate as *'self-reliant, flexible and mobile individuals'* (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017, p. 289) in a job market characterised by economic change and uncertainty in which there is often a fine line between flexibility and job insecurity. The

more recent contributions indicate that most requested competencies of today's post-industrial world of work are linked to transversal and flexible skills (Berti, Simpson & Clegg, 2018; Mitchell, 2018) and, as previously demonstrated, sometimes the curriculum of alternative schools can develop abilities which are appreciated by neo-liberalist states (Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019). In this scenario, even multiculturalism is intended as a skill for the future which makes strategic use of diversity in order to obtain a competitive advantage in the global market (Mitchell, 2003).

This thesis questions the kind of skills and workers of the future that non-traditional schools are cultivating. But above all it aims to understand how, through alternative practices, schools with experimentation are trying to do something different or to distort liberal imperatives. Over the course of time, some geographers have asked if alternative education guided by the state is really as innovative as it seems (Kraftl & Mill, 2016). Starting from these premises, using an Italian perspective, the thesis aims to confront the ways in which non-traditional schools operate within this complex global system under continuous evolution. In order to do this, this chapter has outlines a conceptual framework which will guide the study of the geography of experimentation, exploring the blurred lines between what is seen as the mainstream system, and the alternative. In Chapter 5, the circuits of choice that drive the choice towards a non-traditional school will be considered and how these choices impact on the family's lifestyle and, sometimes, on mobility and residence. In Chapter 6 the focus will be on the ways in which the changing spaces of experimentations in public-school impact on teaching and vice versa; in Chapter 7 the role of informal education and alternative practices in the constitution of these spaces will be discussed. The particular Italian education context, which traces its roots back through the history of the country, shall be outlined in detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH CONTEXT

3.1. Introduction

This chapter shall provide an analysis of some issues relevant to this thesis in order to understand the current functioning of the Italian education system in relation to the global context. Section 3.2 presents the structure and organisation of the Italian school to offer an overview of the context in which the research moves. Subsequently the focus is shifted to the birth of the school and the development of informal education in Italy through analysis of the close historic link with politics and the Catholic Church. This analysis takes a diachronic view of the complex social and educational geographies which characterise the history of the twentieth century. Particular focus shall be given to the mechanism of social reproduction of inequality promoted by the Gentile Reform of 1923 through the set of education system regulations which reformed the Italian school system for the remainder of the century. Analysing the regulations of this provision is crucial because these regulations remained in force, at least the fundamentals, until the Moratti reform at the beginning of the 21st century (Act. No 53/2003) and the successive Act no. 133/2008 which brought about measures for the revision of upper secondary school. The fascistising of childhood was also considered, which took place during the fascist era and the subsequent social mechanisms and repercussions which affected Italian contemporary education. In Section 3.3 alternative education in Italy is introduced, highlighting its roots in activism; a movement that gave birth to Maria Montessori and had a significant impact on the establishment of the first open public schools. Section 3.4 shall discuss the legislation on educational autonomy, and, in particular, on autonomy in operating as a network. Finally in section 3.5 of the chapter presents the backgrounds of the three

alternative experimentation schools within the mainstream system which are the case studies investigated in the analysis (Chapters 6 and 7).

3.2 The Italian Scholastic System

The Italian education system consists of two levels. The first level includes primary school and lasts five years; the second level is made up of both the middle school which lasts three years and the high school which can last from two to five years, depending on the diploma or qualifications to be obtained. Alongside public schools, there are private schools, most of which are managed by religious institutions. Among the various and articulated orientations of the Christian matrix, which have always featured in the history of Italian pedagogy (Cambi, 2003), there are various orders such as the Barnabites, Ursulines, Jesuits, Salesians which, over the past centuries, set up colleges to train children with the possibility of overnight stays in a boarding school. Today, to access these schools you pay a fee that varies according to the type of institution and sometimes the geographical area, so the users are mainly from the upper middle class. If private schools have a curriculum and an educational organisation that complies with ministerial guidelines, they can be recognised as 'equivalent' schools (for numerical data of public and equivalent schools region by region, please see Chapter 5.2). In the Italian context, for example, in addition to religious schools, there are equivalent international schools, where teaching takes place in a bilingual or trilingual form, and there are schools that are inspired by specific global educational philosophies that have achieved parity. Also part of this group are a small number of private Montessori and Steiner Schools which are considered equivalent in all respects. This means that meet the following criteria:

'Requirements to obtain parity:
- educational planning in harmony with the principles of the Constitution
- training offer plan compliant with current regulations and provisions
- attestation of ownership of the management and publicity of financial statements
- availability of premises, furnishings and teaching equipment specific to the type of school and compliant with current regulations
- establishment and functioning of collegial bodies
- enrolment in the school for all students, provided they have a valid qualification for enrolment in the class and are no less than the age established by the school regulations
- application of the regulations in force regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities or in disadvantaged conditions
- organic establishment of complete courses, with the exception of kindergarten: parity cannot be recognised for individual classes, except in the phase of establishing new complete courses, starting from the first class
- teaching staff provided with the qualification
- individual employment contracts for executive and teaching staff that comply with the national collective agreements in the sector.'

(From the Ministry of Public Education website, https://www.miur.gov.it/ – consulted on 13th January 2023)

Among these criteria, two in particular are difficult to adhere to for private schools as they generally rely on fewer human resources than the mainstream. The first is the adhesion of the school to the bureaucratic apparatus of the Ministry of Public Education, which requires considerable expenditure of energy in terms of personnel; the second is the qualification of teachers. Often, in fact, those who teach specific educational philosophies, such as Steiner or Montessori, have generally trained outside the traditional paths. Of the latter typologies, however, it must be considered that most such teachers work in the field of alternative education, which will be discussed in Section 3.5. The Italian school system is in fact a standardised and centralised system in which education is administered uniformly by the Italian government (Ballarino & Panichella 2021). Student paths are differentiated only from high school onwards; while in the primary school context, the context of this research, they show a relatively low degree of stratification.

Experimentations in the mainstream, as I will show in the next sections, therefore represent one of the main strategies for decentralising and diversifying the educational offer.

3.2.1 The Birth of the Italian School

The centralised and standardised character of the Italian school has its roots in the history of the Italian state. The educational system was created under the Casati Law no. 3725 of 13th November 1859, a text originally intended to apply only in two of the most literate areas of Italy: Piedmont and Lombardy (Talamo, 1960). Subsequently, on 17th March 1861 the Kingdom of Italy was established and, from this moment, the school system was extended to the entire peninsula. Various studies (Canestri & Ricuperati, 1976; Turi & Soldano, 1993) observe how a centralised education management system in a single newly established state, such as Italy, does not immediately take root in a uniform manner. This is especially so in the rural, poorer regions, as well as areas in which there is widespread opposition from the institutions of the Catholic Church, which have, for centuries, exclusively maintained the management of education (Faccini, Graglia & Ricuperati, 1976). Over the course of time, the framework of the Casati Law expanded: the second industrial revolution was under way and required increasingly skilled workers. The subsequent Coppino Law of 1877 increased the mandatory education term to three years, bringing elementary school education to the current total duration of five years.

However, the most critical point of the Italian educational legislation at the end of the nineteenth century was the decision to entrust the management of elementary schools to the municipalities: local administrations, which tend to spend little and struggle to find both buildings and trained teachers. The teaching school for training new teachers was only established later, through the Gentile Reform of 1923 and, as the historian Ricuperati

(2018) observes, the few who could study at university did not aspire to unprofitable jobs such as those related to teaching.

Gentile issued the most systemic reform in the history of the Italian school system, which raised the mandatory education age to fourteen years of age. This stayed in force until the early 2000s. At the foundation of the Gentile Reform, which, according to Mussolini, was the *'most fascist of reforms'*, was an aristocratic conception of culture and education. Initially, Gentile refused the proposal of the 1904 Orlando Law, a single middle school for those who would continue their studies at the gymnasium, as well as for those who chose the option of studying at a technical school: in this way, when the child left elementary school, they would have been encouraged by their parents to choose their professional future. This was often decided based on their social class. It was a premature and rigid decision, but there were no alternatives in this system (Ricuperati, 2015). The decision-making process of the Gentile Reform was composed of four settings: the gymnasium which paved the way to classical school and university; the technical school and teaching school, separated into lower and upper courses; and the professional development school with a technical direction, for example, commercial or agricultural studies (Barbero et al., 2021). It must be observed that, thanks to the push of the Gentile Reform, the dominance of humanistic culture over practical manual training cast a shadow over Italian schooling for the duration of the twentieth century. In addition, the actual idealism pedagogy, developed by Gentile, as Cambi points out:

> *'influenced not only the Italian school system, but also the national pedagogical tradition, making a decisive turning point in a spiritualistic sense, and causing a clear rejection of the scientific and secular tradition which, through Positivism, Herbartianism and Neo-Kantianism, had established itself in the teaching culture during the second half of the Nineteenth Century'* (Cambi, 2003, p. 296).

The thrust of activism, inspired by the great masters such as Dewey, Decroly, Claparède and Ferrière, did not therefore officially take hold in the Italian school at this stage. The orientation of activism was democratic politics and soon proved to be antiphrastic to fascism: the objective of the active school was to create a more intelligent, free but also happier person (Borghi, 1984). This international movement, although not spreading in a capillary way in public schools, has sown experiences in recent years, which, although powerful, remain isolated within the peninsula.

Among these it is also important to mention three less famous personalities than Montessori who are equally significant in the history of Italian pedagogy: the sisters Rosa and Carolina Agazzi, whose most significant didactic invention was that teaching material should not be preordained according to scientific criteria, rather, it should be spontaneously and occasionally collected (Agazzi, 1955); and Giuseppina Pizzigoni (1870–1947), founder of the first open-air public school in Milan, built with French doors, a garden, a vegetable garden that allowed the child to always be in a state of exploration immersed in nature (Muraro & Ferri, 2020). The experiences of these educators, however, remained isolated in the growing standardisation and centralisation of public school programmes that takes place at the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, with the arrival of the Gentile Reform, the absolute focus on the figure of the teacher is reinforced as well as the passive lesson (Cambi, 2005), where there is little room for experimenting with new teaching methods or institutionalising the Italian and international experiences of the new schools and active education which spread across Europe and the United states from the end of the nineteenth century onwards (Borghi, 1984).

For a short time Maria Montessori thanks to a partnership with fascism, managed to promote educational experiences in public schools. She acquired a fascist card and became an honorary member of the party while Giovanni Gentile is appointed president of the

Montessori National Opera, established by Royal Decree and born in 1924 from the 'Society of Friends of the Method' (Giovetti, 2018). Two years later, in 1926, the Montessori National Opera was incorporated into the propaganda of the regime, becoming a moral institution: the honorary president was 'Il Duce' Benito Mussolini, head of the fascist government, who donated 10,000 lire from his personal fund to the institution. Thanks to this institution, training courses for teachers were provided and new method schools were activated and fully included in Gentile's reform (Giovetti, 2018). However, this partnership was short-lived: Montessori did not give in to the educational changes requested by Mussolini, and in 1931 she resigned from the Montessori National Opera. Gradually Montessori Schools were closed in Italy and Germany and, despite spreading throughout the world, in the Italian context they remain part of alternative education until the end of the century.

3.2.2 The Historic Links between Politics, the Catholic Church and Informal Education

i. The first half of the twentieth century

Within this historical period of the fascist era, it is evident how school takes on a true organisational and regulatory role within society: it promotes propaganda, it supports paramilitary education, and it erases any form of teaching autonomy, starting with the adoption of a consolidated text both for public and private schools (Marraro, 1936; Tannenbaum, 1974).

The historian Barbero observes how the mere enrolment of children in primary school automatically entails their entry into the youth organisations of the regime (2021). In 1922, a new entity with the aim of managing extracurricular activities, with particular emphasis on physical education, was born, the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB). In the photos below it is possible to see some pupils who celebrate the symbols of fascism (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 – THE FASCISTISATION OF CHILDHOOD Source: Archivio Storico del Sole (Historical Archive of the Sun)

In the photo on the left the official logo of the Opera Nazionale Balilla, in the two photos on the right a lesson with rifles and the Duce's visit to the school.

In fact, this organisation marked the stage of development of each child from infancy to age of consent, dividing children and young people into various groups, each with their own uniform, divided by age and sex, with the aim of bringing them closer to sport, preparing them for military service (Barbero et al., 2021): 'Figli della lupa' (6–7 years), 'Balilla' (8–14 years), 'Avanguardisti' (14–18 years). The sports preferred by the fascist government were those which have scope to be used for purposes of physical military training, as well as team sports which were helpful to the idea of a line of soldiers. Women were divided into 'little' Italians (from 6 to 12 years of age) and young Italians (from 12 to 18 years of age) in order to be trained, and one day, become good mothers, understanding of the fact that they have to give children to not just their families, but also to the Nation. However, the operation of fascism is not just directed towards control over the body; at a

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psychological level, the objective is to manipulate the emotions of children: instil the fascist identity within them, the cult of obedience, the love for country and the Duce.

A vital role in the fascistisation of children was also entrusted to the Catholic Church: the Lateran Treaty of 1929 reinforced the regime and ensured religious education in all orders of school starting from elementary school, as well maintaining regime control over programmes and textbooks. These agreements between the Church and fascist state also guaranteed the survival of many private Catholic schools still present today. Following the end of fascism, the Catholic institutions themselves promoted the main forms of informal education throughout the twentieth century, such as for example through the construction of oratories, places used for catechism meetings and weekend recreational activities. Similarly, thanks to the presence of several Catholic associations, the educational experiment, the 'Boy Scouts', promoted by the former English colonel Robert Baden-Powell spreads throughout the Italian Peninsula (Cambi, 2003). It is important to underline this religious aspect to understand why today's experiments in the mainstream and the forms of informal education mentioned in this research, which have a predominantly secular matrix, are to be considered a real paradigm shift within the history of the Italian school.

ii. Post war

During the post-war period, along with the climate of the Cold War, Italy enters into a neo-capitalist economic development plan thanks to funds from the European Recovery Programme. In these fifty years the Christian Democrats party dominates, a moderate party which is only dissolved in 1994. The only exception was the 1984 European elections in which the Italian Communist Party prevailed. Even in these years the school assumes an important political role of standardisation and centralisation, becoming crucial especially

in a young state like Italy which for many centuries was made up of fragmented territories. The British historian, Ginsborg, observes how within the span of forty years, thanks to the surge of the economic boom and moving from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, Italy witnesses profound changes in its social processes. These include the emergence of an urban national culture, as well as an unprecedented double migration phenomenon, from the countryside to the cities, and from the South to the North (Ginsborg, 1989).

The Marxist pedagogical experience theorised by Antonio Gramsci (Quaderni dal carcere / 'The Prison Notebooks' 1925–35; published from 1948 to 1951) deeply influences the educational strategy of the Italian Communist Party: if the function of school during the Gentile Reform was to reproduce inequality, and keep the social classes well separated through rigid pre-established paths, the post-war period favours a social ascent of sorts, although minor, of the middle class.

This happens through the introduction of a single model for middle school which becomes the same for all its students, and access to school becomes more flexible and less intransigent. However, it remains the case that only those who have the economic means to do so continue to study, that is, only a small portion of those leaving elementary school. Cambi (2005) notes how Gramsci on the one hand emphasises the inevitable notionism and the guiding role of school in a systematic learning culture that is as secular as possible, yet on the other hand, like Gentile, rejects all pedagogical activism and spontaneity. From the sixties, more specialised and technological solutions are proposed in the educational field, focusing mostly on the teaching of foreign languages and mathematical sciences (Ricuperati, 2015). In this scenario, it emerges that both from the Right in the early 20th century and from the Left in the second half of the 20th century, in Italian public schools there was a substantial lack of interest in the activist movement to which alternative

education in Italy was subsequently inspired and which, at the end of the 19th century, when Maria Montessori was born, it was particularly felt and widespread in Italy.

3.3 Alternative Education in Italy

Alternative education includes pedagogical approaches that distance from what is considered mainstream in a given context, therefore it can present differences and different perspectives from country to country (Woods & Woods, 2009). Given the multifaceted meaning of the concept, some scholars speak of a *'fragmented landscape'* (Sliwka, 2008, p. 1). A second meaning of the term is often used to describe programmes dedicated to vulnerable children who are not able to attend traditional schools (Aron, 2006). This last exception is more common in the American and European context but almost absent in the Italian one.

In this context, alternative education spaces include parental schools, various forms of homeschooling, libertarian schools, most of the non-equivalent private Steiner and Montessori Schools, many forest and farm schools and, in general, learning spaces that operate outside the school system. Their presence is made legal by Article 30 of the Italian Constitution according to which *'institutions and individuals have the right to establish schools and educational institutes, without charges for the State'*. Among these typologies, parental schools in Italy present a very varied panorama that sometimes overlaps various typologies. There are parental schools in the woods, Steiner parental schools, Montessori parental schools and schools that mix several educational philosophies, without necessarily having a label. They are managed by groups of parents who decide to educate their children by entrusting teaching to chosen teachers (Fazioli, 2020), often parents themselves, but in pre-established places and times. Although these types of learning spaces are not required to follow ministerial guidelines, they must be compliant and

controlled by the local health authority (ASL). However, there is no reliable census of them. This is because alternative learning spaces should be registered in regional lists updated every year, and available on the website of the competent regional school office for the area, but this does not always happen. Furthermore, these alternative learning sites cannot issue qualifications with legal value or intermediate or final certificates with legal certification value. To have the title recognised, the students of these schools must take an exam of aptitude as a private student at the end of each scholastic path in a state school or equivalent. The same process applies to those who opt for homeschooling, currently the most widespread form of alternative education in Italy (Bosoni, 2018); according to data from the Ministry of Education reported by the economic newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, the number of homeschoolers went from 5,126 in the 2018–2019 school year to 15,361 children in 2020–2021, thanks to the Coronavirus pandemic which acted as an accelerator. They study at home with their parents, or with a person set up by them, especially primary school children, who reached 10,000 units in the 2020–2021 school year. This scenario also includes forms of parental education, such as unschooling (Holt, 1964, 1967, 1990; Holt & Farenga, 2003), in which contact with the state school or equivalent of reference may not take place: in this case the idea of staying out of the system is radical (Piffero, 2019).

In Italy, there is still no academic literature that surveys alternative education. Some exponents of alternative education have tried several times to map the various experiences (for an example, see Bosoni 2018) but at the moment there are no updated sources that describe and quantify the phenomenon in an overall way. The data come from the website of the single alternative learning sites trade associations. For example, the Federation of Steiner Waldorf schools on its website (https://www.educazionewaldorf.it/federazione/) counts 61 schools including kindergarten, primary, secondary level I and II, with a total of

about 3200 pupils and 450 teachers; the Montessori National Opera reports 253 schools in all between nursery, childhood and primary schools (https://www.operanazionalemontessori.it/); the network of libertarian schools has six schools of limited size: each one welcomes about twenty children (http://www.educazionelibertaria.org/scuole/in-italia/); the Ostia wood kindergarten network has more than 70 participating schools scattered throughout the peninsula. (https://www.asilonelbosco.com/wp/esperienze-in-natura-mappa/). The sites were consulted on 15th January 2023 and are continuously updated. However, what emerges is that, compared to other countries for example, England with 5% of the student population engaging in alternative education, and the USA which is greater than 10%, the phenomenon in Italy remains small-scale and involves a few tens of thousands of children.

These forms of alternative education can be considered as fully autonomous (Kraftl, 2013) due to the way in which they operate outside of the mainstream, finance and manage themselves, and how they do not fall under the criteria of the aforementioned private equivalent schools. As expected, however, in the Italian school system, there are forms of experimentation which are inspired by alternative approaches, and operate within the public school system; this typology is featured in the three case studies analysed in Chapters 6 and 7.

3.4 From the Centralised System to Laws on Autonomy

The first alternative experimentation schools within Italian public primary schools developed in the second half of the '90s when the Minister of Public Education, Luigi Berlinguer launched a series of political reforms within the school system. In particular, the first provision made by Berlinguer was Law no. 59 of 15th March 1997 which, through Clause 21 modified the schools' centralised management system, broadening it through a

project which recognised individual institutions' managerial autonomy over teaching, organisation, research and experimentation; alongside this, the road to recognising elements of financial and managerial autonomy for the first time (Barbuto & Mariani, 2019). Shortly after, Italian Presidential Decree 275/1999 Clause 6, sanctioned the opportunity for educational institutions to promote or subscribe to agreements, creating networks of schools to promote various purposes: from research to teaching, from training to professional development, but also to improve administration and accounting through the acquisition of common goods and services. This measure has highlighted how schools can achieve higher goals than those acting individually (Nigris & Piscozzo, 2018). The possibility of forming a network is not solely limited to single school institutions: schools have the opportunity to stipulate agreements with state or private universities, local informal education associations or entities offering a contribution to the fulfilment of specific objectives. The networks presented in the case studies of this thesis are therefore possible thanks to Clause 6, which allows *'structural modifications which go beyond curricular flexibility'*, and so individual or network educational institutions can propose *'initiatives for innovation'* to the Ministry. These initiatives (Clause 11, para. 2 of the Italian Regulation on autonomy) must, however, have a pre-defined duration and clear objectives. Based on the results obtained, these projects can redefine the curriculum of the study systems and become part of the teaching offer of the school.

Networks within the public school system examined in this thesis focus on experimentation in innovative teaching. In different ways, all three build their educational offerings by dealing with state institutions, informal education associations and the actors that make up the educational community of the surrounding area. A common denominator for all three projects is the supervision of a scientific committee coming from the university world: The University of Bologna for the Outdoor Schools Network; University of Florence

for the No Backpack Network; and the University of Urbino and University of Rome for the Montessori Network promoted by the Fondazione Montessori Italia. However, it should be clarified that there are dozens of networks throughout the peninsula which this research does not discuss. As shall be demonstrated in the methodological chapter (see subsection 4.3.3), the above-mentioned experimentations were chosen because these places of learning present a peculiar spatial design that is more in line with the objectives of this doctoral thesis in the geography of education. Therefore, in the following sections, the networks selected for the field research sections (Chapters 6 and 7) shall be presented.

3.5 Background to the Case Studies Used in Chapters 6 and 7.

This section is intended to give an overview of the three case studies discussed in this thesis: Montessori Experimentation School in Omegna, No Backpack School in Ponte a Moriano, Outdoor School Giacosa in Milan. These are three individual schools which are part of a wider network of experimentation. For each network an attempt has been made to delineate the history, the number of member schools at the moment of writing (the number is in continual expansion), the main pedagogical principles and practices and a summary of the educational philosophy that initiated the experimentations. These issues are presented in different measures and lengths of discussion, depending on the importance they hold for development and spatialities analysis. For example, the No Backpack network largely uses the pedagogical principles of the founder Marco Orsi. On the other hand, for the Schools in the open network more time was given to the history of the Trotter Park – the public park where the school under analysis is located and where the historical perspective is crucial to understand the spatial and daily social processes and the transformations this school space has undergone through time. In fact, as I am dealing with emerging experimentation, the academic research available concerning these

approaches is limited; but an attempt has been made to gather the most recent and significant writing, particularly on the Montessori experiment, which has been studied primarily by Italian universities. Each section ends with a presentation of the school visited during the field research by way of its principal characteristics. None of the visited schools or schools examined was identified as a principal establishment within the network to which it belongs. This allows contact with schools that have strengths and weaknesses and which explain the network method, adapting it to existing resources without being necessarily an ideal experimentation model for others.

3.5.1 The No Backpack Network

The No Backpack network (Italian translation: 'Senza Zaino') is one of the most innovative forms of experimentation in the Italian national landscape of primary and middle schooling (Castoldi, 2019). It started out in Lucca (North Tuscany) in 2002 through the work of Marco Orsi: this network had existed for exactly twenty years at time of research. Currently, there are over three hundred of its schools scattered throughout all the regions of the Italian Peninsula, as well as in the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. The network's philosophy is a teaching model based on the values of community, hospitality and responsibility (Orsi, 2006). One Italian scholar observes how there are recognisable references in the No Backpack proposal in relation to the construct of '*community of practices*' (Lave & Wenger, 2006, cited in Castoldi, 2019, p. 62). As shall be demonstrated, these three pillars are all interconnected. At the level of teaching traditions, the method used by this school is inspired by the teachings of a combination of great thinkers such as Dewey, Freinet, Montessori, Rousseau, Bruner and Claparade. The curriculum is a varied, educational and eclectic offering which, beyond the curriculum's institutional subjects, aims to activate flexible and transferable skills. The typical choice for the No Backpack School, as shall also be demonstrated by the remaining two networks explored in this

thesis, is to be part of a solid and widespread (throughout Italy) network which shares best practices and guidelines and monitors and updates the knowledge of its teachers through focused training courses.

Figure 2 – THE FIRST CASE STUDY: THE NO BACKPACK SCHOOL OF PONTE MORIANO (LUCCA) Source: Author

The photo on the left shows a typical No Backpack class with shared material. The two photos on the right show the carpentry workshop and some teaching materials for the study of mathematics.

3.5.1.1 Why No Backpack?

The name of the institution itself offers an explanation: the children attending this network of schools really do attend school without their schoolbags. The absence of a rucksack in favour of a light-weight satchel is a symbolic, practical and educational choice. At this type

of school, there is no need to bring materials from home because the school space is adequately organised and prepared: there are books cases, chests and shelves full of books, containers full of pens and pencils and boxes of coloured pens and crayons (see Fig. 2). The students have access to all the school materials free of charge. Etymologically, 'backpack' is a word which in Western dictionaries is understood as *'a large bag used to carry things on your back, used especially by people who go camping or walking'* (from https://dictionary.cambridge.org). The founder of the No Backpack network puts particular emphasis on the habitual unsuitability of the destination children travel to with their backpacks (Orsi, 2015). He observes how, in traditional Italian primary and middle schools, unlike nursery schools where there are many useful objects, the standard of equipment in these spaces dedicated to learning is rather meagre and unprepared:

> *'The work done by school administrative staff (and headteachers) benefits from the privilege of a generous provision of materials and furnishings, while the tools provided for students' work, are insufficient and scant. This is clear from the fact that the only furnishings within a classroom are cheap, single-seat desks with uncomfortable chairs, the teacher's desk and a cupboard. Furthermore, unlike the offices, the classrooms often do not have pictures on the walls, there is no space for plants and flowers, there is no air conditioning and there are often no blinds over the windows'* (Orsi, 2015, p. 34).

The No Backpack founder refers to this process as 'prosciugamento' (draining):

> *'It's a process where 'learning activities completely lose their understandability within the objectivity of the space'* (Orsi, 2015, p. 37).

The philosophy of the No Backpack Schools therefore shifts emphasis onto the design of the learning environment. The learning materials used at the three hundred No Backpack Schools are produced in some specific areas, like the tool factory in Lucca, Tuscany. Often, these materials are shared and reused among the schools in the network. Even though the curriculum approach is clearly outlined and detailed by the founder of the network, this

type of change is not the same in all the schools of the No Backpack network: each school has its own story, its identity, its existing structures, a body of staff hired by the Italian state, and lives within a certain social and environmental context. Becoming part of the network can have very different effects which shall be analysed in due course. Among these, a positive which can be noted is that the arrival of experimentation in traditional schools has often interacted with the dynamics of the surrounding territory. Of all, the case of the little village of Godenzo in Tuscany is exemplary: a mountain village of one thousand inhabitants which, until a few years ago, had one multi-class school, destined to be closed down, saw a rebirth and growth for the school thanks to the presence of No Backpack, attracting residents and new students from nearby villages. Each year, dozens of new No Backpack Schools pop up, bringing challenges that the network will have to confront in the coming years. In particular, these include managing an ever-growing number of institutes, implementing the system alongside training teachers and promoting the sharing and researching of best practices, both within the network and opening a dialogue with the wider educating community. The buildings of the new No Backpack Schools have been designed by specialist architects through open communication with the founder of the network. The network's architects have often worked on the interior design of the existing buildings and converted them into No Backpack Schools (in fact, this applies to the majority of the buildings), as well as having redesigned the outdoor areas of the schools to adapt them to the network's method. An example of these schools is the Ponte Moriano elementary school where this research started.

3.5.1.2 The case study choice: the school of Ponte a Moriano

The primary school chosen to carry out the research programme is located in Ponte a Moriano, an enclave of Lucca, noted for the wall encircling the old historic centre, the capital city of the province. Despite its nearness to the urban centre, the school itself is

located in a natural setting rising on the banks of the river Serchio, closed to the east by the Pizzorne massif and to the west by the Morianese hills, extreme offshoots of the Apuan Apenning mountain range. As a suburb school, the institute does not have an especially numerous student population. There are three hundred pupils at the junior school and two hundred at the high school. It was the last school where Marco Orsi worked, the founder of the No Backpack Network. This institution was chosen because, as opposed to other schools such as that of Montespertoli (Florence), this school was founded as a normal state public school and only later converted to the No Backpack method. Moreover in the school of Ponte Moriano there are the classic characteristics of the internal environment of the No Backpack School (Orsi, 2015): 1. The classroom does not have desks, instead it has an area set up with tables in a square formation resembling islands, which is adapted to the undertaking of individual, small group, or paired work; 2. The common area is a space set up with soft chairs of various forms, rugs and wooden platforms. Here, discussions, talks, small student assemblies and explanations given by the teachers take place. This space also allows for informal set-ups which are often not possible within the traditional school hall. 3. Themed workshops where in-depth learning activities take place. 4. A computer area 5. A teacher's station: there is no desk in the centre of the room, but a station located against the wall, with a table, stool and swivel chair: this choice symbolises the mobility of the No Backpack teacher. Similarly, the positioning on the outskirts of the classroom indicates the role of facilitator and companion, discarding the typical role of transmitter of knowledge (Mura, 2016). The Ponte Moriano school was also chosen because it is equipped with an external furnished space which allows for lessons to be conducted outside, although these are subject to a timetable decided at the beginning of the year. The external space is limited and does not allow for lessons to be conducted simultaneously, unlike the second case-study school.

3.5.2 The Outdoor School Network

The Outdoor network is formed of around sixty institutes (elementary and middle schools) scattered throughout the various regions of the Italian Peninsula. It was born in 2016. The schools share the common goal of promoting a national agreement on the establishment of outdoor public schools. This network agreement, hailed for its '*innovation, experimentation and research into outdoor education*' (as can be read on the network's website, https://scuoleallaperto.com/chisiamo/) aims to fulfil the common interest of the participating schools in the planning of innovative teaching experiences inspired by outdoor education and the redesigning of external spaces as widespread learning environments and classrooms (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3 – THE SECOND CASE STUDY: THE GIACOSA OUTDOOR SCHOOL OF MILAN Source: Author and Lorenzo Lipparini
A school completely immersed in the greenery of Trotter Park

The recruitment of teachers, like in all Italian schools, is undertaken via national public examinations carried out by MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research), and so the first step which the network's schools must take is that of training their staff in developing the skills required to set outdoor education into motion in a conscious and

productive manner. The hub of the project is in Bologna, the capital city of the region of Emilia Romagna; the flagship school is located here, and it coordinates the general running, as well as organising regular catch-up meetings and check-ups on the activities being carried out in the schools throughout Italy. The University of Bologna is also located here and, through an agreement with the network, it is responsible for the scientific coordination of the project and the sharing of outdoor education best practices. From here, all the participating educational institutions work together to set up territorial conventions and agreements with all sorts of institutes in order to promote an opening in the territory and to identify the economic resources and materials necessary for the project's development on a local and national scale. In comparison to the No Backpack network, the schools involved in the Outdoor School network are lesser in number; but the project has high development potential, and, each year, the number of its schools increases. The condition for participating is having an open space available in which teaching activities can be carried out, but this does not necessarily mean that the institute must have a school garden; there are an increasing number of schools which are preparing agreements and conventions with institutions and municipalities to be able to use public outdoor spaces. This is because not all Italian schools have gardens; often the exterior of the buildings have courtyards or artificial flooring.

The movement is not officially inspired by any specific educational philosophies. The objective is to promote and support methodological pluralism, in line with the network's principles through the sharing of tools and best practices; it is, however, difficult not to see a link with the activist schools of the European teaching tradition which appeared in the previous century discussed in the previous section as well as the wide panorama of the European forest school (Grimm et al., 2011; Lindemann & Knecht 2011; Kraftl 2013) and those of the open schools in Italy (for an updated reference, refer to D'Ascenzo, 2018). As

seen at the beginning of this chapter, in Italy, the teaching tradition is to this day influenced by the Gentile Reform of 1923 in fascist times. This had privileged the transmission of humanist and classical culture, which was considered more prestigious and elitist, in place of practical sciences which were more suited to the middle and poorer classes. Throughout the course of the 20th century, this cultural heritage influenced the subsequent school reforms and the structure of the curricula of all forms of Italian schools, and for a long time outdoor activities were limited to only agricultural and agrotechnical professional institutes (Cambi, 2005). The rapidly spreading work of the Outdoor School network has the advantage of beginning at primary school and is significantly helping to form a shift in mentalities and deepening the very necessary reflection on new learning environment configurations. At the time of writing this thesis, being very recent phenomena, there are still no academic texts that offer a literature review on the work of this Outdoor School's network but the speed of expansion recorded in recent years indicates that in the near future it will be more frequently under discussion.

3.5.2.1 The case study Choice: Istituto Giacosa

Among the institutes belonging to the Outdoor School network, the Istituto Giacosa has been selected especially for its particular history as an Outdoor School which operated throughout the 1900s. The school is composed of an elementary and middle school. It is a historic school, located inside Trotter public park (a green space of 126,000 m²) in the outskirts of North Milan.

Figure 4 – SCHOOL LIFE AT TROTTER PARK IN THE PAST Source: Archivio Storico del Sole (Historical Archive of the Sun) and Author

In the two photos to the left: heliotherapy and an outdoor lesson in the farm; in the two photos to the right: a vegetable garden lesson and the Old Park Tower, equipped with a siren, to communicate the school timetable in the fascist period.

The school celebrated its centenary in the spring of 2022. The decision to choose this school came from a desire to discuss and describe an institute with a complex identity in which the social and spatial processes have been subject to significant change over time (see Fig. 4). Istituto Giacosa has a history which goes back many years, which was, at times, difficult. Over time, it has assumed various identities: it was one of the first activist schools in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century, an institute for children affected by tuberculosis at the beginning of the 1920s, the Regia Scuola Speciale "Umberto di Savoia" during fascist times, Outdoor School 'Casa del Sole' (House of the Sun) with cooperatives and workshops in post-war times and, today, it has once again changed its face, becoming one of the most multicultural and innovative schools in Northern Italy (Weyland & Leone, 2020).

i. A School with a Complex Identity

In the 1920s, Milan city council purchased Trotter Park and built a school especially for children from all over Milan whose families were affected by tuberculosis. In those days, tuberculosis was a social scourge, but it was not just tuberculosis: the hygiene and health situation for Milanese children was made far more dire by World War one. The school first opened its doors on 8th May 1922, but it was officially inaugurated three years later, becoming one of the biggest schools in Italy, with 1,400 pupils. In the following years, the boarding school was also built. It had 160 beds, and it was named 'Casa del Sole' (House of the Sun) in reference to the heliotherapy treatments practised there. This way, the new teaching, the active school, connected with the outdoor activity project. In this circular area, classrooms, stables, vegetable gardens, orchards, ponds, swimming pools, gyms and a little church were designed and built. Three years later, the Regia Scuola Superiore "Umberto di Savoia" was established, and the rise of fascism permeated the Outdoor School's principles:

> *'However, it reinterprets these principles in coherence with the ideological characteristics of the regime. The task of strengthening weak bodies of young boys and instilling the allegory of rurality and work in service of the country are attributed to the practical exercise in agriculture. Domestic economics must reinforce the division of roles among the sexes and the vision of a history subordinate to men, and exclusively devoted to the task of social reproduction. Gymnastics delivered a sense of hierarchy, obedience, and discipline. This project was accompanied by the imposition of a military and nationalist culture: children in uniform, marches, fascist salutes, and the hymn to the Duce as well as the flag'* (Barra, 2005, pp. 16–19).

For a long time in Italy, the idea of physical education was linked to physical fitness, and it was thought that in some way, this may have limited disciplinary development in the successive educational reforms (Ricuperati, 2015). The arrival of World War II forced the school to close its doors. In 1942 the children were transferred to the province of Milan

because the quarter was destroyed in bombings (Barra et al., 2005). The school was rebuilt five years later, dispelling any fascist distortion of teaching principles in order to return to the original activist setting (Farina, 2009). In the fifties, following the idea of J. Dewey, the practice of cooperative work was adopted through the simulation of a little production system: here the student learned to manage the organisation of work, production and even commerce (Muraro & Ferri, 2020). With the passing of time, however, these activities were gradually reduced, until they disappeared completely. After a period of decline, the school came to life again at the end of the 1900s, beginning a process of rebirth, supported by the District of Milan and knowledgeable head teachers, eventually becoming a point of reference for the network of Outdoor Schools.

ii. A park with a school, or a school with a park

Today Giacosa school is made up of the historical buildings of the schools of Milan's Trotter Park, as well as some buildings located on via Russo, just outside the park. This clarification is important as in discussing the outdoor teaching method, it is crucial to consider that one of the schools in the network does not have an entire park available to it. This is interesting to our analysis because this aspect does not prevent the complex from being designed according to the principles linked to the inspiration of the Outdoor School network. Trotter Park, in terms of space, is outwardly a very fragmented school, it is set horizontally: the classrooms are located within twelve distinct wings which are very similar to cottages in an Art Nouveau style, located within the park, each with its own little terrace. Each wing has four spacious classrooms: at one time, there were thirty-five pupils in each class, now there are on average twenty to twenty-five pupils per class. Each classroom has fold-up chairs, cushions, boards or tables for outdoor teaching. There are open-sky workshops like The Compass and Minitalia which are forms of active teaching, making learning more effective through observation and movement of the body: this is a place for testing

knowledge and geographical skills, like the study of winds, the position of the planets and locating Italian regions. In order to move between wings, you must travel through tree-lined paths and lawns. This distance allows the classes to enjoy recreational time in the surrounding space and allows them to carry out lessons outdoors without disturbing one another (Barra et al., 2015).

iii. A School within a Multicultural Neighbourhood

This school can therefore not be analysed without an understanding of its history and knowledge of the site's urban geography. Trotter Park is located near the new Nolo quarter, between Viale Monza and via Padova, the historic street which pre-dates the Milan land registry commissioned by Maria Theresa of Austria in the 1700s. This area has always been a cultural melting pot: since the nineteenth century, it has welcomed immigrants from other provinces and regions of Northern Italy. From the twentieth century it welcomed immigrants from Southern Italy, and, nowadays, it welcomes immigrants from the Global South (De Antonellis, 1983; Barra, 2022). Today, this street is one of the most multi-ethnic streets of Milan and, wherever you turn, you can hear different languages and accents from every corner of the globe (Cognetti, 2019). The Nolo quarter has not been granted any planned urban development, but with time it has become a district known for its creativity; it attracts students, young professionals and families drawn by the low house prices and manageable rent, a critical point for Milan, which is one of the cities with the highest cost of living in Italy. Today, the Scuola Giacosa is a reflection of this area as, inside the school, more than twenty-four languages are spoken. There are around thirty different ethnicities within the school, and foreigners represent 67% of the population. Of this 67%, more than half were born in Italy. In section 7.3.2, this aspect becomes a crucial kernel in defining the ways in which informal education operates as a social support network for

diversity, and as seen in section 7.3.3, it also aids in observing how alternative education participates in the spatialities of the school in question.

3.5.3 The Network of Schools with Montessori Experimentation

In Italy, there are numerous networks within the primary and secondary school systems which are inspired by the Montessori method. These experiments are, however, inspired by two separate entities which do not collaborate together on the undertaking of the method: The Opera Nazionale Montessori, with its headquarters in Rome, currently coordinates around 24 public schools; the Fondazione Montessori Italia, located in Trento, monitors 17 schools located within the Piedmont region. Both of these entities are a national point of reference for the Montessori method. They collaborate with universities, schools, pedagogists and educators all over Italy, carrying out the training of teaching staff and school managers, as well as nursery school staff and other educational organisations which subscribe to the Montessori method. Furthermore, on a national and international scale, both of the organisations promote activities in study, research and distribution, as well as publishing two magazines which have a strong following by those interested in the Method. Firstly, there is the monthly magazine, 'Vita dell'infanzia' (Life of Childhood) which has been published since 1952 by the Opera Nazionale Montessori. The second is 'MoMo' (Montessori World), a more recent publication, distributed by the Fondazione Montessori Italia.

The difference between the two networks lies in their historical purposes. Opera Nazionale Montessori is a historical organisation, founded by Maria Montessori in 1924 and operates as a purist of the network: *'It is the heir and owner of a clear scientific, educational and pedagogical tradition and it operates as a national organisation of research and experimentation, training and development, consultancy, of promotion and distribution of*

the principle Montessori ideals, science and methodology' (see the website, https://www.operanazionalemontessori.it/).

More recently, the Fondazione Montessori Italia similarly undertakes '*to spread awareness of the work and ideas of Maria Montessori, the educational practices which she inspired, and the reflection and study of psycho-pedagogical theories, and the Montessori practices and teachings. Additionally, it supports transformation projects of traditional school education contexts*' (see the website, https://www.fondazionemontessori.it/).

The strongest point of disconnect lies in the Fondazione Montessori Italia's desire '*to innovate Montessori practices and apply them to the social, cultural and economic context currently at play in the globalised world*'. A recently published and particularly significant text, 'Il metodo Montessori nei contesti multiculturali' ('The Montessori Method in Multicultural Contexts': Coluccelli, 2020), proposes a reflection on how the Montessori method can be fruitfully applied in multi-ethnic classes, from nursey to primary school, and in Italian language teaching, for example in adult education, including illiterate adults or those from distant linguistic backgrounds.

On the other hand, the Opera Nazionale network is the only Montessori network to have received a formal legislative recognition. The network received the recognition in 1987 with Law no. 46; the Italian state recognised the organisation's duty and right to support all schools (public and private) which adopt the Montessori method, through special agreements. Thanks to this agreement, the schools affiliated with the Opera Nazionale Montessori present a real and true teaching differentiation. This procedure allows for the recruitment of staff trained in the method through specific rankings within public school.

In the case of the Fondazione Montessori Italia, the experimentation system is the same as that of the No Backpack and Outdoor networks: the fundamental step in order to formalise

the Montessori journey is that of deliberating at the Academic Board and the Institute Council (address of applicable body), specifying the classes involved. In this case, there is no official classification; the only way to do it is through permanent faculty members in the school who are available to provide training on the method (Coluccelli, 2018). Italian academic literature is filled with experimentation carried out by the Opera network within the public school system (Nigris & Piscozzo, 2018; Caprara 2020). There is less literature on Montessori Experimentation promoted by the Fondazione Montessori Italia, and the literature is mainly volumes written by the network's principal trainer (Coluccelli, 2015 2018; 2020; Coluccelli & Pietrantonio 2017). This is some of the reasoning behind the decision in this research to visit a school affiliated with this specific network: The Istituto Beltrami in Omegna.

Figure 5 - DAILY ACTIVITIES IN MONTESSORI EXPERIMENTATION, OMEGNA (ITALY)- Source: Sonia, Teacher

3.5.3.1 Who is Maria Montessori?

In the 20th century, Maria Montessori had a prominent place in the history of pedagogic activism (Cambi, 2009). She was born in the region of Marche, in the city of Chiaravalle, she studied in Rome and was the third Italian woman to graduate in medicine, with a specialisation in neuropsychiatry. Her training was strongly linked to the cultural climate of positivism. In 1906, she organised nursery at some council houses in Rome, and in 1907, she founded the first 'Casa dei Bambini' (Children's house). In 1909, she published the scientific-pedagogic Method applied to children's education in the children's houses (1909) which then was subject to a series of subsequent editions (1913, 1926, 1935, 1950). The 1909 volume, considered the key work of her thinking, saw the introduction of an experimental study on the nature of the child. Montessori realised that the development of the mind of the individual was directly related to physical development, highlighting the four levels of development ('the constructive rhythm of life'), Montessori (1950): infancy (0–6), adolescence (6–12), childhood (12–18), and maturity (18–24). Here, emphasis is given to the motor-sensory activities of the child which are developed through practical life exercises, scientifically organised material, and the work of the teacher. Kilpatrick (1914) criticises the rigidity of these materials and points out that the method is, in his opinion, lacking a creative and constructive component. On the same chain of thought, Dewey (1951) believes that the individual should be left free to try different materials and make direct experiences. However, the revolutionary idea of Maria Montessori is to materialise the theoretical idea and present it to the child (Montessori, 2018): the materials grow with the child and can lead them to self-educate. In subsequent writings, 'The Secret of Childhood' (1938) and 'The Absorbent Mind' (1952) a reflection of the rights of childhood and education is introduced. This is developed within the principles of the liberation of the child, discussing the role of the environment and the concept of the mind

of the child as an *'absorbent mind'*. As some critics have noted (Cambi, 2009), the same positivism which enlivened the initial research of the Chiaravalle Doctor is diluted in support of an original and new vision of childhood, which leads to the emancipation of the child itself and of man. This aspect however is also scaled down by Kilpatrick (1914, p. 67*)*:

> *'Her doctrine of auto-education will at most provoke thought; the term is good, the idea old. Her utilisation of "practical life" activities, more specifically her solution of early tenement-house education, must prove distinctly suggestive. […] We owe no" large point of view to Madam Montessori. Distinguishing contribution from service, she is most a contributor in making the Casa dei Bambini. Her greatest service lies probably in the emphasis on the scientific conception of education, and in the practical utilisation of liberty'.*
> (https://ia800202.us.archive.org/32/items/montessorisystem00 kilprich/montessorisystem00kilprich.pdf – Last Accessed on 27 January 2022)

In *The Montessori system examined*, Kilpatrick highlights various criticisms including the clearly visible link between the Montessori work, and the work of Éduard Séguin; Montessori indeed admitted to having been inspired by the materials created by the French scholar (Honneger Fresco, 2007). Kilpatrick then defines the Montessori educational practices as being too rigid for how they leave little room for the development of creativity and work employing the use of imagination, as well as being applicable mostly to Italy, and therefore being too limited for having being written without taking international literature into account (1914). However, at the same time, the American scholar also highlights the merit of the Montessori method in its creation of a strong breakage from the traditional method, starting from the emphasis placed on movement and autonomy, to personalised use of space and time, giving life to a style of teaching which could vary from pupil to pupil (Kilpatrick, 1914). These observations are also cited in subsequent studies (for a literature review of the evaluations of the method, refer to Marshall, 2017), which sometimes however question the use of individualised work, which can limit group interaction. In the analysis chapter (Chapter 6), it shall be demonstrated how social experience is a crucial trait in the development of social and spatial processes at the Beltrami school in Omegna.

3.5.3.2 The Istituto Beltrami in Omegna, a Montessori public school on the shores of lake Orta

Omegna's Istituto Beltrami is a public school which has been using the Montessori method for some classrooms for ten years now. Its staff is composed by members of the Fondazione Montessori Italiana. The school's distinctive trait is the fact that within the same building, a traditional school, and the Montessori Experimentation School coexist.

The only thing separating them is their location on different floors. At the Istituto Beltrami, the classroom is organised into themed spaces, and divided into two main areas: a larger space with desks grouped in four, and a smaller area with a rubber mat on the floor. The whole perimeter of the classroom is occupied by shelves and cupboards containing materials, arranged on trays and organised into spheres of interest: practical life, sensorial, language, math, science, arts, and music. The Montessori environment has a regulatory dimension both in terms of space and materials (Montessori, 1909): this rule is designed to develop competences through the children's freedom of choice. Every child is required to perform all the proposed activities, but they are free to choose when, and how they perform them. Much of the Montessori materials and furniture was donated by private parties, by the Omegna municipality, or built by teachers together with children and parents. However, there are regulatory limits regarding the space outside the school walls. The utilisation of outdoor spaces must always be agreed and managed according to the relevant legislation, like in normal public schools. In this regard, the school teachers are working ahead of schedule, trying to expand the learning spaces in the lakeside town itself. For instance, the school has an agreement with the 'Gianni Rodari Fantasy Park' in Omegna, which offers theatre workshops and local walks with specialised educators.

The adaptability of space and material is the main feature to be considered in transferring the Montessori method into public schools (Nigris & Piscozzo, 2018). It is challenging to create the ideal Montessori classroom when buildings are often old and designed for traditional teaching. What can be done, is to find the best way to adapt every material aspect and identify its potential for the method.

3.6 Conclusions

This chapter presents the salient characteristics at play in the Italian school system. Through the aforementioned historical facts, it outlined how – since establishment and throughout the course of the 1900s – Italian school was a standardised and centralised entity with strong connections to politics and the Catholic church. Alongside this, the landscape of Italian alternative education is also presented; although this is a small-scale phenomenon, it is continuous evolution which is of particular interest to the section on school choice in Chapter 5. The historical discussion shows how experimentation in the mainstream (analysed in detail in Chapters 6 and 7) represents a true change of paradigm within the primary school system, but at the same time, attempts to promote educational experiences inspired by activism and pragmatism are not a new concept. For example, Maria Montessori herself, in her time, was one of the first to promote experimentation within public school and launch a collaboration (although short-lived) with the Fascist government. The second part of the chapter analyses the legislative framework which permitted the development of the experimentation schools analysed within this thesis, highlighting the teaching and organisational traits which give life to the individual schools visited. In the next chapter, the project design and methods used in the field research shall be illustrated, as well as the rigorous ethical protocol the study adheres to.

CHAPTER 4:

RESEARCH METHODS

4.1. Introduction

The methodology of this thesis, broadly qualitative and multi method, has allowed the chance to work with parents (n=40), teachers and school directors (n=28) and students (n=75) that have chosen non-traditional schools.

The data gathering process began in the spring of 2020, and, after being modified due to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, it concluded in the spring of 2021. After outlining the conceptual frameworks (Chapter 2) and explaining the context (Chapter 3) in which the thesis is set, this chapter aims to present the research methods used in the study through five sections. Section 4.2 represents the reasons why a multi-method approach was identified for data gathering and then how this was re-designed for the case of research with children following the Coronavirus pandemic in 2019 and onwards. Section 4.3 then analyses the recruitment process and the choice criteria adopted for schools while Sections 4.4 and 4.5 illustrate the analysis methods of the three programmes in response to the three research questions under examination. The final part, Section 4.6, discusses ethical considerations and the challenges of research in experimental schools during the COVID-19 period.

4.2 A Multi-Method Approach: The Evolution of Research Design under the COVID-19 Pandemic

Given the focus of the study described (see Chapter 1), strongly centred on personal experiences and the circuits of choice, a qualitative methodological approach was

immediately adopted.

The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Birmingham in January 2020 (Application for Ethical Review ERN_19-0692), which Section 4.6 will deal with in detail. The original research design used a multi-method approach in which more traditional techniques such as participatory observation (Prout & James, 1997) and a programme of semi-structured interviews for adults, combined with a mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) integrating verbal and visual investigation techniques in order to facilitate the many expressive channels of children.

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020, the interview programme was done entirely remotely and school visits that included participant observation and some activities designed for children, such as the focus group approach, were cancelled and mosaic method was foregone.

After a period of inactivity, in which six months of leave of absence was requested pending better conditions that did not transpire, the final research project was reorganised through three programmes: (1) 'The School Of My Dreams', a programme of semi-structured interviews for adults who have chosen a non-traditional school for their children; (2) 'What's Education For', a programme of semi-structured interviews for teachers and principals working in public schools with experimentation, and (3) 'All About Your School', a programme for children that involved them in task-based activities: the creation of a lapbook consisting of several thematic sections. The outcomes of 'The School Of My Dreams' programme offered data to approach the first research question, while the outcomes of the 'What's Education For' and 'All About Your School' programmes were combined to answer the second and third research questions (see Chapter 1).

While the programmes for adults have remained almost unchanged from the original research design, the programme with children was completely re-thought through a new method, never used before – the creation of a lapbook by children on the topics investigated by the research. Table 3 illustrates this research journey (see Table 3).

Table 3 – THE JOURNEY OF FIELD RESEARCH Source: Author

The initial programme envisaged a multi-method approach consisting of a precise scan of research activities through which different techniques can be used in order to facilitate the expression of children's thoughts and interpret the different skills of each individual participant (Mortari, 2009). The restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, precluded any possibility of carrying out face-to-face activities. The choice therefore fell on

the type of task-based activities, coordinated by the postgraduate researcher remotely and led by the teachers in the schools.

As will be seen (see subsection 4.4.3) the lapbook is a three-dimensional map of a topic that can be constructed in very different ways, depending on the tastes of the child and the habits of the class. It collects investigation techniques that can range from media tools to drawing, to the technique of having stories told in writing. For this reason, it is possible to consider it an instrument that in itself includes a multi-method approach. The use of different approaches has allowed access to different sets of data to provide an answer to the research questions, relating to the ways in which experiments take shape within the mainstream.

4.3 Recruitment

Data collection took place using different channels depending on the research programme. 'The School Of My Dreams', the main channel was offered by the virtual Facebook group 'Tutta un'altra scuola' ('A Whole Other School'). This community operates on a national scale and has made it possible to gather parents from every region of Italy, allowing research to operate on a larger scale. Other parents were recruited with the help of teachers from the experimental schools visited in successive programmes.

For the 'What's Education For' and 'All About Your School' programmes, the recruitment – and hence the data collection – took place in the school environment, following a 'snowball' process. First of all, the national leaders of the experimentation networks were contacted and these then indicated, among those available and adhering to their network, the school to be involved. Once the school had been designated, each principal identified a project contact reference person for research. Once appointed, the contact person took steps to involve teachers and students, promoting research participation. The involvement

promoted directly by the schools helped to create a climate of trust and acceptance towards the research (Alfaro, 2021; Bruzzese, Gallagher, McCann-Doyle, Reiss & Wijetunga, 2009).

4.3.1 The Recruitment of Parents

'The School Of My Dreams' programme was aimed at a specific target – parents who have chosen a non-traditional school for their children. As has been explained (see Chapter 1 Introduction and Chapter 3 Research Context), the non-traditional training offer is very varied and can be both public and private. In addition, parents who have opted for parental education were also included in this group. The Facebook group 'Tutta un'altra scuola' ('A Whole Other School') gathers 14,075 users scattered throughout the peninsula and is a useful channel for those entering the world of non-traditional schools in Italy. It was created by Terra Nuova, a magazine that proposes sustainable lifestyles, in collaboration with a working group made up of representatives of alternative educational and school realities spread throughout the country. The eclectic character of the community has made it possible to select parents who have made different choices with regards to schooling (see Table 4): Homeschooling (5); Forest school (4); Montessori Public School (5); No Backpack School (5); Outdoor Public School (5); Parental school (6); Other private school (5); Steiner School (5).

THE SCHOOL OF MY DREAMS RECRUITMENT

Homeschooling	5
Forest School	4
Montessori School	5
No Backpack School	5
Outdoor Public School	5
Parental School	6
Steiner School	5
Other Private School	5
Total	**40**

This was possible thanks to the intervention of the Facebook group administrator who approved the project and shared an invitation to parents, created specifically for 'The School Of My Dreams' programme (see Appendix 1a). The text of the invitation presented the doctoral thesis project, the role of the postgraduate researcher and the possible interview methods for those who joined. 76 applications were received for the interviews, but it was decided to reduce the research sample to 32 to ensure at least one hour of time for each interview.

The remaining parents (8) who participated in the programme were recruited through teachers from the pilot schools visited in the 'What's Education For' and 'All About Your School' programmes. This has made it possible to have a user base that is as representative as possible of the various types of non-traditional schools in the public, private and alternative sectors. The main criterion was that of the choice of school in order to have an average of five interviewees for each type. Alongside this, the employment position of the

parents was also taken into consideration, in order to select as much as possible the sample among those belonging to the middle class (as explained in Section 2.4).

This led to the random geographical origin of the candidates who were concentrated mainly between northern and central Italy (see Tab. 5).

Table 5 – 'THE SCHOOL OF MY DREAMS' RECRUITMENT – geographical origin of the participants

The interviews took place between January 2020 and April 2020 via Zoom and lasted an hour on average. Being semi-structured interviews, they did not all have the same duration which ranged from thirty minutes to a maximum of one and a half hours.

4.3.3 School Recruitment

In Italy there are several hundred school networks and experiments in the mainstream, albeit of varying types. Therefore, even before recruiting the schools, it was necessary to

decide which experiments would be the focus of the research. There were two main criteria. A first criterion of choice was the extension of the network. The No Backpack network, for example, is among the largest in Italy and has about three hundred institutes and more than six hundred buildings at the time of writing this thesis. Both the Montessori classes, which, as we have seen, can be directed by the Montessori National Opera or the Montessori Italia Foundation, and the classes of the Outdoor network, have about a hundred participating public schools. Therefore, they too can be counted among the largest school networks in the country.

A second criteria was to have a characteristic and immediately recognisable method. The Montessori method is codified and many materials are now known to those who work in the educational sector. The network of Outdoor Public Schools shares the common interest of designing innovative educational paths inspired by outdoor education. The No Backpack School network is inspired by the model promoted by its founder Marco Orsi which envisages a precise reorganisation of learning environments around the promotion of active methodologies at school and in the community. Although very innovative and interesting, the 'Movimento Avanguardie Educative', promoted by INDIRE (National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research, a point of reference in Italy), was not included among the case studies because it is difficult to summarise and too complex for this type of study. The network, which is inspired by common principles, in fact has more than a thousand participating schools throughout Italy with varied and very different experiences of innovation (see Research Context, Chapter 3).

Similarly, the so-called 'unlabelled' experiments were excluded, which do not belong to any network and present an original and innovative curriculum. These are very interesting and widespread mainstream experiments in Italy but which, in the absence of a network, often remain isolated cases and owe their survival to the work of exceptional teachers.

Once the experimentation networks to be included in the research were identified, the leaders of each were contacted. The contact took place first via e-mail and then through a meeting in-person, in June 2019. On this occasion, the possibilities and possible collaboration plans for research were explored. Each network subsequently indicated the most suitable school among those that were willing to collaborate in the project. In two cases the proximity to the postgraduate researcher's residence was also considered. My home is located in Novara (Piedmont), the Giacosa school is in Milan (Lombardy) and the Beltrami school in Omegna (Piedmont), and these are each about an hour away. Unlike the Ponte a Moriano school in Lucca (Tuscany), indicated by the No Backpack network, which was an eight-hour return trip by car.

Once the school was designated, in the autumn of 2019, meetings were planned with the principals of the three institutes and, on that occasion, each identified a teacher in charge of the project. These reference teachers proved to be the best allies for the success of the 'What's Education For' and 'All About Your School' programmes. In November 2019, an initial meeting was organised in each school with other members of the teaching staff to share the objectives of the project and set an agenda for the various activities included in the programmes. Most of the volunteers for the interviews of the 'What's Education For' programmes were recruited in these meetings (n=18) while others were proposed by the leaders of the networks themselves (n=10).

4.3.4 Recruitment of Children

Fourth and fifth grade children, from nine to eleven years of age, were recruited to participate in the 'All About Your School' research programme. This is because part of the lapbook required writing skills with the hope of making the collected data more reliable. In the oral interview it is more difficult to control the relational dynamics and encourage

the free expression of the child without what the child believes to be the interviewer's expectations impacting the responses (Clark, 2005; Mortari 2009). Hence the idea of proposing a form of task-based activity that also contemplates something that comes naturally to children: narration in written form.

The recruitment of the children was carried out in different ways according to the internal procedures of each school and coordinated by the reference teacher. In each school a different class was assigned to the project. The total number of participating children was 75, coming from the three classes (n = 25, n = 22, n = 28) of the three schools examined (Outdoor School, Montessori Public School, No Backpack School). The lapbook included a six-section track: (1) my space, (2) my activities, (3) the school materials I need to learn, (4) school and the world outside, (5) relationships in my class, (6) how COVID-19 changed my school.

The duration of the project, in agreement with the reference teachers, was estimated at six weeks. Each week the children would thus face a different theme (see Appendices 3a and 3b). The period chosen was in the months of March and April 2022; in fact, these are the most relaxed months for students and teachers, because they are far from the mid-term and end-of-year deadlines.

All research programmes, especially the one involving children under eighteen, followed strict ethical protocols developed by researchers and geographers.

4.3.4 Icebreaker Meeting

Before starting with the creation of the lapbook, an icebreaker meeting was organised, albeit in a different form for each school. In the Montessori Public School and No Backpack School it took place remotely, with the class held by the reference teacher who introduced the project to the children. In this case I was displayed on the interactive whiteboard

screen. From there I introduced myself, adapting the language and making the conversation fun to keep the attention of the children, which is not very easy from a screen. One by one the children then introduced themselves and pointed out to me that they knew they were part of a special school. Children commented, '*this is not the first time we have had a researcher in our school'*. On the other hand, in the Outdoor School, in agreement with the principal, it was possible to have a live meeting on the occasion of the school's spring festival which took place, as every year, in the public park which is part of the complex. It is an event open to citizens in which children usually present their school and guide visitors around within the historic Trotter Park. On this occasion the contact person of the Outdoor School introduced me to the children, who already knew who I was and seemed to have an idea of the work we would be doing together (*'will our lapbooks become part of a book? Will we become famous?'*). Others seemed to be aware of the uniqueness of their school ('*Last week a new friend of ours arrived from Sri Lanka. He told us that it is the first time he has seen a school with such a large garden*'). Others were proud to be part of a school that had been studied even in England.

The children of all three schools asked me many questions (see Fig. 2), especially personal, about my life and the places where I live. Some of the students from the Milan Outdoor School showed me their bicycles with which they usually travel around the park and asked: *'How long does it take to go to Birmingham by bicycle?'* I took advantage of the questions to talk about the project and explain why I wanted to be told about their school. A child from the No Backpack School shyly asked me if he should have written in English: 'I*'m not capable but I could ask my sister to help me – this summer she took a study holiday to Ireland'*. I replied that there would be no need and he would do everything in class, a little at a time every week, in Italian and together with his classmates. The fact that the practice of the lapbook was already a popular and well-known exercise in schools greatly facilitated the

situation and excluded technical questions. The children felt competent in how to make a lapbook. They especially asked if they could add details such as origami and drawings or do it on the PC.
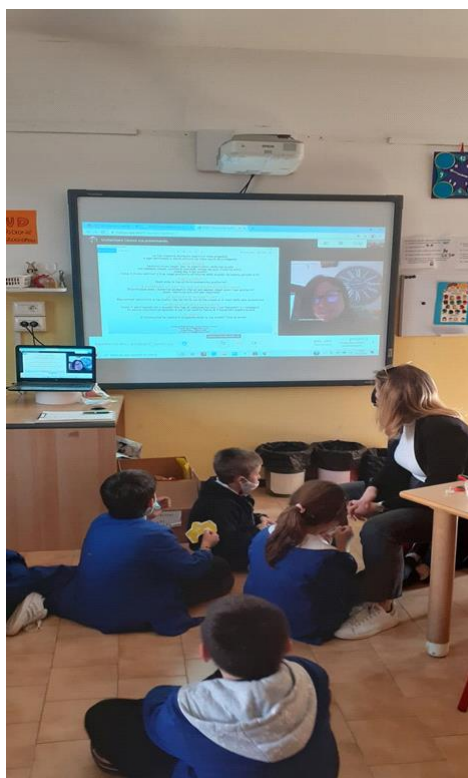
Figure 6 – REMOTE ICEBREAKER ACTIVITY Source: Silvia Teacher

After this first chat, remotely and live, each child was given a green folder containing the poster printed in colour with the tracings of the lapbook in six points (see Appendix 3a) and a card to be given to parents where the project and consent were explained in a consent form (see Appendices 1a and 1c). The latter was dealt with point by point, explaining above all that the work would be stored in a safe place and real names would not be included. This was disappointing for one child who, at first, imagined a book in his name would be published in England. At the end of these first meetings, I explicitly told the children that they could think about it, discuss with their parents and decide whether to participate or not. They were to let me know by submitting the consent form or not the next time we would meet.

4.4 Addressing Objective 1: 'The School Of My Dreams' Research Programme

The first research objective, *'to explore the factors which lead a family to choose a non-traditional school'* was addressed through the interviews with parents of 'The School Of My Dreams' programme. Parents are sometimes the spokespersons of needs that come directly from those who live the school life every day and, at the same time, offer an external observation point that can say many things about the ways in which today's schools are conceptualised.

The interviews were scheduled through a shared calendar on the Doodle platform where each family chose their place for the interview at the time and day indicated among those available. Before starting, a participant information sheet for parents was sent (Appendix 1b) and relative consent form (Appendix 2b) to be returned scanned. Every interview had a viable duration of an hour on average and was recorded through the Zoom platform. Interviews involved 27 women and 13 men, principally white (except two), and principally in heterosexual, married / co-habiting relationships (except three). It was not possible to define the social class with precision, as the data such as occupation and level of education were not sufficient to establish the wealth of the family and the social situation in Italy is very fragmented and difficult to classify into clear divisions of middle and working class (ISTAT, 2017). Indicatively, these were middle-income families, mainly composed of freelancers, artisans, company employees, small entrepreneurs, teachers and traders.

A minority only could be traced back to the upper class, made up of doctors, entrepreneurs of large companies, company managers and university professors (six who chose mainly private schools). Families in economic difficulty or recently migrated from another country did not answer the call. On the other hand, no data were available that would indicate how many people of this extraction were part of the community of 'A Whole Other School' from

which the interviewees come. Therefore, a research sample strongly oriented towards the middle class emerged. The relationship between alternative education and low-income families is an aspect that could be investigated by further, more targeted research in the future.

The questions of the semi-structured interview were divided into five themes: background, perceptions, experiences, school design and school space (see Appendix 3c for a copy of the full questionnaire). Through these same categories they were classified once, fully transcribed and uploaded to the 'Bear' portal of the University of Birmingham. Inspired by the method of previous research on alternative education (Kraftl, 2012), the interviews followed the structure of the personal story (Riley & Harvey 2007): this facilitated the participants' narrative. Topics covered included a brief description of the non-traditional school chosen, the family background and a brief overview of the school offer in the area of residence. The interview focused on the reasons, both ideal and practical, that led to the choice of a non-traditional school, then moved on to ask for details on the family experiences up to the present. In addition, the characteristics of the school curriculum and the main disconnections from the mainstream in teaching activities were explored.

The interviews only tangentially considered the physical space of the schools, as this was not frequently a factor for interviewees except in instances where they felt the school building was significantly different than that of a traditional school. Instead and significantly, the different visions of education and the function of the school emerged.

4.5 Addressing Objective 2: The Research Programmes of 'All About Your School' and 'What's Education For'

The second research objective, 'to investigate some of the social and spatial processes which characterise three of the major school networks with experimentation in Italy:

Outdoor School, No Backpack School and Montessori Public School', was addressed through the combination of two research programmes aimed at children and teachers. The first engaged each student to write a lapbook during the spring of 2021. The second was a semi-structured interview programme aimed at teachers and principals who are part of the network of schools examined. This subsection addresses the two methods in detail.

4.5.1 Write, Draw and Create: The Lapbook 'All About Your School'

The lapbook is a teaching tool that is created directly by students, increasingly popular in Western pre-schools and primary schools. It is also a tool which can be adapted to any age and school and can easily be applied to any topic. The research observes how the lapbook functions both as a means for low-grade thematic learning (Zariul & Lazim, 2020) and at university level (Locatelli & Zanuzzo, 2021). In fact, it is very different from traditional books, since it is a dynamic object, with a variable format whose content usually revolves around a single topic. The lapbook is part of the visual methodologies tending to concentrate on material and emotional spheres (Pink & Leder-Mackley, 2014; Rose, 2016).

In the field of educational research, the active role that the child takes in the creation of a lapbook has been observed. For example, it has been used as an active methodology in teaching Human Rights (De Freitas et al., 2021). Other scholars have shown how this tool promotes the creativity of students (Halimah et al., 2020) who are not only called upon to deal with contents and their organisation, but also with graphics. The interesting aspect for research with children is the fact that using the lapbook as a tool can favour the use of the multi-method approach. To make a lapbook, for example, you can write, draw, take a photograph, create origami or choose images on the computer. Each child can choose the expressive channel that is most congenial to them. In fact, is the researcher's task to find the most suitable tool (Mortari, 2009) and to put the child in the condition to be able to

best express his or her potential. For some examples of lapbooks created for the 'All About Your School' programme see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4.

Figure 7 – 'ALL ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL' PROGRAMME – examples of the lapbooks created by the children of the Montessori Experimentation School of Omegna (Novara) Source: Author

The programme ran between March and April 2021. After the icebreaker meeting, the researcher exclusively coordinated the project remotely due to the restrictions from COVID-19. The absence of the researcher during the creation of the lapbook was not a negative aspect. The children worked in their natural habitat without the interference that an external visitor would inevitably have on their work. The reference teacher was briefed by the researcher with precise instructions not to intervene in the creative process of the children but to assist only, providing practical solutions if necessary.

The structure of the lapbook was deliberately simple and the children were not forced to respect a specific format. For example, the Montessori Public School has favoured a paper format, in which, in addition to the text, many drawings were visible. The Outdoor School also preferred paper but using A4 format sheets. The No Backpack School opted for a lapbook in which the text was prevalent and drawn up in digital format thanks to the templates provided by the Story Jumper application. The children were asked to write about and express their thoughts on 6 topics (see Appendices 3a and 3b): (1) my space, (2) my activities, (3) the materials I need for learning, (4) my school and the world outside, (5) relationship with my class (6) how COVID-19 changed my school.

It was also clarified that these 6 macro-topics could be developed at will, without overly rigid rules that would have made participation in the research project similar to a homework assignment to be completed. I remained connected via Zoom during the activity to answer questions for clarification and give advice to the reference teacher. In this way it was also possible to monitor the progress of the activity.

Each school had structured the time plan of the project in a different way. For the class of the No Backpack School, the writing of the lapbook became a weekly appointment on Wednesday afternoons, in which the six themes of the track were addressed one at a time. The Outdoor School, on the other hand, adopted a more autonomous approach, without a fixed appointment, leaving the children time to complete their work during the month, even during the free times between class hours. The Montessori Public School carried out the work during the hours of the reference teacher, on Monday afternoon, but leaving the children free to choose themselves which order to follow in carrying out the six topics that form the outline of the lapbook.

Figure 8 – 'ALL ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL' PROGRAMME – example of a drawing extracted from a lapbook in which the caption explaining it can be read ('I like wisteria because my mother told me that my great grandmother liked wisteria so much'). Source: Author

The data analysis, as expected, was able to rely on different types of data: drawings, texts, photographs, media images. In the case of the drawings, the children were asked to provide a short text with them to help interpretation and make the results more reliable (Thomas & O'Kane, 2000).

At the end of the activity, the lapbooks were scanned and sent via WeTransfer by the reference teacher who supervised in class. In this way, each student was able to keep their original work. This last aspect was intended to be able to leave the participants with a memory of the programme – in fact a small self-produced book to take home together with a thank you note sent to each child. This is guided by the principle that *'the researcher's*

thinking should always be inspired by the principle of gratitude: being grateful to the child because it allows us to seek knowledge in her world' (Mortari, 2009, p. 66).

The data were analysed going beyond the six topics proposed by the lapbook track. All the children's works were grouped and classified with the aim of identifying common themes, to be classified into categories, trying to identify the networks of meaning in which they move. Since these are personal experiences, the lapbooks often took on the character of narration (see Davis, 2007), with texts told in the first person but which did not lead to private aspects and remained generally pertinent to the track of the lapbook. Furthermore, the drawings were analysed several times to find any symbols and patterns not visible at first glance and resonating with the content of the narratives (see Alfaro, 2021; Haring & Sorin 2014; Malchiodi, 2012).

4.5.2 Teachers and Principals Talk about the School in 'What's Education For'

As previously stated, this stage of the fieldwork had the dual objective of answering research question 2:

> *How have the physical spaces transformed and how do they differentiate from the mainstream?*

and research question 3:

> *What are the emerging spatialities which make this experimentation possible, and how do they disconnect from the mainstream?*

The 'What's Education For' programme was composed entirely of one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. This means that once the topic was introduced to the interviewee, a track was followed with the questions to ask (see Appendix 3d for the complete list of questions); However, sometimes some questions were changed, added or removed,

depending on the experience of the teacher or principal in question. For example, the interviews with the teachers of the Montessori network had a more concentrated focus on the method and life within the class. The interviews with the teachers and principals of the No Backpack Schools had particular attention paid to the funded projects, to the new activities within the curriculum and to the No Backpack methodology. The interviews with the staff of the Outdoor School, for obvious reasons, dedicated more space to everything that happens in the park and in the open air. The average interview time was about one hour but in some cases it even reached two hours. The interviews were recorded, transcribed in Italian and subsequently translated into English for the analysis phase.

Regarding research question 2, the interviews provided insight into how school life takes place within the physical spaces of the schools with experimentation. In particular, they made it possible to investigate details and aspects of the organisation's culture that are not easily investigated through observation. Personal experiences have brought to light reflections on how the transition from a mainstream physical space to a new one has been lived. At the same time they made it possible to collect information on these spaces and understand the reasons that encouraged their transformation.

In the case of research question 3, the interview had a more flexible pace and, in certain questions, it adopted the semblance of a story-telling interview (Rooney et al., 2016). For example, some teachers told part of their past school experience and, through their story, they explained why they chose to work in a different school. This dynamic was found in several participants and is observable in the analysis chapters (for example, see Chapter 6). Some teachers talked about life in the school space and the habits and routines that, together with the children, build the school day, the activities that make their school somehow 'different'. Once the interview went into depth, in some cases problems, critical issues and hopes for the future emerged. There was no punch-pulling in the world of public

schools with experimentation, so much of this material made the research results interesting and probably useful in the future to policy makers and professionals. The fact that teachers and principals were not only recruited from those of the schools in question but were part of the wider organisation of the network to which they belong allowed points of view from different angles.

The research approach, inspired by previous studies involving public schools with alternative curriculum (Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019), is positioned within social constructionism (Crotty, 1998; Smith et al., 2009). In this scenario, the experiences of children and teachers have been crucial for understanding the meaning of practices and representations that make up the spaces of schools with experiments. The effort of this analysis was to try to question the subjective perceptions, stories and representations that emerged from the children's interviews and lapbooks.

4.5.3 Data Analysis

Once the 'What's Education For' programme, carried out between May and June 2021, was completed, the analysis process began. The thematic analysis of the data was inspired by the approach of Braun-Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method uses multiple phases: familiarisation and codification of data and the organisation of said data into core categories and subcategories (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At this step, the answers were examined in search of themes and meanings and compared with what emerged in the 'All About Your School' children's programme. In several cases the children's drawings and stories, through the lapbooks of the 'All About Your School' programmes completed the information that emerged from the teachers' stories and vice versa. The data collection was guided by some geographical themes, some of them already experimented on in the previous literature on alternative spaces (Kraftl, 2018): 1. the design, furnishings and

setting of the learning spaces; 2. the outdoor space, inside and outside the school walls as well as how to use it; 3. the spatialities that make up the learning spaces; 4. the relationship between the school and the outside world. This allowed an open dialogue between the adult world and the world of children, the synthesis of which gave life to the answers to research questions 2 and 3.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical standards is a constitutive part of the entire research process, although for a long time the codes of ethics have mainly had adults as a reference (Lindsay, 2000). Ethical standards concern both the entire process in which research is carried out, from conception to implementation, and the stakeholders of the system in which research moves through its processes from evaluation to dissemination and integration in the decision-making processes of policy makers.

Reflections on ethics and research with children were officially introduced in the 2000s, thanks to some codes that are now a reference for researchers such as the 'Code of Ethics and Conduct' (British Psychological Society, 2006) and 'Ethical Standards for Research with Children' (American Society for Research with Children, 2002). Without questioning the effectiveness of the use of standardised ethical codes, it was observed that the image of a child as a competent subject should not make us forget his or her vulnerability (Lahman, 2008; Mortari, 2009).

In this thesis it was decided to use the Guillemin and Gillam framework which identifies two aspects from which to start the discussion: 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice'. Alongside this, the four ethical qualities outlined by Tronto (1987) are considered, in turn inspired by Carol Gilligan's (1982) as ethics of care: attention, responsibility, competence and reactivity. These considerations are crucial when addressing research, particularly

with children, who are subjects to be cared for. The subsection proposes ethical considerations on the various dimensions applied to the cases of this thesis.

4.6.1 Procedural Ethics

The Research Ethics Committee of the University of Birmingham, among other tasks, has the main function of evaluating and expressing opinions on projects in which human beings are included, presented by individual researchers or research groups belonging to the university structures. To this end, the application for Ethical Review was submitted in July 2019 with the aim of requesting the approval of the research project that would have involved adults and children. A period of six months was estimated to allow the committee to respond and enter improvements both to the application itself and to the 12 appendices sent as research work materials. The estimated date for the start of the field research was set for January 2019, with 'The School Of My Dreams' parenting programme. In October 2019 there was the first contact with the committee which asked for more information on more information regarding the recruitment process for the adult programmes. The language in particular was simplified to be understandable to people of various backgrounds.

For example, the term 'semi-structured interview' was inserted in the original recruitment poster and was considered 'unfamiliar to a non-professional audience'. This was changed to 'open-ended interview'. The committee then focused its attention on materials intended for children. Also in this case the committee asked for the language to be simplified to the extend that it was appropriate for children with special educational needs. In particular, some words – such as 'innovative' and 'data' – were considered too complex for children. The first was changed to 'special', the second to 'information you give'. With these new terms, the information sheets and consent forms were re-worked.

The full ethical approval of the research project was earned on 3rd January 2019.

Unfortunately, due to the advent of Coronavirus 2019, just a month and a half after approval, the project with children was arrested. In the following year, there was no possibility of restarting the research in person; it was possible to carry out only one programme out of three: 'The School Of My Dreams', entirely carried out through the Zoom platform and concluded in June 2020. A request for amendments was therefore sent to the ethics committee in December 2020, in which it was presented with the new form of the 'All About Your School' programme; in it the previous activities were cancelled and the new research method was proposed through the creation of a themed lapbook. On that occasion, a new attachment was created, a poster presenting the activity dedicated to children in which the research activity to be done together was illustrated. In total three variations were prepared:

- Participant information sheet for children (Appendix 2c)

- Consent form for children (Appendix 2a)

- Poster for children (Appendix 3a)

This proposal was worked on several times following the advice of the Ethics Committee which accepted the lapbook as a research method with children monitored remotely but, at the same time, asked to improve communication and to describe each stage in more detail in the document. Alongside this, the committee asked to use simple and immediate language that would make the activity easily understood. It was therefore decided to illustrate the work through a story-telling interview approach (Clark, 2005):

> *'Participating in this research programme means telling your story through a lapbook which you will create with your teacher during lesson time, in your class, developing a topic which will change every week! Feel free to decide and choose how you want to respond and organise your answers. You can use any kind of paper, any font style,*

you can write yourself, or on the computer, draw, add photographs
or even just write: it will be you who chooses what to tell us and how
to do it!' (see Appendices 3a and 3b and Fig. 5)
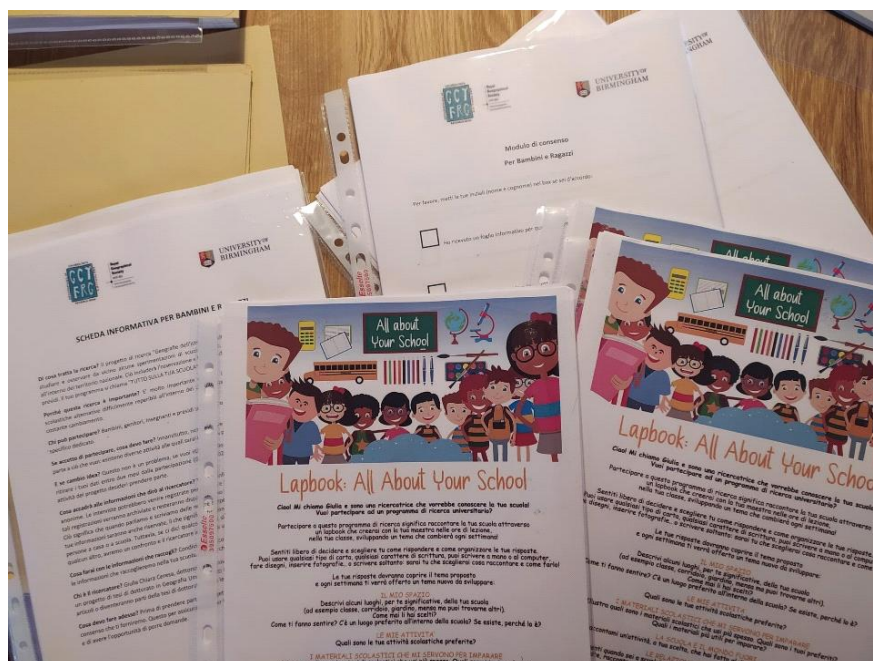
Figure 9 – RECRUITED PARTICIPANTS – documents including consent forms, information sheets and posters ready to be distributed to the children

Subsequently, the six sections with the subject areas and related questions were added to the poster that would help inspire the children's work (see Appendix 3b). Once the ethical approval – request for amendment form was obtained from the university board on 1st March 2021, all the documents of the 'What's Education For' and 'All About Your School' programmes were delivered to the principals and heads of the school networks in paper format for the purpose of acknowledgment and approval. Having also obtained approval from schools, before starting the data collection process, the information sheets and consent forms were illustrated and delivered to both teachers and children.

On the other hand, in the case of the participants in 'The School Of My Dreams' programme, the delivery of the information sheet and the consent form took place directly between postgraduate researchers and participants. Concerning the consent forms of the 'All About

Your School' programme, they were signed by both parents and children, a practice encouraged in the literature to increase the awareness of the latter in undertaking the research project (Alfaro 2021; Crane & Broome, 2017; Dockett & Perry, 2011). The consent forms included the ability to agree or disagree to use the contents of their lapbooks (in the case of children) or their interviews (in the case of adults) in academic publications. In compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation, 2018 the consent form stated the anonymity of the participants and the use of pseudonyms during the re-elaboration phase. All were offered the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time and delete their data within two months of participation (June 2021).

4.6.2 Ethics in Practice: Attention, Responsibility, Competence and Reactivity

A research project made up of several programmes such as this one required special attention to its various subjects. Adult programmes, for example, required a different approach on my part during the interviews depending on whether they were about parents or teachers. In both cases, I tried to create a positive atmosphere, through a genuine interest in the interviewee, aimed at putting at ease the person who chose to donate their time to my programme. Personally, I found the interviews with the teachers easier to conduct because they showed more that they understood the aims of the project and their words showed a certain motivation to make their work known: *'This job represents the life I have chosen, sometimes it works well sometimes you have to pedal with more energy'* (Chiara, teacher, Outdoor School).

This made it easier for me to direct the interview to the most interesting and relevant areas of research, even when they concerned the multiple regulatory aspects, which could be heavier to address. Interviews with parents were more varied and sometimes required a certain reactivity, for example by helping to express themselves or to conceptualise a point

of view without at the same time being intrusive in the other's point of view. In particular, in a couple of cases it was necessary to overcome a few moments of embarrassment, due to the confusion of the role of the researcher for two parents. In the first case, during an interview, a mother reported personal problems with a teacher of her daughter at a certain Montessori School. After concluding the story, she addressed me by saying: *'Write this down, please, everyone must know'*. In this situation I immediately clarified that the research would not have reported particular cases of disservice but certainly one of the purposes was to start a reflection on the relationship between school and family.

In the second case, I realised that a second parent did not fully understand the purpose of the interview and was thinking simply of giving visibility to the parental school he founded: *'when writing of my school you can then look at the website and find better delineated the characteristics by which our project differs from the others'*. In this case, with the utmost delicacy, the question was interrupted by explaining that the research programme did not propose to nominally present various types of non-traditional schools but to investigate the reasons why, on a personal level, we were oriented towards a choice rather than another; in both problematic cases, a relaunch was done, followed by attempts to try to bring the conversation back to the topic of the interview.

As for the children's programme, the fact that they cannot physically enter classrooms due to COVID-19 restrictions has undoubtedly taken away a lot from the research. As participant observation took place beyond the computer screen, probably many interesting dynamics were lost. In the part of the lapbook which talked about COVID-19, feelings of unease emerged from the drawings of the children of the first school where the programme was started. In one case this theme was also visible in an unfinished drawing.

Figure 10 – PLANNING FOR COVID-19

*'I hate COVID because it makes me wear a mask and it bores me. It has changed a lot but it will end. I want it to end. Now I hope it will end soon'. This drawing reads in ungrammatical Italian: 'The virus has changed many things, including the masks and the spacing'. In the comics of the characters: 'I can't hug anyone. Mmmm … ok … we can't stay close.' In the same drawing at the top right: **'sorry if I haven't finished colouring but I don't feel like it'**.*

After seeing these drawings, I consulted the reference teacher, and we decided by mutual agreement not to insist on the part related to the virus because for the children it was not a positive experience to emphasise. I realised that talking about COVID-19 created apathy even in drawing it. Subsequently I met with the other two reference teachers of the other sample schools and we decided to leave the point on Coronavirus as an option, clarifying that those who did not like it could skip it. In doing so, it was chosen to privilege the positive experience and well-being of the participants, from the point of view of the ethics

of care: *'the other must feel challenged about something of which he understands the importance, about something he feels considerable'* (Mortari, 2009, p. 66).

4.7 Summary and Conclusions

The chapter illustrated the methodological aspects that characterised the three research programmes that make up the thesis, from recruitment to development. In these pages I have outlined how the methods have been adapted to the context created by the advent of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic, effectively transforming field research into research conducted remotely. This made it possible to collect a large, robust dataset involving the different key subjects involved in alternative education.

Ethical issues were analysed through a set of practical examples from research. Doing so showed the care and flexibility that characterised the data collection process, which started in January 2020 and ended, after a long interruption, a year and a half later, in June 2021. In the next chapters, the research results emerging from these methods will be presented, focusing on the choice circuits of parents who have chosen a non-traditional school (Chapter 5) and on the social and spatial processes of transforming spaces (Chapters 6 and 7).

CHAPTER 5:

PRIMARY SCHOOL CHOICE IN ITALY

5.1 Introduction

As was previously seen (see Section 2.4 in literature review) school choice is a spreading global phenomena (Ball & Nikita 2014) which engages strategies and circuits leading to families choosing those educational options which are most suitable for their children.

This process has value not only for children and youngsters but also for parents. Depending on the choice made by children, parents' lives are in fact influenced and moderated. In Italy studies on school choice were carried out mostly on senior schools (Panichella & Triventi, 2014; Leone-Pizzighella, 2018; Aktaş et al., 2022); there are no studies on the training offers of public primary and non-traditional equivalent schools linked to the world of alternative education. However, international literature, especially in the US, has often investigated alternative schooling and the circuits around this education sector (Osborne, Russo & Cattaro, 2012), while British literature is especially concentrated on the relationship between school choice and social classes (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1996). As shown previously, (see Chapter 4, Research Methods), this study does not intend to focus exclusively on the relationship between school choice and social class of the participants, who belong mainly to the middle classes. Instead, this chapter investigates the multiple and differing reasons that lead parents to leave the mainstream. In doing so, it aims to address the first objective of this study:

> *To explore the factors which lead a family to choose a non-traditional school.*

A premise is necessary here. As has been observed in the research context, there are few parents in Italy who can choose the school for their children. The one analysed is a small-

scale phenomenon but it deserves attention because it can say something about the circuits that come into play in imagining the ideal school.

Hence the name of one of the research programmes: 'The School Of My Dreams'. The intent is to investigate what are the levers that lead parents to choose and not to accept the public school assigned by the catchment area of their residence. Furthermore, this study evaluates the impact that alternative education is having on the mainstream and, at the same time, brings added value to policy makers who find themselves working on the processes of renewal of education and on the design of public learning spaces. Observing the social phenomenon of school choice from a geographical perspective is important because it allows reflection on the perceptions of places, practices and representations that constitute the learning spaces of alternative education and schools with experimentation.

In the first phase of the study, particular attention is paid to the context in which the research takes place. The Italian context is varied, in which the forms of parental school choice have expanded thanks to the increase of the educational offer which occurred, especially in the first decade of the 2000s. The purpose of the analysis is to investigate how the parental school choice circuits are sometimes oriented towards private schools offering non-traditional curricula, sometimes towards public schools with experimentation, sometimes towards private schools and sometimes towards the offers coming from the alternative education landscape. Despite the new possibilities of choice offered to the public, there are still parents who choose to stay outside the school system and opt for the various types of alternative education spread throughout Italian territories. At the public school level, the research results are not that different from the studies on the English system (Burgess et al., 2007) for which some children enrol in the local school and others choose to travel outside the catchment area allocation. From this perspective, it was possible to observe how the circuits of choice are fluid and their boundaries are not

always marked, depending above all on the typical characteristics of the specific school in question and not on the category to which they belong. The analysis opens by reviewing the close link between place of residence and school with experimentation. Subsequently, the focus shifts to private schools with innovative curriculum and the possibility of choice available in some regions, through the introduction of a voucher policy. The voucher system design in Italy is decided on a regional basis, as different and non-homogenous as one region is from another. In this particular area attention will be given to the Lombardy region, as the 'school voucher' is one of the measures by which the local administration supports families economically and the educational path of young people from 3 to 21 years who attend professional teaching and training courses in public schools or their private equivalents. However, at the time of writing, this voucher is not usable for parental education or non-equivalent private schools.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the analysis of the motives and reflections leading to the decision to send children to alternative school or experimentation in mainstream. The emerging reasons for their choices are then presented through thematic areas. The final section of the chapter summarises the principal points emerging from the interviews on the connections and disconnections of choice circuits between the mainstream and alternative schools.

5.2 Circuits of Choice in Italian Public School Experimentations: The Close Link between Place of Residence and School

This section analyses the mechanism regulating access and choice limitations that parents can experience within the Italian state circuit of elementary and junior schools, through a study which in qualitative terms would give a voice to the multi-form experiences recounted by parents who participated in the programme 'The School Of My Dreams'.

Access to Italian schools, particularly in cities or in densely populated areas, is regulated by the user base system. In other words, territories are established for administrative purposes in order to steer the directions users go in. From now I will call these areas CA (catchment areas of residence), as used in the study of Cordini, Parma and Ranci 2019.

The planning of the school networks and their support services in the area falls under the responsibility of local entities in the provinces and districts. For example, it is these entities which manage the school transport systems based on the user base system regulating each school. This regulation was first set forth in the Italian Royal Decree of 4th May, 1925, no. 653 and was updated in the Italian Ministerial Circular no. 367 of 20th December 1985: '*Requests for pre-enrolment can be accommodated for schools located in different areas than one's domicile provided that they do not entail an increase in classes*'. As has been observed, this amendment, which is still active, subordinates freedom of choice in schools for families to the administrative criterion of cost control (Mariani, 2019). After having identified the public school, the only choice available generally is that of attending religious classes or not. For those who do not wish to adhere, there are different options available, some of which are teaching activities with assistance from the teaching staff, or non-attendance of school during the hours of Catholic religious education which are regulated by regulation D.P.R. no. 751/1985. Living within a CA in which there are schools following the traditional curriculum as well as schools with experimentation slightly amplifies the circuit of choice, but does not provide choice for the majority of Italian families. It is not set in stone that all pre-enrolment requests are accepted at the desired experimentation school.

A French mother, who relocated to Tuscany, illustrates the imbalance of choice through the experience of her two children:

> '*I have two children. Ameliè was taken to the school with Senza Zaino [No Backpack] experimentation in a nearby village, Leandro didn't*

get a place and instead attends the local state school. There's a huge difference, and it puts the two children in an asymmetrical position: when you pay for enrolment at a No Backpack School, you're also paying for the teaching materials. The school buys pencils, jotters and loads of crayons and this way it keeps costs down for families. At Leandro's school, it's every child for himself. Luckily the children need to wear an apron at both schools, so it gives a bit of equality between all children as they don't need to stress themselves over what to wear to look cool in front of their classmates. However, Ameliè's school does much more sport. Leandro instead goes to the gym every 15 days because his school shares the hall with another school. For him, I need to look for more opportunities to do sports nearby.' Claudine, a mother who has chosen the Senza Zaino (No Backpack) school.

In a similar vein, another mother is critical of the assignment of schools through the CA:

'I don't want my son's scholastic journey to be based on chance. The average Italian is a person of routine. The father went to the same school, the grandfather too, and it is thought that there is no other choice than the school near home. Of course, it is easier to let the institutions choose the fate of your child automatically, but the educational responsibility illustrated in Article 30 of the Italian Constitution is too important not to be exercised, even if you have to commit yourself and get informed.' Maria Chiara, mother who chose a parental forest school.

As Maria Chiara affirms, in order to choose you have to inform yourself and not all parents do so. Many Italian families simply accept not having the possibility to choose other than the extended time option, short time or other common possibilities in elementary and junior schools such as music or sporting improvement. In areas with higher population density, however, it may happen that due to the large number of registrations there is not even this limited choice. A dad from Milan, the second most densely populated city in Italy, observes that social inequality emerges from the system, which is sometimes random; but in the case of large urban centres, it is determined by the area of residence which leads to the spreading of ghetto schools in the outskirts of the cities:

'I tried to access an experimentation school outside my area but did not find a place. I had to opt for a private school. On the one hand, some of the areas of the city are characterised by high level schools

with very diversified users, from a social class point of view, and from an ideological and religious background point of view. On the other hand, some areas, especially the outskirts where we live, are ghettos where 16 out of 20 children in a class are foreign and don't know Italian well. In these kinds of schools, the school programme lags, resources are used up trying to bring all the children up to the same standard and, even the most open-minded of Italians don't want to enrol their children there. This is the result of the choice to divide users according to their area. On the contrary, those who live in the centre, where houses are more expensive, find schools with a majority of Italians or foreigners with a high level of education. Those born in the outskirts, or in rough areas where house prices are low, despite having good teachers, receive a different service – the chance to have a good education, and I'm saying this without hypocrisy, is seriously low.' Carlo, a father who chose a private school.

A mother who moved to a new quarter of Milan and has yet to choose in which school to register her daughter provides another example:

'I have an elementary school next to my house – we are in Viale Jenner in Milan. The other day I met a Filipino father with a child in the playground who told me, "No, don't go there, there are too many foreigners". He made me laugh at this situation. However, he recommended the other one towards Porta Garibaldi, a comprehensive school with the same principal, where there are more Italians. I am not genuinely interested in users, but for me the question of language is important. I would be sorry if my daughter did not develop a good vocabulary because there is a very basic level around her. On the other hand, I think that having a good level of multi-ethnicity seems to me an excellent skill for the future, I don't know and I have not yet decided on a school.' Chiara, a mother who has not yet taken a choice.

The case of Chiara is in line with the concept of 'strategic cosmopolitan' (Mitchell 2003), the ability to live and act within a multicultural context is to be considered a desirable skill to compete in the global market. Urban segregations such as those emerging from the interviews are often discussed in international critical literature, particularly in the United States and England. In Italy, Cordini, Parma and Ranci (2019) propose statistical research showing how school choice is an important factor of higher urban inequality in a city, like Milan, characterised by low-to-medium residential segregation. The study demonstrates

at a numerical level what emerges from the interview with the Milan father: the flows, especially from the well-off users (56% in Milan), towards the centre, sometimes out towards the private schools, towards the schools guaranteeing the maintenance / growth of the socio-economic family status. However, this aspect is seen differently by the mother interviewed who is indecisive concerning two schools nearby. This contribution follows the observations of Boterman (2021) suggesting scholastic mobility is part of school choice but many parents in the end opt for the school system in which they live, assisting residential integration. Another father has chosen for his children the Giacosa open experimental school which is situated among the social housing in Via Padova and the new Nolo quarter, where foreigners represent seven out of ten pupils (Barra, 2022; Cognetti, 2019).

> *'I did not fear the mixture between Italians and so-called 'foreigners'. The word 'Foreigners' means very different things: a category that includes the many children born here and integrated, Italians without citizenship awaiting the 'ius soli' [citizenship at birth], others who have lived in our country for a few years and still others who are newcomers. And my children here are receiving good foundations for personal growth, experiencing a community life that is open and supportive and free from prejudice. In multi-ethnic schools like ours, the quality of teaching is high, teachers are open to great challenges. As a parent I can testify that my children are growing up with great mental elasticity, with a wide ability to adapt to situations, to unexpected events. They learn it by attending this school, in a context where your classmate comes from a condominium where only Egyptians live and when you go to their house you don't speak Italian. And then you have to interface with a different culture, not in the abstract, but concretely.'* Luca, a father who has chosen a public school with outdoor experimentation.

The choice of school for the user is, however, not the only factor. The pedagogical method offered by the school is more important for some parents. Marta is a lawyer from Milan, her husband Paolo, is an expert in wind farm engineering. The couple decided to leave the city and move to Lago d'Orta in order to enrol their daughter in the public elementary school with Montessori Experimentation:

> *'After nursery school we didn't know which primary school to send our daughter to. The private alternative schools which we had our sights set on cost too much. Tuition fees at a Montessori or Steiner School in Milan could be around 8,000 euros a year. So we decided to move to Orta, a small lakeside village in Northern Italy, where there's a multi-class public school with Montessori Experimentation. It's well run and there are only a few children'.* Marta, mother from the school with Montessori Experimentation.

As has been demonstrated, the advantage of these schools is that they make a different way of doing school possible for families from all walks of life, even if it cannot be ignored that there are limited places, as explained by Claudine in the case of the No Backpack School. The above-mentioned case is a counter trend – Orta is a small village with an equally small school risking closure, obliged to run a composite class as it is impossible to form classes for each primary school grade. It is interesting to note how this situation has become attractive to a city family which, thanks to this option, decided to move from the city. It is not an isolated case among those interviewed – another family living in a little province of Liguria states that they are thinking about moving to find public schools with alternative experimentation:

> *'There is no offering where we live, only extortionate private schools'.*
> Anna, from Genova.

On this topic of public school, various international studies (Boterman, 2012; Butler & Robson, 2003; Michielin & Mulder, 2008) have shown that often families choose where they live according to the presence of various services, for example, the quality of the schools in the area. It is interesting to note that many parents are looking at average-sized Italian cities, like Genova, Reggio Emilia and Cuneo and not at the more highly populated regional capitals. Likewise, Trento, one of the most habitable cities in Italy, is considered a popular area by many families. As for any other possible relocation destinations, none of the interviewees mention Milan, Rome, Florence or Naples. As seen with the Italian public school with Montessori Experimentation in Lago d'Orta, and even with the birth of the No

Backpack Schools – for example in little villages in Tuscany and Sardinia – students from further afield have been attracted to the areas. This has spurred the requirement for school buses from nearby villages and, in certain cases, enticed families into relocating to towns where the schools appear. Another good example is the little village of San Godenzo in Tuscany. A village of one thousand inhabitants which, until a few years ago, had one multi-class school, destined to be closed down, but saw a rebirth and growth for the school thanks to the presence of a No Backpack School, attracting residents and new students from nearby villages.

Various critics of the magnet school programme maintain that this kind of school has increased socio-economic divisions in many areas (Osborne, Russo & Cattaro, 2012). According to this thesis, middle class families have more of a propensity to be informed on educational options than lower-income families. This in part also emerges from the backgrounds of the parents who took part in 'The School Of My Dreams' programme, but, as some of those interviewed have highlighted, it also depends on the amount of free time the parent has. Getting to a school further away from home requires greater time commitments that then become an additional task for parents who are already full-time workers or freelancers.

> *'Bringing Giada to the Montessori School is a sacrifice that my wife and I have decided to support despite the fact that it has significantly changed our daily routine. We arrive at the kindergarten near home after a ten-minute walk. Now, depending on the day's commitments, we take turns waking up at half past six in the morning and after breakfast we have a 30-minute car journey ahead of us to get to school. It's demanding, at the weekend we are always tired, but we are happy to do it.'* Valerio, a father who has chosen a Montessori Public School.

These first results are in part in line with the work of the human geographer Boterman (2021) for whom the choice strategies depend on social class, ethnicity and residential

context. According to the scholar, if on the one hand school choice policies would effectively reduce the need for residential relocation, on the other hand they could increase school segregation. The case of parents who have chosen to move home in order to enrol their children in the desired public school or who tend to enrol their children in a chiefly middle class populated school is in line with this thought. However, it can be observed that the choice may also depend on the personal history and the mindset of the individual persons rather than on the social group to which they belong. The case of the citizen with non-Italian nationality who does not want to send his children where there are other citizens with non-Italian nationality or the father who thinks that the multi-ethnic school is an important added value are examples that contrast with what has been highlighted by the studies so far. Previous studies have shown how most white pupils in the UK register at schools where their own ethnic groups are most prevalent, but this does not happen with other ethnic groups (Harris & Johnston, 2008). Similarly in the case of this small qualitative study the situation remains open. Among the major examples in which school segregation is seen in upper and middle class whites are the private schools with innovative curriculums for the wealthiest families, where '*freedom of choice has certainly fostered a 'white flight' dynamic*' (Cordini, Parma, & Ranci 2019, p. 3229). In the next section the reasons for interviewed parents choices regarding the type of private school, most of which are run by faith institutions, will be dealt with. These are defined in Italian as 'equivalent' because they have equal status to state schools but cannot be publicly funded.

5.3 The Possibility to Choose Private 'Equivalent' Schools

As previously discussed, the Italian education system is based on three levels: a five-year primary teaching programme, a three-year lower secondary teaching programme and a cycle of three or five years upper secondary teaching where students choose various study

programmes. Alongside the public schools, in this system there exist 'equal' private schools that have the same status as that of the state schools and private schools that do not have equal status to the state school. For private *'equivalent'* schools carrying out a public service, their legal recognition guarantees the equalisation of the rights and duties of students, the same procedures for carrying out state exams, the fulfilment of the education obligation and the authority *'to issue qualifications with the same legal value as state schools'* (MIUR, https://www.miur.gov.it/web/guest/cos-e-la-scuola-non-statale). In the table below, the divisions by region are shown and the numbers of students attending *equivalent* schools and state schools (see Tab. 6).

Table 6 – NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO ATTEND PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND EQUIVALENT SCHOOLS IN ITALY

Source: MIUR (Ministero dell'Istruzione, Università e Ricerca, the Ministry for Teaching, University and Research)

REGIONS	Student numbers in Public Schools	Student numbers in Private Schools (equivalent)	Total number of students by region	%
Piemonte	176,925	5,423	182,348	2.97
Lombardia	386,862	31,446	418,308	7.52
Veneto	205,888	8,883	214,771	4.14
Friuli V.G	49,813	924	50,737	1.82
Liguria	62,615	2,317	64,932	3.57
Emilia R.	196,636	4,061	200,697	2.02
Toscana	167,958	2,828	170,786	1.66
Umbria	39,389	270	39,659	0.68
Marche	72,187	1,619	73,806	2.19
Lazio	251,989	14,883	266,872	5.58
Abruzzo	56,869	709	57,578	1.23
Molise	13,384		13,384	
Campania	310,635	24,557	335,192	7.33
Puglia	204,624	1,754	206,378	0.85
Basilicata	28,465	80	28,545	0.28
Calabria	97,093	1,439	98,532	1.46
Sicilia	240,386	8,796	249,182	3.53
Sardegna	73,392	725	74,117	0.98

A vast difference in offerings between the North and South emerges from the data: in Lombardy, there are 360 second grade private schools (attended by 31,446 students), and 653 state schools attended by 386,862 students; in Calabria, there are less than 38 private secondary schools (attended by 1,439 students) and 288 state schools attended by 97,093 pupils. Among those interviewed in the programme 'The School of my Dreams', there are some families who have chosen to send their children to private equivalent Catholic schools adopting innovative curriculums of various types. For example, linguistic and digital improvement or environmental science. The main stated reasons are due to a desire to receive more attention and a personalised teaching which still remains within the system. The study plans are like those carried out in state schools, but private schools are perceived as providing families with support that is more continuous throughout the school year. In some cases, greater technological innovations are reported in the classrooms, the laboratories are well-stocked and the teaching aims to be as innovative and inclusive as possible. In addition, courses for language certifications are active within many independent schools, a service which is not always offered by public schools. It is interesting to note how, within the same Catholic institute, there are parents who choose the school for completely different reasons:

> *'I chose this school, making an economic sacrifice even with the help of the voucher (both myself and my husband are teachers), because I want my daughter to grow up in a protected environment where peer pressures like smoking, drugs and premature sex, to name a few, are limited and managed by teachers who have a strong and present leadership behind them. When Anita finishes middle school, I will enrol her in a state school. I believe that the children have to learn how to get by in the world, but this school lets me create a 'bubble' so I can delay this delicate transition as much as possible.'* Emma, a mother who chose a private middle school in the centre of Milan.

The first factor that emerges from the interviews is the point that in the private school there is a perceived increase in protection and less social pressure from peer groups on

activities that can occur both inside and outside school hours. This aspect in reality is not always controllable by a parent, because there are many variants that can influence the sociality of a teenager such as sports, parish events, music or residential groups. For example, from interviews with homeschooler parents it emerges that beyond school there are many ways to have a peer group:

> *'Everyone thinks that socialising takes place only at school but in reality, following homeschooling, my children have friends all over Italy. They have a group of playground friends and other friends who follow their hobbies and still others who are the children of friends and other homeschooler parents. We are talking of friendships based on common interests.'* Stefania, homeschooler mother.

A common characteristic among the parents choosing equivalent private schools is the world of alternative education and the attempts to control the socialising of children and orient it in a direction which is more pleasing to them. A second criteria emerging among the parents choosing equivalent private schools (in this case the same aforementioned Catholic institute) is that of the performance expected by parents at the end of the schooling period.

> *'We enrolled Leonardo at this school which we consider to be a school of excellence because we wanted to give him a better chance; we wanted him to be pushed towards realising his full potential; the world of work today is competitive – Italian universities no longer guarantee a job and we wanted him to be able to speak other languages well in order for him to be able to one day navigate the global labour market'.* Mario, a father who chose a private middle school in the centre of Milan.

There are quantitative studies in international literature showing that religious schools are associated with higher academic achievement (Alexander & Pallas, 1983; 1985; Hastings & Weinstein 2008; Hudolin, 1994; Jeynes, 2014) while some scholars have shown how such schools have the advantage of having selected users and a low percentage of racial minority children (Ball, 2003). The Italian literature on the subject, however,

contrasts sharply with the Anglo-Saxon and American world: Italian quantitative studies show that the quality of private schools is lower than that of state schools and the former would have a more predominantly restorative role towards students from wealthy families who do not follow state the school (Bertola, Checchi & Oppedisano, 2007; Brunello & Rocco, 2008) What the quantitative analysis does not show is that in Italy there are a small number of equivalent private schools that are perceived by parents of 'The School Of My Dreams' programme as high performance, of a higher level than the mainstream and not necessarily used only by wealthy families. This is not unexpected; in the centre of Milan competition for schooling is high, and some private schools are considered as particularly excellent. To throw light on this aspect, the famous 'Tiebout choice' model (Tiebout, 1956), that identifies a correlation between residential choices and the quality of local public goods, can be used. This theory has often been reiterated, and it has been shown that increases in Tiebout choices improve school productivity and, in turn, also improve student achievement (Hoxby, 2003). In this sense, it appears the increase in children with high earning parents and a high education level modifies the request for special schools and also in specific areas (Boterman, 2020). The presence in the city of many private schools, as in the case of Milan, could be a factor that increases quality but at present there are no studies or theoretical and empirical economic evidence which supports or denies this thesis (Burgess et al. 2007). At private schools, the teachers are chosen according to a different recruitment process, although in order to maintain equality, 60% of each school's teaching staff must be qualified according to the MIUR regulations. Some parents highlight that there is a huge difference in offering – there are highly competitive private schools and others, defined as *'too welcoming'* (Leonardo's mother) where the courses, according to parents, seem overly simplified.

This section has shown how the panorama of private schools is vast and uneven in the quality perceived by the interviewees. The criteria that lead to the choice of this type of institution, beyond the pedagogical method, have to do with the idea of a selected and homogeneous user as already highlighted by previous studies (for a review, see Jeynes, 2014). Furthermore, the interviewees perceive the quality in the school service to be higher than in state schools, so that children would be better served both on the educational and social fronts. This perceived quality is not necessarily accurate, however, as some studies show that the opposite is true (Bertola, Checchi & Oppedisano, 2007; Brunello Rocco, 2008). There are no qualitative studies that have investigated large-scale parental perceptions and more research is needed to shed light on these aspects and see how widespread these perceptions are nationwide.

5.3.1 The Italian Voucher System. The Case in Lombardy

Although many requests are received by private and alternative schools, the school reforms have never issued laws or provisions in support of the possibility of this kind of choice in Italy. The only concrete help, if it arrives, is regional and in various forms. Some regions contribute with vouchers to support attendance at a private or public school which provides tuition and attendance fees, aimed at students under the age of 21. However, these vouchers cannot be spent within parental schools, or private schools which are not equivalent. Not all Italian regions use the same financing for supporting the school vouchers and in some regions, this possibility does not exist at all. In Lombardy, the region with the greatest number of private schools and the area where some of those interviewed and mentioned in this section are residing, the school voucher is determined according to the following table, relative to the family's income band and grade of school attended (see Tab. 7).

ISEE VALUE	PRIMARY SCHOOL	SECONDARY SCHOOL 1ST GRADE	SECONDARY SCHOOL 2ND GRADE
Up to Euro 8,000	Euro 700	Euro 1,600	Euro 2,000
From Euro 8,001 to 16,000	Euro 600	Euro 1,300	Euro 1,600
From Euro 16,001 to 28,000	Euro 450	Euro 1,100	Euro 1,400
From Euro 28,001 to 40,000	Euro 300	Euro 1,000	Euro 1,300

Observing these data, it is inferred that in Lombardy, it is possible for a middle class family to afford a private school, but these families may struggle to afford the tuition fees at a school of excellence or the pure Montessori or Steiner methods which, in North Italy, can cost up to Euro 8,000 per annum. Therefore the possibility of choice is limited even within private schools themselves and that, with these charges, schools of excellence are difficult for the middle class to access.

The evidence that emerges clearly is that the voucher system in Italy is not homogenous among the Italian regions and not consistently useful, in the face of high fees, at reducing social inequalities and helping families to have more choice. From this it can be derived that increasing numbers of parents, in order to widen the choice possibilities, take into consideration solutions that are also outside the Italian scholastic system.

5.4 What Are the Didactic Dimensions for Choosing a Non-Traditional School?

As illustrated in the method chapter (see Chapter 4), most of the interviewees were selected among those who chose alternative schools (=25, including Forest school, Steiner

School, Parental School, Montessori School, Homeschooling). The other participants went to public schools with experimentation or equivalent private schools with an innovative curriculum (=15) operating within the national school system. From the interviews with parents some issues concerning the didactic organisation have emerged which guide the circuits of choice. Didactic method and the link with outdoor education, the reputation of the school, smaller classes and continuity, the search for an empathic and attentive environments for the weakest and the involvement of parents. This observation must be caveated by the fact that these themes derive from the perceptions of the parents interviewed and are often the result of personal experience. However, several connections with the mainstream emerged from the analysis and some of the needs of parents overlap with those who choose equivalent private schools or public schools with experiments (which will be dealt with more analytically in Chapters 6 and 7).

5.4.1 The Teaching Method and the Link with Outdoor Education

Some parents support choosing schools based on the teaching methods employed and due to the specific educational philosophies used as part of its curriculum, such as Montessori or Steiner teaching. Experience-learning in particular is the preferred approach of parental schools, homeschools and forest schools. Alongside this is a dislike of traditional methods, especially frontal lessons. In reality, few Italian public schools use the frontal teaching lesson method regularly. This will be shown in later chapters of this thesis (see Chapters 6 and 7), but the parents interviewed who choose alternative schools have the deeply rooted idea that frontal based lessons are the symbol that characterises traditional school. The Montessori method is continually cited in the interviews, not only by those following this specific educational philosophy but also within the panorama of parental instruction.

> *'Montessori is a name that every mother knows today. There are hundreds of magazines, media and board games that bear the name*

of the Chiaravalle pedagogist. Sometimes even in the supermarket aisle you can find Montessori games. The map of the continents is a tool that even kindergartens have. After visiting some parental schools with the Montessori method, I opted for an 'official' school managed by the Montessori National Opera. I hope this method, which many consider outdated, does not become commercialised or managed by non-certified personnel. I wanted to give my daughter the opportunity to get to know it in its most authentic teachings.'
Lidia, a mother who chose a Montessori School.

In the case of the Montessori method, it can be observed that in the face of the choice of a possible educational methodology or philosophy, the offer of school types is very varied. For example, parents who decide to approach the Montessori method come across various possibilities, from private Montessori Schools that follow the traditional method to parental schools. Several homeschooling parents report using this method in their daily activities. As seen in the Research Context chapter (see Chapter 3), even within Italian public schools there are two types of differentiated teaching inspired by the method: one promoted by the Opera Nazionale Montessori and the other promoted by the Montessori Foundation Italy. A case study of the latter will be analysed in Chapters 6 and 7. The world of alternative education is not in fact homogenous, as mentioned several times, but fragmented (Sliwka, 2008, p.1).

Similarly, there are also different possibilities regarding the Steiner Schools. Not all are private, and within the Italian Peninsula there are very different educational experiences. This kind of private school has different quality standards and, beyond equivalence, they require families to pay fees not everyone can afford. For example, the historic Steiner School in Milan has fees ranging from 4,000 to 6,000 euros per year depending on the type of course. Among the various experiences reported by the parents, a parent school inspired by Steiner is significant, founded in Novi Ligure thanks to the input of a group of parents. The contribution to the operation here is established on the basis of the economic needs of the association that manages the school; for families who are unable to cover the full

portion of the operating contribution, there is the possibility of requesting a reduction. An interviewed mother illustrates the activities that led her to adopt this method:

> *'I am very satisfied with my daughter's course: the Steiner School which she attends is organised like a little house – they make bread every day, they spend an hour outside everyday regardless of the season. They study, write and learn to do activities which they wouldn't do at a normal school. They learn to cook, to embroider, they look after the vegetable garden. They are peaceful children, competent on many levels, and they aren't stressed by the traditional school system.'* Loretta, mother, Steiner School.

Loretta is a mother who works as a doctor and is part of the association that helped create the Steiner-inspired parental school. She made this choice because she strongly believes in the Steiner method which, in addition to manual activities, creates continuous contact with the outside space. The use of manual activities, such as cooking bread, allows the development of different senses, such as touch, sight, smell. These practices fall within those spatialities that the geography of alternative education has often described (Kraftl, 2013; 2018). The school is also located inside a biodynamic farm, which is housed in a beautiful and bright farmhouse, surrounded by a luxuriant garden and a grove. In choosing this teaching methodology, an important role in this case is also entrusted to movement and the possibility of using the school garden for outdoor play, a very common practice in the Steiner method (Gillman, 2014). The vast majority of those interviewed who chose an alternative school for their child look for a school where movement is possible and the children do not have to be sitting at a desk for hours on end every day. These parents want a curriculum with more sport compared to traditional schools – through an increase in the hours of PE – and with more movement in daily life during normal classroom hours. It can be observed that the request to increase learning spaces is often linked to the possibility of increasing the mobility of the children themselves. This is consonant with studies which demonstrate that the expansion of teaching spaces can offer new interactivity forms and

experiences to the This need does not only concern outdoor spaces. A Tuscan mother who grew up in the Russian school system opted for homeschooling because she did not find in the Italian school system the complexity of experiences in which she was immersed in her country of origin:

> *'In St. Petersburg, people went outside even in winter. The lessons lasted forty-five minutes with a ten-minute break, the children could move around much more by changing classrooms and they also learned to do practical work. There was a classroom dedicated to civil protection, you learned to wear a gas mask, the men learned to shoot or what to do in the event of a flood. The females learned the elements of first aid and then there was the manual labour room where you learned to upholster a chair, to saw a beam, to sew a dress and to cook preserves. I do not expect training of this type but my son's kindergarten garden here in Tuscany included a beautiful forest and they never took him out there. And I asked the teachers "Why don't we take the children outdoors, are we in Siberia?'* Irina, a mother who chose homeschooling after an unsatisfactory mainstream experience.

Another aspect from Irina's experience is the necessity to take more care of common spaces:

> *'In the courtyard of the elementary school there was a statue of a partisan surrounded by uncultivated grass and even here I asked the teachers: "Why don't you clean it?" "It is not up to us, the municipality must take care of it", they replied. Well in Russia this lack of respect for the memory of people who gave their lives for their homeland would be unthinkable and the green space is managed directly by the students. Last year I took a fig plant to school but no one takes care of it.'* Irina, a mother who chose homeschooling after an unsatisfactory mainstream experience.

From Irina's words emerges a desire for active citizenship and participation in the common good. In this regard, research has often explored how the promotion of environmental education programmes can foster student responsibility (Beames & Ross, 2010). However, Irina's intention to make the school space a decent and tidy place did not find resonance among the teachers of her son's school and influenced her decision to opt for alternative education. On the other hand, in the Italian literature on the care of school

gardens there are several positive experiences evident in the mainstream (Bortolotti, Farnè & Terrusi, 2018), some of which will be presented in Chapter 7. Regardless of the category in which the school is classified, what is observed here is that the presence or lack of outdoor space is a factor, together with the didactic method which distinguishes the choice of school. It is not just forest or farm schools, there are many parental schools which are located in countryside homes, or in forests, and many Montessori or Steiner Schools are surrounded by gardens. The outdoors become a learning space which is both privileged and sought after by many parents. Even here, there can be different levels of use of outdoor space and this influences the family towards its choice of school.

5.4.2 Reputation of Alternative Learning Sites

Some parents chose certain types of alternative school, not for the methods themselves, but because they have been attracted by the reputation of the alternative school's staff on the internet and in the media. The 'school brand' has been a known phenomenon for some time (James & Phillips, 1995; Whitty & Power, 2000); in particular some studies have shown how branding and marketing create niche educational entities within the public system (Di Martino & Jessen, 2016; Oplatk, Hemsley & Brown, 2007).

Knowing the teachers' reputations allows parents to know beforehand what teaching methods the teacher will apply to their children. Some parents interviewed fear enrolling their children at a school 'left to chance' and school branding offers a sort of control:

> *'I'm not interested in the teaching method itself. The best teachers today know how to master different approaches and active methodologies. I've never believed in the perfect method, but I think it's right to give students the opportunity to try multiple approaches; we parents have a duty to inform ourselves. I chose a bilingual international school that combines different approaches: active methods, outdoor education and emotional education. From the school website I was able to see the CVs of the teachers and it seems to me that they have different and complementary skills. At the open day I met these teachers and they gave me confidence. I hope I made*

a good choice.' Paola, a mother who chose a non-equivalent international school.

In Paola's interview it emerges how the vector of choice is not influenced by a specific teaching method but by a set of teachers' skills that are communicated through the main tools that schools use for the school brand, such as open days and the website.

In the world of alternative education at the time of writing this thesis, there are no particular studies on the school brand. In fact, this process is traditionally linked to the mainstream and alternative schools that tend to detach themselves from consumerist practices (Kraftl, 2013; Woods & Woods, 2009). In Italy, however, there are many alternative facilitators who have written books and methods which are accessible to the general public thanks to the internet. An example is *Pedagogia del bosco* (Pedagogy of the forest) by Selima Negro, who runs a school in the parental forest on the outskirts of Milan and a Facebook group with which she recounts the school's activities to more than 13,000 followers. Or 'Il mondo è la mia classe' (The World is My Classroom) by Erika di Martino, head of the Italian parental education network, which manages a network of paid online courses and an Facebook community with over 50,000 followers. Both of these educators' books were published through independent publishers. Beyond parental education, there are various teachers who have decided to make their work known through publications and the media. Paolo Mai and Giordana Ronci manage the kindergarten in the woods of Ostia and, in addition to having written the book on their method, they manage a very popular Facebook page, which has exceeded 350,000 followers. The school brand of alternative schools is therefore an area that is booming in Italy and should be investigated by future research, to understand the levers with which parents are attracted to alternative education and how this is modelled within mainstream channels, such as social networks.

5.4.3 Valuation Methods

In December 2020, with the ministerial order no. 172 which eliminated numerical grades on a decimal basis in favour of descriptive judgments, the Italian public primary school changed its paradigm of assessment. With the advent of the 2021/2022 school year, the evaluation process therefore takes place through four levels (advanced, intermediate, basic, in the process of first acquisition) to which correspond four dimensions to be connected to each level: autonomy, continuity, resources used, known/unknown context (Nigris & Agrusti 2021). The result is descriptive judgments that aim to bring to light the concrete educational needs of children in every subject without resorting to numbers that quantify the achievement or otherwise of the objectives. The programme of interviews 'The School Of My Dreams' was conducted in the spring of 2020 when the above evaluation paradigm was not yet in force. Not all those interviewed agree on the presence or absence of assessments: for some, they are an absolute no, for others, they need to be re-considered. Most of the parents choosing an alternative school are opposed to numerical grading and would prefer a discursive assessment. The parents interviewed are all quite agreed on the fact that there are potential alternatives to the numerical grade and that they would like a primary school with no grading. The most popular solution in parental education, and in general, in the panorama of the alternative world, is the promotion of self-evaluation by the child, without the mediation of the adult.

> *'We don't reason by votes. We are more practical. Can I or can't I do this, my son wonders. And the answer belongs only to him. If he hasn't learned, let's do it again.* Livia, homeschooler mother.

Beyond the judgment on the degree of effectiveness of this process which does not have place in this thesis, it can be seen how self-evaluation is also common practice in the public school with No Backpack experimentation, as will be seen in Chapter 7. Despite being

diversified, self-assessment therefore represents a point of contact between alternative education and the world of mainstream experimentation.

5.4.4 Didactic Continuity and Smaller Classes

The school, whether public or private, is the nerve centre around which many figures revolve: pupils, teachers, educators, parents, managers, specialists in the field of psychology and pedagogy. However, as has often been observed in Italian scholarly literature (Bordin et al. 2021), professional figures generally come into contact with each other in a fragmented way, often due to precarious employment contracts or a fragmented internal organisation (Orsi, 2015). This cascading problem affects the perceived quality of the pupil–teacher relationship during the course of studies. It is not surprising that this aspect emerges from the interviews with parents who choose schools outside the mainstream and that there is demand for didactic continuity within the school community:

> *'When she was in first grade my daughter changed three teachers within a term. One of the reasons why I decided to withdraw her from school and opt for a parenting school was the desire to create a learning place, with other parents, where the teacher would accompany the children all the way, without continuous broken relationships, in a place where adults and children could grow up together.'* Cecilia, a mother who created a parenting school.

The precariousness of teachers' employment that emerges from the interviews is a scourge of Italian public schools that no reform has ever managed to solve and has various repercussions on school organisation (see Chapters 4 and 7). Another factor linked to the scarcity of human resources is the impossibility of reducing the number of pupils per class. Cecilia continues:

> *'The situation in schools is getting worse every year: the classes are increasingly numerous and can reach 28 pupils per class, so a lot of time is spent keeping the group together. Moments of leisure are kept to a minimum, trips cancelled due to lack of money and personnel. We thought we needed a new school. Our school has only nine pupils,*

> *this makes it possible for us to do the above activities without leaving anyone behind.'* Cecilia, a mother who created a parenting school.

While parental schools have the intrinsic characteristic of having small numbers of students, which often fall below ten 'units' (Fazioli, 2020), Montessori and Steiner Schools differ, having a lower number of students than the mainstream which hardly exceeds twenty students per class. In the context of equivalent private or public schools with an innovative curriculum, the cases are very varied; however, in the case of the latter, even in the presence of experimentation, it is necessary to submit to the MIUR regulations which guide the formation of the classes. While in traditional English schools personalised forms of learning are offered to pupils (Pykett, 2009), at the moment, in the Italian mainstream it is difficult to hypothesise a reduced number of students per class; underlying the decisions of some parents is the belief that having smaller classes is more beneficial. In the case of homeschoolers, the one-to-one relationship makes it possible to constantly monitor progress and difficulties, which is why this type is often chosen by those with a different learning pace.

5.4.5 The Search for an Empathetic Community, Open and Attentive to the Weakest

Some families with children who have personalised study plans due to common learning difficulties (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthographia, dyscalculia) or Special Educational Needs prefer to opt for a less high-performance and competitive alternative school. The families maintain that, for them, the tools used in the alternative schools are more suited to the style of learning their child needs. In particular, Davide's mother has chosen homeschooling which allows the preparation for the end of year exam as a private person, closely following the son's preparation:

> *'At school, my son had a personalised study plan with tools and compensatory measures that allowed him to study at his own pace. However, by the middle of the school year he was exhausted and had*

developed a sort of phobia of daily tasks and trials. With homeschooling I was able to help him achieve his goals and slow down further, trying to create a more congenial environment for him. Last year he passed the sixth grade exam in the old school by taking a private exam. We are now working on the second grade programme.' Livia, a mother who has chosen homeschooling.

Although in the mainstream there are several learning places that offer services to children with emotional, behavioural or learning differences (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014), and in the case of Italy this occurs in every school through the drafting of personalised study for each student (Ianes, Cramerotti & Gogarolo, 2021), parents who are oriented towards alternative education do so to drastically change the system. The request for an environment more attentive to the needs of children also comes from other parents who do not have children with special needs. Many parents highlight the importance of finding teachers and educators who have a more human approach to children, who know how to create a good climate, with children, and more loving relationships, defined by Kraftl (2013, p. 189) as *'family'-like relations'*, among classmates and between teachers and pupils. Again, the French mother who lives in Tuscany explains:

> *'Ameliè's teachers constantly go around the desks, they explain in groups of eight and they are always reachable, it really seems like they love what they do. They have a calm voice, a kind attitude which is never commanding. In Ameliè's class, there is cooperation among classmates, they set off slowly but they get there stronger.'* Claudine, a mother who has chosen a No Backpack School.

In the construction of this relational climate an important role is played by empathy, an inner feeling that leads to conceiving people in their individuality and singularity and which, through education, can be solicited in favour of the improvement of humanity (Hunt, 2010). The empathic connection is also the basis of building a community. It allows us to value differences and feel the needs of others. What emerges from Francesca's interview is a sense of cooperation between classmates that brings positive results for the whole group. The sense of community that emerges from alternative spaces has often been

explored by geographies of alternative education (Kraftl, 2013), but as will be seen in later chapters it is not a distinctive trait unique to these spaces. In the Italian context, more and more schools are practicing empathy and developing new ways of thinking about the community even within the mainstream (see Chapter 7). When a child enters into attending school, they also enter into becoming part of a community. The programmed lines of the Minister of Education (MIUR, 2021) dwell significantly on the importance of building an educating community around the school. This aspect in alternative education has been felt for some time and some literature has brought to light the different ways in which even autonomous learning spaces can have ramifications and implications with the mainstream and its surroundings (Kraftl, 2013)

For example, parents who enrol their children in parental or Steiner Schools have a strong sense of community:

> *'First there's the community and then there's school. However, every week our community interfaces with the town, we participate in the markets of local associations by selling the chestnuts we collect in the woods, we help clean up the public park after the town festivals, we go to the town library at least twice a week to choose the books we use in our school. The locals know us, we are not extra-terrestrials.'* Ludovica, a mother who has chosen a parental school.

Some studies have shown that, through the involvement of children in the life of the community, school is not the only way and not necessarily the best way to integrate with others (Arai, 1999). In a similar way, some parents who have opted for homeschooling describe well the importance of friendship without regard to age and the different types of socialisation adopted by children not attending the school.

> *'Since I started homeschooling with my son, there is a question that has been asked me like a mantra by family and friends: what about socialisation? Will he grow up without friends? Social interactions for homeschoolers occur by personal choice and are based on personal interests. But not only that. Not attending school means interfacing more every day with people of all ages. My son has many*

> *friends both his age and older adults.'* Franca, Homeschooler
> Mother.

Homeschooling has long been criticised for isolating children from the outside world (Romanowsky, 2006; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013); to date, however, no studies have been able to demonstrate that homeschooler children suffer real social disadvantages. As has been repeatedly observed, and as also emerges from this interview, homeschooling can strengthen family relationships (Mountney, 2008) and promote socialisation with people of all ages (Lowe & Thomas, 2002). In the study by Ray (1999) it emerges that children not attending school seem to be more inserted into voluntary activities in respect to their school peers, and they spend more hours in the week with adults not necessarily. In Italy, in reality these intergenerational activities are not just a quirk of alternative experimentation schools: they have been recently developed especially by primary schools, or lower middle schools. They boast quite a critical and developed literature (Boffo, 2011), following the indications of social European policies that have underlined the need for the development of a community model founded on intergenerational solidarity and a person's lifelong development. Chapter 7 will deal with these themes within public schools.

The parents who choose alternative school want to be more involved in their child's academic life.

> *'You can enter these schools – in other schools it's all secret.'* Laura,
> a mother who chose a Montessori School.

However, of the parents interviewed, the need for parental involvement has very different levels, and this is also a factor which sets the landscape of alternative schools apart. Parental schools are often born of the parents' initiative and provide all-round involvement. In Steiner, Montessori or forest schools, the parent instead have less involvement than the

staff but can equally have a direct dialogue with the teacher. In choosing the alternative system, the parent can choose how they want to be a part of their child's academic life.

In this section, some reasons related to the choice of school have been outlined which are mainly concerned with the sphere of the organisation of teaching. From the methodology to the evaluation and passing through to the size of the classes, the continuity, the climate, the relationship with the outdoors and the opening towards the outside. Some of the interviewees demonstrated a connection between their children's choice of school and their job and lifestyle.

5.5 Lifestyle and Life Choices in Parental Education

Several studies have shown how the choice to undertake parental education has represented a crucial lifestyle change for families (Neuman & Aharon, 2003) and, at the same time, parental education has led many parents to a redefinition of career choices and what self-actualisation represents for them (Lees, 2014). The next section will analyse some factors that lead to the choice of parental education from this point of view. Attending a school, be it public, private or alternative, means accepting an educational pact involving teachers, parents and pupils. In this pact they responsibly assume reciprocal commitments to favour a close and effective collaboration for the success of the students themselves. In Italy, in public schools, it is a real document, regulated in the Decree of the President of the Republic 21st November, 2007, no. 235. In the educational co-responsibility pact, which is signed at the beginning of each school year by all the actors involved, each school establishes rules, school attendance, planning of objectives and reciprocal responsibilities. In families that choose parental education this pact is not formalised, and since there is no separation between daily life and learning (Kraftl, 2013b), it can happen in different ways for each one or not at all. As has been seen in the research context (see Chapter 3), there

are different forms of parental education, from homeschooling which can be more or less structured to 'unschooling', passing through parental schools. Each family builds its own educational path for the children through needs and habits that can be significantly different (Ray, 1999) and, as has been observed, homeschooling is characterised by variously scaled movements, both in spatial and temporal terms (Kraftl, 2013b). What emerges in the interviews is that often the choice to focus on this practice brings with it a recurring relationship between lifestyle and education. Some parents, for example, claim that they have chosen homeschooling in order not to be forced to attend school every day and to be able to travel more freely during the year:

> 'When I was young, I always hated the idea of having to get up at seven every day and take the bus to go to school. I was having a really hard time getting up early and was tired all day long. Since the beginning of my career I have chosen to work remotely, today I am a virtual assistant. Alongside this, I built my family in an international context: my husband is American and we often live for six months in Italy and six months in the USA. The choice to offer my daughter parental education was natural as we are a family that travels a lot. Not having a school calendar allows us not to stay in the same place from September to June. In a way, I also chose 'unschooling' for myself. I do it in order to explore the world with my daughter and to spend time with her that I otherwise wouldn't get. My daughter is learning, and so am I.' Lucia, an 'unschooling' mother.

As already noted by geographers, ironically a large amount of the homeschooler's time is spent not at home but travelling, for example, with trips to museums, parks and libraries (Kraftl, 2013b). The different structure of the school day is an important decision circuit for parents because it can equip the child with a different approach to space and to the time management in their own lives. A mother notes:

> 'Before we didn't have much time to be together, the afternoon was like playing Tetris: fitting homework time around sports and music. In the evening we were tired and ended up spending time together only on weekends. With homeschooling, the quality of family life has also improved, and family relationships are more liveable.' Laura, a homeschooling mother.

In this case the homeschooling choice has allowed for a more relaxing view of the day, where family relationships become more 'liveable'. Some parents choose alternative learning sites where they are able to recreate some of their own family lifestyle routines. For example, in some parental schools, vegetarian or vegan diets are available, as is meditation before and after lessons. These preferences include habits with a relatively low impact on education, such as a specific diet, as well as broader values, such as religious denomination. Even in the smallest of contexts, it is possible to identify a precise political or ideological orientation. For example, in the international literature there are several studies in the field of Christian movements, in which homeschooling is associated with social commitment and political participation (Cheng, 2014). In other cases, parents focus on parental education to allow for health choices which the state system does not support. The most common example lies within the case of vaccines: both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, many children remained out of the state school system due to an Italian law which only permitted the enrolment of children who had been given all the compulsory vaccinations. On this issue, however, there are dissenting opinions among the interviewees following parental education. Laura, for example, observes that these aforementioned phenomena *vulgarise parental education because they lose sight of the most important point – learning*'. In any case they represent levers of varying weight in the orientation of choice and, although not shared by all, they offer a cross-section of the complexity of the world of parental education.

5.5.1 Parental Education: Economic Sacrifice and Entrepreneurship

Parental education is usually associated with those wealthy families in which a parent, usually the mother, can afford to stay home from work. Although in some cases this is also true here (two-thirds of the interviewees are women who personally take care of their children's education), the research sample includes families with average incomes,

confirming the online trend of other international studies (Kraftl, 2013b). Among the respondents, not all homeschooler parents chose to be the teachers of their children; many rely on private teachers or online courses on various disciplines purchased on the net. Some parents interviewed, mostly women, have somehow tried to reorganise their lives through part-time or remote work. Some of them have opened a consultancy business, others have developed craft skills and created online stores, one mother enrolled in a research doctorate in an online university studying Montessori pedagogy. Among the most interesting cases, some parents have qualified as educators, developing forms of self-entrepreneurship, whereby the management of the parental school has become a source of livelihood for the family itself.

> *'We couldn't find a school that we liked, so we founded one but to run it and to cover all the costs we have no choice but to advertise it, especially through word of mouth and over social networks. In our school we look after everything ourselves. From teaching to administration, furnishing the teaching space and cleaning. There is not a large amount of money to be made, but for us it is sufficient to live on.* Cecilia, mother from a parental school.

Like Cecilia, other parents have in fact created for their children a school which became their work. The phenomena is also visible on a larger scale. Even in the case of the Homeschooling Italia portal, there are advertisements selling books, themed t-shirts and so on. In the photographs (see Fig. 11 and Fig. 12) courses and e-lessons are available as well as notices for attracting new members to the paid network which set out various prices for the different levels of subscription.

In the sections, costs are shown for subscribing to the site and the costs for 'packets', including Homeschooling videos and Montessori methods.
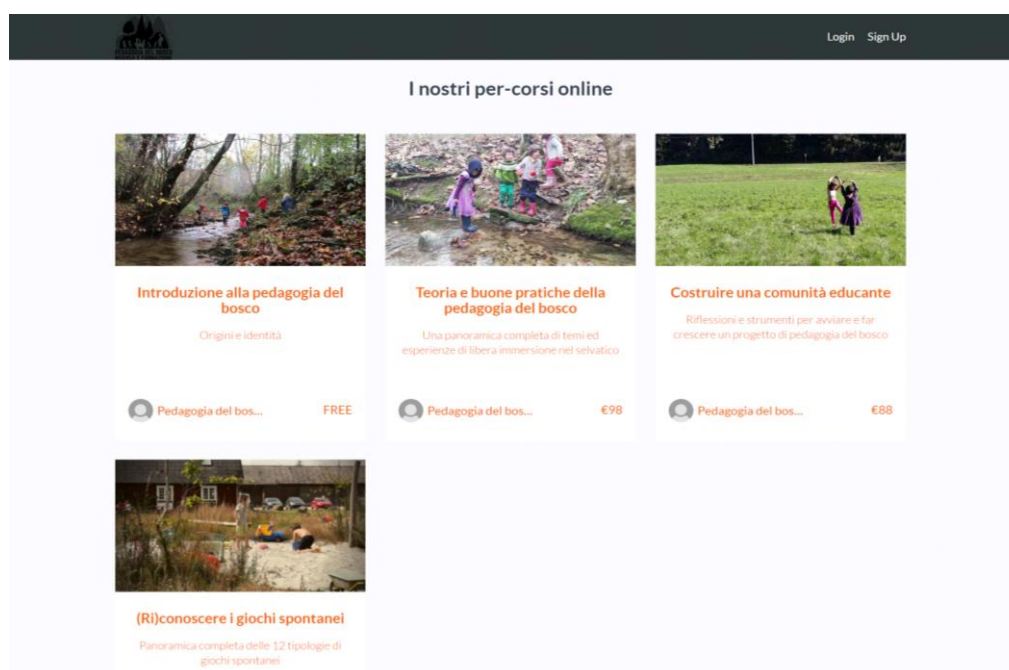
In Fig. 12 the price list of a forest school that offers courses for homeschooler mothers is visible. Some courses also target mainstream schoolteachers and educators: 'introduction

to forest pedagogy', 'theories and good practices of forest pedagogy', 'build an educational community', 'recognise spontaneous games'.

If on the one hand these experiences reinforce the thesis that homeschooling is an alternative type of privatisation (Katz, 2008), on the other hand they show only one side of the phenomenon. Some parental schools, where parent collaboration is nearly always the school's supporting pillar, have a different solution: the exchanging of skills or jobs within the school instead of tuition costs. This dynamic also allows parents with limited economic means to be able to afford a parental school, and in the same way it also symbolises a desire for a different society which is not based purely on money as a merchandise exchange.

Elisa and her husband, for example, are two former university researchers and now manage a cultural centre open to the community, which offers English courses at a modest price; their children who follow their own education path in unschooling also benefit from it:

> *'Unschooling has led us to re-examine all our choices. From mobility, to work, to lifestyle. My husband worked as a university researcher in electrochemistry but has had several lives: he was a qualified English language teacher in China, an Italian language science teacher at the Italian Cultural Institute in Haifa, a shrimp packer, and a street musician in Ireland. I was a teacher of Middle East History and Politics and a freelance researcher on urban development in Cairo. To devote ourselves to our children, we left the academic career and moved from England to Italy. So, we bought a cargo bike, pedal assisted with the front box and two seats for transporting children and sold the car. We decided to move to a farmhouse in the countryside, close to my family of origin, where we have revised down our economic needs and reinvented our work as part-time English teachers. Less hours of paid work, the vegetable garden, a country house with low impact on the environment, the gift economy, reuse and recovery have led to more relaxed rhythms of life, more space for reading, music, do-it-yourself... but above all time together, sharing and presence. We have patches on our trousers (and we wear them with pride!), but we feel much more fulfilled and in line with the values we believe in.'* Elisa, homeschooling mother.

The decision to take care of her children's education led Elisa to assume a more modest and less consumerist lifestyle, to work part-time, to move from the city to a low environmental impact cottage in the countryside and to give up the car. In 'The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy', Gibson-Graham discusses the importance of discovering the *'world of economic difference'* (1996, p. 3). Elisa's narration offers several starting points for reflecting on what a family that is committed to living and acting outside the capitalist logic can do in their small way. In this sense, the choice of parental education is indicative of a different vision of life itself (Kraftl, 2013) and differs significantly from the idea of privatisation of education which is sometimes associated with homeschooling as an elaboration of neoliberal ideology (Henley, 2021), presenting itself in this case as a form of resistance to the dominant social forces (Puga, 2019). However, cases can be very different from each other, and this also depends on the parents' background. Another mother hopes that parental school can induce in her child aspirations of entrepreneurship and not of white-collar or other middle class jobs:

> *'We talk about school as work. It is in fact considered the work of children, and it is no coincidence that the students' hours often imitate those of the parents' office hours. I do not wish my son to work in the post office or as a clerk in a bank. I hope that in the future he will develop a passion and open his own business. We ourselves are in a way entrepreneurs, even if this is within the world of alternative schools. In any case, if he wants to go to university, I know that universities of excellence like Harvard and many European universities accept homeschoolers from abroad."* Ludovica, a mother who has created a parent school.

The idea of a creative lifestyle should be applied to both the school and the work of the future. It is striking in this interview that if on the one hand there is a rejection of the mainstream school which is compared to a workplace, on the other there is no lack of

aspirations towards highly competitive and symbolic universities of the capitalist world. In this case there is not a complete adherence to an alternative lifestyle but more the refusal of a middle class school (perceived by them) in favour of another that teaches children how to be professionals for a flexible economy.

5.6 Summary and Conclusions

Drawing on interviews with parents who have participated in 'The School of My Dreams' programme through their experiences in experimental, private and alternative schools, the chapter explored the factors that lead to choosing a non-traditional school. Thus, it has contributed to the still limited literature on school choice in Italy regarding the primary school educational offer. It has been observed how the choice of a school with experimentation within the public system can lead families to move outside the catchment area. However, this possibility is limited by the availability of places, which does not always allow all applications to be accepted. In particular, the interviews show that in large urban centres, where there are processes of urban segregation, mobility can extend to the province. In the city of Milan, as previous studies have shown, 44% of families who opt for the public System tend to go to the nearest school, while just over half at 56% opt for private schools and public schools towards the centre (Cordini, Parma & Ranci, 2019).

This study demonstrates that, beyond the search for an ethnically uniform school (Harris & Johnston, 2008), many of these parents move to look for a school with alternative experimentation within the public system. Similarly, the attraction of private schools has to do both with the wish of a selected audience and with the promotion of an innovative curriculum that offers greater possibilities and facilities in view of the university period, such as language certifications and strengthening in STEM subjects, in order to compete in the future in the global market with greater competitive advantage. Parents who chose

non-traditional schools, including forest schools, Steiner Schools, farm schools, Montessori Schools and the various types of parental education, were considered in this group. The analysis revealed that the factors that lead to choosing an alternative school can be traced back to various spheres of the teaching organisation, including curriculum, method, link with external education and evaluation methods.

Alongside this, great importance is given to the relational environment through the search for an empathic community open to the weakest, a theme that strongly emerges also in the case of public schools with experimentation (see Chapter 7). It is interesting to note that the reputation of teachers and the school brand also play an important role in this dynamic, a phenomenon usually more common in mainstream education (Di Martino & Jessen, 2016; Oplatk, Hemsley & Brown, 2007). The aim of the last section (5.5) was to show the parents' point of view and the multiple, divergent and sometimes contradictory answers to the reasons why parental education was chosen. The relationship with work and lifestyle mirrors their own identities and visions of life. It can be seen that not all those who choose parental education want to stay outside the mainstream. Many people create personal forms of engagement with the structures of the society they belong to (Kraftl, 2013). The significant aspect here is that the complexity of parental education gives rise both to experiences of privatisation of education, in which a great role is played by the entrepreneurship of some parents, and to forms of alternative economy consonant with the idea of 'several economies' (Roelvink, Martin, Gibson & Graham, 2015). A reverse process will be explored in the next chapters (6 and 7), in which experimental public schools create links with alternative forms of education while remaining within the mainstream.

CHAPTER 6:

SPACES IN TRANSFORMATION

6.1 Introduction

Over the past thirty years, the construction of the learning environment has found itself at the centre of the interdisciplinary debate encompassing the geographies of education, pedagogical reflection, architecture and social policy. As seen, with the development of the geography of education, an eclectic literature on educational spaces has accumulated (Kraftl et al., 2020; Kučerová, Holloway & Jahnke, 2020), and the interdisciplinary nature of this creative field of study has sparked a methodological debate involving policy makers and institutions at various levels (see Chapter 2).

In this and the following chapter (Chapter 7), the data from the field research carried out within the public schools with experimentation are examined. This chapter focuses on the transformative character of scholastic spaces in traditional and experimental didactics and on the ways in which physical space versus flexible and polytopic spaces are organised. It is divided into four sections in the following order. Section 6.1 discusses the current problems experienced in Italian public schools which experimentation schools aim to avoid. Section 6.2 highlights some of the ways in which physical spaces have been reconverted from traditional schools into experimentation schools. Section 6.3. explores the role of the scholastic classroom. Despite the learning spaces being more widespread and flexible, the classroom still occupies a central position in the organisation of space throughout the three experimentation schools under analysis. Finally, Section 6.4 focuses on outdoor space from the school garden to the other external environments and explores

the potential which this can offer to ordinary teaching and structured projects in the form of outdoor education.

The decision to conduct an analysis of the physical spaces was taken as they represent the corner-stone with which the students, teachers, parents, and users interact on a daily basis; these spaces shape the learning environment and have an important influence on the organisational model and on the social and spatial processes of daily school life. Castoldi (2020) recalls the famous statement, '*the medium is the message*' (McLuhan, 1964) and observes how it is important to organise a functional learning environment in line with its teaching objectives. Similarly, the most recent guidelines, covered in the literature review of Chapter 2, begin with the re-thinking of the learning environment in the processes of change in school. This idea has already been present for some time in alternative education (Carnie, 2003; Kraftl, 2013; Woods & Woods, 2009), and it now seems to be widespread even throughout the mainstream system thanks to institutional guidelines (OECD, 2013; Kraftl, Gulson & McKenzie, 2022 for UNESCO).

As illustrated in the methodology chapter (Chapter 4), data were collected via two programmes: interviews with teachers and head teachers through the programme, 'What's Education For'. This programme was conducted remotely in the spring of 2020. 'All About Your School', a programme dedicated to children was conducted remotely between March and April of 2021. Here the children were asked to produce lapbooks in class with a teacher who was previously briefed by the postgraduate researcher. Bringing together these data, the analyses produced some connections and disconnections between the children's different experiences while attending the three case study schools, more specifically the three schools with alternative experimentation within the state school system which this thesis investigates: The Outdoor School Network, the No Backpack Network and the Montessori Schools Network.

The choice to begin an analysis of the physical space came from the fact that the school buildings examined present very different characteristics from one another. They are learning sites which, over the course of time, have undergone transformations, and which were not originally designed for the current experimentation teaching. The Giacosa school in Milan started off as a sanatorium for unwell children at the start of the 1900s. Today it is a school with outdoor experimentation that benefits from the space created in the past. These benefits often act in continuity with the past but sometimes also with new purposes. The Lucca Quinto di Ponte at Moriano school in Tuscany began as a traditional school which was then re-purposed, re-decorated and re-organised with the assistance of architects specialised in the No Backpack teaching method. The Beltrami school in Omegna is a classic Italian state school building of the early 1900s, composed of three floors and long corridors, and to this day it has two functions: a mainstream school with classes following the traditional curriculum and another school with Montessori Experimentation in specific classrooms, refurnished in accordance with the Montessori method. Each of these schools therefore has a different story and identity. Over time, these buildings have taken on new meaning, each in their own way, and it will be demonstrated for all three how the transformation is still under way.

6.2 Italian Public School Buildings

As seen above, policy makers from many countries have taken an interest in school buildings, giving way to the development of many renovation and reconstruction projects of school spaces, although in Italy there have been only partial and limited results in certain areas. The redesign of the school spaces is a hot topic of the political agenda of the Italian Minister of Public Education, Patrizio Bianchi. In the spring of 2022, the Minister established a working group formed of architects and pedagogists to create guidelines set

out in the dossier: 'The future, guidelines for planning, building and inhabiting schools', a programme which proposes a widespread renewal of school buildings. Together with this document a tender notice has been issued for the full construction of school buildings taking on the form of "schools of the future": schools of architectural quality and efficiency, with low consumption, which are sustainable and welcoming with open spaces, promoting co-planning, flexibility, physical involvement, functional furnishing, technology and connectivity. For now, however, this provision will only be for the full construction of 195 schools. The topics mentioned in 'Futura' (MIUR, 2022) are not new in literature, for example, Barrett et al. (2015) proposes three principles which should guide the school design. The first, naturalness, whereby the quality of air, temperature, light and sound are harmonised and made as natural as possible; following this, both the individualisation of teaching and stimulation in order to guarantee students the best conditions for developing their learning potential. Similarly, in the Italian context, for decades, the Reggio Emilia Approach has put emphasis on care of the school space as a third educator (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2014) as well as a fundamental element in the definition of the educational project to be undertaken.

From this perspective, in order to understand the background in which the public schools with experimentation under analysis operate, an introduction is required. The schools with experimentation analysed here began through the reconversion of old buildings, which was made possible largely due to public bidding and private funding. Air quality, temperature and light are not parameters which can be considered in this discussion: the old buildings do not have photovoltaic installations or air conditioning systems. These are dated buildings which often have to deal with pre-existing structural problems, such as draughty windows in the winter and temperatures which can reach over 30°C between May and June, especially in the Mediterranean regions. There are currently around 57,000 school buildings in Italy,

many of which are in critical condition; for now, the ten characteristics proposed by the MIUR working group mentioned above are very distant from the reality in which Italian schools currently operate. The following is testimony of a teacher with twenty years' experience in the public schools sector, here describing the situation in a Northern Italian city.

> *'Here, most of the public institutions are located in old buildings. It is possible to find classrooms of 20 sqm for 30 pupils, single-glazed windows held in with mastic (a low-cost system used in public buildings in the 1940s). In one case, electrical panels were used from the sixties that were not always up to standard. Not all schools are currently provided with internet and even in technologically advanced schools, wi-fi coverage does not reach everywhere. Renovating the laboratories from scratch is extremely expensive. In technical institutes it may happen that the materials used are those which the current teachers used when they were students. Other problems can also be found in more recent buildings as they were built with an eye on cost savings – for example you can find walls of concrete perforated tiles without insulation. In this way, the wall, not being insulated, does not protect from the cold in winter and from the heat in summer.'* Alessandro, public school teacher.

This interview with Alessandro is not an isolated case. The majority of Italian schools operate in buildings fabricated in the previous century, with equipment which is not always equal and sufficient to the task. In the face of innovative and modern school buildings, often thanks to enormous investments by local institutions as seen in the case of the experimentation schools in this chapter, it is not unusual to hear testimonies of parents who are forced to fundraise to buy toilet roll or equipment for the school (see Chapter 5 on circuits of choice). These observations are important in understanding the change which the public schools with experimentation underwent within the Italian public school system before the arrival of the Futura guidelines (MIUR, 2022). A change which has been observed primarily in the regions with specials statutes (like Trentino-Alto Adige and Sardinia) is that they can count on greater legislative autonomy regarding school buildings (Weyland & Prey, 2020). In the rest of Italy the situation is still critical and, at time of

writing this thesis, the so-called 'innovative school' represents more the exception than the rule.

Along with this situation comes a feature of imbalance and inequality in the conditions of the physical space between one school and the other. Three teachers, now working at the Montessori Experimentation School, echo this reflection as they recall their previous teaching experiences in public middle schools in Italy, which are often characterised by older buildings, bare furnishings and uneven equipment among the classes:

> *'At the traditional school where I previously worked, some classes did not even have a cupboard, in fact, it was often the case that the children would be called by the janitors in the afternoon if they left a book under the desk, or if they left their gym shoes at school in order to lighten their bags. In September one year, a shutter broke and I informed the office. It took six months for someone from the council to come and fix it.'* Rosaria, Teacher, Montessori Public School.

> *'In the public school I previously taught at, the heating barely worked; I remember winters wearing my coat in the classroom, broken windows which were only fixed after months of waiting. But that's not all: gardens with grass which had grown up too high to take the children there, class store rooms where broken desks were piled up and so couldn't be used as laboratories, cupboards and drawers filled with old and disorganised materials. These conditions would be unthinkable thanks to the care and attention that No Backpack applies to school spaces: other than the teaching method, you need only visit a No Backpack building to see the differences from the mainstream.'* Federica, Teacher, No Backpack School.

From the interviews with these teachers, it appears that there is a very common sense of discomfort in public schools which is also expressed by some parents in Chapter 5 on circuits of choice. It is interesting, however, that, for the first time, this discomfort is also acknowledged by the MIUR study group. As per the dossier of the above-mentioned 'Scuola Futura': *'Giving greater quality to schools also means supporting the growth of a widespread architectural and urban culture, overcoming the image still prevalent in our country of schools as worn-out, run-down buildings with negative reflections on the sense of belonging*

and care of spaces' (MIUR, 2022, pp. 6–7). In the interview with Rosaria the theme of furniture emerges. How can one feel welcomed in a place where you cannot even leave a book under a desk or where there is not even a cupboard to keep class materials? Orsi references this spatial process, defining it as a *'thinning down of the learning environment'* (2015, p. 39) against which is counter balanced the antithesis of the No Backpack School model, which, as can be seen in the following sections, recalls the affordance concept (Gibson, 1979): the environment becomes a place that sends out messaging. Federica's words denote a sense of negligence within the space described, for example, unkempt grass and broken windows which have not been repaired. It is evident how this contrasts with the care and order desired by the Montessori environment (Montessori, 2018) and by the idea of hospitality proposed by the No Backpack model (Orsi, 2015).

Given these conditions, on the one hand the Futura guidelines may appear utopian, because they do not take into account the starting situation of most school buildings; on the other, they represent a starting point for building the schools of the future. The guidelines, however, have just been published and it will take time to see their results.

Therefore, this study intends to start from the changes proposed by existing experimentation schools that have already operated for ten years in the Italian context. In the concluding chapter of the thesis, reference shall be made to the implications that these three schools imply for the wider landscape of school buildings in Italy. The common starting point for all three schools with experimentation under investigation is the different ways in which they look after their physical spaces. In the subsequent sections, the discussion moves to how the buildings of these schools have been re-purposed and re-organised and how the histories of these schools as traditional schools still impact on some of the teaching and social processes of the school day.

6.3 Doing Experimentations: The Reconversion of the Common Spaces of Traditional Buildings into Experimentation Schools

As previously stated, none of the three visited schools were purpose built to become No Backpack, Montessori or Outdoor experimental institutes. All of the schools were established within the buildings and gardens of pre-existing schools which once followed the national curriculum, as well as the same routine as all other normal public schools. Among the three, the case of Beltrami school is more significant with regard to the transformation of the learning space. Within the same traditional school building the Montessori Experimentation School also co-exists. The only thing separating them is their location on different floors. The outdoor space, a wide paved courtyard, is a common area shared by both curricula. The two curricula also use the school cafeteria as their main shared gathering point. In these common spaces there are no Montessori materials as these have been appointed as neutral zones, where the two 'souls' of the school come together (see Fig. 13 and Fig. 14).

Figure 13 – MONTESSORI EXPERIMENTATION SCHOOL BUILDING IN OMEGNA Source: Author

Figure 14 – ASPHALT PLAYGROUND AT THE MONTESSORI EXPERIMENTATION SCHOOL IN OMEGNA

Source: Sonia, Teacher

'Having two schools in the same building means having two different timetables, different entrances and exits, different curricula, classrooms structured in a different way, different subjects between one class and another. Even in the evaluation: for example the 3B Montessori does not receive grades, the 3A traditional follows the deadlines of the traditional public school calendar. To make things work, collaboration between teachers from both institutes is essential.' Rossana, Teacher, Montessori School.

'The same internal courtyard is used at different times and in different ways by both schools. The traditional classes tend to use it at break times between classes; for Montessori it is a proper outdoor classroom where lessons are taught, weather permitting.' Antonella, Montessori School.

In this case in the same physical space different social processes apply, a point worth emphasising.

As has already been highlighted in the literature of public schools with Montessori Experimentation, the common characteristic of these Montessori public spaces is their adaptability (Nigris & Piscozzo, 2018), which has allowed the school teachers to modify the setting and planning of the learning environment and organisation depending on the requirements of the teaching methodology in play. This aspect is actually not surprising.

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Even Maria Montessori, in her first *Casa dei Bambini* founded on 6th January 1907 in the San Lorenzo district of Rome, had an educational environment that was in principle very similar to that of a traditional school, with the teacher's desk at the front and rows of pupils' desks.

The Beltrami primary school in Omegna with Montessori Experimentation made its first steps in 2014, starting from a building constructed in the '60s with chalkboards, essential furnishings and identical classrooms which were subsequently reorganised into Montessori classes (discussed in detail in Section 6.3). Other classrooms were transformed into themed rooms and dedicated to specific disciplines like music, art and information technology. The staff themselves admit a few points of disconnection with the original Montessori method (D'Ugo & Lupi, 2017); in this school there is no kitchen or work room, and there is less space for practical life exercises due to the recurring issue linked to the HACCP regulations present in state schools, as mentioned in the research context (Chapter 3) on school legislation.

> *'Practical life activities are an important component to the method but in the public school with Montessori Experimentation these activities are scaled down due to certain legislation which governs school life. Of course, the class is kept tidy by the students, each has their own duty to undertake in terms of cleaning and looking after the class space. In some classrooms, we have created a corner with plants to water and flowers to look after. The problem then becomes that there is a lack of spaces to store materials, or that the classes are too small to hold all the required material at a determined time.'*
> Leila, teacher, Montessori Public School.
>
> *'I am not completely satisfied with the structures used, for example the cafeteria: meals are served in the same place as the traditional school, they don't allow certain Montessori directions to be put into practice during these moments, for example, allowing the children to prepare food, clear the table or wash the dishes.'* Clelia, teacher, Montessori Public School.

As can be deduced from the interviews, on the one hand the Montessori sections within state schools represent a huge opportunity as they allow everyone a chance to attend; on the other hand, the implementation of the method in this context brings some legislative limits and the issues resulting from Italian public school buildings, such as limited space and dated structures originally designed for traditional teaching.

The case of the schools belonging to the No Backpack network highlights some similarities: implementation within the No Backpack physical space, despite the fact that there are common material components – such as being constructed by architects – the furnishings, specific teaching tools (known as '*hardware*' in Orsi, 2015, p. 86) vary according to the original condition of the building. There are still few schools built as No Backpack Schools from scratch (for example, the Istituto di Montespertoli). In reality even if a No Backpack School provides special materials for outdoor environments, not all of these have a garden.

The Lucca Quinto school in Ponte Moriano was transformed from a traditional school into a No Backpack experimentation school, and its spaces were re-designed thanks to the help of architects specialised in the No Backpack methodology, as well as being refurnished with the method's official materials produced by the tool factory in Lucca. The underpinning idea, which is also shared by the Montessori Experimentation, was to limit the centrality of the classroom and to include all the internal and external spaces of the school building in the learning environments. In this way, every single space was transformed into a small functional space for detailed study or individual activities, creating for example, different corners dedicated to reading. This idea, beginning 20 years ago in the No Backpack network, was proposed again by the manifesto model '*1+4 spazi educative per la scuola del terzo millennio*' (1+4 educational spaces for schools of the third millennium) (see Literature Review, Section 6.5.2). The photographs (Fig. 15) illustrate how common scholastic spaces are given value through various experimentations.

Figure 15 – COMMON SPACES IN THE NO BACKPACK SCHOOL Source: Author

New furnishings were also created, which is also the case in the secondary school Outdoor School classrooms in Milan. This gave a new look to the corridors and common spaces and allowed students to inhabit the whole school and take on the unused spaces. In this way the living space for the students was expanded beyond the walls of the classrooms, favouring both the creation of flexible corners that could be personalised as widespread laboratories and mobile libraries. This insight is in reality more and more widespread in Western schools and recent studies have begun to show the positive impact of flexible learning spaces, accompanied by greater use of student-centred pedagogies and the well-being of students (Kariippanon et al., 2018).

The photos in Figure 16 show how the so-called Green Room, shared across all the No Backpack Schools, is entirely constructed in wood. This is complemented by the arrangement of the wooden classrooms, which present spaces supporting personal study and concentration (see Fig. 16).

Figure 16 – WOODEN CLASSROOMS IN THE NO BACKPACK SCHOOL Source: Author

The use of recycled materials in wood was intended to allow for an ecological influence in these spaces. In literature studies have shown how the awareness of the sustainable design of the learning environment can shape adolescent and adult mindsets towards a better environmental awareness (Leeming, Dwyer & Bracken, 1995). However, other studies have not revealed a significant relationship among them (McCunn & Gifford, 2012; Olsson et al., 2019). Notwithstanding, Hadfield-Hill (2013) shows how children can themselves be agents of the changes to environmental practices if they are consciously involved in a wider system that extends further than daily life within a sustainable building (Hadfield-Hill & Christensen, 2021).

In the case of the No Backpack School in Ponte a Moriano only one classroom was furnished entirely in wood and natural materials, thanks to private funding. The funding was only sufficient for this room and the furnishings and other classes in the school still have few

materials made from recycled materials. Despite the teachers' commitment to promoting sustainability projects and building new spaces with natural materials, the idea of building an entirely sustainable school has had to deal with the regulatory limits of public schools.

In the world of alternative schools, ecological architecture can be more creative and free, sometimes artistic, as evidenced by the case of the Nant-y-Cwm Steiner School in Wales (Kraftl, 2006); However, in Italy renovating public spaces from old buildings is a bureaucratic process managed by institutions, which must follow a long approval process and comply with stringent Minister of Public Education safety regulations. For these reasons, the Italian scientific community desires a widespread paradigm change at national level (Tosi, 2019; Weyland & Leone 2020), which is not only aimed at exceptional cases, to allow innovative and ecological architecture. Much of the work on education sustainability in schools with experimentation is mainly done through practices (see Chapter 7).

6.4 From 'Affordances' to 'Spatialities'

As revealed in Section 6.5 of the literature review, the organisation of the environment of these experimentations plays upon the concept of *affordance* (Gibson, 1979). According to Gibson, affordances are the potential actions which become available to users at the mere sight of an object, alignment of objects, or configuration of space. From this perspective, classrooms, laboratories, libraries, gyms and canteens are equipped in a manner which renders them functional for the activities to be carried out. The possibilities for use of the environments become clear and perceivable to the students inhabiting the space. Delfina describes the art room, which can be seen in the following photograph (Fig. 17), as a place adapted for specific activities:

'For example, in our school there's the art room which is at the end of the corridor. It's a very big room, it's spacious and very colourful: in one part there's the sea, and in the other part there's a rainbow. There are lots of tables and compartments. In one, there are photos and a desk, in another there's a mirror, chairs and a rug. In another one there's a computer and next to it there's a unit and shelves with paints. Here, you can do activities that wouldn't be as good to do in the classroom.' Delfina, student, No Backpack School.

Figure 17 – ART ROOM IN THE NO BACKPACK SCHOOL Source: Author

Delfina describes the art room as a coloured environment which stimulates creativity thanks to its furnishings and a particular placing of objects. But not only this, her narrative mentions also the presence of photographs, mirrors and other inanimate objects used to create an atmosphere adapted for designing.

Alongside the presence of materials which guide learning, some scholars have demonstrated how colours and informal design can increase the well-being of students and make them feel more secure (Newman, Woodcock & Dunham, 2006). This aspect can also be seen in the accounts of the children:

'In the assembly hall, there are shelves with books. In this room you can do all kinds of work, you can even paint on the walls. I chose it because you can relax there.' Isidora, student, No Backpack School.

Another female student reveals how the 'soft' corner of the Montessori School shows the potentiality for certain types of activity, such as sitting in a corner

> *'I chose the soft corner because when you're sitting there, you hear stories about love and other things. I chose this place because it allows me to reflect.'* Laura, student, Montessori Public School.

In the same vein, some scholars have found that flexible spaces can expand learning possibilities and methodologies by meeting the different needs of students (Blackmore et al., 2011; OECD, 2013). In the case of the No Backpack School the classrooms are furnished with teaching materials pertinent to the lessons at hand, and, at the same time, they are organised in a way which promotes interaction among the children:

> *'In years 1 and 2, we had a traffic light system for going to the toilet. Any time we needed to go, we had to move the key onto the red circle. When we came back, we put it back on the green circle, so the classmate who needed to go knew that if the red circle had the key, they couldn't go and they needed to wait for the other classmate to come back.'* Fabio, student, No Backpack School.

In this case, the traffic light has an inherent affordance that allows children to understand independently if they can or cannot go to the bathroom. However, it should be noted that the effect is not always automatic. Within the learning environment not all affordances are explicit (Norman, 1988; Gaver, 1991), some are created thanks to the routine created by the work of the class group:

> *'When we go to class, we do attendance after having put our jackets, bags and snacks away. One classmate stands up and calls out our work areas; each child stands and puts a magnet by their name. If a name has no magnet next to it, it means the classmate is absent. At the end of the day, everyone takes down their magnet and goes home.'* Bader, student, No Backpack School.

> *'In that room, empty with a round rug in the centre, we talk about things quietly, we go now and again to talk about important things and we've already been quite a few times. I really like this room because you can speak in peace, and you go to talk alone and not to play.'* Bianca, student, No Backpack School.

On the one hand the furnishings of school buildings are designed to increase the learning opportunities (Barrett et al., 2019). On the other, it is clear that the presence of a teacher is required in order to guide the children to the discovery of the affordances. From the accounts of Bader and Bianca it emerges that only some effects are due to architectural design, but it is the class group with its routines within the space that creates practices that stand out from the traditional way of teaching. An empty room might just be an empty room. But the one described by Bianca is an empty room with a round carpet on which *'we talk quietly about important things'.* In this scenario, the affordance is created by group interaction, according to the exception made by Oliver (2005): the possibilities offered by the environment are evaluated through the group's imagination as it reproduces, expands and re-adapts them to fit their own requirements.

In the No Backpack methodology this room is called the Agora and is the place to gather. It takes its name from the square of the Greek polis (in ancient Greek: ἀγορά, from ἀγείρειν = to gather) where the citizens gathered for market and public assemblies. In the Agora of the No Backpack model, various activities are held, such as personal reading, presentation of the day's activities, listening and guided discussion and also the making of decisions concerning the life of the class and the confrontation between pupils and between pupils and teacher. Various social moments therefore correspond to this place and their whole can be defined as that process that has often been called 'spatiality' (Keith & Pile, 1993; Kraftl, 2013).

While the No Backpack (Senza Zaino) and Montessori Schools have been reconverted from pre-existing traditional school buildings as well as sharing a similar teaching methodology, at the Istituto Giacosa Outdoor School, a distinctive feature and a departure from the mainstream school system is provided through the architecture of the school which shows an unmistakable physiognomy due to its past as a sanatorium: the classrooms are situated

across twelve distinct buildings, called pavilions, located in the most beautiful areas of the park. Three are used by the nursery school, five by the elementary school and three by the junior school. One is used by management and the secretarial office. The distance between one pavilion and another allows students to use the surrounding garden for both lessons and breaks without mutual disturbance between classes. This can be seen below in photos of the pavilions and a drawn map of the park which was provided by the Associazione Amici del Parco Trotter (Friends of Trotter Park Association).

Figure 18 – MAP OF THE TROTTER PARK AND PAVILLIONS CONTAINING VARIOUS CLASSES

Source: Associazione Amici del Parco Trotter (Friends of Trotter Park Association) and Author

The pavilions are situated on one floor only and are raised approximately one metre from the ground (see Fig. 18). They include two external verandas, four spacious classrooms in each, joined by a large internal corridor that functions as a refectory. Each pavilion thus has its own balcony overlooking the park. From the outside one gets the impression of being in a village with a number of child-friendly houses.

> *'However, this arrangement is subject to pros and cons. Having a number of small pavilions within a large space is like having five small schools within the same institute because the pavilions often struggle to communicate with each other. But having these small living units makes it possible for children to experience school just as if it were their home. Their classroom moves right along with them from the first year to the fifth. We are not the ones who move because moving from one pavilion from year to year would be a logistical mistake. Every year the students return to their little house in the park and this, as used by the Trotter Park, located between Via Padova and Viale Monza, where many migrant children or their children also live, allows them to feel welcomed and part of a group. It also helps us to create community.'* Chiara, teacher, Outdoor School.

It is clear how in the case of the Outdoor Schools, the idea of affordance is even more explicit and in its own way assumes a metaphoric significance. In this case, there are not only functional opportunities such as the class being equipped with all that is necessary to do lessons, but the social and emotive opportunities that environments offer and produce are also evident (Kyttä, 2018); as observed by the teacher Chiara, the little pavilions which contain the classes are designed to be considered as little houses which accompany the student throughout their school journey so that students feel welcome and part of a group. An idea of beauty emerges in a different way, through the atmosphere which is created around the pavilions.

> *'This year's children arrive at 8.35am to 8.40am. I arrive in the park at 8am while the bell tower of the nearby church rings the Ave Maria. And I do it because I enter the silence of the park and you can hear only the birds singing. I believe that even just for a teacher, and this is my choice, to enter the park by bicycle, to leave my transport in*

front of a pavilion and to begin making contact with what my school world will be in a busy city like Milan can help to open the classroom door and truly enter the school world, leaving all the problems that accompany our life outside the door of the park.' Massimo, teacher, Outdoor School.

Another spatiality appears in the story: a sense of peace of place is created here by the bells of the church in the park that join the birdsong as Massimo arrives in front of his class, parking his bike next to those of the children. This is a routine that can happen in a school that has a 120,000 square meter park but is difficult to replicate in a busy city like Milan.

If on the one hand the Giacosa Outdoor School maintains the traits of the traditional school, on the other it operates in an architectural context which significantly changes the experience of the students within it. Similarly, in the drawing taken from Maya's lapbook (see Fig. 19) you can see how in the centre of the sheet, in the drawing to which more space has been dedicated, there is a drawing of the park symbolised by plants with sinuous roots and a swing, with the words 'the sun house'.

Figure 19 – LIFE IN THE PAVILION Source: Maya Lapbook

Alongside there is a portrait of herself and the classroom with the balcony; above, the classic materials found in the primary school box such as scissors, glue, ruler, eraser and pencil. In this representation can be observed the centrality attributed to the park around which everything revolves.

While in the schools with Montessori and No Backpack experimentation, there are mainly themed classrooms used as laboratories, in the Outdoor School there are entire pavilions dedicated to a single subject: the newly built STEM Lab (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics laboratory), the gym and the theatre which have been recently been restructured.

> *'When you enter the STEM lab you already know that you will have to experience things you have never seen before and at the same time concentrate hard. Sometimes you wear gloves, as if you were in a real work environment. It is natural for you to behave like a grown-up.'*
> Fabio, student, Outdoor School.

In this case the idea of affordance is reinforced not only by the furnishings but also by the existence of a specialised building, as can be seen in the following photograph (Fig. 20):

Figure 20 – THE NEWLY BUILT STEM LAB (Science Technology Engineering laboratory), Outdoor School. Source: Author.

Another specialised building is the gymnasium shared among all the classes of the school (Fig.21).

Figure 21 – THE HELIOTHERAPY PAVILION, NOW TRANSFORMED INTO A GYM: PAST AND PRESENT Source: past, Archivio Storico Casa del Sole (Historical Archive of the Sun); present, Associazione Amici del Parco Trotter (Friends of Trotter Park Association)

In the children's drawings (Fig. 22) one can observe the typical architectural forms and the stained-glass windows, which at first glance could be mistaken for prison bars, but instead

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represent windows that let the light through. This building was in fact once a heliotherapy centre and today it has been completely renovated, keeping the large windows that show what happens inside to the outside and vice versa. In the top drawing, a girl can be seen playing ping pong and another jumping rope, exclaiming 'wow' (see Fig. 22).

Figure 22 – GYMNASIUM Source: Filippo's and Michela's lapbook

Here, it can be observed how the spatialities have mutated over the course of time (see Fig. 21): in the '20s, the gym was a heliotherapy centre, a silent place in which movement was calm and eased by the voice of a sole teacher who scanned and guided the flow of exercises;

today, it is a sports centre where students carry out many activities at the same time, often autonomously. Furthermore, the mobile and modular furnishings create more space within the gym which can be redesigned by different classes, time and time again. In this way, the affordances also take on a new form according to the group using them and they do not remain the same over the course of time.

6.5 The Flexible Class

Despite the expansion and added value of the common spaces, in public schools with experimentation the classroom is still the nerve centre around which the teaching experience revolves. In a different way, each incorporates an open and flexible design which replaces the static and physically limited classrooms. In general, in flexible classes, there are adaptable work stations and mobile furniture which facilitate movement or allow for the structure of the space to be changed, as well as the sizes of groups according to each activity (Blackmore et al., 2011).

At the Beltrami school with Montessori Experimentation, the classroom is organised into themed spaces and divided into two main areas: a larger space with desks grouped in four, and a smaller area with a rubber mat on the floor. The whole perimeter of the classroom is occupied by shelves and cupboards containing materials, arranged on trays and organised into spheres of interest. As a result, the organised environment maintains the function of stimulus that allows intuition (Montessori, 1970), and each subject has a dedicated and unmistakable place. However, it must be observed how, compared to an official Montessori School (D'Ugo & Lupi, 2017), the classroom space is reduced (see Fig. 23).

In the classroom at the public Montessori School, the Beltrami, there are themed corners supporting sensory and motor skills, materials for the promotion of writing and language and for the promotion of mental arithmetic and geometry. Not all the materials were purchased from official and authorised Montessori suppliers. Much of the furniture comes from recycled materials donated by school children's parents. The teacher's chair is placed next to the window, in a marginal position, and is often used as working space as well. The Montessori teacher rarely sits on the chair, but usually walks around the desks and sits and works together with the students. On the wall there is a list of all the small tasks to be performed by each student to keep the classroom in order. The blackboard and dashboards are hung on the walls at eye level; among them, in the foreground, are the dashboards listing all the activities with the names of the children and the performed subjects.

Similarly, in the No Backpack Schools classroom, the environments are intentionally prepared with structured materials, although this does vary in manner and magnitude from school to school. In this case the space has been adapted for year four 9–10-year-old children. The idea of furniture is very similar to the Montessori classroom of the Beltrami school, in which, in addition to the four worktables, there are specific cultural areas and a

'soft' corner for rest and reading. The absence of the teacher's desk and the rows of desks in both cases maintains that idea of interchange between adult and child that Montessori thus theorises: '*The child becomes the centre of the activity where he or she learns on his or her own, who is free in the choice of his occupations and its movements*' (Montessori, 1970, p. 148). Both in the classroom with experimentation, No Backpack and in Montessori, you can observe how movement is given by the presence of empty spaces between the furniture and the tables (see Fig. 24). Students can change seats whenever they want, choosing their own working desk every day. The only requirement is to change their position during the lesson, in order to promote social interaction between all classmates. Sometimes working groups, deadlines and tasks to be carried out within the four-month period are listed too. In this type of classroom one can witness a variation of the appropriation rites that become more collective than individual. For example, there is no longer the 'my desk' or 'my chair' typical of mainstream schools (Malatesta, 2015) but square tables that can accommodate six to eight children who are not always assigned a permanent seat.

Figure 24 – A NO BACKPACK CLASSROOM IN PONTE A MORIANO (LUCCA) Source: Author

As has been observed numerous times in the literature, the Montessori environment presents a regulatory dimension. On the one hand it proposes the establishment of a structured order in which activities and materials are selected to develop certain set competences. On the other, this aspect tends to support free choice through an environment which supports motivation (D'Ugo & Lupi, 2017).

> *'Each day we choose our materials: some people use "la grande divisione" (the big division), some use the beads, some the building triangles and some work on research. There's always something to do and if someone else is using the material I need, I'll wait until they finish with it.'* Livia, student, Montessori Public School.

In the Montessori method, knowing to wait one's turn is considered an added value (Nigris & Pisicozzo, 2020) and the children seem to have understood this.

Each material has a purpose, its own affordance. The very idea of affordance is in fact not so different from the Montessori intuition of ordering and structuring the environment, through the predisposition of its material which it defines as *'materialised abstraction'* which *'opens up to intelligence ways otherwise inaccessible to childhood'* (Montessori, 2018, p. 207–208).

Figure 25 – AN EXAMPLE OF MONTESSORI MATERIAL: coloured beads for mathematics Source: Author

In the book, 'La scoperta del bambino' (the discovery of the child) the teaching technique of the Montessori founder involves presenting the characteristics of the lesson objective in a clear way so that it will remain embedded and serve as a stimulus for the subsequent exercise. In this way it can be seen how the teacher explains the potentialities and guides the child, without forcing them whether or not to reach the result:

> *'At the end of year 2, the maths teacher made us the times tables to help us remember them better. You can use the table for division and multiplication too. Here's an example: the teacher says, what's 44 divided by 4? Some of us look at the table to help, some us don't need it and do it all by themselves. Sometimes I use it and sometimes I don't. I think it's very helpful because it helps us with loads of things.'*
> Andrea, student, No Backpack School.

Flexibility is therefore not just a physical characteristic of the conformity of the learning environment but is also applied to the didactic use of materials that can be personalised according to age and the competence of students. (See Figure 25 for an example of Montessori material: coloured beads for mathematics for every age).

6.5.1 Living in the Polytopic Space

In the case of the No Backpack and Montessori classrooms, it is possible to speak of a polytopic space (Orsi, 2015) that welcomes the contemporary development of several teaching activities, unlike the typical monochronic time (Hall & Hall, 1990) spent in a monotopic space in traditional schools (for greater detail, see the Literature Review chapter). In carrying out different activities at the same time, students can benefit from teaching which is personalised, dynamic and varied. With multiple activities on offer, it becomes easier to develop, reinforce or recuperate the skills at play in a specific discipline. Some teachers at the No Backpack School observed, however, how the use of one single polytopic space is more demanding and difficult to manage than the monotopic space found in public schools:

> *'Teaching in a space organised into stations requires a different kind of attention than that required for managing a lesson in which the students work on the same task at the same time. Some teachers do not feel at ease with this method. This is why some schools do not adhere to the No Backpack 'Senza Zaino' model, and in some cities, despite the best intentions, it is hard to find staff who are ready to undertake the training course.'* Fabrizio, Head Montessori Teacher.

As previously demonstrated in some studies, (Saltmarsh et al., 2014; Barrett et al., 2019) for some teachers, the transition from a monotopic teaching space, which they have been used to for many years, to a polytopic space, is a source of negative feelings at the beginning of their participation in the No Backpack method:

> *'I taught in traditional schools for ten years. When we started using the Senza Zaino No Backpack method, at the beginning I had problems managing the class. It seemed as if I did not have immediate control of the room as it was split into four or five work groups. I didn't think I would be able to manage everything, and it seemed like a disorganised environment. Despite the children working silently and without noise, I always had the feeling that there was too much background noise in the class. As the months went on, however, trusting the individual groups, I realised that it wasn't necessary to have constant control of the children's work and that a fruitful working environment does not need to be deadly silent but of low volumes and moderate tones. That is how I started to enjoy learning to experience the class space in a different way.'* Giulia, teacher, No Backpack School.

In this last testimony, it is interesting to see how the teacher's feelings of the class being disorganised – because it worked in multiple stations was changed over time – thanks to a greater acquired experience, in favour of a more positive feeling which recalls the so-called '*mess manageable*' (Kraftl, 2013). A disorder which often is in opposition to the environment of the Beltrami school, which before and after the lesson is reorganised and where the materials are ordered in such a way as to be always accessible and present in a single copy.

On the dynamics of order/disorder Kraftl (2013) observes how, thanks to this dualism, effects and affects are produced which in turn impact on pedagogical practices. An example

of how flexibility involves both space and activity also comes from the use of shelves. At the beginning of the year in the No Backpack School they are rather bare; they fill up as the work is carried out over the course of the year. By observing these shelves, it is possible to implicitly examine how the classroom space changes over time depending on the progress of pedagogical practices. There are also explicit signs in this direction, such as the presence of information boards that make the space readable to an external visitor. The impression one receives by visiting the classrooms is of aesthetically refined environments, thanks to paintings and vases with plants and flowers that represent non-human materials (Adey 2008). A perception emerging from the accounts of the children is that the classrooms are fully equipped, both specifically for the teaching activity and in order to create an atmosphere of domestic warmth and peace.

> *'In this school, I feel at home, in a way which I have never experienced before at public school. There is no need to bring materials from home because the school space is adequately organised and prepared: there are books cases, chests and shelves full of books, containers full of pens and pencils, boxes of coloured pens and crayons. Children can simply take a satchel containing the bare minimum: a book, a jotter for homework and a snack. Everything else can be found here without bringing it from the house.'* Lidia, teacher, No Backpack School.

> *'At school you find what you need and our teacher is very calm, she gets us to do things a little at a time without rushing.'* Luca, student, No Backpack School.

The perception of a familial environment is a spatiality which has been encountered as seen also in the case of the Outdoor School. What changes here is the use of the polytopic space, which on the one hand makes it possible to differentiate activities and on the other, as emerges from Luca's story, also allows a different management of personal time and the creation of a stress-free environment. The need not to have standardised time, the same for everyone, has often been mentioned as one of the levers that lead parents to choose an alternative school (see Chapter 5). Kraftl (2013) identifies taking time as a practical

strategy used by alternative educators to channel movements and mobilities. In fact, standardised time has often been associated with the rigorous control of activities and bodies in the organisation of the daily timetable (Foucault, 1976) as well as with the promotion of competitiveness, sometimes taking on a political significance, aimed at the neoliberal reproduction of a school '*making workers*' (Mitchell, 2018). The fact that this different time management has arrived in public schools is important, as it demonstrates how alternative education and a different vision of education are impacting the design of educational spaces beyond their own; this theme goes hand in hand with the role of outdoor education which will be discussed in the next sections.

6.5.2 Traditional and Open-Air Classes

The Outdoor School among the schools analysed is the only one using traditional desks in rows and a teacher's desk: the Giacosa primary school of the outdoor network. This traditional class is, however, placed in a context that completely changes the scholastic experience. The flexible space should be researched here, and externally researched. Beyond the balcony overlooking the park, the Giacosa school classroom shows no significant differences from a classroom of a normal Italian public school. Inside there are desks positioned as islands, a slate blackboard, a cupboard and a number of panels and coloured posters on the surrounding walls. Not all classrooms have a multimedia whiteboard but in each pavilion there is at least one. Similarly, there are no special classroom teaching materials that cannot be found in the indoor teaching resources at other traditional schools. However, the position of the teacher's desk is at the discretion of the teacher. In some classrooms it is central, in others it is decentralised. In other classrooms it may not even exist, by choice. For the activities, this aspect, as shall be demonstrated in the following chapter, reflects the freedom of teaching and flexibility that characterises the work of the teachers at this school. In the case of the outdoor school

classroom, the affordances are not provided from the furnishings or materials studied in order to promote particular types of learning, but from the different positioning of some symbols of traditional school, for example, the decentralisation of the teacher's desk or the chalkboard moved outside.

> *'The Giacosa Institute is known as an Outdoor Network school for the possibilities and potential it has in being able to provide a 'school in the round' outside the walls and classrooms. What does this mean? It's not just the gardens and the farm that certainly are a great potential that the school in the park gives us, but the possibility of having continuous contact inside and outside the classroom from which you exit through a door that opens onto a balcony overlooking the park. So, while in a lesson you could ask the question "Do you know what the horizon is?" – a rather simple example – you can go outside and physically look at the horizon – something which cannot be done in any other school because it needs planning and structure as well as the necessary permissions. I believe this is the great potential of Trotter as an open-air school – you can design open-air activities but you can also experience great continuity both inside and outside the walls.'* Chiara, teacher at Outdoor School.

In interdisciplinary literature there are several works that emphasise the importance of outdoor learning or moving between indoors and outdoors (among the most recent Meighan & Rubenstein 2018); the interesting aspect here, which is distinct from the literature on forest schools (Joyce, 2012), is that of having a traditional classroom, in a school in a big city, which in a short time can be transformed into an open-air classroom.

Figure 26 – THE OUTDOOR LESSON Source: Giulia's lapbook

In Giulia's drawing (see Fig. 26) you can see the children in a circle in the middle of the park. In this case it is not an activity planned to be outdoor education but a normal lesson that is done outside rather than in the classroom. To make this possible, the Giacosa institute has equipped itself with ad hoc equipment:

> *'We do not have specific materials as happens in Montessori or No Backpack Schools. For us, everything that allows you to work outdoors, such as camping tables and fishing chairs, are materials. The headmaster invested a large part of the school fund because he saw that we were working on the ground. Specific materials are what you need for the construction of the activity. The box you take out, the piece of cardboard you use to read and write, sheets, mats, blankets, materials to be able to stay outdoors and teach.'* Chiara, teacher, Outdoor School.

This aspect, as shown by Chiara the teacher, is a characteristic of Giacosa and is difficult to replicate in other city schools where it is a requirement to plan outside trips or make agreements with other classes to use the external spaces.

Similarly, although the garden of the No Backpack School is smaller, there are less than 100 square metres compared to the 12 hectares of Trotter Park, this too allows outdoor lessons to be conducted thanks to the available environments which have been organised for specific activities:

> *'Our No Backpack School's garden furniture is usually made of natural materials and is often less costly than the furniture used inside: outdoor classrooms with different sheltered seats, an open-air Agora which performs the same meeting point function as its indoor counterparts. There are planters for growing things and putting our hands into the ground, small environments with different ecosystems (for example, the 'butterfly garden'). Our garden is of a limited scale; therefore it is important to organise ourselves with other classes and choose slots, especially after COVID. What is not restricted, however, is the option to carry out lessons outdoors, and not only during break times or physical education class, as is normal in the public schools of our district.'* Patrizia, teacher, No Backpack School.

The Agora space can be seen in the photo (Fig. 27), which affords the same social functions as the inside spaces – a place to recount and tell about oneself.

Figure 27 – OUTDOOR AGORA IN THE NO BACKPACK SCHOOL Source: Author

An open-air class in this sense allows one to follow those outside activities that would also be carried out inside and do not necessarily come within the definition of outdoor education practices (Farnè, Bortolotti & Turrusi, 2018). Hence the importance of looking at school gardens as a fully-fledged school space and not just as places for specific outdoor activities, physical education or breaks.

6.5 Beyond the Scholastic Garden

For some time in the literature, external spaces have been considered as fundamental learning environments where students can learn social skills and develop their cognitive abilities (Woolner et al., 2012). In the three schools, although the gardens and courtyards of each building are different from one another, the external spaces occupy a central role in teaching. The Giacosa school makes use of the 12 hectare Trotter park, boasting the largest school gardens in Europe; the No Backpack School has a garden of a limited scale, which, however, is adequately equipped with the method's materials; the Beltrami school, among those visited, is the only school without its own garden – instead it has an asphalt

courtyard which it shares with the traditional school, although it does benefit from having the Gianni Rodari public park situated close by, thanks to an agreement with the Municipality of Omegna.

All three schools, however, use their gardens in different ways, for example, simply to do ordinary lessons outside rather than in class, or for structured outdoor education activities. This is an ever-expanding and evolving teaching approach as seen in the literature review of Chapter 2. Some of the more recent studies are as follows. The manual, 'Handbook of outdoor Play and Learning' (Waller et al., 2017), a product of the work of more than fifty international authors. In an Italian context, there is a collection of theoretical perspectives and best practices (Farnè, Bortolotti & Turrusi, 2018) offering an exploration into the scientific and cultural reflection on topics of Outdoor Education, evaluating its critical developments, research paths, experiences and methodological approaches. These approaches are truly varied and, for obvious reasons of time and space, only some find resonance in the activities proposed by the schools with experimentation. This is particularly due to a strong relationship with informal education and the landscape of associations which interact with the institutions, as shall be demonstrated in the following chapter.

Apart from the possibility of organising outside lessons, the Giacosa Institute offers a learning farm and kitchen gardens assigned to classes to be maintained and managed as can be seen in these photographs (Fig. 28):

Figure 28 – THE EDUCATIONAL FARM, Outdoor School, Milan Source: Author

'The best materials in our school are all in the vegetable garden or the farm: rakes, shovels, tables with flowers.' Livia, student, Outdoor School.

In the lapbooks of the children of the Outdoor School, these activities are often mapped, as can be seen in these drawings that depict teaching moments in the garden. In the drawings you can read the names of the plants: mint, flower, strawberry, cactus at the top. The

caption accompanying the drawing reads: *'My mates and I went to the garden to put in pea seeds and we watered them. Now the peas have grown but the birds have eaten them. I spent a happy and contented morning'*. The drawing below reads in the comic: *'thanks to my rays of sunshine those plants will become beautiful'*.

Figure 29 – REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FARM Source: Outdoor School children's lapbook.

The fact that the same subject was drawn by four different children makes it possible to assume that the garden is a symbolic place in the spatial experience of the class group (see

Fig. 29). Taking care of plants allows children to experience space by moving and assuming more informal postures. In Isidora's lapbook, drawings depict children cross-legged or bent over (see Fig. 30). In total, five children are seen in front of the farm:

Figure 30 – CHILLY MOMENTS Source: Isidora's lapbook.

While having pavilions at the Giacosa school allows for more classes to benefit from the park at the same time, the Montessori and No Backpack Schools have to take turns with other classes to access the outdoor spaces. With regards to the possibility of conducting lessons outside, a common theme which emerges from the three case study schools is the children's desire to break out from closed places which are perceived as being burdened with rules. In fact, as seen in many studies (Holt & Murray, 2022; Buchanan, Hargreaves & Quick, 2022), this desire is often amplified by the implementation of new regulations due to the coronavirus pandemic.

> *'Our garden is very big, they put in tables and benches. We can play, do lessons and we can even relax at the benches. I really like going to the garden as it lets me feel more free since in the classroom we have to follow lots of rules.'* Adelaide, student, No Backpack School.
>
> *'The garden makes me feel free to do (nearly) whatever I want.'* Andrea, student, Montessori Public School.
>
> *'Our garden is big and it has tables around the trees. The tables are used for working, for example, with our technology teacher we made*

> *a little boat, it was really good but it was a shame that mine broke, and at one point it started raining and we had to go back to the classroom.'* Marta, student, Outdoor School.

An environmental report highlighted how the outbreak of COVID-19 made the use of outdoor spaces in school more crucial in increasing the learning spaces available, and in improving safety during the time of the pandemic (WWF, 2020). Furthermore, it is evident in the work of the children, and often cited in the literature, that the idea of the school garden acts as an opportunity to move independently and to explore and discover (DfES, 2006).

One of the first criticisms that was levelled at mainstream schools was that of forcing children into the desk environment for many continuous hours. In these activities it is evident that the dimension of the control of the children's body, repeatedly denounced by Foucault (1976) and his followers, fails. On the one hand, these outdoor practices offer added value to teaching through learning by doing (Dewey, 1916); on the other hand they allow greater freedom of movement and exploration of space that is undoubtedly limited in the classroom. The fact that the open space is not too structured and controlled by adults allows the children to let their imaginations run loose:

> *'The garden is my favourite place because you can chill out and, with some imagination, it becomes a whole other realm.'* Lidia, student, Montessori Public school.

It can be seen how the school garden here offers an expansion of the learning environment and therefore enriches the daily geographies of children within the schools with experimentation. Therefore, although school is a basic space governed by rules (Aitken 2001; Hammond & McKendrick 2020), within it children can perceive security, calm and freedom of movement and imagination. But it is not just imagination, being in the garden allows for the appreciation of solitude of feeling a sensation of safety:

> *'I like being in the garden near the magnolia tree because it makes me feel calm, and because there aren't many people and my classmates are in another area. I feel safe because it's very big. I chose it because it's pretty.'* Aladino, student, Outdoor School.

Some external spaces are linked to images of memories which do not necessarily reflect the school routine, but instead, are more attributable to the individual's emotive and personal side:

> *'In the school garden, I like being near the wisteria because my mummy told me that my great-granny liked wisteria.'* Ludovica, student, Outdoor School.
>
> *'My favourite place is the courtyard: the ground is full of drawings. I remember when it was winter there was snow.'* Licia, student, Montessori Public School.
>
> *'I liked going to see the murals, because I like seeing new places while standing in the line and chatting about what we see.'* Isidora, student. Outdoor School.

In the Montessori School, the lack of highly specialised outdoor spaces led the teachers to use public parks in the city and also to take lessons by the lake, as this photo shows (Fig. 31).

Figure 31 – MONTESSORI LESSON IN THE CITY OF OMEGNA Source: Sonia, Teacher

The same occurred in the No Backpack School:

> *'We go to the river park to play and exercise with the teachers Elena and Cristiana. Sometimes we see the teacher Elena, the Italian one, who goes running along the river. There we play with the swings, the slide and other games.'* Lidia, student, No Backpack School.

As mentioned several times in the literature, space can be seen as a process and creativity as an embodied practice (Kyritsi, 2022); this can be repeatedly seen in the stories of children and teachers who build their own social space by adapting the school environment to the activities of experimentation. In this case it can be observed how the public space can become an extension of the school garden. The theme of creativity will be taken up again at the beginning of the next chapter, showing how teachers build social spaces that allow for the development of children's creativity. In Chapter 7 I will also focus

on the ways in which the school spills over into the city (Bordin et al., 2021), not only by using its public spaces as in this last part of this chapter, but by actively participating in the life of the local community. A similar process, sometimes in reverse, will see the city of Milan as its protagonist, which borders Trotter park of the Giacosa Outdoor School and becomes, if necessary, the scene of events, art exhibitions, markets, sporting events, social events and, a key point in this discussion, alternative culture.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the key spatialities of the three case study schools, deepening analysis and understanding of the affordances and representations that emerge from the experiences of teachers and children. In this way, the analysis has outlined some of the most significant spatial and material processes that inform the geographies of education in experimentation.

In particular, this chapter illustrated the transformative character that each space has adopted to reorganise teaching: a path that started from different histories and has followed developmental parables that are sometimes coincident, sometimes parallel.

One important common denominator was dealing with the current system and the regulatory limits of the public school and its buildings. The analysis highlighted the attempt to reconvert common spaces through the creation of flexible, customisable, mobile spaces, sometimes built using environmentally sustainable materials. In doing this, the students were also allowed to take possession of normally unused spaces and to live in the school in a new way.

The chapter then explored how the material spaces of schools created particular kinds of affordances (Gibson, 1979) that characterise the furnishings of the rooms, both explicit

and hidden (Gaver, 1991). These affordances have been put in dialogue with social processes by identifying some of the spatialities that characterise the spaces of the schools with experimentation. The sense of home, the sense of peace and the relaxed time are key themes that emerge from the voices of teachers and children. The focus then shifted to the classroom which, despite the expansion of common spaces, still represents the nerve centre around which the learning experience revolves. Here the analysis focused on how polytopic space is experienced by students and teachers. It emerged that the character of flexibility embraces the socio-materiality of the spaces and is also a constitutive part of the didactic approach. Subsequently, the indoor-outdoor continuity that occurs in the No Backpack and Outdoor School was analysed and considered in terms of ordinary lessons to be carried out in the school garden. The discussion outlined how children feel freer to move inside the outdoor space and, taking into account that this research was carried out in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, it reflected on the dimension of control, highlighting the spatial freedom and imaginations that accompany the narration and representation of these places by children.

CHAPTER 7:

SCHOOL LIFE IN EXPERIMENTATION

7.1 Introduction

As has been seen, to present some of the ways in which experimentation schools are distanced from the mainstream, in Chapter 6 a choice was made to deal with the transformation of physical space where learning occurs. In this chapter, like the previous one which combined data from the methods 'What's Education For' and 'All About Your School', the focus in this chapter is centred on the *practices* carried out within these spaces. One condition is to be noted – these spatial practices cannot be understood without taking into account the specific context of the Italian public school discussed at length in the previous chapters (see Chapter 3, Research Context). The first part of the chapter (see subsection 7.1) explores how the imagination and creativity that emerge from the relationship between students and teachers impacts in very different ways on the conformation of the environment, on the activities of each experiment and on the school's curriculum. The creativity of the teacher also becomes crucial to overcome the organisational and practical limits that derive from being part of the Italian public school. Section 7.2 explores the practices and the role of the teacher, in experimentation schools, through three macro themes: autonomy, differentiated learning and uncertainty. In Section 7.3 there is a discussion of how alternative practices take shape within the mainstream. On this subject, the section analyses the close relationship between school and informal education, focusing on two main aspects. First of all, from the analysis it emerges that informal education plays a leading role in the construction of alternative experiments in the mainstream. In all three schools, different activities are outsourced through tenders and funding, often private, that allow the curriculum to be expanded. The

teaching offer moves from gardening to carpentry, from live role play to theatre and, in the case of the Outdoor School, to all the activities that concern the activities in the park-animal care, donkey rides and the so-called 'nature' activities. Secondly, with particular reference to the case study of Outdoor Schools, it is possible to see the role that informal education offers to support students with specific learning needs, related to disabilities, multicultural contexts or situations of economic hardship. The final part analyses the relationship with alternative spaces and some of the ways in which the curriculum of schools is shaped through them. In doing so the complex system that allows the preservation and evolution towards new forms of learning spaces is shown. In fact, these are spaces that year after year are never equal to themselves.

7.2 Imagination and Creativity in Conducting Lessons

This section aims to shed light upon an aspect of the learning environments of schools with experimentation which often presents itself in different ways: creativity.

Creativity in education literature has often been explored, even if some scholars observe the fragmented character in terms of research fields and methodology (for an accurate review, refer to Hennessey & Amabile 2010; Katz-Buonicontro & Anderson, 2018); some scholars have referred to multiple definitions of creativity (Pitri, 2013), others have defined it as an interdisciplinary skill (Karademir, 2016). Here the study is consonant with the definition for which *'creativity involves the development of a novel product, idea, or problem solution that is of value to the individual and/or the larger social group'* (Hennessey & Amabile 2010, p. 572). Here in fact is not a question of creativity but rather quality which is often typical of a good teacher. Creativity is understood in the sense of an aptitude which emerges from the relationship between the students and teachers in these contexts,

allowing for the structural limitations of Italian public schools to be overcome through temporality and spatiality management.

Three examples from the case studies are proposed to explain this concept: in the example from the No Backpack School, some teachers use imagination to co-design learning materials along with their pupils; in the organisational plan, the staff at the Montessori School use creativity to adapt the Montessori method to the public school structures and regulations; in the case of the Outdoor School, while not having a fixed method (*'it is not scientifically correct to talk of a method but certainly one can speak of an inheritance'*: Muraro & Ferri 2020, p.177) teachers and children invent activities and show off their creativity by coming up with stimulating learning opportunities within the huge park available to the school. As shown in the background chapter on the case study schools (see Chapter 3), each form of experimentation has its own ideal classroom and school space structure and organisation based on space and time. The materials used in the study schools are also very diverse. Each school has its own materials which can be used for individual activities, entire class time, or for small group activities. Despite this, even within the same network, there is considerable differentiation in experiences due to the way in which the various institutes translate their own ideas of the method into teaching practice.

In the No Backpack School, many of the materials are supplied at the school and are bought through the network distributors; they are mainly divided into three categories (Orsi, 2015): management tools (computers, recorders, projectors); stationary tools (shared trays on the table for pencils, rubbers and pens); learning tools for various disciplines. It is also the case that some of the teaching materials used are created directly by the children and teachers. Co-designing with the children is not a new concept in the literature (Wake & Eames, 2013), but what makes it unique in this context is the fact that a real tool factory

has been created in Lucca, Italy, for the No Backpack School for this very purpose. Other than the materials for the various disciplines, the No Backpack method focuses on the creation and use of tactile tools (timeline, sentence dominoes, Propp cards, abacus, wooden Cartesian plane, microscope etc.) in order to train and improve the first sense used by human beings in their discovery of the world. In the photographs taken at the Lucca Tool Factory, it can be observed how these teaching tools are handmade using simple materials like paper and wood, and they come with a note typed up on the computer explaining how they can be use.

> *'Unstructured play and work materials alongside toys chosen to develop creativity, inventiveness and divergent thinking. Unusual materials, including those of company waste, have combined water, flour, earth, photographic magazines, lights, dolls, buildings and books, making the entire school space a place full of cultural stimuli. All the materials have been researched, designed and sometimes produced by the teachers who have the task of changing them, innovating them, constantly rethinking them'* (Pampaloni, 2020, p. 183).

While the materials of the No Backpack School were created and shared out over the past twenty years, the Montessori material, although very varied, is standardised and based on the scientific idea of its creator. Montessori teachers receive specific training on the method which allows them to confront any educational need and scenario they may encounter:

> *'I feel at peace in my daily job because the Montessori method is very clear and specific regarding the various educational matters; in this experimentation we are all trained and it's easy to find a cooperation with colleagues. This helped in adjusting the school time and improving the organisation of a timetable which complies with the municipal school requirements as we are expected to'* Rossana, teacher, Montessori Public School.

Timetable organisation at public elementary school, through the alternating of disciplines and the sounding of the bell, can sometimes come into conflict with the typical requirement

of the Montessori method of taking time (Kraftl, 2013), where the free choice and option for the child to benefit from personalised time in undertaking their work is at the heart of the method (Montessori, 1909). In this sense, the imagination of the teachers and staff of the school in organising the timetable comes into play through adjustments within the teaching timetable and class hours (Nigris & Piscozzo, 2018), for example, scheduling teachers of the same group of disciplines closely together and coming up with projects created to promote interdisciplinary work. Not only that, although the Montessori method is full and rigorous in its application, within the public school, the teacher must put their own imagination to work in order to adapt the method to the mixed context which characterises its use:

> *'Montessori teachers within the public school system are called upon to manage complexity. An example – in all classes there are materials which the children can use to learn how to write: metallic joints in preparation for writing, nomenclatures such as illustrated cards and little cards that contain both the image and the written name and then a card that contains only the image and one that contains only the word. Some children however come from difficult backgrounds, perhaps they speak little Italian at home and for them, these materials become far too complex, and in class, they struggle to work independently. The teacher must continuously renegotiate the work and reinvent little objectives, keeping the children's mixed backgrounds in mind and, very often, the high number of children in each class which sets Italian public schools apart from private Montessori Schools. Or where the materials are not sufficient, they can invent new solutions: – for example, with no outdoor furniture, with the class fund we bought some little yoga mats so that each child can have their own spot to sit outside'* Antonella, teacher, Montessori Public School.

It can be observed how in this interview, creativity leads to solving logistical problems that are often encountered within public schools like the high number of students with diagnosed learning difficulties or special educational needs, or even the lack of specific Montessori materials for certain scenarios, in this case, outdoor materials. A separate discussion of multicultural management follows in the subsequent sections. Creativity in

organising the school day and time-management can also be seen in the No Backpack and Outdoor School methods:

> *'We do not use the slots of 60 minutes; we do 54 minutes which seems like an odd choice. This is because a teacher has 18 contracted hours, and has 20 hourly spaces per week, those two extra hourly slots are used for coexistence: Latin, KET certification, teaching with historical archives. For the primary, we can guarantee more coexistence even in including children with difficulties'* Adelio, teacher, Outdoor School.

> *'In the No Backpack School, there is a board with the daily / weekly activities which aims to act as a compass for the children's work, another board is for time and group management. The teachers have to plan the activities, involving and informing the children, conversing with them, listening to them to understand if that which is planned is really possible in reality, monitoring their progress and, if needed, reorganising the work with new materials or groups.'* Alessia, teacher, No Backpack School.

As has been observed previously in informal (Jeffs & Smith, 2005) and alternative (Woods & Woods, 2008) learning spaces, as well as in the spaces of schools with experimentation, it is crucial to create a relationship of trust and respect between teacher and student. Here, it is not a question of creating family-like relations (Kraftl, 2013) which are difficult to maintain in scenarios where there are 25 students per class, but to establish a dialogue and a positive atmosphere which can be both constructive and productive to the learning process. The creator of the No Backpack method speaks about the responsibility system: *'Taking on the responsibility of educating means putting yourself in an asymmetric position which in itself is a hierarchy. The adult (parent or teacher) has power given to them through competence (knowledge and know-how) which should be made available to the young people to help them to grow'* (Orsi, 2020, p. 22). What characterises the learning atmosphere according to the second interview with Alessia is particularly the creative action that is established in the relationship between student and teacher through dialogue and a continuous ability to negotiate and mediate. In this sense it becomes important for

students and teachers to know and put into question the properties and affordances of the space (see Chapter 6).

As previously seen, the schools operating under the No Backpack and Montessori networks have a set methodological approach, shared among the teaching staff, which is monitored and evaluated by the technical management team at the MIUR and by the networks' experts. However, at the Outdoor Schools, at the time of writing this thesis, the methodological approach was in the definition stage: the activity of the Outdoor Schools is nurtured through the sharing of best practices, under the supervision of the network's highest-ranking management. In this way, the Outdoor School teacher can express their creativity freely and manage class activities autonomously depending on the class's needs. The Muba Box, for example, a toolbox mentioned in some of the children's lapbooks at the Outdoor School, is a teaching material invented by the teacher, Chiara.

> *'I like the Muba Box because when we are outside you can hear the little birds. The Muba Box contains stencils, stickers, pencils, coloured pens, rubbers, paper for arts and crafts with letters'* Ester, student, Outdoor School.
>
> *'My favourite activity is the Muba Box because when we make pretty things I'm happy. We stick on stickers and draw on them'* Adele, student, Outdoor School.

The image shows the children from the Outdoor School, sitting in a circle with their legs crossed, attempting to carry out the Muba Box activity.

Figure 32 – MUBABOX ACTIVITYSource: Giada's lapbook

In the drawing above (Fig. 32), where you can see many children talking (top-left), under the sun you can read *'I like the Muba Box because we take Vitamin D'* outdoors. Another drawing reads *'Thanks to my rays of the sun those plants will become beautiful'*. The sun is an element that is often depicted in the drawings of the children of the Outdoor School (Fig. 32).

It is not for nothing that the name of the institute was once 'School of the Sun' in memory of the past in which it was a heliotherapy centre for frail children, coming from the most degraded districts of the city of Milan. The narrative that emerges from the drawings is that of a certain awareness of the benefits of being outdoors, both for plants and for humans. A narrative already present in the school's past and re-proposed in the current context in the form of environmental education. On this topic various scholars (Nelson,

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Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo, 2018) have highlighted the importance of not reducing the complexity of the nature-based approaches to curative means to favour the healthy development of the child (Louv, 2005) but of looking at it through new daily practices.

In this case, environmental education is one of the components of the daily activities of the Outdoor School that joins, through co-productive relationships, with other disciplines. This idea is supported by the principal himself who aims to attract students thanks to the important scientific direction that characterises the curriculum of the institute (for example in the park there is the STEM Lab, the flagship of the school, see Chapter 6) *'to prevent schooling outdoors being transformed into a simple form of didactic pastoralism with no formative value'* (Muraro & Ferri, 2020 p. 179).

Teachers and students are free to unleash their imaginations, like the case of the teacher Chiara who, together with her pupils, invented Muba box time. Similarly, teacher Massimo at the Outdoor School shared his sporting talent with his students between lessons:

> *'In the last year, having such a large park available has allowed me to take advantage of an education in theatricality and callisthenics that in my previous experiences of state school, I have never been able to do. In my free time I'm actually an acro-yoga instructor. It was wonderful applying my skills to this work, and teaching the art of acro-yoga to my students between history and geography lessons. Doing lessons outside without absolutely having to plan structured activities has unrevealed potential, there is never a dull moment'*
> Massimo, Teacher, Outdoor School

An aspect which emerges from the interview with Massimo is the possibility to put one's skills and capabilities learnt outside of teaching into practice, something which is very difficult to achieve in the mainstream context; the Giacosa school has a 12-hectare park and space never has to be planned or booked in order to take the children outside.

It can be observed how in all three case studies, creativity is an important driving force which characterises the learning landscapes of the schools with experimentation, although

in different ways. Here, creativity is particularly intended as the teacher and students' ability to use their own technical, cognitive and expressive resources in an original and creative way, in order to resolve technical and structural problems and realise new potential in the available learning environment. A role of responsibility in this process is that of the teacher becoming a scene producer and co-ordinates the group work, to place the students into the conditions of learning and so favour the individual needs for auto – creation (Maslow 2010). This difficult work will be discussed in a more focused manner in the following sections.

7.3 The Role of the Teacher in Public Schools with Experimentation in Autonomy, Differentiated Learning and Uncertainty

The traditional teaching model involves learning of set teaching content by the class group in a given time and place (Castoldi, 2020). In Chapter 6, it was discussed how the polytopic space supports the simultaneous undertaking of multiple teaching activities thanks to which the students have different tasks at the same time; the name comes from polytopic, a geometric shape with multiple dimensions (see Fig. 33). This multidimensional structure is guaranteed by the fact, for example, in the No Backpack and Montessori Schools, that the classroom is divided into multiple areas thanks to the special materials and themed corners for each discipline. Similarly, in the Outdoor School, even with a traditionally furnished class, in the children's drawings, the polytopical use of the school building is demonstrated, with many different spaces due to the vast surface area and the possibility to experience school in different dimensions.
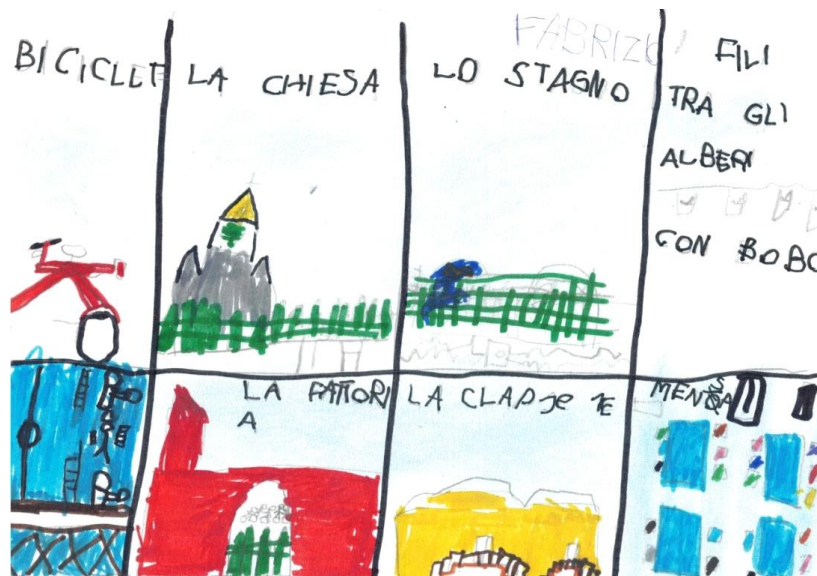
Figure 33 - A POLYTOPIC SPACE Source: Fabio's lapbook

An aspect of a disconnect with mainstream school is the presence of some school hours being dedicated to free work, agreed with the students, in order to meet objectives in different disciplines: it is an aspect which is more prevalent in Montessori Schools, but it is significantly present in No Backpack and Outdoor Schools. The students find the organised material in the environment to complete a task agreed with the teacher, who supervises to ensure discipline while also allowing room for some freedom in carrying out the task, in order to support the child's preferences. An example of this was the creation of the lapbook for this research programme: each child was able to work autonomously and follow their own thought process in creating the 'All About Your School' lapbook. The good success of this research programme is attributed to the fact that the children were already used to completing tasks of this kind autonomously within their daily school life, and the project was tailored to the class while in continuous collaboration with the teachers.

Here, it is also seen how this polytopic structure contributes to the promotion of autonomy and differentiated learning (Tomlinson, 1999):

> *'In our school, there isn't a teacher's desk, but in the corner there is a space to relax, talk and read a book. Everybody is responsible for their own designated work. We do a lot of group work, or in pairs or individually, or even with other classes and we always help each other whenever any of us is struggling'* Lidia, student, No Backpack School.

From the interview with Lidia, it can be seen how for the No Backpack method, the aspect of teaching differentiation finds a point of connection with the Montessori method; a century ago, the pedagogist from Chiaravalle developed her teaching practice based on cooperation and autonomy: *'The teacher limits themselves to indicating and guiding, to providing mental exercises which help the children to grow, become individuals and acquire an inner health which is exactly the brilliant result of the freedom of the soul'* (Montessori, 2000, p. 166). For Maria Montessori, collaboration did not mean doing the same things, nor did it necessarily mean working in groups, but organising the children's space and time: *'Freedom without the organisation of work would be useless. The child, left to their own devices without means of work would be lost, just like a newborn, left alone with no nourishment, would die of starvation. The organisation of work, therefore, is the milestone of this new structure of goodness; but even this organisation would be useless without the freedom to use it and without the freedom and expansion of all those energies which arise from the satisfaction of the child's highest activities'* (Montessori, 1999, p. 60). In the No Backpack and Montessori Public Schools with experimentation much rests on the theme of making the children responsible and leaving them to their own devices:

> *'In the first classes of Montessori primary school, reference is made especially to activities with classic Montessori materials like writing and language, expressive activities, mental arithmetic or musical abilities. In fourth and fifth year, the activities become more complex and involve the creation of products or works: for example, this year the children built the Parthenon and a time machine; on an operational level, they are used to preparing research for class presentations by themselves, to then lay their work out and print and present it in front of their classmates'* Rossana, teacher, Montessori Public School

In the interview with teacher Rossana, it is observed how Montessori materials coexist with ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) practices and with the progress of the classes there is a need to update them to the changing needs of students. In the following interview with the student Lidia, it is inferred how the use of the materials for learning are not however an imposed obligation, but it is the children themselves who regulate their use.

> *'At the end of year 2, the math's teacher made us the times tables to help us remember them better. You can use the table for division and multiplication too. Here's an example: the teacher says, what's 44 divided by 4? Some of us look at the table to help, some us don't need it and do it all by themselves. Sometimes I use it and sometimes I don't. I think it's very helpful because it helps us with loads of things'* Lidia, student, No Backpack School

Through a daily, methodological task, the teachers try to promote a critical spirit which encourages self-awareness of each child's own strengths and weaknesses. For this reason, in two case study schools, the No Backpack and Montessori Schools, autonomy is extended to grading:

> *'When our jotters are used up, the teacher gives us a sheet, to fill it out we have to take three pencils, a green, orange and red one. The green means we've done everything well, the orange means we've done ok, the red one means we've not done well. In the table, all the tasks are written down, if I wrote nicely within the margins, if I wrote with a date and title, if I coloured everything and never skipped pages, if the pages aren't created or dog-eared. Beside these items there are little circles that we need to colour depending on how we think we've done everything. After we've coloured, the teacher has her own circles which she fills our depending on how she thinks we have done. Then, we need to get our parents to sign the jotter and bring it back signed to the teacher'* Elisabetta, student, No Backpack School

As seen in the schools with experimentation, the role of the teacher is active, but it changes from school to school. In the creation of this role of teacher as facilitator, other than the

practices, the passage from monotopic to polytopic space is thought to have had an important function. A common denominator is the attempt that the dogmatic-authoritarian role (Foucault, 1976) has been overcome in favour of the role of the teacher as mediator among materials, environments and students. In the contexts of the public school however this attempt cannot be automatically overcome, as well observed by Beate Weyland (2020).

> *'When the teacher enters the classroom the teacher has the power. The teacher can decide anything. The teacher can make children feel good or bad, she can mortify or empower them, the teacher can guide or oppress them. She or he is in command. In the same way, in the context of the school, understood as an organisation, someone else commands: the manager, above him the inspectors and so on. Similarly, in the school, understood as a public building, others are in charge, such as security technicians, administrators of local authorities, etc. The exercise of this power can lead a system to immobility or success and its flowering. Whoever exercises power with more force oppresses or supports all others and blocks or facilitates the potential and empowerment of each one and of the system'* (Weyland, 2020 p. 140).

Operating alternative experimentation in a public school carries with it a substantial difference with respect to the world of alternative education where management of power assumes differing significances and forms. The theory of democratic education for example assumes *'a degree of parental authority over education, resisting the strong communitarian view that children are creatures of the state'* (Gutmann, 1987, p. 46); in homeschooling and parental schools, the aforementioned power actually passes into the hands of parents or whoever takes their place in the world of lessons. In schools that manage themselves through private funds or voluntary work, such as Farm school, Forest school or Democratic and Human-Scale school, there are lines of power, albeit sometimes less visible and more subtle, within the organisations themselves. Experimentation schools, while aimed at new styles of teaching and the creation of active spaces of democracy within schools, must submit to the superstructures of the Italian school system.

Also, the work of the teachers is however often uncertain; it does not allow for continuous teaching, as often demonstrated in the interviews with parents who choose to opt for a private or alternative school (see Chapter 5). For example, the teacher, Massimo who offers to his students acro-yoga classes is a temporary worker, tit might not be possible to do this activity with the same students in the coming year. Although the alternative experimentation schools have their own work groups, they take advantage of the management of human resources and selection of the staff of the normal public schools. In this scenario, teachers with open ended contracts and teachers with annual contracts work together.

> *'The end of the year is the time of farewells, of partings. One group of students will leave as they will have completed their studies. Another set of teachers will also leave: the rule on the possibility of annual transfer in place makes the school a very particular organisation, also as regards the relationship agreement with its salaried employees. In summary, everything is set out in the temporality between September and June.'* Orsi, No Backpack founder.

This transience of the teachers is particularly typical of the Italian context. According to ISTAT findings, the temporary teachers were around 3 million (3,077,000) in December of 2021. In January 2022, based of INPS data, 503,158 workers with temporary or fixed-term contracts were hired. The children feel the insecurity of the teachers' work and the relationships they build with them.

> *'There are five teachers, and we don't know if they will stay or go because they are temporary'* Ludovica, student, Montessori Public School

 It does not mean that the fixed teachers are more skilled or included to work in the experimentation school that requires a huge waste of energy and time in terms of lesson planning as well as in terms of operation, training and updating. These data vary from school to school and cannot be evaluated here. One point however is certain: In Italy, the

precarity of teachers in public schools is a social plague which no education reform has ever managed to resolve. The temporary feeling accompanies the growth of the children, and it is perceived by them and the teachers as a normal and accepted element of school life, while for head teachers it is by now a constant practice of organisation which they need to deal with each year.

As can be seen from this discussion, being a teacher in Italian public school experiments is a multifaceted challenge. In this context, the teacher works by balancing differentiated teaching and the spheres of inclusion, while at the same time favouring the autonomy of the individual student and the creation of a collaborative and empathic atmosphere within the class.

All this is carried out within the public school structures, which leads to facing up every day to deadlines and regulatory and bureaucratic limits, with which the purpose of change, and creativity as shown in Section 7.1, must necessarily interface. No less problematic is the recruitment system that condemns the lives of younger teachers to precariousness and undermines the didactic continuity between one year and another. However, within these schools there are also a large number of educators, facilitators and operators in the world of informal education who live in even more precarious situations and, at the same time, are the propellers of innovation and of some of the ways in which experimentation alternatives take shape in the mainstream. This will be discussed in the next section.

7.4 The Close Relationship between Experimental School and Informal Education

In this section, another characteristic point of the spatialities of schools with experimentation is outlined: the close link between informal educational practices and didactics. The ways in which voluntary associations and networks revolve around the schools examined are very varied and take on different meanings (Pimlott-Wilson &

Coates, 2019) sometimes even at a political level (Collins, 2021; Mills, 2014). Two specific cases will be analysed here. In the first instance, the role of informal education in schools with experimentation as a complement to the training offer through educational activities that require skills not possessed by the class teachers. These activities are managed through public and private funding. In fact, many experiences have emerged in the case studies, ranging from gardening to carpentry, from theatre to role play. The common denominator is the experiential learning character that emerges from these practices, requiring an expenditure of human and intangible resources not normally possible in ordinary lesson hours.

In the second instance informal education will be discussed as a support network for schools needing more effort in order to deal with some complex issues, sometimes multi-cultural, and the increasing numbers of families with economic difficulties populating the public schools under examination. Within this second meaning, informal education activities have a social value and are sometimes operated through the work of cooperatives and voluntary associations that are emerging in the area around the school. In The final part will be explored the close relationship between experimental school and other kinds of 'alternative' within and beyond the school walls.

7.4.1 Informal Experiential Education as a Complement to the Training Offer

Thanks to the laws on autonomy and extended time, experimental schools have activated various learning experiences based on the use of different languages to enhance the different learning styles of pupils.

Among all the Outdoor Schools, Giacosa is the one with the largest number of external working collaborations. It is enough to know that the activities involving children within Trotter park, for example horticultural, farming and walking with the donkeys are

organised through external organisations within the schools PAS project – Science and environments park. Some associations then have headquarters inside the park and alongside school buildings, for example the Friend's Association of Trotter Park (AAPT) which manages the library (and the LibroTrotter project which is mentioned in sub section 7.3.3), the historical park archive and those children's activities linked to it. In some cases the associations share the spaces within the school itself, for example the classrooms which are used by the children Monday to Friday are then utilised on Saturdays by the Chinese, Russian and Arabic schools of the quarter.

> *'Here, intercultural education is a real approach to teaching. In the school there are several students with a migrant background and therefore it was chosen to open the classes after school hours at the Chinese, Arab and Russian schools in Milan. The aim is to enhance the students' mother tongue, in the belief that the preservation of the original linguistic link can favour a condition of psychological balance favourable to the acquisition of the language of insertion. Similarly, the institution of the 'mother tongue day', celebrated in the park every 21st February, becomes an opportunity for educational initiatives open to all school students and citizens'* Diana, teacher, Outdoor School

The Giacosa school has always been a place of education to the challenges of complexity (Barra et al., 2022) and the commitment to urban multiculturalism is a living theme, supported above all by voluntary associations, something that will be analysed in closer detail in Section 7.3.2.

By opening school spaces to the latter, the training offer expands through qualified courses. All schools with experiments in this study welcome proposals, which must be consistent with the objectives of the curriculum, from associations operating in the extracurricular field. These are both profit and non-profit associations. Among the most common activities in mainstream schools, there are music and instrument courses, language courses (both Italian as L2, both for community and extra-community languages and for preparation for

English certifications) and sports courses such as basketball, volleyball and karate. Some activities are paid for privately by families, others are financed through broader public tenders and are free to students. However, what makes this approach innovative is given by practices and activities that create co-productive and synergistic relationships with institutions, universities and the private sector.

For example, there are collaborations and conventions made through cultural institutions: the STEM laboratory which allows for high level environmental science teaching is the flagship of the Giacosa Outdoor School, entirely financed through well-known collaboration with the museum of science and Technology of Milan. Thanks to this, the teachers then received training directly from the museum's operators.

> *'In our curriculum, the principal has decided to manage the school through the activities of the 'instrumental functions' and so within the school are some seventeen of these instrumental functions taking specific actions that fall back on the school. I am an 'instrumental function' of relations with universities and research. What does this mean? My activities have allowed seventeen trainees and one Erasmus student to attend the school. Having seventeen trainees gravitating around the class makes you change your teaching. It is true that they come to learn but for the school they are a great resource. They allow you to work in small groups, and to carry out monitoring and supervision activities. This year the disability function was able to work with an association that allowed seven Pet Therapy meetings for children with autism-related disabilities within our school. Seven meetings are not many, they are a drop in the ocean but always better than zero'* Clara, teacher, Outdoor School.

Clara highlights how informal education activities can be generated from inter-institutional collaboration, as between school and university in this instance and these can have exchange characteristics. The apprentices work for free to learn but at the same time improve the didactic offers of the school.

The use of informal education as a complement to the training offer is a very common practice even in the No Backpack School. For example, the project 'The Lesson Hour Is Not

Enough' (LODLNB), through a four-year funding, offers the possibility of expanding the training offer on three fronts that would find it hard to make headway in normal lesson hours through the artisan model, the dramaturgical model and the game model (see Chapter 4). These are highly specialised courses that are carried out by teachers outside the school and allow students to try new experiences.

> *'In the afternoon, with the help of the teacher, we made small wooden objects. At first I did not understand the usefulness of these huge benches, circular saws, planes of various sizes and screwdrivers. The teacher told us that wood is the 'hottest' element in our homes and is the first material that was used to build dwellings by human beings. When I create something, it's satisfying and maybe when I grow up I will be a carpenter and not a doctor as my mother wants!'* Juri, student, No Backpack School.

Informal education activities not only allow expansion of the educational offer but give students experiences that can open a window on unexplored worlds, in this case the woodworking and the artisan workshop. Another feature of informal education is to offer activities that could not be organised by a single teacher. At the Beltrami school, thanks to an association operating in the area, an after-school cycle was organised that involved pupils in the third, fourth and fifth grades with a Montessori orientation. The project made children experience the adventures of Dungeons & Dragons – the most famous tabletop role-playing game, born in 1974 – in which to play a role and, through collaboration with companions, complete missions and solve plots. Similarly, the No Backpack School, thanks to an agreement with the Lucca Crea play agency, has proposed several live role-playing games set both inside and outside the school walls.

> *'With my companions and a dozen educators we created a choral story in which everyone played a character, based upon a pirate tale. Everyone had his character, written on a card, and had to act as he thought the character would act in such a situation. In the woods each crew had a map and a compass to find the treasure. It was also a great experience to do some orienteering and play with friends. I was very excited that day and I learned many things about piracy, a*

topic that we have not explored in history' Pietro, student, No Backpack School.

Live role-playing games are increasingly popular activities in Italian schools. Pietro's story refers to an edu-larp, created specifically to combine the skills of orienteering with the study of history. Edu-larp (educational live action role-playing) is mentioned when explicit educational or training purposes are inserted right from the first design phase of a larp and are reflected in the various moments of the activity (Bowman, 2014).

In the activity of edu-larp the characters are called upon to interpret a character and to operate a symbolic adhesion to the narrated matter. Therefore, the game creates a fictional world that metaphorically reproduces the social and spatial structures of real space, providing the player with a new point of view, due to the different perspective from which the story is seen. It can be said that, albeit for a specific time, this process expands the student's living space towards the creation of a fantastic space, providing an active and emotional experience (Ceresa, 2020). The landscape here can take on a symbolic meaning.

For example, the forest that the characters are called to explore represents the archetypal place par excellence in which '*literary and psychoanalytic interpretations have effortlessly recognised every very delicate phase of life in which one finds oneself going through a period of darkness and disorientation, and then resume their own path with greater certainty. In the case of the developmental age, the forest represents the phase of uncertainty and lack of reference points that one goes through when freeing oneself from the situation of total entrustment to adults: as one becomes aware of oneself, they measure themselves their abilities and possibilities and finally they start walking in the open again*' (Pasquinelli d'Allegra, 2010, pp. 96–97).

The American scholar Bowman observes how edu-larp follows the theoretical principles of the educational theories of experiential learning. Specifically, she finds in the form of the

edu-larp the four phases of the experiential method for which cognitive skills can be developed – '*through concrete experience (doing), reflective observation (thinking back to the experience), abstract conceptualization (forming a theory about what was observed) and active experimentation (testing the new theory)*' (Bowman, 2014, p.114). In this case the peculiarities of the orienteering experience and then working on the spatial and time sense while promoting, apart from the various personal competences of role playing, the acquisition of spatial abilities that are difficult to gain traction in the school classroom.

The fact that this activity is not based on acting but on the free interpretation of the individual allows anyone to participate without necessarily possessing drama skills or indeed any special skills.

It can be observed how the experiential learning character is recurrent in the informal education activities mentioned above which, in this case, complete the school curriculum. Another crucial aspect that emerges from the close link between school and informal education is that of exploiting the potential of the community in which the school is located. This will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

7.4.2 Informal Education as a Network of Social Support for an Included School. The Case of Trotter Park.

According to the research institute ISTAT, on the 1st January 2021 there were approximately 5.2 million foreign citizens in residence in Italy, representing 8.7% of the total population. With respect to the previous year, those without Italian nationality increased by 132,000 (+2.6%). The graph below illustrates the number of foreign citizens in residence in European countries, by 100 inhabitants (Tab. 8). As can be seen from these data, Italy is positioned higher than the average European level but not significantly.
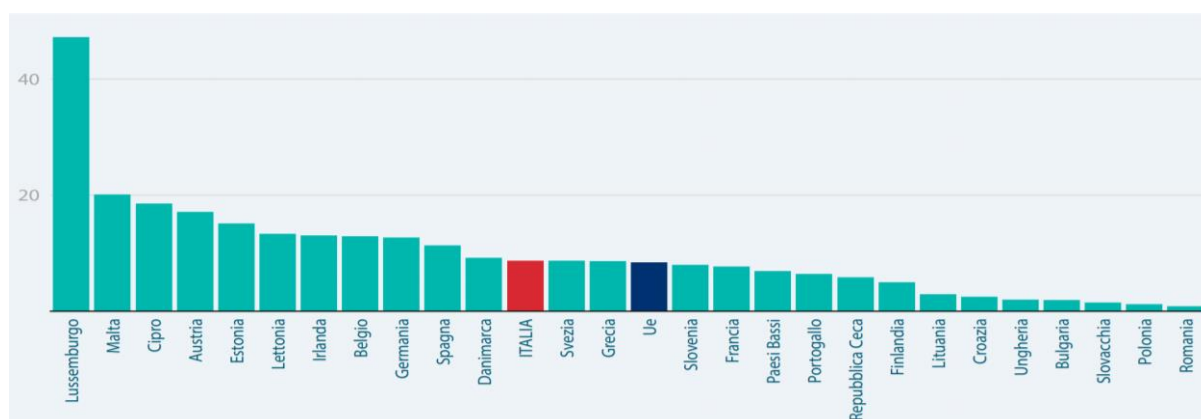
As happens in many western countries, Italian public schools have to deal with the growing complexity of an increasingly diverse school audience. Of this assumption, however, it must be noted that the percentage of pupils with non-Italian citizenship in schools changes a lot according to the geographical position and the region. To illustrate, this other chart below illustrates the MIUR numbers, divided by regions, in respect of the students with non-Italian nationality numbers in Italian public schools (Tab. 9):

Table 9 – STUDENTS WITH NON-ITALIAN NATIONALITY IN RELATION TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS BY REGION (percentage values – 2019/2020) source: MIUR.
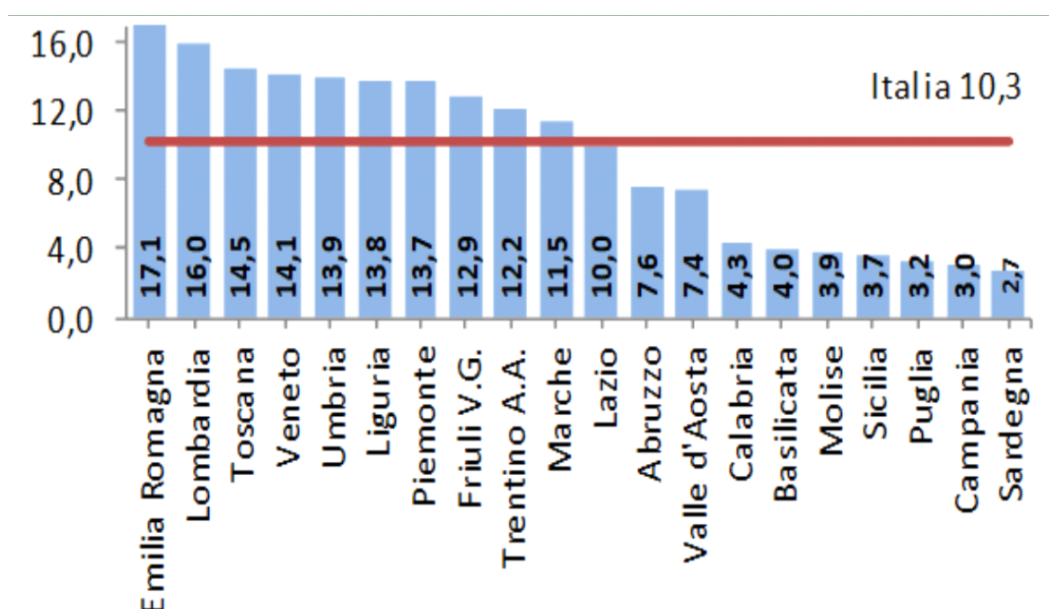
The situation is polarised – at the bottom of the rankings are the insular regions and the south of the country with the lowest percentage of students without Italian citizenship, at

the top there are the two richest regions in the centre and north of the country – Emilia Romagna and Lombardy. Among the case studies analysed, the Giacosa school is located in Lombardy and offers a significant point of observation.

It is attended by 1,400 students, 850 in the Trotter pavilions and the others in the two branch offices.

This school population of the institute is made up of 70% of a large proportion of pupils with non-Italian citizenship (CNI), more than half of whom were born in Italy. The remaining 30% is made up of 'native Italian students' (as they are called in ministerial documents) belonging to a middle socio-economic class that tends to choose this type of Outdoor School model. Furthermore, during the course of the year, the school continuously welcomes newly arrived pupils in Italy. These numbers, definitely above the Italian average, are due to the school's location on the border between the historic district of Via Padova and the new Nolo district, one of the most multi-ethnic areas of the city of Milan (Cognetti, 2019).

A popular and populated outpost, where people from different countries meet, new and old generation immigrants, once coming from Veneto and southern Italy and now from the southern hemisphere (see Chapter 3, Research Context). The principal explains:

> *'It is not a neighbourhood that has been systematically transformed, here, building by building the geographies change. The other day, a policeman I was talking to for school matters was able to tell me which building on my street I live in, and explained why: "In other buildings on that street we carried out searches. And since you follow a profession, let's say, as a professional you certainly cannot live at 16 or 14, so you must necessarily live at number 2." Even the police have a checkerboard geography of the neighbourhood'* Francesco, Principal of the Outdoor School.

In a neighbourhood that appears so fragmented, the Giacosa school, coordinating the work of the various associations, offers a strong element of educational and social planning that brings new ways of civil coexistence (Barra et al., 2022).

The Giacosa school, beyond its vocation as an Outdoor School, is a polar organisation for integration within the FAMI 1597 project 'Actions and governance tools for the qualification of the school system in multicultural contexts'.

Events and meetings between families from all over the world are organised every week to encourage mutual knowledge and cultural exchange. The previous section discussed the activities for the enhancement of the students' mother tongue through collaboration with specialised schools. In the field of volunteering, the intercultural activities that take place within the walls of the school park during the year are truly varied. The peculiarity here is that they are not only aimed at the students of the school but also at the families of the neighbourhood.

An example is the 'Librotrotter – Multilingual library', a space managed by the volunteers of the Amici Parco Trotter Association with the contribution of the Parents Committee, which has a supply of books on loan in a foreign language and offers readings in the languages present among the students of the school. Since 2019, this space has hosted a small library in Arabic managed in collaboration with the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) and the Centre for Arab Culture in Milan. Another example is the social space reserved for mothers at the school, many of whom are non-Italian, which allows meetings and shared experiences, such as the 'Atelier Trotter', a creative sewing workshop.

The meetings take place during school hours and in the school premises made available by the institute. In the park the Chinese New Year is also celebrated every year, with the famous dragon parade in the presence of the consul and the Chinese community.

However, it must be considered that the educational planning of the Trotter park does not only involve intercultural projects but also naturalistic-environmental initiatives aimed at the neighbourhood. For example, without the work of volunteers, such as Franca, a mother in the school's history, and Nonno ('Uncle') Vittorio, an elderly resident of the neighbourhood, the Orti Project, which organises flower horticulture activities with children and adults, would not be possible. Similarly, the donkey parade, an initiative promoted by 'Legambiente-Orti' in Via Padova, which brings school children in to take care of a couple of donkeys housed in the park for two days. This activity ends with a festive procession to take the donkeys back to a shared garden in the Via Padova district.

There are several studies that show the complexity of a multicultural learning environment: Neal, Bennett, and Cochrane (2017) show how schools are urban spaces that mediate the sociality and experience of students, but are also complex places, often intertwined in the wider urban context in which they are located. Torres and Tarozzi affirm that multiculturalism is not to be understood as normative but constructive and that education is always political: *'Intercultural education faces social and political issues that neither begin nor end in the classroom'* (2020 p. 14). In the same way, Dei (2021) observes that in Italy there are in fact no regulatory recipes or didactic programmes regarding such changing dynamics. Each school operates in its own way and it often happens that public schools do not have sufficient resources to cope with this complexity.

To respond to the growing need for resources, the Giacosa Outdoor School has fielded a battalion of support teachers, professional educators and social workers which, however,

are never enough. Hence the importance of having a solid informal education network around. The principal continues:

> *'If we did not have a territorial network around us, we would suffer greatly. We need volunteers to teach Italian to children and parents in the neighbourhood and we also need to create spaces for mothers to socialise and to explain to them how to access counselling and health care services. We need after-school care for children who not only do not have a room to work in but often there is even no table in the house either. This is perhaps because they live in very small 20 mq spaces or three rooms utilised by seven or eight people. But even more simply there is a need for support spaces for grandparents who take care of the gardens or for the association that brings us donkeys every year to use in teaching at the elementary school. Fortunately the school is situated in a quarter characterised by some very active associations based on theatre, sport and other initiatives.'*
> Francesco, principal of the Outdoor School.

What differs from informal education activities as a topping up of the curriculum is the fact that the operators of informal education in the social sector are not only professional educators, but also grandparents and retired professionals. In this field, public tenders and funding are almost never sufficient to cover the needs of families and students. A support network has therefore been created within the Giacosa institute consisting of volunteers, associations, and family members of the school children. The substantial difference with the mainstream lies in the fact that, as has been seen, the Trotter Park is a social space of the city and the school acts as a propulsion centre of the community networks (Barra, 2022).

Teacher Clara explains the importance of the parents' committee in school activities:

> *'The Parents Committee is a strong group and it helps a lot, not only in informal activities. This year, for example, we did not have the funds to buy infrared thermometers for COVID and they bought them for us. Then of course the management is not always easy, it depends on the parents who are in it. Sometimes there is a bit of intrusiveness on the peculiarities of the teachers but having retired professionals and volunteers who can teach Italian for free in the afternoon is really important for us. The parents committee then installed an annual meeting for the 'Trotteriadi' – an organised sports event in*

volving parents, associations and businesses within the quarter.'
Clara, teacher, Outdoor School.

By promoting events, moments of assisted study and parties, it can be said that the parents' committee contributes to multiplying social activities within the park.

The support of informal education is in this case a backbone of the school structure because it allows to manage a complexity that would otherwise be problematic. The strategy of the Giacosa Institute is to unite forces and try to communicate their identities and strengths to the outside world:

> *'In my most extreme imagination I have come to think that this is a laboratory in its own way. Here we recognise real citizenship for everyone through education. Just as they land in Lampedusa, they metaphorically land in our school. We don't throw them overboard. We put them among others, we teach Italian history, Italian culture and this is integration, if we want to use the most banal term. We are an agency that also deals with managing a migration phenomenon. To stop the escape of Italians from multi-ethnic schools, however, it is necessary to focus on the offer, from the courses to the structure. For us, multilingualism and outdoor school activities are an attractive strength; having a park with activities at all hours and the school staying open until 31st July is a service to the neighbourhood, as well as to the school. Well, this would not be possible without the help of the associations that live around us every day'* Francesco, principal of the Outdoor School.

In Andrea's drawing below people are illustrated of different ages and nationalities, playing together under the Trotter Park sun (Fig. 34).

Figure 34 – PEOPLE OF TROTTER PARK Source: Andrea's lapbook

In the vision of its principal, the aptitude to enter a multilingual area is a strength, an element of qualification and not of difficulty. Similarly, the activities that revolve around the park, in synergy with the associations, can become an attractive point also to stop the escape of Italians from multi-ethnic schools (see Chapter 5). With respect to the activities of strengthening and expanding the curriculum, the discussion here is above all about efforts to bring everyone to a basic level and ensure academic success for all, even those who start at a disadvantage. In this sense, it can be observed that in the case of the Giacosa school, informal education can create cultural change in society (Ditton, 2014) and imagine a new relationship between school and community.

A significance is that of education which, as already highlighted by Torres and Tarozzi (2020), is above all political. In the next subsection this theme will be developed, observing how schools with experimentation can become active laboratories of democracy (Weyland, Leone, 2020) and, as in the case of the Trotter Park, of political participation and alternative practices.

7.4.3 Experimental Schools and Other Kinds of 'Alternative'

As noted earlier, experimental schools act as relationship builders and, in some cases, as a neighbourhood reference. In the previous sections, attention was focused on expanding the training offer, both through private entities and non-profit and voluntary associations. This type of process, which occurs in different ways in the schools under consideration, has allowed for the expansion of participation practices which, as Weyland (2020) observes, are a means of distributing power. Today in literature there is an awareness that educational spaces are not neutral, but culturally and socially known (Kraftl, 2013; Viteritti, 2020) as well politically as seen in the previous section (Torres and Tarozzi, 2020) (see Chapter 2 for a complete literature review).

In the LODLNB ('The Lesson Hour Is Not Enough') project of the No Backpack School, great emphasis was placed on the connection of public and private entities which led to the selection of 15 national partners (mainly entities and associations), each with a specific competence specialist, of which intercultural education, craft workshops and gaming are just a few examples (see subsection 7.3.1). This project is based on the assumption that a local community capable of combating educational poverty finds in the school the main point of reference for connecting the various actors who perform other functions in that school, be they social, educational or administrative. However, there are relationships in these schools with experimentation that do not include public and private actors, or simple forms of voluntary work such as those observed previously (see subsection 7.3.2) but take place in so-called 'alternative' spaces.

One of these is the Outdoor School farm which is located inside the Trotter Park and since 2015 has been managed by a cooperative, 'Tempo per l'infanzia', which through an agreement provides for a co-planning role with the Giacosa school and the 'Amici del Parco

Trotter Association', which as always acts on a voluntary basis. It is a farm that, unlike common educational farms, has no productive purposes and was created with the intention of providing schools and citizens with a meeting place. Being located in the centre of Milan, within a park, it defines itself as an urban farm and is one of the few in Italy to join the European Federation of City Farm (EFCF) project. It is a space open to both school children and the neighbourhood:

> *'Our farm is home to small animals such as chickens, hens, rabbits, ducks, doves and a colony of cats. Unfortunately, the space available is not sufficient to accommodate larger animals. However, it happens, as in the case of the donkey procession, that some animals are hosted for a short time, becoming a sort of guest star for the students. In addition, special workshops are often organised, such as those on natural cosmetics, bird watching, building toys with recycled materials, and beekeeping. My favourite a couple of years ago was to build scarecrows: the organisers provided twine, sticks and straw and the children created'* Federica, teacher, Outdoor School.

Through the agreement the school maintains jurisdiction over the structure by creating a partnership that is articulated on different levels of collaboration, from children's workshops to the zootechnical study, to the dissemination of good practices in the neighbourhood population towards greater food awareness. It has often been observed that these types of care farms aim at broader social objectives, such as the spread of a global ethics of responsibility (Kraftl, 2014), *'empowering people to improve their own lives and environment in peaceful coexistence'* as stated on the EFCF. website. At the same time, these spaces support the local community, for example in the case of the Trotter Park farm, through the organisation of organic markets offered by local farms and producers. It must be borne in mind that alternative food markets, as in the case of alternative schools, also have a political significance (Goodman et al., 2011) as they fall within the different economic practices advocated by Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008). Despite the absence of a

farm within the school, the Montessori Beltrami institute also organises some self-managed activities open to the community every spring:

> *'For the school party, a small market run by children is organised which allows the recycling of used clothes and toys. This is flanked by local producers' markets that promote sustainable consumption projects. This year our children had the opportunity to create seed bombs – clay and soil balls that contain seeds and are literally thrown into uncultivated spaces to enliven them with lively flowers. It is a gift to our lake bees'* Lidia, teacher, Montessori School.

Maria Montessori herself in her cosmic education hopes for a solidarity in space and time that connects humans and the animal world: *'everything is closely connected on this planet and every detail becomes interesting because it is connected to others. We can compare the whole to a canvas: every detail is an embroidery, the whole forms a magnificent fabric'* (Montessori, 2016, p. 60). It can be inferred that schools with presentation present visions of life and community that somehow disconnect from the narrative of what has long been understood as a traditional school (Foucault, 1976) and, although they cannot completely detach themselves from it, create different connections with the visions of life itself that are created in alternative spaces (Kraftl, 2013). Sometimes these schools become spaces for political participation, in which the shared values that form these visions of life are made explicit and settled. For example, every 20th November, to celebrate the Convention on the rights of the child approved by the United Nations in 1989, a children's rights march is organised in the Outdoor School that runs along the streets adjacent to the school.

Around forty associations march together with the school children, including the Chinese school with its dragon, the Arab school, the local scout groups and various other associations that orbit the Trotter Park. With the same aims, key dates for the Italian Republic are celebrated in all three schools examined: the Day of Remembrance, 27th January and Liberation Day on 25th April. During these days, conferences, exhibitions, film

screenings and testimonials are organised. In the COVID-19 period at the Trotter Park this vitality was not lost and was celebrated with the Red Thread of Memory, a rope stretched throughout the park in which families and children were able to hang cards with their thoughts on the racial persecutions of the past and of the present, as seen in these photos (Fig. 35).

Figure 35 – MOMENTS OF ACTIVISM AT TROTTER PARK Source: Author

Above a mural with the inscription 'In my school no one is a foreigner'.

Source: Author

In this case, the political commitment does not only concern children but passes through the collective leadership of the Friends of the Trotter Park Association which supports all these events and in recent years is simultaneously engaged in a fight in favour of social housing in the neighbourhood:

> *'More and more families from the school tell us that they have to leave because their rent has been increased. Now these neighbourhoods, renamed NoLo (North of Loreto), are attracting many professionals and the petitions and our requests to the Municipality of Milan to increase the supply of houses are of no use, encouraging small owners of vacant homes to make them available at an agreed rent, or to renovate abandoned buildings with social rent. If our people leave, our neighbourhood loses its identity'* Dino, Teacher, Outdoor School.

It is evident that in these practices there is the idea of constituting collective and non-capitalist forms of politics, identity and citizenship (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006), acting no differently from what are sometimes called *'autonomous learning spaces'* (Kraftl, 2013, p. 237). However, these practices represent only a facet of what is the conformation of the school with experimentation which, as previously described, is constituted in many ways. Some practices go through the privatisation of certain processes, others through informal education, others still depend on how the individual institution articulates its curriculum through the law on autonomy 59/1997. In this complex conformation it becomes difficult to define the boundary between alternative and traditional space, which, as will be seen in the conclusions, is very fleeting and sometimes leans more towards one side, sometimes more towards the other.

7.5 Summary

The chapter presented some of the processes involved in the constitution of experimentation within the public school. Considerable attention was given to the ways in which informal and alternative education practices shape the curriculum. Meanwhile, the traditional school of the past still has a significant impact on school life and produces, in different ways, creativity in the adoption of new forms of teaching. Experimentation networks tend to produce processes that are implemented over time according to the peculiarities of the school they belong to.

There are situations in which teaching methods are more structured, such as the No Backpack and Montessori models, and others such as the Outdoor School in which a large margin is left to the autonomy of the teacher. The creativity of these processes is visible in the organisation, in the materials and in the activities that give life to the model from time to time. As happens in alternative education (Kraftl, 2013; Lees, 2016), these learning spaces feel different from the mainstream. The furniture, the physical space, the way teachers conduct teaching move in different ways. However, the substantial difference lies in the fact that they cannot be defined as autonomous but are interdependent and shaped by the category of public school to which they belong.

This process creates many contradictions. For example, it was shown how creativity, personalised learning and the promotion of autonomy in children's daily activities must deal with the standards of the times, still marked today by the sound of the bell, and sometimes by the precariousness and temporary nature of teachers' contracts. On the one hand, the proposal for collaborative and self-assessment-oriented teaching can be observed; on the other there is the regulatory obligation to submit students to the INVALSI standard tests every year so that the government checks the performance of each individual student.

A significant aspect is that the activities that are most disconnected from the mainstream are organised and financed thanks to a close relationship with informal education practices within and beyond school walls. This relationship can take on a social value, especially when carried out in collaboration with voluntary associations, and a political value, when carried out through public tenders, as in the case of the Giacosa school with the Municipality of Milan. However, the relationship between mainstream and informal education can also be read as a possible step towards the process of privatisation of public schools (Mitchell, 2018), especially when the completion of the educational offer takes

place through private funds and companies that sell services. However, this completion can also take place through practices and links with the alternative world and political activism aimed at overcoming the capitalist model. The result is that these experimentation schools represent a hybrid form between an attempt to look alternative and the need to remain within the system by reworking some of its founding aspects. Through this lens the final chapter will outline the contributions that this research has brought to research on the geographies of education and alternative education.

CHAPTER 8:

CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has the main merit of bringing to light the co-productive and recursive relationship between mainstream and other forms of informal and alternative education that takes place in some public educational spaces in the Italian context. In doing so it explored the geographies of experimentation in the mainstream, an emerging line of research which, to the writer's knowledge, has never been explored in Italy from a geographical perspective and has rarely been explored in other contexts. The most innovative aspect is that this achievement was made possible not only by listening to the voices of the teachers but also that of the children. At the same time, the thesis investigated the circuits of choice which guide families towards non-traditional schools curricula and learning practices, outlining the crucial geographical relationships between institutions, lifestyle and educational systems. In this way the thesis contributes to the literature on the geography of education, alternative education and the geographies of children in experimental spaces.

Drawing on a substantive original dataset from research in Italy, this thesis had applied a qualitative approach to investigate to the two principal objectives inspiring this research:

1. *To explore the factors which lead a family to choose a non-traditional school.*

2. *To examine the spatialities of the educational spaces that are classed as 'experimentation' in mainstream.*

Never before have the boundaries of traditional education in contemporary school systems been questioned in the ways explored in this thesis. As has already been shown in the research context, the Italian school system in the twentieth century has passed through highly centralised management (Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006) and only recently have legislative measures been introduced aimed at guaranteeing the autonomy of individual institutions and the possibility of interaction between them and the surrounding educating community. The many experimentations present in Italy represent a disconnection from the standardisation process that has guided the Italian school for years. This has allowed public schools to detach themselves from mainstream programmes in favour of teaching by skills, but also to train their teachers in innovative methodologies, to acquire autonomous financial resources and their own governance tools. At the same time, forms of privatisation have been articulated in increasingly evolved educational proposals ranging from the ambit of private schools of equal status, predominantly Catholic in orientation, to the varied panorama of alternative education. In a constantly changing background this thesis has navigated. Alongside this, it has deepened understanding of the factors that lead to parents' choice of a non-traditional school, demonstrating how the boundaries between the circuits that guide the choice of alternative education, experimentation and innovative curricula are sometimes intertwined and sometimes in stark contrast. In the following sections, the principal research results and contributions emerging from the analysis shall be presented and discussed through the two aforementioned research objectives.

8.2 Addressing Objective 1: Primary School Choice in Italy

Over the last few years, the Italian academic literature on school choice has focused through quantitative studies on high school, which has always been the place where there

are the greatest choices for students enrolling in public schools (Bussu et al., 2022), with particular attention to the issues of migration and social stratification (Barban & White, 2011; Brunello & Checchi, 2005; Panichella & Triventi, 2014). Following the approach of some scholars, I have chosen to follow a qualitative method (Holloway, Hubbard, Jöns & Pimlott-Wilson, 2010) and in my thesis I have supported the importance of observing parental choices starting from primary school, because it is the moment in which compulsory schooling begins, both in the field of experimentation in the mainstream and also in innovative curricula in the private sector and in the forms of alternative education. The questions which inspired the research are therefore stated:

> *What are the reasons which lead a family to choose an alternative school? What are the reasons for choosing a private school? What are the reasons for choosing a public school with experimentation?*

From this analysis, conducted through 'The School Of My Dreams' programme on families mainly from the middle class, several aspects characterising these processes emerged which enter into dialogue with previous studies.

First, it has been observed that the choice of a school with experimentation within the public system can lead city families to move outside the catchment area, but not necessarily towards the centre as some studies underline (Cordini, Parma & Ranci 2019). In the city of Milan, for example, some schools with experimentation mentioned are located in peripheral districts, such as the open-air Giacosa school or the Montessori public middle school in the Barona district. Another aspect that emerges, consonant with the studies of Boterman (2021), is that moving house plays an important role in school choice.

But here too in the analysis the experiences of people who sometimes travel to another region to have access to the desired school emerged. The case of Orta, a small town on Lake

Maggiore or the mountain municipality of San Godenzo in Tuscany are good examples: schools threatened with closure that come back to life thanks to the presence of experiments that attract new residents from outside the area.

Second, parents choose a school with experimentation, a private school with an innovative curriculum or a school outside the public school system, often at the cost of resorting to the private sector in the hopes of finding a solution which reflects their values and encompass certain dimensions of the didactic organisation. It is interesting to note, however, that these dimensions sometimes overlap and sometimes diverge even within the same educational category. Important factors in choosing the school are to be found in the philosophy and teaching method, in the possibility of using outdoor education, in the very reputation of the teachers, in the assessment method, in the size of the classes, in the teaching didactic continuity and in the search for an empathetic community, open to the weakest.

These aspects do not necessarily characterise a specific category of schools but must be sought and analysed on a case-by-case basis. They appear sometimes simultaneously and sometimes in variable numbers within the various types of non-traditional schools chosen by the parents. The result is that the factors that guide the choice from the point of view of the dimensions of teaching often overlap between experimentation, private schools and alternative education.

Thirdly, the influence of parents' aspirations and lifestyle on school choices can be observed from different angles. In private schools with an innovative curriculum, the attractive factors have to do with a homogeneous audience as has already emerged in various international studies (Harris & Johnston, 2008) or with the hope of a more welcoming school (Bertola, Checchi & Oppedisano 2007). Here also emerges the desire to

access training, considered by parents to be of greater excellence, in order to compete in the future in the global market of Italian and foreign universities or to find the most qualified job possible. This aspiration, as well as the control of their children's socialisation, also emerged in the interviews of those who choose parental education and is therefore not the prerogative only of those who choose equivalent schools. This fact is not surprising since the research sample is mainly composed of the middle class. Previous studies have in fact observed where there is economic disadvantage there are low aspirations (Holloway, 2011) while wealthier families try to create an advantage of position in the labour market through the accumulation of degrees in prestigious universities (Waters, 2017). Alongside this, this result is in line with the studies of those who see a privatisation process in parental education (Henley, 2021; Katz, 2008) and an implicit neoliberal political philosophy.

This idea is reinforced by the self-entrepreneurial character that sometimes emerges among parents of parental schools, whereby alternative educational experiences become a sort of business to be shared externally, for example through the sale of training courses or private consultancy. However, this vision has been reaffirmed by the many cases documented by research on international alternative education, seeking out a different vision of life itself (Kraftl, 2013). Different visions also emerge here from the interviews both from parents who have chosen the public school with experimentation, and willingly see a multicultural school not based on competition, and from some parents of parental education who have built their own lifestyle around non-consumerist economic practices. This provides a complex, multiform and multifaceted picture of the phenomenon of choosing a non-traditional school which is in its infancy in Italy and deserves further research in the years to come.

8.3 Addressing Objective 2: Geographies of Experimentation in the Mainstream

To outline the results of the second research objective It was decided to answer question three first, rather than the second, because it is broader in its meaning. The collection of contributions presented in Chapters 6 and 7 responded in fact to the third research question:

What are the emerging spatialities which make experimentation possible?

As has been observed in Chapter 7, schools with experiments make an inverse process to alternative spaces and cannot be considered autonomous spaces (compare Kraftl, 2013, 2018), but are interdependent and shaped by the category of the public school to which they belong. On the contrary, as has already been seen in the literature, they challenge the dichotomy between informal and formal educational spaces (Pimlott-Wilson & Coates 2019), sometimes expanding to enhance services or make up for some deficiencies. In doing so, they get help from the groups that make up the local educational community and promote new ways of teaching. Schools with experimentation differ because they are characterised by curricula that value experiential learning, artistic and musical disciplines, craftsmanship and outdoor education to a greater extent than the mainstream.

This completion of the training offer is possible thanks to the synergy with specialised professionals, institutions and companies that generally find funding through public tenders and private funds. As has been discussed, these are curricula where free work and movement is encouraged through polytopic spaces from non-standardised times. Among the key driving forces is creativity (see subsection 7.1) which characterises school learning relationships and landscapes in different ways. It has been observed how creativity affects both the social processes that take place within the school and materialities. Each trial has its own learning materials but sometimes these are adapted to the structure and context,

overcoming the limits and precariousness that characterise the physical spaces and structures of the public school itself (see subsection 7.2). The way teachers conduct teaching moves in different ways. The teacher can assume the role of the Montessori master, sometimes he or she acts as a facilitator and director of learning, sometimes the teacher is specialised in a particular methodology but always remains a teacher trained and recruited by the public system. Although I cannot speak of real family-like relations (Kraftl, 2013), in all these cases the common trait of the experiments examined is the promotion of empathic relationships between students and teachers. It was observed how these connotations are in contrast with the idea of a coercive school which envisages compliance with the discipline and strict obedience to the hierarchy (Foucault, 1976). However, in the case studies situations have emerged in which the forces that the school puts in place are not sufficient to help the weakest pupils or those with special learning needs, as in the case of the management of multiculturalism at Parco Trotter. In this scenario, an important role is played by informal education which operates in the form of intergenerational volunteering (see subsection 7.3.2) and through important connections with parenting (Mills, 2014). Also at the Trotter Park, the activities do not only concern students but sometimes they also aim at adult education, as in the case of mothers with non-Italian nationality who find a meeting point, sharing and support for daily life directly in the spaces of the school. In this sense it has been observed how the synergy between school with experimentation and informal education can create cultural change in society (Ditton, 2014).

A further connection that has emerged is with the world of alternative education which contributes to the curriculum of schools with experimentation, as in the case of the urban farm school in Milan or the Montessori School. At the same time, these exchanges contribute to the support of the local community, through alternative food markets, social

support interventions and sometimes spaces for political participation. The spaces of political participation make the reproduction of citizenship in these environments more varied and multifaceted. As previously shown, informal and formal have no static boundaries, but complex and fluid ones (Mills, 2014) just as alternative learning spaces can have multiple and varied connections and disconnections with the mainstream (Kraftl, 2013).

In this thesis it has been shown how public school with experimentation amplifies the plurality and visions of life itself that can be conveyed through education. In fact it becomes a catalyst that connects various community actors who perform other functions and find a point of reference in it. In doing so, it conveys a different vision of the public school which on the one hand promotes alternative and inclusive models of citizenship ('in my school no one is a foreigner' reads the wall of Trotter Park), not leaving the weakest pupils behind, on the other it expands and competes with the mainstream from a neo-liberal perspective by privatising some of its processes, albeit in the form of tenders or external funding.

8.3.1 The Transformation of the Physical Space: Polytopic and Flexible Space and the Potential of Outdoor Space

Chapter 6 responded to the second research question:

> *How have the physical spaces transformed and how do they differentiate from the mainstream?*

In doing so, it analysed the key spatialities of the three case study schools inspired by the approach of Kraftl (2013) and innovatively applying the theory of Gibson (1997) to the reorganisation and refurbishment of buildings, all three built in the previous century and once used as a traditional school. In this conversion, the idea that unites these spaces was to limit the centrality of the class in favour of the enhancement of usually less used internal

and external spaces. Here it was chosen to use the concept of affordances in the meaning extended by Kyttä (2008) by which is meant not only the perceived functional opportunities and restrictions concerning the actions of a person in a given environment but also the emotional and social ones that that environment offers (Kyttä, 2018). Using the model by Norman (1988), the usability of the affordances was also considered. According to Norman, they can be real and perceived but it does not mean that they are always readable. It has been observed that the creation of flexible learning spaces (Kariippanon et al, 2018) has had a strong impact on teaching interaction and on the social processes themselves, favouring greater movement, personalisation of activities and at the same time interaction between students. The existence of affordances, sometimes explicit and sometimes latent, has been demonstrated (Wells, 2002); at the same time, it was considered, according to the perspective of Oliver (2005), the possibilities that teaching can generate through this type of affordances. In this last sense, it was seen that the information and significances necessary to guide the behaviours available in the perceived environment (Withagen & Chemero, 2009) can sometimes be enhanced by the teacher's agency. This is the main contribution that this thesis offers to Gibson's theory applied to school spaces; this should not be read as a vision that distorts the concept of affordance, but as a consequence of Gibson's own words: *'The observer may or may not perceive or attend to the affordance, according to his needs, but the affordance, being invariant, is always there to be perceived'* (Gibson, 1979/1986, p. 139). In this case the teacher has an organisational function in the establishment of the teaching practices and in the use of polytopic, flexible spaces which characterise the public schools with experimentation under investigation.

For example, in the Montessori method the regulatory dimension of the environment, through the preparation of materials defined as *'materialised abstraction'* (2018, p. 207)

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and the help of the teacher in interpreting them, allow the child to navigate through the affordances and develop skills that are always new. It has also been observed that in this type of flexible space there is a variation in the rites of appropriation of space which become more collective than individual. For example, in all three case studies we no longer speak of 'my desk' or 'my chair', for example as happens in mainstream schools, but of flexible classes, which can also change during the morning and which usually have tables that can seat six to eight students and therefore have no permanent place.

Flexibility must be read not only as a characteristic of the physical space but also as an instinctive trait of the teaching process itself. An educational process that becomes flexible in space and time through the creation of polytopic environments in which different activities are possible simultaneously (Orsi, 2015), not subject to standard times. In the construction of the polytopic space, an important role is played by the outdoors which can be the school garden or public space and can assume different functions: extension of the educational space with the same social functions as indoors (the case of ordinary outdoor lessons), a place for extraordinary outdoor education activities that would not be possible elsewhere (vegetable garden, walks, activities with animals, role-playing games, etc.) and a complementary space with its own affordances depending on the type of experimentation carried out. This disconnects from the work of Pimlott-Wilson 2019 which places emphasis on outdoor learning as an occasional practice, especially under the form of play. It also disconnects from the perspective of Harris (2018) which defines outdoor education as separate from the physical constraints of the traditional class. In contrast, the internal/external continuity was highlighted as one of the most distinctive spatialities characterising the daily geographies of the Outdoor experimentation school at Trotter Park. On the other hand, the thesis is consonant with the work of some geographers who have highlighted how informal outdoor spaces are socially and culturally mediated

sensory landscapes (Hickmann Dunne, 2019; Morris, 2019); in this case mediated by the very vision of education proposed by the curriculum being tested.

8.3.2 Children's Geographies in Experimentations

Through the research programme 'All About Your School' the thesis gave students a voice and explored the geographies of children in transforming spaces. In particular, the narratives that the children offered in their lapbooks made it possible to identify some of the spatialities and materialities that characterize the flexible classroom and outdoor environments. For example, some children have highlighted how the presence of inanimate objects such as photographs, coloured furniture, and mirrors helps to create an atmosphere suitable for drawing; others have illustrated the potential that 'soft' corners offer for both relaxation and concentration; still others have told how the interaction within the class is facilitated by some teaching materials, such as the traffic light to go to the toilet or the system of magnetic presence signs in the Montessori school. The children's contributions also revealed the crucial role played by the teachers in identifying the affordances and possibilities of social use of the spaces. For example, this can be seen in the use of the agora during the lesson hours of the 'No Backpack' school, which assumes the role of a shared space, or the pavilion system of the Outdoor school, which recalls real houses, conveying a sense of home to children and, at the same time, allows outdoor activities to be carried out for several classes at once without disturbing each other. Particular attention was then paid to the outdoor activities of the schools in question which presuppose materials and body experiences that are not common within mainstream schools and yet are perceived by children in these environments as routine activities within the school day.

Therefore, referring to the agenda of Horton & Kraftl (2006) and to the previous research of children's geographies in schools (Hammond & McKendrick 2020; Hemming, 2007; Holloway, 2014; Højholt, 2022), the thesis narrated and described the spaces of children's daily life, contributing to the knowledge of some of the practices, material objects, and spatial experiences that come to life in schools with experimentation. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, it was not possible to investigate the emotional geographies of the children because, due to the advent of COVID-19, the research was entirely conducted remotely and there was no direct contact between the researcher and the children. However, a relationship emerged from the lapbooks between outdoor places and children's feelings of safety, tranquillity, and freedom. In particular, the sense of freedom that emerges is linked to both the sphere of imagination and movement. This aspect is interesting, because it is part of the daily school life of children who attend schools with experimentation and is developed at different levels within the case studies, favouring an environment, thanks above all to the help of teachers, which has a positive impact on children's creativity. Given the crucial role of children and the importance of amplifying their voices in the contemporary debate, a more analytical analysis in the field of emotional children's geographies in experimentations is indicated as a future line of research.

8.4 Directions for Future Research

The contributions of this thesis concern key aspects of the geographies of experimentation in Italian public schools and of the circuits of choice that guide parents' choices towards non-traditional education. This observation point has been chosen, but there are many vectors through which to investigate the boundaries between traditional and alternative education from a geographical point of view. For example, starting from alternative education, exploring the evolution of learning spaces after the COVID-19 pandemic and the

relationships with the mainstream in individual alternative learning sites, or continuing to move into the mainstream, considering the many other experiments underway in the public and the configuration of hybrid forms, as in the case of schools without a label. In fact, there are numerous scholastic experiences both in the public and in the private sector that have no name or cannot be categorised but have a lot to say in the ways in which social and spatial processes dialogue with informal and alternative education. In the following paragraphs, three directions will be outlined that can broaden the research paths on these non-traditional spaces:

i. Emotional Children's Geographies in Experimentations

As mentioned above, a first direction could be to examine children's emotions and embodied strategies for educational transformation in the context of a school with experimentations. For over fifteen years, both emotion and affect have become key themes for human geographers, and more recent research has explored their role within educational spaces (Kraftl, 2016) and in the construction of politicised social identities (Kustatscher, 2017). The research field of schools with experimentation remains relatively unexplored, and it could have a lot to say if investigated using methods in the presence of students.

ii. The Digital Space

In the thesis the internal and external space of those spaces under experimentation was treated but digital research is also to be kept in mind for future research and the learning and teaching aspects involving emerging technologies (Kraftl, McKenzie & Gulson, 2022). In particular, here we refer to that area that could be called cybergeographies of educational spaces. This research proposal finds inspiration in the work of Rose (2016) and investigates the narratives of online places used in teaching non-traditional schools

and how they influence the everyday representations of those who live them. Similarly, it would be interesting to consider digital practices in alternative education, particularly after the advent of covid-19, and the role that the web and social media play in attracting students to non-traditional schools and in shaping parental choices.

iii. Towards global and comparative studies of alternative and experimental education

With a view to broadening the focus, it is also important to consider school experiences not only at a national level but also on a global scale. How are public schools with experimentation and alternative education changing in international contexts? In the first instance it might be interesting to start from the European context and observe in a comparative perspective how the mainstream is responding to European policies on the innovation of spaces and teaching (OECD, 2008; Dumont, Instance & Benavides, 2010; OECD, 2013, 2015). At the same time, how alternative education is impacting them and in what way. Furthermore, it would be necessary to observe these transformations on mainstream and alternative spaces in emerging and developing geographical contexts of the south and east of the world, in order to observe the phenomenon even in economically disadvantaged contexts. As was shown in the literature review chapter, most of the studies come from the Western world and from a geographical point of view there is still much to investigate.

iv. Diversify methods and favour the birth of a research network on current experimentation

Further research might also consider extending the qualitative methodological approach of this thesis and combining it with a larger-scale quantitative data set. This would make it possible to map a greater number of non-traditional school experiences and at the same time have a quantitative dimension of the phenomenon by comparing, for example in the

case of Italy, the various regions and identifying any differences or connections between the north and south of the peninsula. In the case of a global study, it would be even more useful to be able to count on a network of researchers who monitor the spaces undergoing transformation in the mainstream and the impact they have on parental choices and on the global education market at various scales. Since these are spaces undergoing transformation, monitoring should take place over time in order to offer forecasting and sharing of best practices.

8.4.1 Implications for Policy Makers

The study demonstrated the value that a geographical perspective can offer to the understanding of educational spaces under transformation. However, there is a gap within the policies debated which rarely allows for the incorporation of teacher's and student's input in the decision-making processes regarding the planning and implementation of learning spaces. The thesis contributes to this debate, promoting the social protagonism of those who exist within experimentation spaces each day. As has been repeated various times, school has a socio-political function and, making the exercise of active citizenship possible, it represents one of the state principals when operating traditionally, and when the learning offer is enriched through alternative and informal activities. However, it is not sufficient to be limited to producing general directions and functional and aesthetic guidelines for the planning of learning environments. It is necessary to rethink the spatial experience offered students and teachers, keeping in mind the uniqueness of each school and the ecosystem it belongs to. This thesis has demonstrated that each school has its own identity and operates within a different context, adapting to the transformations in the surrounding community, while in turn transforming itself. Based on my analysis, the following have been identified as areas of need for policy making that further address learning spaces in transforming contexts.

1. The work of schools with experimentation must be made known

In order to extend school choice even to more economically disadvantaged families, it would be useful to create a guide which illustrates the experimentation taking place around the country. Some families do not know they can choose a public school with experimentation and they do not know the offerings within their areas. Furthermore, in Italy there is always a common sense of little innovation when it comes to traditional school. On the other hand, there is little knowledge of the world of alternative education. Some families do not know what they are dealing with, for example, when they arrive at a parental institution, they are confused and they enlist the help of private consultants to explain the rights and duties that this type of choice entails. Institutions should improve the sharing of the various types of learning space in operation within a specific territory.

2. The sharing of best practices

Italy is home to the movement, Avanguardie Educative (Available at: https://innovazione.indire.it/avanguardieeducative/ Last Accessed: 5 February, 2023) which involves innovative Italian public schools; it would be useful to create an exchange of best practices for not only public schools, but also with the involvement of non-traditional schools operating within the private sector, or in alternative education; this would allow the sharing of experiences among the various institutions, for example, the case of the Opera Nazionale Montessori and public school. Promoting an exchange between the different schools would help both parties to reach higher standard in the services offered to pupils.

3. Reduce the number of students per class to support the use of polytopic space

In the case studies of the schools with experimentation and in the interviews with the parents who chose non-traditional schools, it emerged that there is a need to reduce the

number of students per class. Having small classes allows teachers to better manage the polytopic space and experiential methods and activities. Reducing the number of students per class also increases the agency of the teacher on a single pupil and allows for the plurality of teaching methods and attention for weaker students.

4. **Reduce bureaucracy to create synergy and projects with informal education**

Some schools, especially those which rely on a reduced number of staff, sometimes give up on promoting projects and participating in public and private contracts because they do not have the human resources or time to invest in the great amount of bureaucracy entailed. Creating guidelines or simplifying the existing processes to access activities to complete the teaching offer would be a way to make the best practices emerging from this thesis accessible to a greater number of schools.

8.5 Final remarks: Beyond the Boundaries of Traditional and Alternative Education

The Italian school system has travelled through the era and transformations of the twentieth century, in turn, transforming itself. However, it was only in the 1990s, thanks to Law 59/1997, that the standardised and centralised nature, which had characterised Italian schools for a long time, was broken down.

The experimentation schools, like those studied in Chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis, represent the main strategy for teaching innovation in Italian public primary school. A resultant benefit has been the expanded possibility of accessing schools without fees and with innovative curricula for families coming from disadvantaged social classes who, for various reasons, are generally excluded from school choice and from the world of fee-paying schools (Reay & Ball, 1996). Unfortunately, however, access to these schools is not widespread throughout Italy, as not all areas have schools with experimentation: the

reduction in inequality is therefore determined by chance, unless families choose to travel outside of their area of residence, as some parents encountered in this research do.

The geographies of experimentation emerging from this analysis speak volumes on how the social and spatial processes are shaping the practices, going beyond that which is seen as traditional by the mainstream. For example, something new in this discussion is how some schools respond to the societal changes and how they are organising themselves in order to promote the acquisition of skills for the future. In the Western world, it is not unusual to see job offers or descriptions which require the worker to be flexible, creative and autonomous. Herein it is demonstrated that in the Italian context, the curricula of schools with experimentation ignite flexibility in a more physical sense than abstract (see subsection 6.4), as well as creativity (see subsection 7.1), autonomy in often uncertain contexts (see subsection 7.2), and cooperative and experiential learning (see subsection 7.3). Therefore, as also emerges from other studies in the UK (Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019), experimentation schools in the mainstream cannot be considered as wholly alternative, as they reproduce the requests of the knowledge economy and society itself. However, through curricula which are non-fragmented, fluid and open to the community, the students of these schools are free to choose their own activities, ranging from informal, free or fee-paying education. They are also less constrained to the typical performance of the traditional curriculum. Research results of this thesis have repeatedly shown that both traditional and alternative learning spaces work like kaleidoscopes that reproduce the multifaceted and multi-formed reality in which they are immersed. What emerges is a vision that cannot be centralised and standardised by a school system, but which instead influences and is influenced by the identity of the school itself.

In the same way, the thesis demonstrates how alternative learning spaces tend to take on mainstream school traits: marketing approaches of homeschooling and forest schools in

Italy are just some examples which emerged from the field research (see Chapter 5). If it is true that many non-traditional schools of today (including non-traditional public schools) walk the road towards the privatisation of some processes, as has occurred in the American model for decades (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012; Mitchell, 2018), in this thesis, the other side of the coin has also been observed. Today, alongside privatisation processes, it is possible to observe the incorporation of alternative practices as a necessity and as a response to a different vision of understanding education. They are attempts to do something different and to move away from liberal imperatives. Not all practices that have been mapped out in schools with experimentation correspond to a utilitarian purpose, such as the acquisition of specific skills, such as those mentioned above, to compete in the global market. Some schools with experimentation have reinvented ways of being together, creating spaces of resistance and disruption, encouraging participation and action towards possible alternatives. Examples of this are the many initiatives taking place in the Trotter Park (see Chapter 7) of which the multilingual library, the social space for mothers who embroider, the march for children's rights and the vegetable garden project cared for by grandparents are just a few examples. In ten years, the schools that are the subject of this thesis may no longer exist in the form in which they have been studied today. However, what the geographies of experimentation demonstrate is that spatialities can be renegotiated and interrogated during the course of time, evolving with the transformations of the world, in ways which are as yet unimaginable.

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APPENDICES

SCHOOL CHOICE
AND THE GEOGRAPHIES OF EXPERIMENTATION IN THE ITALIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

Subject: Presentation of the project 'SCHOOL CHOICE AND THE GEOGRAPHIES OF EXPERIMENTATION IN THE ITALIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM' and request for interview volunteers

Dear Parents,

I would like to bring your attention to a project that explores spatial and social experiences in alternative schools: it is called 'School Choice and the Geographies of Experimentation in the Italian School System'. The work is part of a doctoral thesis at the University of Birmingham: the project designer is an Italian PhD student, Giulia Chiara Ceresa with the supervision of Peter Kraftl and Sophie Hadfield Hill (who are authorities in this kind of field research, and also give her expert guidance and help).

Specifically, this work has two main objectives:

- To investigate, through one-on-one interviews, the processes of choice that bring some parents to choose an alternative school over a conventional one for their children.

- Observe and understand the spatial and social experiences of children in the context of three alternative experiments that take place in Italian state schools.

These two objectives will be pursued through the observation of materials, interpersonal relationships, habits, practices, policies that constitute the life of the institutions under examination. This will include observing and listening to the voices of students, parents, teachers and principals. In this case, the main research methodology will be participant observation within the institutions, with the researcher occupying a marginal semi-participant role – that is, one in which the researcher does not interfere with the activities but is nearby as they unfold. There are three threads to this project:

1) THE SCHOOL OF MY DREAMS: in-depth interview, consisting of open questions, with around 40 parents who have chosen an alternative school, or an alternative experimentation within a conventional school, for their children.

2) ALL ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL: a creative programme for children aged 6–10

3) WHAT'S EDUCATION FOR: interviews with key adults who act as teachers and directors of the three schools under examination, with the aim of exploring some of the ways in which social and spatial processes are co-implicated in the constitution of alternative approaches.

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Giulia Chiara Ceresa is looking for volunteers for the first session of 'School Of My Dreams'. Would any of you be interested in taking part in this research? The interviews will be stored anonymously and can take place over Skype or in person, depending on where you live and how much time you have for a brief meeting. All information and measures for the safeguarding of your privacy, as well as details on the research results and data storage will be made available to you along with an information sheet for those of you who decide to participate in the project.

I thank you all in advance for your attention! In order to join this initiative, you can reply to this email.

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Participant Information Sheet for Parents *('The School of my Dreams' Programme)*

What is this research about? The research project 'School Choice and the Geographies of Experimentation in the Italian school System' has two main objectives:

- To investigate, through one-on-one interviews, the processes of choice that bring some parents to choose an alternative school over a conventional one for their children.

- Observe and understand the spatial and social experiences of children in the context of three alternative experiments that take place in Italian state schools.

There are three threads to this project:

1) THE SCHOOL OF MY DREAMS: in-depth interview, consisting of open questions, with around 40 parents who have chosen an alternative school, or an alternative experimentation within a conventional school, for their children.

2) ALL ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL: a creative programme for children aged 6–10.

3) WHAT'S EDUCATION FOR: interviews with key adults who act as teachers and directors of the three schools under examination, with the aim of exploring some of the ways in which social and spatial processes are co-implicated in the constitution of alternative approaches.

Why is this research important?

We think it is important to study these alternative school practices within the state school circuit because they are innovative realities in a constant state of change. Many studies have been conducted on purely alternative schools (Steiner and Montessori Schools, forest schools, homeschooling, parent schools, etc.) but there are no analyses of these emerging educational institutions in Italy.

Who can participate? Children, parents, teachers and school principals: there is a specific research programme for everyone.

If I decide to participate, what do I have to do? First of all, you do not have to do anything that you do not wish to do. There are a number of activities to which you will be invited to participate, including interviews. Your programme will concern the programme 'The School Of My Dreams'.

What if I change my mind? This is not a problem – if you wish to withdraw from the study, you do not need to provide a motivation. You can withdraw your data up until a few months after participation (06/2021).

Where will the interviews take place? Via Zoom or Google Meet.

What will happen to the information I give to the researcher? All communicated information will be rendered anonymous. This means that when we talk and write about our discoveries, your name will not be mentioned. Interviews might be recorded to facilitate transcription by the researcher but such recordings will be available only to the researcher and her project supervisors. Your information will be therefore confidential, which means we will not discuss with others what you told us. Access to the data present in presentations and articles will be given only to authorised individuals and members of the international academic community; they will be stored in a department archive of the University of Birmingham (UK) and will be under the care of the researcher Giulia Chiara Ceresa and her supervisors, Sophie Hadfield-Hill and Professor Peter Kraftl. This project will be run in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation, 2018.

What will you do with the information you gather? We will share the information we collect with the academic community – but remember, you will not be identifiable by name.

Who is the researcher? Giulia Chiara Ceresa, doctoral student at the University of Birmingham. This research is part of a doctoral research project in Human Geography. All collected data will be stored and re-elaborated into articles or will become part of the doctoral thesis. All interviews and other verbal contributions by participants will remain anonymous.

What do I need to do now? Before participating in the project you have to sign a consent form we will provide for you. This is to make sure you have read and understood everything on this information sheet and to give you the opportunity to ask us question.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

What is this research about? The research project 'School Choice and the Geographies of Experimentation in the Italian School System' wishes to study and observe closely some experimentations happening in Italian state schools, like the one you go to. This will include observing and listening to the voices of students, teachers and school principals. Your programme is called "All About Your School".

Why is this research important? Studying your school is very important – your school uses some alternative practices that are difficult to find in a state school: yours is an innovative school that is constantly changing.

Who can participate? Children, parents, teachers and school principals: there is a research programme for everyone.

If I decide to participate, what do I have to do? First of all, you don't have to do anything you don't want to.

Participating in this research programme means telling your story through a lapbook which you will create with your teacher during lesson time, in your class, developing a topic which will change every week! Feel free to decide and choose how you want to respond and organise your answers. You can use any kind of paper, any font style, you can write yourself, or on the computer, draw, add photographs or even just write: it will be you who chooses what to tell us and how to do it! Your answers will have to cover the topic given, and each week you will be offered a new topic to develop.

And if I change my mind? This is not a problem – if you want to withdraw from the study, you don't have to tell us why. You can withdraw your data within two months from participation (June 2021).

What will happen to the information I give to the researcher? All information you give us will be rendered anonymous. The researcher shall never be present in the school and shall receive photographs of the lapbook by email from your class teacher who set the task to the students. This way, each student will be able to keep their own original work. These photos will be stored and will only be available to the researcher and her project supervisors. This means that when we talk or write about our discoveries, you name will not be mentioned. Your information will also be confidential, which means we will not discuss what you told us with other people at home or at school.

Nevertheless, if you tell us something that makes us worried about your safety or that of someone else, we will have to talk about it and the researcher will inform an appropriate

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adult. Access to the data present in presentations and articles will be given only to authorised individuals and members of the international academic community; they will be stored in a department archive of the University of Birmingham (UK) and will be under the care of the researcher Giulia Chiara Ceresa and her supervisors, Sophie Hadfield-Hill and Professor Peter Kraftl. This project will be run in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation, 2018.

What will you do with the information you gather? We will share it with our department at the University of Birmingham – remember, you will not be identifiable by name.

Who is the researcher? Giulia Chiara Ceresa, doctoral student at the University of Birmingham. This research is part of a doctoral research project in Human Geography. All collected data will be stored and re-elaborated into articles or will become part of the doctoral thesis. All participant interviews will remain anonymous.

What do I have to do now? Before participating in this project, you and your parents will have to sign a consent form, which we will provide for you. This is to make sure you have read and understood everything on this information sheet, and to give you the opportunity to ask us questions.

Participant information sheet for teachers and principal

What is this research about? The research project 'School Choice and the Geographies of Experimentations in the Italian School System' has two main objectives:

- To investigate, through one-on-one interviews, the processes of choice that bring some parents to choose an alternative school over a conventional one for their children.

- Observe and understand the spatial and social experiences of children in the context of three alternative experiments that take place in Italian state schools.

There are three threads to this project:

1) THE SCHOOL OF MY DREAMS: in-depth interview, consisting of open questions, with around 40 parents who have chosen an alternative school, or an alternative experimentation within a conventional school, for their children.

2) ALL ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL: a creative programme for children aged 6–10.

3) WHAT'S EDUCATION FOR: interviews with key adults who act as teachers and directors of the three schools under examination, with the aim of exploring some of the ways in which social and spatial processes are co-implicated in the constitution of alternative approaches.

Appendix 1.d

Why is this research important?

We think it is important to study these alternative school practices within the state school circuit because they are innovative realities in a constant state of change. Many studies have been conducted on purely alternative schools (Steiner and Montessori Schools, forest schools, homeschooling, parent schools, etc.) but there are no analyses of these emerging educational institutions in Italy.

Who can participate? Children, parents, teachers and school principals: there is a specific research programme for everyone.

If I decide to participate, what do I have to do? First of all, you do not have to do anything that you do not wish to do. You will interviewed in your place of work: your programme is *what's is education for*.

Only in the case you work as a teacher you have the option of signing up for only one of the two programmes, rather than both: teachers in fact might be observed as they work with the children in the programme 'All About Your School'. It is true that 'All About Your School' is only for children, but some adults will inevitably be present, and their consent to being observed as they conduct teaching activities must be requested. Those

teachers who do sign up for that specific programme 'All About Your School' might then also feature as interviewees for the programme 'What's Education For'.

What if I change my mind? This is not a problem – if you wish to withdraw from the study, you do not need to provide a motivation. You can withdraw your data up until a few months after participation (06/2021).

Where will the interviews take place? Via Zoom or Google Meet.

What will happen to the information I give to the researcher? All communicated information will be rendered anonymous. This means that when we talk and write about our discoveries, your name will not be mentioned. Interviews might be recorded to facilitate transcription by the researcher but such recordings will be available only to the researcher and her project supervisors. Your information will be therefore confidential, which means we will not discuss with others what you told us. Access to the data present in presentations and articles will be given only to authorised individuals and members of the international academic community; they will be stored in a department archive of the University of Birmingham (UK) and will be under the care of the researcher Giulia Chiara Ceresa and her supervisors, Sophie Hadfield-Hill and Professor Peter Kraftl. This project will be run in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation, 2018.

What will you do with the information you gather? We will share the information we collect with the academic community – but remember, you will not be identifiable by name.

Who is the researcher? Giulia Chiara Ceresa, doctoral student at the University of Birmingham. This research is part of a doctoral research project in Human Geography. All collected data will be stored and re-elaborated into articles or will become part of the doctoral thesis. All interviews and other verbal contributions by participants will remain anonymous.

What do I need to do now? Before participating in the project you have to sign a consent form we will provide for you. This is to make sure you have read and understood everything on this information sheet and to give you the opportunity to ask us question.

Consent Form

For Children and Adolescents

Please write your initials in the box if you agree:

I have received an information sheet for this project: participating in this research programme means telling my story through a lapbook which I will create with my teacher during lesson time, in my class, developing a topic which will change every week. I will free to decide and choose how I want to respond and organise my answers. I can use any kind of paper, any font style, I can write myself, or on the computer, draw, add photographs or even just write. My answers will have to cover the topic given.

I have posed all my questions regarding the project to the teacher.

I understand that I do not have to participate in this research and that I can withdraw my participation at any point.

I must ask the researcher to delete my data by the (date: June 2021) if I wish to withdraw.

I understand that my name will not be used in any reports, publications or research results, but that the researcher will discuss and write about the research results both in Italy and abroad.

I have received information on data storage. This research is part of a doctoral research project in Human Geography. All collected data will be stored and re-elaborated into articles or parts of the doctoral thesis. All interviews and other contributions of participants will remain anonymous. Interviews might be recorded to help with the work of transcription by the researcher but such recordings will be stored and will only be available to the researcher and her project supervisors.
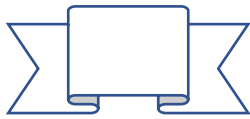
I understand data storage and I give my consent so that my data (lapbook or writing I take) will be stored anonymously; this means that other researchers will also be able to use this information in their research projects.

I hereby consent to participation in one of the following research activities:
Activity 1: "All About Your School" lapbook.

The student

Name

_____

Signature

_____

Date

_____

Parent:

Name

_____

Signature

_____

Date

_____

Consent Form for Adults

I, the undersigned ………………………………………………………………………………… …..

hereby declare that I have received a full explanation of the request to participate in the research programme 'School Choice and the Geographies of Experimentation in the Italian School System' by the researcher Giulia Chiara Ceresa.

□ I have received an information sheet for this project

□ I have presented all my questions regarding the project to the researcher

□ I understand that I am not obliged to participate in this research and that I can withdraw my participation at any point. I must ask the researcher to delete my data by the (date: June 2021) if I wish to withdraw.

□ I understand that my name will not be used in any reports, publications or research results, but that the researcher will discuss and write about the research results both in Italy and abroad.

□ I am aware that this research is part of a doctoral research project in Human Geography. All collected data will be archived and re-elaborated in articles or parts of the PhD thesis. All participant interviews will remain anonymous.

□ I consent to the anonymous archiving of my data (interviews, worksheets); this means that other researchers will also be able to use this information in their research projects. Interviews might be recorded to facilitate the work of transcription but such recordings will be archived and will only be available to the researcher and her project supervisors.

I hereby consent to participation in one of the following research activities:

- □ Activity 1: 'The School Of My Dreams'

- □ Activity 2: 'What's Education For'

- □ Activity 3: 'All About Your School'

Date……………

Participant signature ……………………………………………………

Date………………

Researcher signature

Lapbook: All About Your School

Ciao! Mi chiamo Giulia e sono una ricercatrice che vorrebbe conoscere la tua scuola!
Vuoi partecipare ad un programma di ricerca universitario?

Partecipare a questo programma di ricerca significa raccontare la tua scuola attraverso
un lapbook che creerai con la tua maestra nelle ore di lezione,
nella tua classe, sviluppando un tema che cambierà ogni settimana!

Sentiti libero di decidere e scegliere tu come rispondere e come organizzare le tue risposte.
Puoi usare qualsiasi tipo di carta, qualsiasi carattere di scrittura, puoi scrivere a mano o al computer,
fare disegni, inserire fotografie.. o scrivere soltanto: sarai tu che sceglierai cosa raccontare e come farlo!

Le tue risposte dovranno coprire il tema proposto
e ogni settimana ti verrà offerto un tema nuovo da sviluppare:

IL MIO SPAZIO
Descrivi alcuni luoghi, per te significativi, della tua scuola
(ad esempio classe, corridoio, giardino, mensa ma puoi trovarne altri).
Come mai li hai scelti?
Come ti fanno sentire? C'è un luogo preferito all'interno della scuola? Se esiste, perché lo è?

LE MIE ATTIVITA'
Quali sono le tue attività scolastiche preferite?

I MATERIALI SCOLASTICI CHE MI SERVONO PER IMPARARE
Illustra quali sono i materiali scolastici che usi più spesso. Quali sono i tuoi preferiti?
Quali i materiali più utili per imparare?

LA SCUOLA E IL MONDO FUORI
Raccontami un'attività, a tua scelta, che hai fatto con la tua classe al di fuori delle aule scolastiche

LE RELAZIONI NELLA MIA CLASSE
Come ti senti quando sei a scuola? Che tipo di relazione hai con i tuoi insegnanti e i compagni?
Se esiste, racconta un episodio in cui ti sei sentito felice di frequentare questa scuola.

IL VIRUS
Il Coronavirus ha cambiato in qualche modo la tua scuola? Cosa ne pensi?

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Appendix 3.a

Lapbook: All About Your School

This activity will ask you to reflect on your school and tell your story through a lapbook.

Participating in this research programme means telling your story through a lapbook which you will create with your teacher during lesson time, in your class, developing a topic which will change every week!

Feel free to decide and choose how you want to respond and organise your answers. You can use any kind of paper, any font style, you can write yourself, or on the computer, draw, add photographs or even just write: it will be you who chooses what to tell us and how to do it! Your answers will have to cover the topic given, and each week you will be offered a new topic to develop:

MY SPACE
Describe some places in your school which are important to you (for example, the classroom, corridors, garden, canteen, but you can talk about other places too). Why did you choose them? How do they make you feel? Do you have a favourite place in the school? Why is that?

MY ACTIVITIES
Tell me your class routine and your favourite activity.

THE MATERIALS I NEED FOR LEARNING
Describe the school materials that you use the most (for example tablets, wooden letters, tables, bells, etc.). Which are your favourites? Tell me which materials you think are the most useful for learning.

SCHOOL AND THE WORLD OUTSIDE
Tell me about an activity that you did outside the walls of your school with your class.

RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN MY CLASS
How do you feel when you are at school? What kind of relationship do you have with your teachers and classmates? If you can, talk about a time when you felt glad that you go to this school.

THE VIRUS
How do you think COVID-19 has changed our school and our class? What do you think of it?

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE 1- FOR PARENTS

'THE SCHOOL OF MY DREAMS'

Appendix 3.c

BACKGROUND:

How come you chose this alternative experimentation school for your child?
Can this choice be influenced by your school' memories?
What are the distinctive teaching characteristics of the alternative school you chose for your child?
Do you prefer a morning school or an extended time school in the afternoon with workshops and extracurricular activities? What do you think is the best solution to organise the school schedule?

PERCEPTIONS:

In what ways do you think this school can make the most of your child's potential, more than a traditional school might?
How do you perceive the relationship between your child and the teachers? How different do you think it is to the relationship between a student and a teacher in a traditional school?
How important is the reputation of the teaching staff for you?
How important is it for you to have students attending a certain type of school? Is this a key factor in choosing your child's school?
What do you think are the most efficient teaching methods in the school (lecture-style class, workshops, group work, etc.)?
Who do you think this school is attractive to?

EXPERIENCES:

Have you chosen the alternative school for your child to support some particular educational strand (e.g. outdoor education, technology, sport) that is not valued in the traditional system?
What are the teaching activities of this school that you find most useful and innovative?
If you could change something about this school what would it be?

Are the hours of physical education in a classical school adequate? Does something change in the alternative school programmes?

Do you have chosen an alternative school for your child that enhances creative activities (e.g. art, music, theatre) in the curriculum more than a traditional school?

Do your child's teachers use new teaching technologies? If so, which ones? Have you noticed differences with previous experiences you had in traditional school?

What are the benefits or improvements you've noticed in your child during this school year?

How is the relationship between school and family dealt with in this school?

SCHOOL SPACE:

When you visited your child's school, which architectural and design aspects of the school impressed you?

Have you noticed if there are any learning materials that you can't find in classical schools?

What type of alternative materials are used during teaching? In what way do you think they can be useful to teaching?

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INTERVIEW PROGRAMME FOR PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

'WHAT'S EDUCATION FOR'

- What is the mission, vision and fundamental values of the experiments in your school?

- In terms of hierarchy, how is the network your school is part of structured?

- What kind of funding did you use to implement this experiment in your state school?

- What are the main teaching activities that render your experiment unique and alternative?

- What is the relationship between your experiment and the requirements of ministerial programmes as set out by MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research)?

- In the context of your programme, have you developed relationships with the local community and neighbourhood?

- How important is the reputation of the teaching staff in your process of human resources recruitment?

- How does the teaching staff feel about the experimentation?

- Is the teaching staff composed of teachers, professionals or qualified volunteers?

- To what extent is the school population socially stratified? (boys/girls, Italian/international, higher/lower social class, religious belonging, nationality...)

- How many classes are participating in the experiment?

- Are there specific experiments or teaching areas (e.g. outdoor teaching, technology, sports) in this school that are not usually present in the mainstream school system?

Appendix 3.d

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o Does your school curriculum valorise creative activities (such as arts, music, theatre) more than a conventional school?

o What is the role of new teaching technologies? What do you think are the main differences in the use of new technologies in your school compared with conventional schools?

o Is the school open only during the morning or do school activities extend into the afternoon, with seminars and other extra-curricular activities?

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'ALL ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL' - PARTICIPANTS				
Number	**Code**	**Pseudonym**	**School**	**GENDER**
1	AAYS01	Laura	Montessori	F
2	AAYS02	Livia	Outdoor School	F
3	AAYS03	Marta	Outdoor School	F
4	AAYS04	Elisabetta	No Backpack School	F
5	AAYS05	Isidora	No Backpack School	F
6	AAYS06	Paolo	Outdoor School	M
7	AAYS07	Chiara	Montessori	F
8	AAYS08	Fabio	No Backpack School	M
9	AAYS09	Lorenzo	Outdoor School	M
10	AAYS10	Davide	No Backpack School	M
11	AAYS11	Ester	Outdoor School	F
12	AAYS12	Elisa	No Backpack School	F
13	AAYS13	Delfina	No Backpack School	F
14	AAYS14	Giorgio	Montessori	M
15	AAYS15	Linda	Outdoor School	F
16	AAYS16	Simonetta	No Backpack School	F
17	AAYS17	Aladino	Outdoor School	M
18	AAYS18	Giovanna	Montessori	F
19	AAYS19	Matteo	Outdoor School	M
20	AAYS20	Bianca	No Backpack School	F
21	AAYS21	Mattia	No Backpack School	M
22	AAYS22	Adam	Montessori	M
23	AAYS23	Adele	Outdoor School	F
24	AAYS24	Mattia	Montessori	M
25	AAYS25	Lidia	Montessori	F
26	AAYS26	Leonardo	Montessori	M
27	AAYS27	Vittoria	No Backpack School	F
28	AAYS28	Bader	No Backpack School	M
29	AAYS29	Diego	Outdoor School	M
30	AAYS30	Faje	Montessori	F
31	AAYS31	Fabrizio	Outdoor School	M
32	AAYS32	Fatima	Montessori	F
33	AAYS33	Bernardette	Outdoor School	F

Appendix 4.a

34	AAYS34	Luca	No Backpack school	M
35	AAYS35	Lindsay	No Backpack School	F
36	AAYS36	Livia	Montessori	F
37	AAYS37	Leone	Montessori	M
38	AAYS38	Martine	Outdoor School	F
39	AAYS39	Leandro	Montessori	M
40	AAYS40	Alessandra	No Backpack School	F
41	AAYS41	Fabio	Outdoor School	M
42	AAYS42	Alyssa	Outdoor School	F
43	AAYS43	Alex	No Backpack School	M
44	AAYS44	Juri	No Backpack school	M
45	AAYS45	Oriana	Montessori	F
46	AAYS46	Momme	No Backpack School	M
47	AAYS47	Andrea	No Backpack school	M
48	AAYS48	Gabriel	Outdoor School	M
49	AAYS49	Anita	Montessori	F
50	AAYS50	Oscar	Outdoor School	M
51	AAYS51	Valentina	Montessori	F
52	AAYS52	Isidora	Outdoor School	F
53	AAYS53	Marika	Montessori	F
54	AAYS54	Marco	No Backpack School	M
55	AAYS55	Cloe	Montessori	F
56	AAYS56	Giulia	Outdoor School	F
57	AAYS57	Ariel	No Backpack School	F
58	AAYS58	Alba	Montessori	F
59	AAYS59	Pietro	No Backpack school	M
60	AAYS60	Federica	No Backpack School	F
61	AAYS61	Louise	No Backpack School	F
62	AAYS62	Ludovica	Outdoor School	F
63	AAYS63	Angela	No Backpack School	F
64	AAYS64	John	Montessori	M
65	AAYS65	Licia	Montessori	F
66	AAYS66	Kim	No Backpack School	F
67	AAYS67	Anita	No Backpack School	F
68	AAYS68	Antonio	Montessori	M
69	AAYS69	Bruno	Outdoor School	M
70	AAYS70	Miriam	Outdoor School	F

71	AAYS71	Rosemary	Outdoor School	F
72	AAYS72	Lidia	No Backpack school	F
73	AAYS73	Alan	No Backpack school	M
74	AAYS74	Mohamed	Outdoor School	M
75	AAYS75	Sofia	Outdoor School	F

'THE SCHOOL OF MY DREAMS' - PARTICIPANTS					
Number	Code	Pseudonym	Choice	AREA	GENDER
1	TSHMD01	LIVIA	HOMESCHOOLING	TOSCANA	F
2	TSHMD02	LIDIA	MONTESSORI SCHOOL	PIEMONTE	F
3	TSHMD03	FRANCA	HOMESCHOOLING	MARCHE	F
4	TSHMD04	IRINA	HOMESCHOOLING	TOSCANA	F
5	TSHMD05	CLAUDINE	NO BACKPACK SCHOOL	TOSCANA	F
6	TSHMD06	JESSICA	OUTDOOR PUBLIC SCHOOL	EMILIA ROMAGNA	F
7	TSHMD07	MARTA	MONTESSORI SCHOOL	PIEMONTE	F
8	TSHMD08	ANNA	PARENTAL SCHOOL	LIGURIA	F
9	TSHMD09	DANIELE	FOREST SCHOOL	VENETO	M
10	TSHMD10	VALERIO	MONTESSORI SCHOOL	LIGURIA	M
11	TSHMD11	LUDOVICA	PARENTAL SCHOOL	LAZIO	F
12	TSHMD12	VERONICA	OUTDOOR PUBLIC SCHOOL	TOSCANA	F
13	TSHMD13	VALENTINO	FOREST SCHOOL	PUGLIA	M
14	TSHMD14	CARLOTTA	NO BACK PACK SCHOOL	CAMPANIA	F
15	TSHMD15	CECILIA	PARENTAL SCHOOL	PIEMONTE	F
16	TSHMD16	MARCO	PARENTAL SCHOOL	MARCHE	M
17	TSHMD17	FRANCESCA	STEINER SCHOOL	TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE	F
18	TSHMD18	LUCIA	HOMESCHOOLING	VENETO	F
19	TSHMD19	ELISA	HOMESCHOOLING	EMILIA ROMAGNA	F
20	TSHMD20	BARBARA	FOREST SCHOOL	LOMBARDIA	F
21	TSHMD21	MARCELLA	FOREST SCHOOL	BASILICATA	F
22	TSHMD22	LAURA	MONTESSORI SCHOOL	SARDEGNA	F
23	TSHMD23	ROBERTA	OUTDOOR PUBLIC SCHOOL	LOMBARDIA	F
24	TSHMD24	DOMENICO	NO BACKPACK SCHOOL	SICILIA	M
25	TSHMD25	CHIARA	STEINER SCHOOL	TOSCANA	F
26	TSHMD26	CECILIA	MONTESSORI SCHOOL	TOSCANA	F
27	TSHMD27	FRANCESCO	STEINER SCHOOL	LAZIO	M
28	TSHMD28	INNA	STEINER SCHOOL	PIEMONTE	F
29	TSHMD29	MARIA CHIARA	PARENTAL SCHOOL	SICILIA	F
30	TSHMD30	CARLO	OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOL	LOMBARDIA	M
31	TSHMD31	ETTORE	OUTDOOR PUBLIC SCHOOL	TOSCANA	M
32	TSHMD32	MARIO	OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOL	LOMBARDIA	M

Appendix 4.b

33	TSHMD33	LORETTA	STEINER SCHOOL	PIEMONTE	F
34	TSHMD34	EMMA	OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOL	LOMBARDIA	F
35	TSHMD35	DINO	NO BACKPACK SCHOOL	SICILIA	M
36	TSHMD36	GIORGIO	PARENTAL SCHOOL	TOSCANA	M
37	TSHMD37	ANNALISA	NO BACKPACK SCHOOL	PIEMONTE	F
38	TSHMD38	GIOVANNI	OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOL	PUGLIA	M
39	TSHMD39	LUCA	OUTDOOR PUBLIC SCHOOL	LOMBARDIA	M
40	TSHMD40	PAOLA	OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOL	PIEMONTE	F

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'WHAT'S EDUCATION FOR' - PARTICIPANTS				
Number	**Code**	**Pseudonym**	**School Network**	**Gender**
1	WEF01	Antonella	Montessori	F
2	WEF02	Leila	Montessori	F
3	WEF03	Chiara	Outdoor	F
4	WEF04	Federica	No Backpack	F
5	WEF05	Massimo	Outdoor	M
6	WEF06	Giulia	No Backpack	F
7	WEF07	Clelia	Montessori	F
8	WEF08	Alessia	No Backpack	F
9	WEF09	Alessandro	Montessori	M
10	WEF10	Diana	Outdoor	F
11	WEF11	Francesco	Outdoor	M
12	WEF12	Giada	No Backpack	F
13	WEF13	Fabrizio	Montessori	M
14	WEF14	Silvia	No Backpack	F
15	WEF15	Elena	Montessori	F
16	WEF16	Lidia	Montessori	F
17	WEF17	Dino	Outdoor	M
18	WEF18	Lara	Outdoor	F
19	WEF19	Patrizia	No Backpack	F
20	WEF20	Allegra	No Backpack	F
21	WEF21	Rossana	Montessori	F
22	WEF22	Mirna	Montessori	F
23	WEF23	Adelio	Outdoor	M
24	WEF24	Federica	Outdoor	F
25	WEF25	Marina	No Backpack	F
26	WEF26	Novella	Outdoor	F
27	WEF27	Clara	Outdoor	F
28	WEF28	Cristina	No Backpack	F

Appendix 4.c