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DWELLING SCHOOLS
**CULTIVATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE
AND TERRITORY IN THE MIDDLE MOUNTAINS**

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The small centre of Navelli (AQ), drawn by R., 9 years old, on 31.03.22 during the workshop activity of this research

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the school's role in building bonding between people and places, within the territorial context of Italian middle-mountains. The dwelling dimension, in this area, lost profoundness and specificity over the years, due to the process of increasing depopulation and abandonment that occurred in parallel with the affirmation of the global relational and economic system. The spread of the global culture has made local ties between human beings and their living environment progressively weaker, promoting forms of living that tend to be blind to places. In imagining possible futures in these areas, seeking a new balance between being part of the world and living in a specific geographic context -crossed by heavy fragilities- schools can be an important resource. Being both a place of everyday living, immersed in the life of a community, and an institution that participates in the dissemination of knowledge shared by society, the school emerges as a possible lever in rethinking these relationships. The research conducted explores this possibility through the study of three cases: three primary schools located in three small centres in the Abruzzo mountains.

The adopted qualitative methodology analyses the school's world by assuming a double perspective: on the one hand, it watches from the inside of the schools to the outside by digging into how schools are lived by those who attend them every day -children, teachers, headmasters- and their perceptions of the outside; on the other hand, the research delves into how schools are seen from outside, so what ideas and values are connected to it for local communities. In doing so, various groups of subjects are involved by using different methods: adults' voices are collected using interviews and focus groups, while children participate in a school workshop that makes use of mixed creative methods to activate their communication and thinking capabilities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

TO THE CENTRE OF THE CIRCLE

Some time ago I had the opportunity to take part in a meeting between Cesare Moreno, an elementary school teacher and president of the Maestri di Strada Association, and a group of children, girls, and boys from different schools in Milan¹. The students had been working on how to transform some aspects of their school. One class from the Baggio neighbourhood had focused on deconstructing the stereotype of the suburban school. At the end of the presentation of the student's work, we were all seated to form a large circle for final comments. Moreno began his speech by echoing the words of the Baggio class who had claimed to live in the periphery of Milan. He, who comes from the outskirts of Naples, considers himself a peripheral compared to Naples, which is itself a periphery compared to Milan. But even the centre of Milan can be considered a periphery when watched, for example, from the centre of Brussels. So, Moreno asked the guys, "How do you determine who is in the centre? In the circle we are sitting in, who is in the centre?" The students, somewhat confused, confronted each other. Most argued that because we were in a circle, there was no one in the centre. Then a little girl raised her hand and addressing to Moreno, in a low voice, said: "You are in the centre." "Good, I am in the centre, because I am talking and you all are listening," he replied.

According to the geometry that our bodies were drawing in the room, we should have all been equal since we occupied a symmetrical position with respect to the centre of the circle, where no one was sitting. However, the network of relationships that characterized our being together was at that moment oriented toward a thought-producing centre, represented by Moreno, on which everyone else's attention was focused. Our positions were thus asymmetrical in the system that connected us, which in addition to determining a centre -holder at that moment of the power of speech- defined who was positioned on the margins.

Like the people seated in the room on the morning of that meeting, places are centres or peripheries (at the margins) in relation to their attention, prominence, and position within the global system of relations that connects them to one another. No place can be a centre without a system revolving around it, and no margin can be defined as such except in relation to centres. Even the smallest and

¹ Closing meeting of the Scuola Sconfinata Open Lab project, promoted by Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, with the Sconfinata school movement in four schools in Milan's Municipalities 7 and 8. For an in-depth look at the project: fondazionefeltrinelli.it/collabora/scuola-sconfinata-openlab/

most remote village, located on a hard-to-reach hill or on an island where the ferry passes a few times a week, is fully part of this system. Some places, however, in which flows of communication, information, and economic transitions are more intense and continuous, assume greater relevance and power -becoming centres- than those places where interactions are weaker and rarer, and which occupy marginal positions in the network (Massey and Jess, 2001). The latter have elsewhere been referred to as “places that don't matter” (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018), places that with the rise of the global economic and relational system have not only increasingly lost prominence but have been put to work for the well-being of other places (Armiero, 2021). Areas destined for the extraction of wealth, raw materials, and labour; places of waste, destined to host what the poles do not wish to see and have within them. Therefore marginal areas should not be considered opposed to the poles; on the contrary, these contexts are functional to the needs of the centres (dell'Agnese and Delatin Rodrigues, 2023).

Looking at the Italian territory, those gaining increasing attention and attracting more and more people and investment have been the cities during the twentieth century and the early 2000s, while the territory outside, especially if physically far from the poles, has been emptied and impoverished by this process. Increasingly, localized cultures, developed in each place by the centuries-long interaction between inhabitants and specific living environments-as well as that with other places-has been lost in favour of the spread of a global culture (Dematteis, 2020) in which each place tends to be similar to many others.

It is possible, with this lens, to observe the middle mountains of the central-southern Apennines, part of the territory that Varotto (2020) calls "montagne di mezzo." Historically inhabited mountains where more than a century of abandonment has left a fragile, poorly accessible territory with an insufficient system of basic services, as in most inner areas (Barca et al. 2014) in Italy. Depopulation has meant in these mountains, not only a loss in the number of inhabitants but also the crisis of ways of living strongly anchored to the use and reproduction of local resources. A rupture in the relationships between those who live and the environment in which they live, which has meant the loss of knowledge and practices of care for the land that had helped shape and constitute its specificities. In imagining a possible future for these areas, it seems particularly important then to question the homogenizing logic of the poles, putting the margin at the centre (Carrosio, 2019) "of the circle." Building new forms of relationships between societies and living environments, between people and places, re-establishing deep ties, albeit different from the past, with the local context.

This need can be combined with the challenge of improving the habitability of the middle mountains by implementing the quality of basic services. The school, an institution that is widespread throughout the territory, invested with an educational mission and at the same time a physical place of everyone's experience, immersed in the life of local communities, can assume a fundamental role.

In dealing with the critical issues that these institutions face today, it is possible to radically rethink their organization and teaching. Schools in the low-density population area, are in fact characterized by several common traits, related precisely to the characteristics of the areas in which they are located. Generally, they are "small schools" (Manifesto delle Piccole Scuole, 2017²) with very low numbers of students, strong presence of multi-level classes, frequent turnover of teachers, high fragmentation of plexuses, that make the management of institutions particularly complex. Despite this, in these areas the school often constitutes the only cultural and educational hub present and, more than elsewhere, plays an important role in holding local communities together (Barca et al., 2014). In addition, schools participate in different ways in the construction of relationships between individuals and places. On the one hand, it is part of the network of everyday spaces in which we grow up and where different generations of people come into contact. On the other, it constructs and disseminates knowledge with respect to places. Thus, the school is configured as an interesting point of observation to investigate, in the territory of the middle mountain, how the relationships between people and the local context are configured, how the closest places are experienced and perceived, and, at the same time, how on these relationships intervene dynamics that are manifested at a broad territorial scale. In parallel, the school is itself an interesting object to observe, as a potential resource in promoting a deep and active knowledge of the territory it "dwells."

This work has as its object of study then, precisely the school and the network of relationships that passes around and through it, in the geographical context of the central-southern Apennines. The research investigates, through three case studies-three elementary school located in three small villages in mountainous Abruzzo -two of which are involved in a post-earthquake reconstruction process-, how schools function in these areas, what role they play in the construction of relationships between people and places, and the value they assume for local communities. Looking at the future, the research analyses possible trajectories of transformation for these schools with a view to improving their quality and intensifying their capacity to promote knowledge of the local context.

² The Piccole Scuole Project is promoted by INDIRE, which has been committed to their enhancement since 2017. The Manifesto can be found at the link: <https://piccolescuole.indire.it/il-movimento/manifesto/>

Through an extensive field study, combining different qualitative methods, to be explored in depth are on the one hand the perspective of those who experience school spaces every day (children, teachers, and principals); and on the other hand how it is perceived and experienced by those who look at it from the outside. Guiding the study are both questions that delve into the present: how does the school function in the middle mountain? Is it active in promoting knowledge of the local context? How do children relate to the area in which they grow up? What value does the school take on for communities in the middle mountain? And, looking to the future, how can the school's role in connecting people and territory be intensified?

In addressing these questions, the theoretical framework of the research, set out in Chapter 2, explores the notion of "sense of place" to delve into how relationships between people and places and between different places are characterised. Then, these relationships are described in the geographical context of the south-central Apennines by recalling the processes that have produced depopulation and marginalization in this territory. In the last part of the chapter, to be focused on is the school system in this territory, tracing its criticalities and strengths. The next chapter, on the other hand, outlines the research methodology adopted, which, across the three schools involved in the study, engaged the participation of various adult subjects -with whom interviews and focus groups were conducted- and three classes of girls and boys between the ages of six and ten. Instead, to enable children's participation in the role of co-researchers of their life context, we worked through a workshop path that involved the use of different creative methods (Cele, 2006; Von Bezon et al, 2021; Giorgi et al, 2021), from drawing, to photo-elicitation, to walking tour, to collaborative mapping.

The results of the work done together with the classes are discussed in Chapter 4. To be explored here are the children's senses of place concerning both near and imagined and distant places. Then, we move on to analyse what characteristics living in a small centre in the middle mountain takes on for them, what ideas they have in their minds with respect to "mountain" or "city," and what aspects of place relations change to growing up in a space under reconstruction. Then, it goes on to describe how peer relationships are characterised, what spaces, times, games, and movements the sociality of children in the middle mountain is made of, what breadth their networks of relationships have, and with what levels of freedom and autonomy they experience space and relationships.

Chapter 5, on the other hand, returns the outcomes of the work done together with adults starting with how do they experience the school, how school functions, and how human relationships are configured. It then describes how the school is perceived from the outside, highlighting how the family choices of small centre residents are connected to it, but also their ideas and plans for the

future. Finally, in Chapter 6, the main themes addressed by the research and the evidence that emerged are recalled. Values and contradictions that came out of the analysis of relationships within schools are pointed out, as well as symbols and struggles that keep schools at the centre in the three villages. The close of the work is devoted to the role that schools might assume in the future in the middle mountain area, tracing trajectories of transformation for small schools in these areas and leaving open future issues to be addressed and new questions to be asked.

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2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The chapter explores the relationship between people and place starting with an analysis of the concept of “sense of place”, how this notion can be understood, and how its formation takes place. We will see how different senses of place, produced in central contexts in the global economic and relational system, contribute to constructing imaginaries of more marginal spaces. It is possible to observe the progressive abandonment and depopulation of the geographical area of the middle mountain in the central-southern Apennines -where this research takes place- in parallel with the affirmation of the globalisation processes and the depreciation of rural life. With the idea that it is possible and necessary to find new ways of inhabiting this territory, based on profound relationships between inhabitants and natural resources, the school, a basic place in the formation of our bonding with places, can play an important role.

2.1 SENSES OF PLACE

In cultural geography, the notion of “sense of place” has a fundamental importance in constructing the process of constructing relationships between individuals and places. It is a notion that can be understood in very different ways, depending on how the idea of “place” itself is defined.

When the place is conceptualised as stable, as in the classic works of Tuan (1974, 1977) and Relph (1976), as a pause in the continuous movement of contemporary life, characterised by a shared identity and continuity with the past, then the sense of place is understood as something rooted in our being, an intimate and deep feeling that comes out from ties with the past and the long time spent there. With these premises, the sense of place is, therefore, something that lives in the memories and emotions linked to a specific place, it implies “feeling part of something”, of a recognised and shared local identity, which stimulates the desire to return to that place.

In the contemporary world, characterised by increasing flows of ideas, products, information and people (Rose, 2001) in which even the smallest place is no stranger to global dynamics, there is more uncertainty in understanding places as stable. Massey (Massey, 1994) identifies two main problematic elements in the classical way of understanding identity and sense of place: the idea that places have a single essential identity and the idea that the identity and sense of place are constructed through an introverted inner gaze, based on the investigation of an internalised past. The author therefore argues that places inhabited by a single community have probably never existed and that, even if they did, it would not be automatic that within this community everyone shares the

same sense of place. Furthermore, our opinion about places is produced within the social context of which we are a part; therefore, identity and sense of place are also socially constructed.

The concept of "place" itself is questioned by several authors; Massey and Jess propose to analyse the issue starting from the relationship between "space" and "place" (Massey & Jess, 2001).

Relational space, the authors summarise -which consists of all the networks and complexities of social interconnections and interactions -both at the smallest and global scale- is so expanded and connected that it is difficult to distinguish coherent social areas in space, that can be called places. If we think about space as a relational dimension, then places can be seen as sites where global and local lines of interconnection meet and intersect, adding to and blending with the existing set of connections. Thinking of places as nodes of social relation's intersections and spaces of activity is useful to understand the effects produced by this intersection: the first consideration to be made is that wide-ranging connections influence the character of the place; thus, new processes arise from the old and new encounters that happen in those places. Those processes may take the form of antagonism (e.g. racism or conflicts between different social groups) or bring about an addition of new influences that enrich the long history of cultural flows that constitute the specificity of each place (ibid.). Wide-ranging connections and the openness of places are not new, like globalisation itself; what seems to have changed since the second half of the 20th century is that we are in a phase of the phenomenon that is qualitatively new and exceptionally intense. This also leads Massey to question the idea that places were a source of stability in the past.

At this point, it becomes relevant to emphasise that the reading of places as meeting points, intersections of different trajectories constructed by a specific constellation of social relations, which meet and intertwine in a specific place (Massey, 1994), leads Massey to consider the sense of place as constitute of an understanding of the "character" of the place and the connection of that place to others. "A progressive sense of place is a global sense of local, a global sense of place" (ibid.).

Sense of place, therefore, can be understood in different ways in the geographical literature, but of course, not all aspects of conceptualisations of place as "stable" -and of the consequent sense of place- are denied by those who think that places are "in transformation". For example, the idea that the original "character" of a place is somehow absorbed by individuals and groups is widely shared, even if there is no agreement on what this "character" is. The idea that we are part of a place because of a linkage with the past, has been partly superseded, but many of the theories constructed by Tuan and Relph remain valid and have been the basis for further elaboration.

We can think, therefore, of different senses of place: on the one hand, different dimensions can be considered within the concept of a sense of place, on the other hand, the sense of a place is not something unique. It is possible to identify a list of three elements of plurality to work ok: a personal dimension of the sense of place consisting of the emotions, memories, and meanings each person assigns to a place, leads to a different sense of place for different individuals. On the other hand, we can attribute meaning to places at different geographical scales, with different mental processes and different degrees of sharing with others, thus different senses of place at different scales. And finally, since each place is not experienced by a single uniform group of people and each group assigns shared meanings and identifies differently with a place, we have different senses of place for different social groups.

2.1.2 Different senses of place for different individuals

In humanistic geography, many authors have investigated aspects of the sense of place connected to personal human spheres, particularly with respect to the feelings and emotions that individuals attach to places. Several scholars consider meaningful places as an essential part of the definition of the human being (Relph, 1976) and feelings and connections to places as essential to human nature (Tuan, 1974). With the places we live in, or pass through, we establish different types of relationships that play a significant role in our choices and way of life.

Some of these places are spaces of our intimacy, private places that take on special meanings for us as individuals, and places where we have accumulated strong feelings and memories over time. Time is important in constructing the meaning of a place, but it is not a guarantee. In fact, spending time in a place does not mean knowing and bonding with that place, or developing a sense of place: knowing a place means being aware of it, “not only in your bones but also in your head” (Tuan, 1974). Sense of place is thus the result of the meanings we actively assign to our lives.

The time factor also seems to be a crucial element in attachment to places, for several authors, the sense of place is linked to some kind of repetitive experience, to the creation of daily routines (Seamon, 1980). Relph (Relph, 1976) believes that attachment is linked to familiarity with places - to know and be known in a given place - and that this attachment is confirmed and strengthened by a sense of continuity with the past, by the acquisition of a character of the place, a kind of spirit -or *genius loci* (Norberg-Schultz, 1979)- that persists beyond society and physical changes, and that makes us part of that place.

As already mentioned, in more recent times this aspect of the stability of places has been widely criticised, although without denying the fact that we establish connections with what already exists and happened in a place before. For Bourdieu and Hillier (Hillier and Rooksby, 2005), the specific character of a place is not constituted by a natural element, but by a *habitus*, a characteristic acquired over time, constructed by the social condition and therefore transformable by cultural and social changes within certain limits of continuity. This assumption makes *habitus* changes possible, albeit slowly or with difficulty and subject to specific education. In fact, places are experienced both individually and in a common context, since we are all individuals members of a society even the very intimate and unique feelings we have for them are not independent of common symbols, meanings and experiences and the interaction with others we live with.

To conclude on the individual dimension of the relationship with places, we can state that the senses of place are in fact deeply personal and specific due to their emotional nature but, at the same time, they are inextricably linked to the social context in which they develop and in connection with the ways of experiencing that place. In other words, in this interpretation, the sense of place is a concept that is both deeply individual, personal, emotional, affective, and cultural, socialised and territorialised.

2.1.3 Different senses of place for different geographical scales

Experience constructs place at different scales, in fact the term 'place' refers to phenomena that are very different in size and physical character, but which can be centres of meaning for both individuals and groups (Tuan, 1977). Tuan devoted rich reflections on the different scales of place to which we attribute meaning.

We already discussed how certain places become important to our intimacy and how we connect to them through deep feelings and direct experiences, calling them private places, or fields of attention (Tuan, 1974). These places can be on the scale of our dining table, our fireplace, the bed in which we begin and end our days (Perec, 1989); they are visible objects with which we interact. Home can often be a place of strong feelings, but when we think of home it can be difficult to have a global view of it, it can be a flat or a building and we cannot perceive it in its entirety. Home is experienced through our senses - smells, tastes, specific noises - and is a very strong centre of meaning to which we can assign boundaries and a precise location (Douglas, 1991; Buttner, 1980).

For Tuan, cities are places and centres of meaning par excellence, since most people are concentrated in cities and it is people who assign meanings to places. They are also visual objects but, especially in contemporary cities, their boundaries are not always so defined and shaped. Cities are prominent concepts: they are easy to think about because they have names, symbols, are often in the news and are clear in people's minds. Although they cannot be experienced directly in a complete and deep way by individuals, cities are nevertheless objects of attachment. This is because there is a part of human experience that is primarily a construction of thought: the active mode of experience (Tuan, 1977). Indeed, in large portions of space such as regions, or nations, or supranational institutions we may have common direct experiences, such as feeling the same cycle of heat and cold, but what makes them clear and strong is that places are constructed by symbolic means. This is clear when we think of nations. It is rare that we can deeply experience an entire nation, but this concept can be associated with strong feelings of attachment because of the conceptual knowledge we get of it, reinforced by symbolic meanings and conveyed by a specific education in the ideals of nationhood and citizenship (Anderson, 2018).

Tuan clarifies how we can ascribe meaning from the smallest place to the largest, using both direct experience and conceptual knowledge. Of course, attachment to a small place is something private that we may have difficulty in sharing, whereas attachment to the nation may be a widely shared feeling based on socially constructed meanings and symbols.

2.1.4 Different senses of place for different identities

Senses of place also have to do with the identity of people and places, which is perhaps the most delicate aspect to deal with. Personal identity is how we become aware of ourselves and the meanings assigned to places can become a central part of people's identity (Rose, 2001).

The identity of a place, which for Relph (1976) refers to a persistent homogeneity and unity that makes it recognisable in relation to other places, is made up of two aspects: a first referred to a physical characteristics, activities, meanings and relationships between them, and a second, less tangible aspect, concerning the spirit of the place, which persists even when the other characteristics are changed. Not everyone seems to share the same view of place identity, but what is widely shared in the literature is the idea that identity is not something inscribed in a specific location but, depending on their cultural context and level of belonging to that place, individuals and groups assign different identities to the same place.

On how identities are generally constructed, the hypotheses are different: on the one hand, we bond to the basis of the common feeling of belonging to a place, as is the case of the idea of nation, for example, as an idea of place that becomes a representation of shared meanings and values in which people recognise themselves. On the other hand, identities are also constructed in opposition and conflict with 'others', both individuals and groups, recognised as 'different' (Tuan, 1974).

Once it is accepted that places are not experienced by a single community, that people do not assign the same meanings to places, that identities can be constructed in opposition to others, it is clear that not all social groups assign the same meaning to a place. The identity of a place can therefore become a problematic element when used to produce division, to claim that other groups do not belong to the same place. The tendency to claim rights to a place by defining spatial boundaries is also a way of constructing social boundaries, based on divergent senses of place (ibid.). In this way, the sense of place can be used both to define who belongs to a place, based on similarity, and who is an outsider and does not belong there. At this point in the discussion, it is important to emphasise that there are winners and losers in this conflict over identity, in fact according to Rose (2001), there is a close relationship between social inequalities and senses of place.

Power dynamics shape senses of place that are not only different, but also part of a system of unequal social relations (ibid.). It is therefore possible for a particular sense of place to be made predominant to the point of obscuring or erasing alternative interpretations of that place. Ideas about difference are modelled on the construction of 'others', and these others are usually marginalised, less powerful, the working class, people of colour, women, all those who are geographically and socially peripheral are relegated together into the category of 'others'. The reaction in response to this exclusion may be different: some groups may insist on their diversity and reinforce their own sense of place, others may reject that place altogether if its sense excludes them, still others may produce new and completely different senses of place.

But is it possible to think the sense of place and identity without producing any exclusion of 'others'? To think place and identity without erasing less powerful senses of place? If we accept that places are at the centre of continuous interactions and exchanges, this means that borders, people and things are always in motion, that identity is made up of a continuous reshuffling of cultures, and defining identity today by contrast with others becomes even more problematic than in the past. But difference does not always have to be seen as otherness, it can be thought of in terms of interrelationships, as Massey and Jess argue, place identities are never 'pure' and unique, they are always produced by a history of interrelationships with other places (Massey and Jess, 2001). Identity

can therefore be thought of in terms of positive interrelationships, developing new ways of thinking about place and identity (Rose, 2001).

Following Massey and Jess' argument, conflicts over the identities of places - the construction of differences - occur at all spatial scales, and since places are not simply interconnected with each other, but are part of unequal power relations, the geography of this power also structures the geography of development. Therefore, the causes of unequal relations between different parts of a territory must be sought in the social relations that shape unequal development. The places where political, economic, financial, industrial and communication power is most concentrated establish a relationship of dominance with other places and produce the most powerful territorial images (ibid.). For these authors, the power relations implicit in unequal development are also decisive in the formation of the dominant meanings of places: powerful places and cultures are favoured in the construction of imaginary geographies that may overlap with those constructed by individuals, or shape them, and this may play a role in the reproduction of unequal development.

The different symbolic representations of places contribute to their construction, are potentially performative (Dematteis, 2021), and consequently are not neutral. Within each representation of places there is a vision: in literary texts, geography, songs, films, cartographic representations, information channels or social pages, but not all visions acquire the same force. As Squarcina (2009) points out, maps, for example, widespread and perceived in common sense as a tool for the objective description of reality, offer a point of view on the world that makes some places emerge and others disappear, determine a centre and a direction in the represented territory. The "demiurgic power of the map" behind the practical, symbolic, didactic utility (ibid.) of paper contributes to the construction of conventions that are part of our relationship with places. The fact is that the common imagination tends to be polarised on the senses of place that it has absorbed and continues to reiterate through multiple means. On the other hand, the affirmation of the coexistence of multiple senses of place, especially for those places that are cut off or univocally represented by *mainstream representation*, passes through educational practices that bring out diversity in the relationship with places. As we shall see, in this the school, central to the construction of our relationship with places, assumes a key role.

We will now go on to analyse how a part of the Italian mountains, today affected by abandonment and strong depopulation, can be read through the previously described mechanisms of power asymmetries between places that generate unequal development and the role that the senses of place can play in the construction of a new relationship between inhabitants and territory in these

areas. Before proceeding, however, it seems important to me to introduce a brief analysis of how mountains can be defined and of the geographical differences held together by this concept.

2.2 MOUNTAIN, MOUNTAINS

In physical geography, 'mountain' is defined according to an altimetrical principle. As the Treccani encyclopaedia states, a mountain is a:

*relief of at least Tertiary geological age, higher than 600-700 m above sea level, with rounded shapes and modest altitude if of very ancient formation (e.g. Hercynian folds), or rugged shapes, with peaks, gullies, ravines, etc. if of more recent formation (e.g. mountains of the Alpine folds): low, medium, high, respectively, reliefs up to 1000 m, from 1000 to 3000 m, over 3000 m.*³

With this criterion, a distinction is established between what is and what is not a mountain on the basis of altimetry, and a distinction is also made between low, medium and high mountains. However, the altimetric limit taken into account in the encyclopaedia is not universally valid. In the European context, for example, different countries use different altitude criteria to define what can be considered a mountain and what cannot. In Ireland and the United Kingdom, the altitude above which an area is considered mountainous is 200 and 240 metres respectively, while in Austria this altitude is set at 500 metres (Varotto, 2020). These differences highlight how, although the altimetric criterion is intended to be a scientific and measurable limit, a neutral definition that allows distinctions to be made between parts of the territory, it is culturally determined according to the context in which this limit is produced.

Following this criterion, from an administrative point of view, in Italy a municipality is defined as mountainous according to Law 991 of 1952, when 80 per cent of its surface area is at an altitude of more than 600m, or when there is a difference in altitude of more than 600m within the municipal territory. According to the law, 4.201 Italian municipalities are therefore mountainous or semi-mountainous, 52% of the total (ISTAT 2007)⁴, extending along the entire peninsula and islands following the Alpine arc, the Apennine ridge and their offshoots. It is easy to understand that profoundly different realities are part of this vast and varied territory and that drawing a clear boundary between what is and what is not a mountain is sometimes a political and legislative necessity, but also a great simplification.

³ In: www.treccani.it/vocabolario/montagna/, last consultation date 13.01.24

⁴ ISTAT, *Statistical Atlas of Italian Mountains*, 2007 Edition

"La montagna italiana," writes Armiero, " in buona sostanza, non esiste, e non credo sia mai esistita; piuttosto occorre ripartire dalle diversità, far emergere le tante montagne italiane e i differenti modi con cui esse sono entrate in relazione con le pianure circostanti.⁵" (Armiero, 2002).

Looking at it, therefore, from the point of view of cultural geography, 'the mountain' is a construct certainly linked to the physical, morphological and climatic conditions of the territory, but also to the societies that inhabit it and have inhabited it, shaping it and attributing meaning to it. Within the mountain universe, in fact, the human component is not negligible. The relationship between human beings and territory has shaped the landscapes that characterise these spaces, produced by the struggle, but also by the adaptation of human groups to different natural environments (Dematteis, 2020).

Thus, starting from the assumption that mountains are multiple and that this idea can refer to profoundly different geographical conditions, there are similarities and differences between mountain contexts depending on the criterion chosen to analyse them. One of these can be the relationship between mountains and other territorial areas and in particular with cities, a relationship that contributes to defining and shaping the mountain territory and that today determines at least three types of situations (Dematteis 2018): the peri-urban mountain of the lower valleys, since long the seat of industry and commerce, which in recent years has been invested by residential urbanisation (diffuse city); the mountain of the large ski resorts, a mountain structured and organised in function of the city; and finally the inland mountain, which instead is weakened by more than a century of depopulation and abandonment (ibid.). This third type of mountain is by far the most extensive on the national territory and is not, in general, the mountain of high peaks, on the contrary, it is largely characterised by elevations that do not exceed 1.500 metres. These are medium-sized mountains in terms of altitude, which are concentrated in the Apennines and, in particular, in the central-southern Italian regions. As Varotto states (Varotto, 2020), medium mountains (between 600 and 1,500 metres in height) are more concentrated in the southern Apennines and, in particular, in Abruzzo, Molise, Basilicata and Liguria. More specifically, in the Alps, the provinces with more than 35% of the territory made up of medium mountains are 7; while in the Apennines, there are 16, of which 11 are in the southern regions and major islands. These are historically inhabited mountains where the physical "montuosità" (mountainousness) cannot be separated from the anthropological

⁵ "The Italian mountain, in essence, does not exist, and I do not believe it has ever existed; rather, it is necessary to start again from diversity, to bring out the many Italian mountains and the different ways in which they have entered into relations with the surrounding plains."

'montanità', namely the relationship that the human inhabitants establish with the high-altitude areas in terms of coexistence and belonging to the mountain horizon. Varotto defines these mountains as “montagne di mezzo” (mountains in the middle) (ibid.), characterised therefore by human presence and ways of living that are strongly linked to the resources, levels and characteristics of the territory, which have gradually been lost over the last century and are now in crisis.

In the following section, I will summarise the long-standing processes that have structured and conditioned the central-southern Apennine middle mountain, the geographical area in which this research is located, in order to examine the dynamics at work in this territory today (Image 1_2.1).



Image 1_2.2: A landscape of the “montagne di mezzo”: the Gran Sasso massif with the small centres (from the left) of Rocca Calascio, Calascio and Castel del Monte (AQ), seen from Monte Offermo 1307 m asl, January 2024.

2.2.2 Abandonment, depopulation and marginalisation

Starting from this definition of the mountain as a cultural construct, plural and historically characterised by specific, local and territorialised genres of life, we outline the processes of marginalisation that have led to the current condition of the central-southern Apennine middle mountain.

The *montagne di mezzo* are today a fragile territory, marginal with respect to the systems of global flows that cross the planet, in which it is fully involved, but in a position of subalternity with respect to other places. The process that has led to the marginalisation of these mountains has accelerated with the profound changes that have transformed society in the contemporary era. It is in fact a geographical area that has reached the threshold of the 20th century while maintaining forms of land management and organisation and socio-economic models born many centuries earlier.

Ciuffetti (2019), identifies the formation of an Apennine civilisation, which was structured in its distinctive features in the late Middle Ages when the southern mountains, "montagne pietose"⁶ (Armiero, 2002), welcomed populations fleeing epidemics, famines, and pirate raids "nutrendole della loro ricchezza principale: l'estrema diversificazione delle risorse"⁷ (ibid. p. 67). Already around the year one thousand, the small highland centres, arranged as a hinge along the Apennine ridge, had seen a demographic growth, consolidated over time because they were able to offer the new inhabitants raw materials and energy resources coming from the mountains, as well as land to be cleared, forested and cultivated. On the basis of a very close relationship between the natural environment and peculiar political, social and economic organisations that human beings developed to inhabit and exploit the highlands, a civilisation with its own physiognomy was consolidated (Ciuffetti, 2019).

One of these organisations is the collective ownership of assets such as land for grazing, arable land, woodland, regulated by civic use. A very widespread mode of ownership in the central Apennines whereby resources were - in some cases still are - managed collectively by the local community organised in specific associations called *Comunanze*, *Vicinanze*, *Università Agrarie*, *Partecipanze*, *Regole*, etc. depending on the area, independent of the territorial administrations (Loreti, Coppari, Olori 2021). The collective goods were intended for the sustenance of the local community according to a common purpose that, theoretically, is solidarity towards the present generation (in terms of fair access to resources and redistribution of wealth) and towards the future generation, through the protection and preservation of the good⁸ (ibid.). Work in the forest, in the pasture, on common farmland was often accompanied by agricultural work on private property, usually small in size, which served -with difficulty- to satisfy family needs. But not only that, the life of the inhabitants of the

⁶ pitiful mountains

⁷ feeding them with their main wealth: the extreme diversification of resources

⁸ An interesting in-depth study on collective property in the Central Apennines was carried out by the research collective Emidio di Treviri and the Brigate di Solidarietà Attiva with the documentary 'Le Terre di tutti' (The Lands of All): openddb.it/film/le-terre-di-tutti/

Apennines was based on mobility and pluri-activity: farmers moved according to the seasonal needs of agricultural activities at different altitudes in the territory (harvesting of fords, saffron, vegetables used for manufacturing, etc.) but they were also employed in the production processes of proto-industry such as carding or weaving wool. " Il mondo della montagna è sempre costituito da persone capaci di fare qualsiasi cosa, qualsiasi lavoro, nel medioevo come in età contemporanea⁹" (Ciuffetti, 2019). On the one hand, therefore, life and production were linked to the local dimension and resources, and on the other hand, vertical mobility for activities and jobs that were carried out at lower altitudes or in the city, or in other rural areas, connected the mountains to a broad territorial dimension, as was the case with transhumant herding.

The economic structures consolidated in the late Middle Ages remained substantially unchanged until the last years of the 16th century, when the economic crisis sweeping the peninsula hit the wool sector in particular. The crisis is compounded by waves of famine and epidemics that cause a decline in population growth in the Apennines. " Per la prima volta il processo che nel basso medioevo aveva visto abitanti della valle salire verso la montagna, registra un'inversione di tendenza¹⁰" (ibid.).

However, in the centuries that followed, a new process of populating the *montagne di mezzo* began: between the 18th and 19th centuries, while the cities were growing, going through an initial phase of industrialisation and infrastructural development and requiring more and more labour and resources to feed them, the mountain space appeared as not yet saturated with population and rich in natural goods. These areas then attracted population, were used in a functional way for the growth of cities, triggering a process of erosion of collective domains, a strong acceleration in deforestation practices and a push up in altitude of cereal crops to the detriment of pastures and forests (ibid.). According to Armiero, it is at this moment in history that the link between demographic growth, expansion of arable farming and processes of forest despoliation begin to become clear. The relationships between human presence and natural resources change, the demand for resources and society's productive cycles become incompatible with biological cycles, producing a caesura between socio-productive and environmental systems (Carrosio, 2019). To the depletion of resources, to the impoverishment of the mountain territory, corresponds with the beginning of the 20th century an emptying also of people, which takes on the character of a real exodus after World War II.

⁹ The mountain world is always made up of people capable of doing anything, any work, in the Middle Ages as in the contemporary age

¹⁰ For the first time, the process that in the late Middle Ages had seen valley dwellers move up towards the mountains, registers a reversal

In the first decade of the 20th century, cities, plains and hills already exerted an intense force of attraction towards mountain dwellers. The migratory phenomena towards foreign countries and within the country towards the major urban centres were stable but not definitive; often these were journeys undertaken by only a few family members who expected to return, even if distant in time. Between the 1920s and 1930s there was an increasing acceleration of migration towards Rome or the regional capitals, involving farm labourers, shepherds but also women working as maids in the city (Ciuffetti, 2019). According to Ugo Giusti (1937), in the historical survey of the National Institute of Agrarian Economy on mountain depopulation in Italy, the end of the demographic balance in the Apennines is linked to two crucial events: the first is the economic crisis produced by the First World War, which generates migrations and a sharp drop in births; the second is the collapse of agricultural prices in 1929, which, creating greater dependence of families on urban markets, causes monetary expenses to rise and the traditional 'domestic' economies of mountain areas, oriented towards self-sufficiency, to fall.

Thus, the mountains are emptying out while the entire Italian society changes: during the 20th century, “con l’affermarsi del modello industriale e della società urbanocentrica basata sui consumi, l’Italia è scivolata a valle, discesa inesorabilmente verso le pianure e il mare”¹¹, writes Pazzagli (2017), according to whom the factors of rural expulsion are combined with those of urban attraction. A large part of the mountain population, for generations subjected to a hard life, based on reducing consumption to the essentials, moved in search of better living and working conditions, shifting towards the major urban centres in Italy and abroad and swelling the ranks of the urban proletariat. The desire for a fixed income, independent of the seasons, the promise of greater services and guarantees, such as pensions and health care, but also a new idea of society conveyed by the mass media and in particular by television, led to a depreciation of rural life and culture (ibid.) and a strong desire for 'urbanity'. Thus, from the economic development of the contemporary age, with the industrialisation of the country and the mechanisation of agriculture, mountains, inland hills, valley floors, come out strongly emptied and affected by negative effects also on the environment such as increased hydrogeological vulnerability, strong landscape transformations (ibid.). The new economic model is opposed to the principle of multi-activity, proposing simplification and specialisation in

¹¹ 'with the rise of the industrial model and the urban-centric society based on consumption, Italy has slid downhill, descending inexorably towards the plains and the sea

contrast to the "lo sfruttamento capillare di un ricco ventaglio di risorse scars¹²" on which the settlement fabric of pre-modern mountains was based (Varotto 2020).

The exodus of inhabitants has been matched by a political disinterest in these areas, a lack of infrastructure that renders them deficient in terms of accessibility and services. The winners of globalisation are the urban agglomerations, on which the attention of politics and investments for competitiveness converge. The losers, on the other hand, are the peripheral places, on which there has been a real strategic, political and cultural disinvestment (Carrosio, 2019). In the meantime, once the links between human settlements and the territory have been severed, the relationship of environmental care and mutual sustenance developed over centuries has disappeared. The crisis of these natural and human ecosystems, the backbone of Italy's largely anthropised landscape, has exacerbated economic vulnerabilities and environmental risks, making the *montagne di mezzo* a fragile territory.

The processes described so far - which have affected the Italian mountains in different ways and at different times, depending, for example, on the relations and connections with urban areas - leave in the central-southern Apennine middle mountains heavy criticalities and a series of open questions, all linked to physical but also economic and social peripherality (De Rossi, 2018) with respect to the poles, represented by the major urban centres. In this reading of the processes that have affected the Italian middle mountain, the condition of marginality is not understood as an intrinsic quality or characteristic of subjects and places, but rather the result of complex social relations, innervated by asymmetries of power and knowledge (Borghi, 2017). In fact, these areas are not outside the dynamics of the contemporary city, on the contrary, they are functional to it as a reservoir of resources and contexts of the discard of what the city does not want to welcome or see (dell'Agnese, Delatin Rodrigues, 2023). In the era of the affirmation of global cities, in the name of progress and a superior 'common good', some spaces and existences are sacrificed, literally "put to work" for the well-being of others (Armiero, 2021). The effects of the long process of marginalisation of the middle mountain, as of many other rural areas, are clearly visible and weigh heavily on the lives of those who still inhabit these places.

Residential rarefaction, in fact, and the consequent low demand, constitute conditions of disadvantage, which penalise, in services and opportunities availability, certain territorial areas confinguring a condition of "deprivation" (dell'Agnese and Delatin Rodrigues 2023; Bagnoli 2005;

¹² capillary exploitation of a rich array of scarce resources

dell'Agnese 1998). In these contexts, with difficult physical accessibility, services and opportunities are rarer and much less specialised, on the other hand, they are much more difficult to reach for those who do not possess an autonomous means of transport (dell'Agnese and Delatin Rodrigues 2023), creating strong disparities not only for those who live in different portions of the territory, but also between the different inhabitants of the same place according to economic and mobility possibilities.

Public policies have also played a decisive role in this process of marginalisation of the *montagne di mezzo*. In fact, what has characterised interventions for mountains or the Mezzogiorno (Scoppola-Iacopini, 2019) since the Second World War has been a *place-blind* approach, in which territories were considered passive recipients of resources and measures defined at other levels (Barca, 2009). A change in this sense took place with the SNAI (Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne) in 2013, a cohesion policy that, in line with European *place-based* approaches (ibid.), identifies under the umbrella of “aree interne” (inner areas) very different geographical situations, united by the scarcity of services and remoteness from urban poles. The logic of the intervention is to cope with peripherality, reorganising education, health and transport but also including development projects (Barca et al., 2014) through the joint use of structural funds allocated through budget laws and European funds of various kinds.

Intervening on the reorganisation and enhancement of services is certainly a useful necessity to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of the middle mountain, however, this attempt cannot and must not be separated from seeking a rebalancing in relations with the major urban centres, from the proposal of alternative ecological models to the extractive ones that have caused its decline, and from the construction of a profound relationship between inhabitants and territory. Depopulation is in fact materialised, in the middle mountains, not only as a loss in the number of residents, but also as a distance between inhabitants and territory (Varotto, 2020), once the co-evolutionary nexus built over time with the natural environments is lost, in favour of a widespread global culture, they live, or wish to live, in the central-southern Apennines just as they do in the city. In fact, marginalisation also passes through the production and diffusion of imaginaries that, from the places that occupy a central position in the global economic and social system, are projected onto the rest of the territory, determining their expectations and desires, but also shaping them.

2.2.3 Mountain imaginaries

At this point of reasoning, it may be useful to look at the *montagne di mezzo* from the perspective of imaginaries: investigating how they are formed and circulate in the contemporary globalised world.

Giuseppe Dematteis (2021) emphasises two aspects of globalisation that are of particular interest to geography: on the one hand, horizontal interactions (i.e. those occurring between different spaces) can now occur regardless of physical distance; on the other hand, vertical interactions (those occurring between individuals and the characteristics of the contexts in which they live) no longer depend on interactions that take place on a local or regional scale, but on relationships that the entire society has with the planetary ecosystem. The co-evolutionary process between human groups and the earth's environment that has allowed the development of situated cultures -profoundly different according to the specificities of local natural environments- has never been closed in a bubble, it has always also depended on the interactions that such places and such cultures entertained with other places and other cultures. However, since the modern age, the cultural development of human beings has been characterised by the universal dissemination of techniques of producing and living that have prevailed over the transmission of local knowledge, ways of living and relating to the environment developed over time in each place. The spatial hyper connectedness that defines globalisation can thus be interpreted, according to the author, as the prevalence of horizontal spatial relations over vertical ones, and the risk that this process brings with it is the homogenisation of different cultures located in a single global culture.

The effect of hyper connectedness, however, is not only the increasing similarity between places, but also the development of new forms and new models of inequality (Massey 1994). Within the current system of global relations, in fact, not all places assume the same position: political, economic, social, financial, communication power is increasingly geographically characterised and resides in those places that are most interconnected such as global cities (Massey & Jess 2001; Massey 1994). These places establish a relationship of dominance with the remaining parts of the territory, they become producers of a totalising culture that tends to spread images of itself and otherness from a single, pervasive point of view. Thus, in those sites that occupy marginal positions in the global system of interactions, the vertical relations between inhabitants and places of life are structured imbued with a diffuse culture that tends not to represent them, or to represent them as they appear from the outside.

It is possible to recognise, in the Italian context, the process just described by observing how widespread in the collective imagination are simplified and stereotypical representations of certain places outside the major urban centres. The mountain territory, complex, variegated and profoundly

different in its parts, as clarified above, often ends up being thought of and narrated as adhering to a uniform idea of mountain, coinciding with the highest and sharpest peaks.

For Mauro Varotto (2020), stereotypes of contemporary mountains can be grouped into two large families: emptying stereotypes and filling stereotypes. The first describes a mountain without humans, sacralised and untouchable, in which unspoilt nature, inhabited by fascinating wild animals and a few tradition-loving mountaineers, is the perfect setting for the city dweller to escape from urban chaos and find his or her equilibrium. The second family of stereotypes, on the other hand, puts humans at the centre and makes the mountain disappear, becoming a backdrop for artificial and decontextualised tourist adventures, a space for sport, performance and exhibition, once again at the service of the city dweller. These two groups of images and narratives, in fact, while seemingly opposed to each other, are in fact children of the same culture that draws the mountain as the urban population expects it to be: a space of psycho-physical regeneration elaborated according to the classic mechanism of "oppositional geography" (Aime and Papotti, 2012) to the stressed, dirty, modern world of the city: the mountain-unspoilt nature, the mountain-safe of tradition, the mountain-playground. (Varotto, 2020). Originally, the stereotype is not, according to Varotto, produced by the inhabitants of the mountain, but by an external, 'aristocratic and elitist' gaze, which, resting on certain elements of the mountain -a season, a glimpse, a view-, produces a simplified and partial vision of it.

This version of the mountain "adhering to the clichés of the sublime and the picturesque", in the era of mass communication, becomes a dominant image through the diffusion and reiteration of mass media and social networks, which, with simple and captivating languages typical of advertising (ibid.), become instruments of colonisation when, in the absence of alternative imagery. This way they become so pervasive as to push the mountain dwellers themselves to want their territory to conform to the cliché. These partial images, originally belonging only to a few but powerful groups, are amplified by the media and advertising to the point of pushing the mountain territory to conform to these images of itself, to tend towards a stereotype into which it can fit. Thus, the diversity of each context and each mountain culture tends to converge in that mountain that has a hope of making it, of not succumbing in the dynamics of global economic and social relations in whose competition between places is unlikely to be the winner. Not all mountain areas will succeed in becoming the 'successful mountain', the risk inherent in attempting to assert its existence through this mechanism is, however, that of asserting instead perfect interchangeability with any other vaguely similar space (Sacco, 2018).

In those places that in the global economic and social system struggle to assert themselves, it is particularly valuable, then, to cultivate and bring forth visions of places anchored in the dimension of living, in daily practice, in the infinite ways of human beings relating to the environment and history. Trying to create solid vertical interactions that manage, however, to dive perpendicularly into the rapid and multiple system of horizontal interactions with the globe.

It is therefore interesting to investigate how the relationship between people and spaces is constructed and where it is possible to establish a balance between being citizens of the world and knowing in depth the places in which one lives, between the contemporaneity in which each place is part of the world system and the cultivation of diversity. In mountain contexts, in which social relations are sparse and the possibility of cultivating diversity is in some ways limited, the role of the school takes on great centrality - even more than elsewhere - as an environment for forming a relationship with places but also as a lever for constructing new forms of living, in connection with the territory and its resources. The following section analyses the school's current role in the formation of senses of place, how different ways of doing school could intensify the relationship with the context and also provide the possibility of triggering new forms of living.

2.3 DWELLING SCHOOLS AND MULTIPLE SENSES OF PLACE

The school, especially the primary school, widely spread throughout the territory and a basic link in the construction of learning, is one of the first places where the idea of self and the world begins to take shape. In the childhood years, perceptions of known space develop quickly, as does the imagination of elsewhere. The school, the place of our experience, participates in different ways in our relationship with places: both because it provides learning about them and because it plays a central role in the system of spaces in which we grow up.

True to its dual nature as an institution of the state but also as a physical space involved in the life of a community, the school is both an instrument for disseminating the common ideological basis of society and a physical object, part of the history and culture of a specific local reality. Each school connects horizontally with the rest of the national education system, which absorbs European directives and dialogues with the world, and vertically with the local context in which it is located. However, it seems that the aspect concerning the teaching of already established knowledge and principles that common sense considers fundamental is much more central to school education than the production of situated, experience-related knowledge. In school, mainly indirectly constructed senses of place are nurtured through theoretical knowledge linked to thought, while experience and

the activation of reflection with respect to the local context are not usually at the centre of school learning.

Yet, since the 2000s, it has been strongly affirmed in school policies how important the link between educational institutions and proximity is in the education of students, but also in social cohesion within local communities. More and more autonomy has been granted to individual educational institutions from a didactic and also organisational point of view, in order to experiment with learning paths with differentiated contents depending on the context (Argentin, 2021). The centrality of direct experience in learning and the key role that the territory can play in the formation of each individual have long been highlighted in pedagogical circles and have constituted an important node for reflections on education and schooling throughout the 20th century. In the following section, we retrace the main stages of this pathway.

2.3.2 Active learning and the centrality of the territory

In the twentieth century the school was at the centre of a profound transformation: a radical break with the hitherto established tradition - founded on a formalistic educational institution and centred on the frontal transmission of knowledge - was represented by the spread of the current of thought of activism (Cambi, 2005). This movement was central in Europe and the United States at least until the 1950s, and laid the foundations for the construction of contemporary schooling and current pedagogy (ibid.). It was an international movement that brought about a veritable 'Copernican revolution' in education that focused on: 1. children, their needs and abilities, 2. doing that making precede knowing, 3. learning based on the environment and not on codified and systematic knowledge (ibid. p. 14).

A fundamental contribution to the development of theories of active education and the creation of 'new schools' was made by the American philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey. In his manifesto text 'School and Society' (1899), Dewey configures a school that is integrated into society and ready to reorganise itself according to the changes that occur in it. The school's task is to form a scientific spirit in its students and at the same time to train them in democracy. To do this, the school needs a change that connects it more closely to its environment and to interact with it (ibid.), enabling children, girls and boys to learn through experience. On the basis of these principles, numerous experiments arose in different places.

In the Italian context, one of the first was 'La Rinnovata', a school founded in Milan in 1911 by Giuseppina Pizzigoni in the Ghisolfia neighbourhood. In this school, the focal point was - and still is - the experience of the learner and the connection between school life and social life, in a continuous relationship between what is inside and what is outside the school. Students were therefore taken outside: to the workshop, to the sea, to the mountains, to the city; even today, in this school, the educational farm and the agricultural spaces are the integrating backdrop for learning based on the principle that children have to observe and experiment and that teachers have the task of guiding and accompanying their processes of discovery and learning (Bordin et al., 2021). The vegetable garden, the cultivation of maize, the animals on the educational farm, the physical exercise, are opportunities to observe, to make concrete experiences, to express hypotheses and to draw conclusions; the space outside the classroom is not only used for free play but is the heart and brain of the educational activity; the classroom, on the other hand, is the place where they meet together to review the path followed (ibid.). The method developed by Maria Montessori (1870-1952) rests on similar foundations, in which the 'liberation of the child', the role of the environment in learning and the conception of the child's mind as an 'absorbing mind' is central (Cambì, 2005). Again, this is an approach that focuses on the principle of nurturing motivation through making, through 'intelligent' hands (ibid.), in which experience activates thinking and learning is the result of the desire for discovery.

In more recent years, the new school movement has been enriched by the thinking of Celestin Freinet (1896- 1966) and the method based on cooperation. Experience also plays a central role in this pedagogical approach: the child learns by 'trial and error', driven by his or her own needs, but also by cooperation with others, immersed in the social environment around him or her, linking school to life through the use of truly innovative and original techniques. Among these, there is, for example, the *class-promenade*: a practice of situated learning, carried out in urban space to support a re-connection between education and places beyond the school, constituent elements of educational practice (Lorenzoni, 2023). In Italy, Freinerian methods attracted great interest and formed the basis of the 'Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa' (MCE) which, born in 1951, in the aftermath of the war, played a fundamental role in the renewal of the school (ibid. p. 24). The school proposed by the teachers of the MCE is based first and foremost on the research method: it is called upon to process reality in a reflective and critical manner because everyone must become an agent and bearer of knowledge on a daily basis (Rizzi, 2022). One of the practices that constitute the research method is precisely the "study of the environment" in order to build a dialectical relationship between school,

teaching and the external environment. Children's experience becomes the protagonist through practices such as the free text, in which students are urged to write in the form they prefer, or the practice of correspondence between classes in different schools, in order to build a dialogue between different worlds and break down isolation (Cannella F., 2023).

As a consequence of the student protest of '68 and the workers' struggles of '69, in the early 1970s in Italy the demand for change in the public school institution opened up to a broader public than the experiences mentioned so far. As Roghi (2022) points out, the protests, which initially affected high schools, later came to involve the other orders as well, this time grouping numerous teachers around some crucial questions, such as: "is it possible to change the way of doing school? does it make sense to do so? Or is it more appropriate, on the contrary, to deny the institutions and deschool society?" (ibid.)

These years also highlight a push towards the valorisation of extracurricular education and an operational perspective is inaugurated which, under the umbrella concept of 'integrated educational system' (Frabboni and Pinto Minerva, 2000) intends to make different educational subjects interact in a synergetic manner, operating within and beyond the school context. In this framework, moreover, the MCE's objectives become more explicitly socio-political and advocate, among other things, participatory school management, opening up to the social context and breaking down isolation, opposing authoritarianism and centralism, and striving for full-time education.

The long wave of 1968 consolidated the crisis of educational institutions in the 1970s, sanctioned in Mario Lodi's text 'Il paese sbagliato' whose key action was to 'destroy the school-prison, put the child at the centre of the school' (Roghi, 2022). *Il paese sbagliato* proposes to break the inertia and isolation of educational institutions from the inside out, through didactics, overturning the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in a new alliance with the world, promoting a school that does research (Cannella F., 2023).

It is precisely the realization of new territorial alliances, based on the idea of the integrated education system, in which education is a lifelong process and the task of educating involves local communities that become 'educating communities', that makes room for a model of a school-civic centre, at the basis of the most recent transformations affecting the school institution. The idea of a school that becomes a "collaborating structure" (Paba, 2006) in the making of the city, "a common, cooperating, interactive place of work" (ibid. p.21) that actively participates in the life of the places in which it is located.

The legislation on school autonomy has over time allowed schools to experiment and consolidate agreements and alliances with the third sector and administrations in a perspective of horizontal subsidiarity and educational co-responsibility that is also provided for in our Constitution (Cannella G. et al., 2021). Giving legs to these new educational alliances are tools such as the possibility of integrating the national curricula, suggested by the Ministry of Education's indications, by developing what is defined as the 'local curricula', activating a series of educational paths that take into account the context in which the school operates. The relationship with the territory is considered a decisive element both in terms of attention to the students' learning processes and their motivation, and in terms of enhancing local differences, in relation to the specific geographical, cultural and economic situations of the various contexts (Annichini and Bartolini, 2020).

Another fundamental tool in strengthening the relationship with the territory and local actors is the educational pact, which makes it possible not only to enrich or broaden the educational offer, but to think about the acquisition of knowledge in a different way, enhancing the non-formal and informal dimensions of learning, bringing to the surface the cultural values present in each territory (Cannella G. et al., 2021). The "Patti educative di comunità" (educational community pact), introduced by the Ministry of Education in June 2020, sanctions the collaboration between public school institutions, social and health institutions, social enterprises, associations, informal groups and in general the population of the territory, in order to build an educating community capable of supporting cooperative, workshop-based, participatory and solidarity-based learning for all the young people of the territory (Calvaresi et al., 2021). The pact sees schools as a focal place of participatory meetings and elaboration of the knowledge produced and/or transmitted in the territory, as centres of diffused didactics capable of enhancing and integrating both masterly teaching and laboratory and experiential teaching, in the near territory and the global territory represented by the Web (ibid.).

It is no coincidence that the Patto Educativo di Comunità tool was introduced during the period when Italy was heavily involved in managing the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when schools were forced to adapt to a new reality in which the spaces that had always been used for teaching were no longer adequate, lessons were moving into the immaterial dimension of the online world - requiring teachers and students to change their approach totally - and relationships and sociability, on which schools thrive, were disappearing. The school and its fragilities have been the focus of attention and public debate, making clear on the one hand the need for a reorganisation that would allow the school system to be adapted to contemporary society, and on the other to imagine new ways of doing school. Around the school, in fact, reflection paths of various kinds have moved,

leading to new proposals for transformation that see educational alliances, openness to the territory and the centrality of the welfare and experience of the learner as their focal point.

One of these is the reflection that, by bringing together different educational experiences gathered in the movement "e tu da che parte stai?", has led to the formulation of the proposal of a "Scuola Sconfinata"¹³ (Boundless School) (Bordin et al. 2021). Imagining a boundless school means for the promoters to implement an educational revolution that starts from listening to children, girls and boys and their participation and well-being and then taking the public school outside its walls by learning in different environments and places, with different subjects, creating stable alliances that allow the educating community to be strengthened over time. Of a completely different nature, but equally interesting, is the proposal for a national integrated programme in which the school is placed at the centre of urban regeneration interventions, with tangible and intangible actions, through "School Contracts" (Lamacchia et al., 2021). The integrated intervention programme, coordinated between educational institutions and local authorities, acts on two dimensions, the first is the integration of school spaces with their surroundings, reinforcing the public heritage with spaces and services available for all, the second is the integration of education policies, social and cultural policies, youth and sports policies, both in the design of educational projects and in the planning and definition of spaces to support these policies (ibid.).

With the hope that these and other new proposals will form the basis for a new wave of changes in the school world, it must however be said that a school rooted in the territory and based on active teaching is still an episodic form of doing school, linked to experiments and experiences that are the exception and not the norm. As Franco Lorenzoni points out¹⁴, schools today suffer from great loneliness, which concerns students, teachers and families, usually left alone in the missions of learning and educating, in a tired and repetitive school, still strongly linked to the static and frontal transmission of knowledge.

2.3.3 School and children's senses of place

In fact, schools, in their established practice, participate in no small measure in the dissemination of simplified representations of reality, facts and places near and far. One example of this is the teaching

¹³ For more: www.fondazionefeltrinelli.it/collabora/scuola-sconfinata/. The ebook 'Unbounded School. Proposal for an educational revolution' can be downloaded free of charge at: www.fondazionefeltrinelli.it/scopri/scuola-sconfinata-proposta-per-una-rivoluzione-educativa/

¹⁴ Franco Lorenzoni, 'Letter on school - the three solitudes', 28.08.23: www.illibraio.it/news/scuola/lettera-sulla-scuola-franco-lorenzoni-1442778/

of geography and its contribution to the construction of territorial stereotypes. On several occasions geographers have emphasised how the teaching of school geography is configured as the teaching of the discipline of geography, the exercise of a power, a description of a single point of view (Squarcina 2009).

The very tool of the textbook, widely used in primary schools, in an attempt to be as comprehensive as possible in a contained space, ends up reproducing stereotypes of place and privileging what is seen as beautiful in common sense (Martegani 2009). Textbooks are the tool used to talk about the environment and nature, but they risk being the projection of a single idea of the world that leaves behind alternative points of view and modalities (Calandra 2009). The educational style that characterises teaching versus places is one that understands education as the passage of knowledge from the book to the student, from the teacher to the learner, setting aside the intimate and necessary relationship between the learning process, experience and education (Dewey 1949). The practice of promoting the experience of places starting with the closest ones, made through bodies in movement and the elaboration by children of their own representations, which is then useful in the construction of even the most distant places, is not yet customary.

" Ci troviamo in una situazione di crescente decontestualizzazione dell'azione formativa ¹⁵," writes Pazzagli (2020), " in una sorta di deterritorializzazione della scuola. Si tratta di un aspetto negativo delle tendenze globalizzanti ed omologanti del nostro tempo, di un grande danno per le aree interne del Paese". In this way schools play no small part in reinforcing the spread of imaginaries that once again do not include the most marginal places or look at them from a distant and detached point of view.

Several authors have emphasised how the sense of place can be studied not as an end, but as a guide for sensitive and conscious behaviour towards the territory. This aspect is particularly interesting in the context of the *montagne di mezzo*, where schools could contribute to the strengthening of the inhabitants' sense of place connected to their closest places. Even if, as many argue, we are born with rootedness - we absorb from the place we are born into an unconscious bond - this does not mean that we develop a feeling for that place. The development of a sense of place is in fact a process that involves education (Olwig, 1980). Bonding with places, as a child or as an adult, is based on knowing them (Tuan, 1977). As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is not only a matter of time spent

¹⁵ We find ourselves in a situation of increasing decontextualisation of educational action, in a sort of deterritorialisation of the school. This is a negative aspect of the globalising and standardising tendencies of our time, and a great detriment to the internal areas of the country

in a place, making sense of it means experiencing and connecting meanings to it over time, but also being aware of it. It is something that has to be cultivated, which implies a reflexive *habitus* (Hillier and Rooksby, 2005). It is a process of building 'consciousness of place' (Becattini, 2015; Magnaghi, 2020). Magnaghi writes (ibid.):

...Se il luogo può assumere la forza di “una molla caricata nei secoli” (Becattini, 2015), gravido di saperi, sapienze, identità, culture, accumulate nei tempi lunghi della storia, allora la capacità di riappropriazione della conoscenza dei poteri nascosti di questa “molla” da parte degli abitanti di un luogo, espropriati dalla globalizzazione di ogni capacità di governo della propria vita (trasformati come sono in consumatori individuali di merci e clienti del mercato), si può definire “coscienza di luogo”: un linguaggio che torna a essere comune da parte di una comunità locale che si autodefinisce riscoprendo i propri valori patrimoniali.

Acquiring a consciousness of place, in the meaning given by Magnaghi, means for local communities to face a collective process to appropriate an awareness of the material and immaterial heritage of places, which becomes the common basis on which to build ways of living capable of enhancing the common goods, raising the quality of life, reconstructing forms of self-government of local communities (ibid.). In this, schools can represent a valuable resource, as can the participation of children in this process.

Indeed, the more children have the opportunity to explore, the more they will be able to shape the world of tomorrow (Sobel, 2001). In fact, growing up means progressively projecting oneself into the outside world, becoming more and more interested in one's surroundings, exploring space, experiencing it. The period of childhood when children begin to 'look for a home away from home' (ibid.), when they go in search of new worlds in which to fit in -a type of experience that adults no longer have- is a time, according to the author, when strong ties with places are developed. It is clear, therefore, how important it is for schools to promote paths that allow children to experience their living context and reflect on it. In order to know and fully grasp the uniqueness of a place and a territory, it is indeed necessary to develop a complex competence, a type of knowledge attentive to the diversity of places and people (Decandia, 2004). By working on the construction of an active care of places and senses of places and identities that are open and cooperative in the present and, hopefully, also in the future, schools can play multiple roles in involving communities in processes of territorial care.

In this perspective, the transformative and planning gaze of children (Paba, 2011) can constitute an important resource in the production of new interpretations of places, of new imaginaries, involving unseen subjects that are strongly anchored to the local. The contemporary sociology of childhood

(Satta, 2012), unlike in the past, looks at children as relatively autonomous subjects and social actors, "human being, not becoming" (Halloway& Valentine, 2000), endowed with their own vision and representation of the world, different from that of adults but not for this reason deficient.

Children, in fact, attribute their own meanings to places, different from those that adults attribute to the same places; or they discover new places that to an adult eye might be insignificant, or marginal (Satta, 2012). The territory has a different extension, geometry, measures for them, which is not only realised in a reduction of space, the territory of children is structurally different from that of adults, differently experienced and thought of: sometimes dilated, immense, boundless (places of the imagination, of desire), at other times collected in one place, considered a point (both small and deep) (Paba and Pecoriello, 2006). Children are capable of bringing to the territory a point of view that, in addition to having a different degree of maturity, is completely different and unpredictable compared to that of adults, and this view, once recognised, can make social life richer and knowledge of the world deeper (ibid.).

In the paragraph that follows, will be analysed whether and how the schools in the central-southern Apennine middle mountain could constitute a resource starting from the implementation of ways of doing school capable of promoting the role and wellbeing of children and the relationship with the territory they "dwell", so as to overcome the numerous and profound fragilities by which they are characterised.

2.3.4 Small schools, different schools

The middle mountain schools of the central-southern Apennines, like many other schools located in sparsely populated and hardly accessible areas, affected by depopulation and abandonment dynamics, are generally 'small schools'. These are schools that, in the framework of the research project promoted by INDIRE and dedicated to their enhancement, are defined both in terms of size, based on the number of students enrolled, and in their relationship with the territory in which they are located. Quantitatively, small schools do not exceed the number of 125 pupils in the primary and 75 in the secondary; 8,849 schools are meeting these characteristics throughout Italy, of which only 199 are located in island or mountain areas¹⁶ (Bartolini et al. 2020). Talking about small schools, however, means not only referring to plexuses with a small number of students but also to those schools characterised by isolation, difficulties in accessing essential services, and the progressive

¹⁶ The data reported refer to the 2017-2018 school year and were compiled by the authors based on data from MIUR.

depopulation of the contexts in which they are located (Manifesto of Small Schools, 2017)¹⁷ .

Precisely because of the peculiarities of the geographic areas in which they are located, and of the local socio-economic dynamics, these schools have common characteristics that often constitute critical issues so serious as to call into question the very existence of schools in these areas.

A very common factor in small schools is the high presence of multi-grade classes, i.e. multilevel classes in which students of different ages learn together, present in 16.5% of small schools (Bartolini et al. 2020). When the minimum number of students to form a homogeneous level class cannot be reached in a school - the minimum number is set at 10 students in schools in mountainous areas, according to DPR 81/2009 - it is possible to amalgamate two or more levels that become a single class. In common feeling, the multi-grade class is perceived as a measure of necessity, but in several contexts it has actually been highlighted as an important area of didactic and pedagogical experimentation (Tozza, 2020). In addition to multi-classes, the sizing of the school network creates major management problems, as a result of which comprehensive schools with a low number of students are often not assigned a director but a regency, i.e. a director in common with other, often different and physically distant, schools. Moreover, the high *turnover of* teachers, for whom small schools are unattractive due to their isolation and inadequate local public transport system, affects learners' motivation and acquisition of the study method and also negatively influences the planning and design of curricular and extra-curricular educational activities (Profeta, 2020). In addition to causing a sense of bewilderment in learners, resulting in their failure to acquire a valid study method, this phenomenon also negatively affects the planning and design of curricular and extra-curricular educational activities. Complicating the lives of young people in sparsely populated areas, especially in the post-primary levels, is the fact that they often have to face long journeys to reach schools and have to rely on inadequate public transport to reach them. The 'rarefied' distribution of the school network in sparsely populated areas (Barca et al., 2014) and the scarcity of public transport produce a strong disparity for children living in these areas compared to their peers who live in better served and more populated contexts and has a strong impact on student's performance, the fatigue they feel, the possibility for them to follow their inclination in their school choices, as well as their participation in extra-school activities. These and other critical issues, in addition to the choices due to the rationalisation of the school system, made by central governments, sometimes lead to the choice of eliminating small plexuses.

¹⁷ The Small Schools Manifesto can be found at: <https://piccolescuole.indire.it/il-movimento/manifesto/>

Without denying the urgency of a structural reorganisation of the school system at a national level to better meet the educational needs of children and the needs of families, it might be interesting - adopting the approach suggested by Paba (Paba, 2011) - not only to focus on what these schools lack but also on the possibilities they may reveal. The presence of the school in low-density contexts can, in fact, play a fundamental role in the revitalisation of the territory for several reasons: on the one hand, it has a not inconsiderable impact on the family choices of those who still decide to live there (Lopresti et al. 2018), and on the other hand, the school often constitutes the only social, cultural and community stronghold in these areas (Barca et al, 2014; Profeta A., 2020). For many localities in inland areas of Italy, the closure of the school, resulting from depopulation and marginalisation, translates into a loss of future, which ends up accentuating the inequalities between strong and weak areas, polarising services and opportunities (Pazzagli, 2020), a further step towards decline.

Finding strategies to resist is sometimes a necessity for these schools to counter the risk of closure, but it can also be an opportunity to think of different, and no less valid, ways of educating and relating to places, in essence of doing school. And so it is precisely starting from learning linked to experience, from the construction of alternative narratives of places, from deep relationships with the local environment, that strategies can be built to enhance schools and the most marginal areas together. Often these schools, necessarily different from those in major urban centres, suffer the same struggle as the places in which *they live* to assert their value within a cultural system that asks them to be like all the others.

Focusing on the need to provide the same levels of learning as all other schools, it is possible to look to small numbers of students and teachers, to multiple classes, to proximity to environmental resources, and to direct knowledge of the subjects with whom to collaborate, as levers for building innovative schools and services designed based on precise territorial needs, of inhabitant schools, a precious resource for their territory. The school would become a fundamental place to make the history, characteristics, and values of the territory known, to nurture social, economic, and productive innovation, to create synergies with institutions and actors in the territory, to provide knowledge, skills, tools, to bring local instances and specificities into the global and vice versa (Anichini and Bartolini, 2020). This would be an investment in the future, the real way to reverse the course of depopulation and the globalising and standardising trends of our time (Pazzagli, 2020). In the most marginal contexts of the global economic and relational system, the school can be that space in which to begin to build a new balance between the awareness of having to deal with global dynamics and

the elaboration of the heritage of the places in which we grow up. However, it is necessary to accept the value of diversity, starting with that of the schools themselves.

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3. INVESTIGATING SCHOOL'S ROLE IN CONNECTING PEOPLE AND PLACES

3.1 OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The previous chapter dealt with the Italian middle mountains depopulation process and how this is also linked to the loss of a lifestyle built on a close relationship between inhabitants and territory. A loss of knowledge of places also linked to a loss of experience: living with no need to use local resources, has meant, over time, to no longer know them, forgetting their use and quality, and thus ceasing to take care of them. The current ecological crisis forces us to imagine possible ways to reconstruct a relationship of care for natural resources. A need that becomes more pressing in those portions of the territory made particularly fragile by abandonment. Connecting the need to build a synergy between inhabitants and living environments, to cope with the dynamics of depopulation of the middle mountain and to implement the quality of basic services in those areas, one can look to schools -as proximity territorial bodies already present and rooted in the territories, invested with an educational mission- as resources to address these issues.

Taking this step means dealing with characteristics and critical aspects of the school system in the middle mountain areas, trying to turn what is normally perceived as limits -small numbers of students, multiple classes, organisational barriers- as a useful opportunity to rethink the school together with the relationships between inhabitants and their territory. In fact, in the face of numerous obstacles, the small schools in these areas are also rich in advantages. Compared to the larger schools in major urban centres they can count on a more direct relationship with their surroundings, made up of familiar faces and places, which would make easier to imagine didactic and organisational approaches immersed into the local context. The research therefore intends to enter inside these schools and to assume both the point of view of those who live them every day and the one of those who usually look at them from the outside. What emerges from this framework will then be linked to the ongoing dynamics in the area where the schools are located, in order to identify possible ways of strengthening the role of schools in connecting inhabitants and living environments.

Objectives of the research are therefore:

- First, to investigate how middle mountain schools function today; how children, teachers and families relate to their local context and what value local communities place on schools;

- in perspective, to grasp trajectories of transformation in school form and didactics, useful for constructing or intensifying the role of the mid-mountain school as a binder between people and places.

Taking from the reasoning carried out so far and the theoretical framework expressed in the previous chapter, the initial questions that the research investigates are:

- With respect to school organisation: how do schools in these areas function today in terms of numbers, organisation, and teaching? What characteristics assumes teaching in these schools?
- With respect to the production of local knowledge: do middle mountain schools produce knowledge about the local context? How do they relate to the places where they are located? Do they allow children to experience the territory?
- On the relationship between people, schools, and the territory: How do children relate to the territory of the middle mountain? What role does the school play in building that relationship? What role does the school play in the family's choices? What value is placed on schools by local communities?
- Putting the previous dimensions together: how can schools contribute to intensifying the relationship between inhabitants and places in middle mountain areas? How can this aspect be strengthened and supported?

During the work implementation, the starting macro-questions were defined and enriched by new questions that emerged from the field investigation phase. The following diagram represents the final questions on which the study was oriented. (Image 01_3.1)

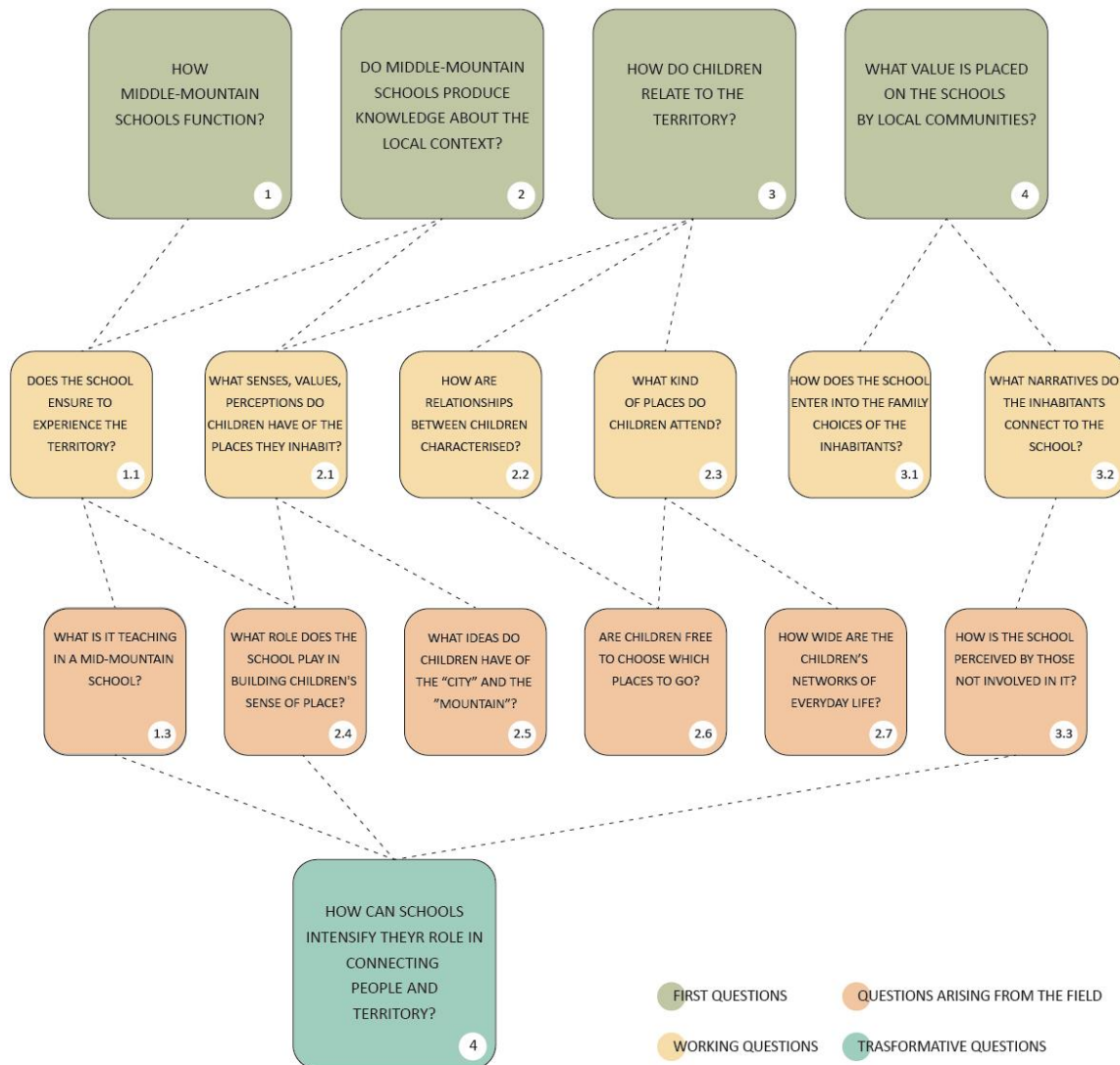


Figure 01_3.1 - Research questions

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH, METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.2.1 General Methodology

The research follows a qualitative approach, aimed at investigating the school's role in shaping the relationship between people and between people and places in the "montagna di mezzo" territory (Varotto 2020). In the architecture of social activities that take place outside and inside schools, the aspect of 'where' schools are located - the place - assumes a central role. The research therefore explores in depth, in a given place, the fabric of everyday life that moves around and through schools,

together with the meanings that different social groups connect to schools. The constitutive role assumed by places in structuring social action can hardly emerge from the results of a broad survey. It instead needs to be examined through direct experience, in contact with the groups involved, by establishing close contact and continuous interaction between the researcher and the object of research (Herbert, 2018). The research is therefore based on a field survey, carried out between March 2022 and February 2023, involving the study of three cases, three primary schools, located in three small mountain centres in the Abruzzo region, conducted by combining different qualitative methods depending on the subjects involved.

The reflection on the groups and subjects to engage in the research moves from the consideration that schools are centres of relations networks that expand far beyond the space of the school buildings. The dynamics that affect this network are influenced by phenomena that take place on a much broader scale than the school building. This means envisaging the participation of different subjects who live in, pass through or in some way relate to schools, taking up different positions in the social network that revolves around them. Every school is in fact a small world. Someone enters this world daily, giving form and life to what happens within it - i.e. schoolchildren, teachers, headmasters, and school staff.- Someone else, on the other hand, comes into contact with the school on more limited occasions, with more detachment, even not physically in touch with it, but being in some way connected to it - such as parents, grandparents, former students or other villages inhabitants. Following this reflection and making an initial distinction between those who attend school daily and those who do so occasionally, two different gazes, two perspectives emerge, albeit not clearly and definitively. One first gaze "from inside" belongs to those who inhabit and animate the spaces of the school every day, a second one "from outside" characterises those who construct their own ideas about the school being less involved in it. In the study, I worked on this double layer of analysis. On one hand I tried to look "through the school windows", from inside the school towards the outside through an in-depth analysis of the everyday life of the children -an analysis of how they live and perceive the area they inhabit- and by questioning the adults who animate the school on their experience. On the other hand, by following the gaze of those who are less involved in the life of the school, observing from the outside towards the inside, in order to deepen senses and values that communities attribute to the school.

In doing so, it is not so much the 'expert knowledge' of technicians or administrators which are questioned, even if they are sometimes interviewed, but rather the 'lay knowledge' of those who work and live in the territory (Callon, Lascoumes, Barthe 2001; Leone & Calandra, 2019) made up of

the meanings, emotions, memories, and narratives that individuals and groups living in the territory elaborate. Research participants are thus the knowers, the experts on the contents of the investigation conducted, so as they become active subjects in the research, producers of knowledge, rather than objects of study (Lather 1986). Having access to the intimate sphere of relationships between subjects, groups, and places, implies establishing a relationship of trust with the participants. This trust feeling was built from time to time in different ways according to the groups, places, and dynamics in which I found myself interacting, which I will describe in the following pages. There is, however, an important element to bear in mind that conditioned the organisation of the camp and the research activities: a fundamental part of the subjects that animate a primary school are children, who played a fundamental role within the study conducted. Adults and children, in fact, do not experience the places they inhabit in the same way. They do not frequent the same spaces, do not use the same tools to construct ideas about the world, nor to express them (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Satta 2012). The research activities were therefore designed and implemented at different times and using different methods with the children and adults. In the first phase of the camp, from March to June 2022, an initial research segment was carried out involving children in an educational workshop on their vision of the territory they inhabit, carried out in schools through a combination of different *creative methods* (Cele, 2006; Von Bezon et al, 2021; Giorgi et al, 2021). From May 2022 to February 2023, I instead carried out research activities exploring the adult world, involving teachers, former teachers, parents, and other inhabitants of the small towns where the research took place, through individual or group interviews and focus groups.

The starting point of the field investigation was the questions set out in section 3.1 of this Chapter, guided and constructed on the basis of the theoretical framework analysed in Chapter 2. While adopting a deductive approach in proceeding -starting from theory in order to organise the field study- the research design was intended to be open and ready for modification whenever new questions and themes emerged from the field. The starting theory was thus confronted and challenged by the data that emerged from the field: "What is necessary is not a commitment to a particular starting location, but a religious willingness to remain open to experiences in the field and to continually reconsider our theoretical presuppositions. Only these practices will enable a robust conversation between theory and data." (Herbert, 2018). In the reflections I noted during the fieldwork and in the subsequent analysis of the materials, the dimension of individual and collective experiences of the social networks around the three schools was thus connected with the socio-territorial dynamics affecting, more generally, the territory where the schools are located.

3.2.2 Case Study Identification

The case studies of the research are three primary schools located in three different small centres in the province of L'Aquila, in the south-central area of the Appennini mountain chain. The motivations that led to the selection of the cases are varied: upstream, it was decided to work on the primary school as an educational institution with a widespread diffusion throughout the territory, and therefore more present in sparsely populated areas than higher education levels. Moreover, it is in the primary school years that our relationship with others and with the places where we live is structured (Tuan, 1977). Thus they represent a privileged vantage point from which to observe the formation of such ties. The choice, instead, to work on the province of L'Aquila was guided not only by my interest as an 'adoptive' inhabitant of this area for four years now but also by the desire to work on the relationship between people and places in the mid-mountain area, where this relationship is particularly complex, as an area hit by the earthquake could be, where the role of schools in strengthening this relationship could take on particular value. On the other hand, the literature in the sociological field on post-disaster (Olori & Ciccozzi, 2016, Mela et al. 2017) suggests that the spatial transformations that occur following disasters can in some cases emphasise dynamics that call for reflections on temporality, living, the ability and possibility for inhabitants to take part in their own living contexts (Castellani & al, 2016). This means that observing a territory in the post-emergency period could also provide information on other contexts characterised by similar territorial dynamics, albeit with less evident effects. Disasters have long been interpreted as an upheaval in the ordinary (Mugnano, 2017), a rupture of the habit in which the idea of change could find space (Dynes, 2002) causing, besides pain and destruction, also a reactive impulse in people. Schools, in the context of post-disaster reconstruction and the mutations they undergo over the years (in terms of the different spaces in which they are located but also in terms of issues of the present addresses) could therefore follow interesting paths of transformation.

L'Aquila and its surroundings were hit in 2009 by an earthquake measuring 6.3 degrees on the Richter scale, that caused 309 deaths and over 70,000 displaced persons (INGV data¹⁸). One might think that fourteen years after the disastrous event, the situation has almost returned to 'normality', but instead L'Aquila continues to be "Europe's largest building site" -as the city's inhabitants say- and the situation in the rest of the earthquake crater, does not seem to be any better. To give an example,

¹⁸ Data from the website of the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV): ingvterremoti.com/2023/04/06/an-interactive-map-of-the-earthquake-sequence-of-quila-of-2009/ (last consultation date 20.12.23)

school building in the city is still a major problem: only two of the schools destroyed by the earthquake have been rebuilt to date (January 2024). So the majority of schools are still housed in temporary structures, mostly located in sectors of the city outside of the centre, differently from what it used to be before the earthquake. The long years of reconstruction after the earthquake are years of great change. In the time following the impact of the catastrophe, the configurations of physical space change several times. In fact, the spatial references one had 'before' the earthquake are not only different from those one will have when everything is rebuilt but are in continuous - albeit slow - transformation. Therefore, growing and developing one's ties with living places in an area under reconstruction, or doing so where this process does not happen, makes a relevant difference. For these reasons, the three schools under study are located both in small middle mountain centres that are part of the 2009 earthquake crater, and in a small centre that was not significantly damaged by the earthquake, although part of the Province of L'Aquila.

The case study schools were identified by pointing out a set of potentially interesting characteristics for the research based on a list of the institutes present in the area. This set of criteria was composed by: the number of students enrolled in the school, school location in middle mountain municipalities inside and outside the crater in the Province of L'Aquila, the number of inhabitants in the municipalities where schools were located, and the activities carried out by the schools about the local context. The institutes were contacted in the first instance by e-mail and telephone. It is relevant to note that the first contact took place between October and December 2021, when the spread of the Covid-19 virus in Italy was causing great concern and access to schools was very difficult for outsiders. The proposal to take part in the research was therefore coldly received by most of the schools in the area. The schools that declared an interest in participating were only three out of the nine contacted. My initial idea was selecting three cases, but selection was not necessary.

Two of the schools that took part in the research, the Barisciano and Navelli primary schools, are part of the same comprehensive school (Istituto Comprensivo Navelli) and the municipalities in which they are located are part of the 2009 earthquake crater. The third case is the Franco Di Paolo primary school in Campo di Giove, outside the crater, which is part of the Istituto Comprensivo Lombardo-Radice Ovidio with its main seat in Sulmona. Barisciano, Navelli and Campo di Giove have different characteristics in terms of demography, urban structure, and historical evolution. They have different relations with the closer urban poles and also different economic vocations, while they have some lines of contact such as being located within or near National Parks. These and other elements are part of the analysis framework of this work (Image 02_3.2.2).

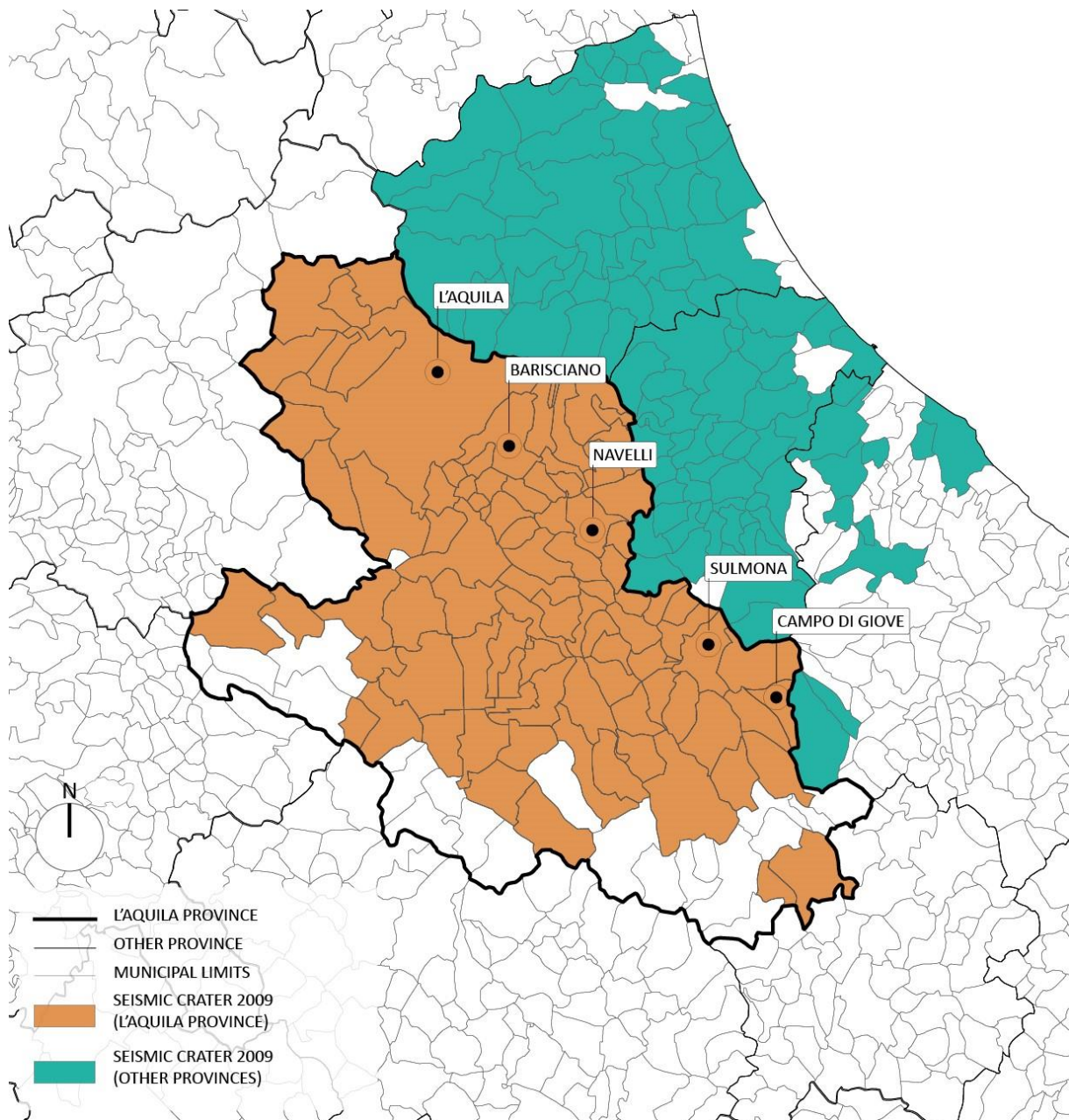


Image 02_3.2.2 – Map of the case study location, author's elaboration.

3.2.3 Fieldwork: the research segment with children

An initial observation that can be made while entering any school, is the clear separation between the groups of adults (teachers, headmasters, school staff) and group of children. The first manage the running of the school machine and are in charge of organising teaching. They are fewer in number but have greater powers than student's groups, usually young or very young, more numerous,

commonly recipients of knowledge, with little possibility of deciding on the running of the school and teaching. In primary schools, then, the young age of the students - although perhaps limiting the conflict that arises in higher education between youngsters and adults - defines a clear boundary between the role of adults and that of children. Moreover, in the school context more than elsewhere, there is usually a hierarchical definition of roles whereby adults decide *the rules of the game* and children are rather used to staying within these rules. According with this habit, children are used to adapting behavior and judgments to the will of adults -or to what they think is the will of adults- with the risk for the research of collecting untrue data. Aiming the research at exploring children's relationship with the area they inhabit, there is a need for children to be able to express what they feel deep inside, going beyond the surface of ideas and judgments expressed to meet the expectations of adults. In addition, it is important to consider the type of questions the research investigates: on the one hand, the desire is to work "from the inside out," delving into how the school is internally structured, how participants who live the school every day relate to places outside, and how the outside is perceived; on the other hand, with an "outside-in" perspective, the intention is to explore the value assumed by the school for the local community. Children are more involved in the research activities that deal with the first of the two perspectives. To be able to work in depth with each group of participants, the research within the schools was articulated on different paths, using different methods with adults and children. I will describe in this section the work carried out in the classes with girls and boys, to recount in the next section the research activities in which adults took part.

The construction and implementation of the research segment carried out with the children of the three primary schools involved in the research was a long and challenging process. The starting point was the need to work on suitable research questions to investigate the children's world in depth. I therefore needed to look for channels of access to their everyday life, taking into account to be an adult, and moreover a stranger to the everyday life I was investigating.

The research tradition working with children is of course a long one, but in the second half of the 20th century, there were important turning points in the approach taken by researchers. In the past, the most common approach was to conduct research from the point of view of adults 'on children', with the risk of losing the possibility to examine certain details of the children's lived experience (Burke, 2005). Since the 1970s, research involving children has moved from considering them as objects of study to thinking of them as subjects, included more and more actively in the research process (Cele, 2006), slowly moving towards a research posture "*with children*" (Burke, 2005). This

trend has affected not only research carried out with children but a paradigm shift that, starting from constructivist epistemologies, has led qualitative research towards more inclusive practices. In this process, boundaries between researcher and participant, research phases, and methods that can be used, have become increasingly permeable (Giorgi et al., 2021). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, these approaches have oriented research towards a further step that assigns children the role of researchers of their own world. They become co-producers of data collection, but also a fundamental part in their analysis, well aware to be investigators of their own life experience. This perspective is influenced by the emerging sociology of children, which sees them as human beings instead of *human becomings*, with their own activities, time and places (Clarke & Moss, 2005; Malatesta, 2015). In this perspective, children are perfectly capable of expressing their views and experiences through skills and competences that adults can help to bring out by providing different resources and environments. However, how much and in which ways research can be able to assign children a central role, not only in the collection of data but also in the organisation and analysis of the work -transforming the *with children* approach into a practice of research *by children* or *on behalf of children* (ibid.)-, is a highly open and debated issue. Undoubtedly, to truly assign an active role in research to children, there is a need reflect on how it is possible to create the conditions for this to happen. In this regard there are at least two themes of relevance:

- A first theme regards the distances between the adult's world and the children one. When conducting research with children, it must be considered that the research is usually promoted by an adult and this means not only acting and thinking differently than a child, but also that both children and adults are usually used to move within defined power relations. The knots to be unravelled for the researcher here concern the definition of one's own positioning within this state of things, finding a space for dialogue to communicate effectively with children. This aspect becomes even more relevant in a context such as schools, which, as already mentioned, is usually characterised by a clear distance between adults and children that makes roles crystallised.
- A second theme concerns the issue of choosing appropriate methods and tools to enable children to be researchers of their own world, in relation to specific research questions. This means reflecting on how it is possible for them to express their own point of view on reality, having in mind that the expressive capacity of children is different from that of adults.

In approaching the research with children, I therefore began to reason about the approach which, as an adult, could be most suitable to communicate with primary school children and make them an active part of the research data collection. On this subject, Fine and Sandstrom (1988) highlighted

two central issues to deal with: on one side the dimension concerning the degree of authority, and on the other side that of positive contact between researcher and child. If, therefore, the aim of this segment of research is to grasp children's ideas and perceptions of their everyday life in depth, there is a need for them to be free to express themselves out of the adult's stringent authority and thus to minimise the authority adults usually have over children by granting greater degrees of freedom (Cele, 2006). Yet, trying to assume a 'buddy' role for the researcher still brings the risk to be ineffective because the researcher is simply not a child, not part of the imaginary world of children, nor of their reality (Punch, 2001). There remained the possibility of assuming the role of a detached observer, but this would not be effective to participate in the children's world, it would have allowed a description of their behaviour, but without fully understanding it (Cele, 2006). Mayall (2001) therefore proposes to place in the middle between these two solutions, without assuming the superiority of the adult or posing as a playmate. Also, for Cele (2006), the most appropriate approach for an adult to relate to children's experiences is to take an active part together with the children and learn how they use, relate to and reflect on phenomena (p.21), striving to understand what the differences between children and adults are and how it is possible to connect them to generate mutual learning. In this regard, Paba (2006) also emphasises how the radical relationships asymmetry that exists between adults and children must be taken into account when dealing with the latter: "Siamo abituati a ragionare di bambini nella loro radicale assenza¹⁹" he says. The need is therefore "trovare modi per ascoltare prendendo i bambini molto sul serio, con concentrazione e creatività, ponendoci in una situazione di osservazione-interpretazione²⁰" (ibid).

The approach I tried to maintain in my work with children has been that of 'doing together', trying to listen outside the box without forgetting, however, to be an adult. The habit of an asymmetrical role with respect to children in the world we live in, is an obstacle that I had to take into account: undermining this habit in the world of schooling has posed some obstacles when dealing with adults and children in the case study schools. It happened to me more than once that the teachers' advice at my first meeting with the children was to "tenere il pugno duro²¹". Even on the part of the children, unhinging the idea that the adult who takes charge of an activity, may not set up them with the role of the ordering teacher, required specific attention. It was then important to work from the outset on the children's awareness of the role they would play in the research and the objectives of the work to

¹⁹ We are used to reasoning about children in their radical absence.

²⁰ To find ways of listening by taking children very seriously, with concentration and creativity, placing ourselves in an observation-interpretation situation.

²¹ Keeping the hard line

be done together, as well as demonstrating an attitude of listening and openness towards them. Getting adults to accept the children to be the greatest experts and not the teachers, is sometimes more complex than sharing it with children, who, however, can be excellent defenders of their own autonomy.

The choices about the most suitable methods to work on my research questions with children was weighted by taking into account what the literature in the fields of geography, sociology, urbanism and pedagogy states about place-based research studies with children, as well as the specifics of my field of research, my previous skills and experience, as well as the resources available to me to carry out the work.

The subject of my work with children, that is, the way they experience and perceive the village and the natural space of their everyday life -aspects that pertain to children's experience of place after all- is a complex and multifaceted subject. Investigating the relationships between people and places poses a methodological challenge in itself (Cele, 2006), as one means to enter the intimate and subjective sphere of human experience. Interaction with the space around us occurs both on a physical and mental level. Our experience of places is made up of memories, emotions, narratives that arrive from the outside -from others, from the media- but it is also experienced through our bodies that move in space, as discussed in Chapter 2. It is complex to conceptualise one's feelings and thoughts about places and even more complex to communicate them. In a work in which are children to be invited to express ideas and feelings about places, words may not be the most suitable way to collect their considerations, so other methods must be sought to allow children to communicate different sides of their experiences. Cele (2006), as an example, points out how the abstract (what feelings places arouse, what dreams and imaginaries children connect to places) and concrete (where and with what children interact) aspects of their experience of place can emerge differently using different methods, also in relation to the age and cultural *humus* in which children grow up. Indeed, there are many works in the literature that make use of *visual methods* (Burke, 2005; Rose, 2007 ; Bignante, 2011; Cooper, 2017), *creative methods* (Cele, 2006; Von Bezon et al, 2021; Giorgi et al, 2021), *arts-informed methods* (Butler-Kisber & Polma, 2010), bringing together different qualitative methods according to specific contexts and research questions in order to give children the opportunity to demonstrate their perspective in a variety of ways by relying on their "hundred languages" (Edwards & al. 1998). The boundaries between the labels of visual, creative or *art informed* methods are blurred and perhaps of little relevance to this work. All these ways of doing research, derived from qualitative approaches aimed at obtaining situated and accessible research

results (Butler-Kisper & Poloma, 2010). Their root can be traced back to a constructivist epistemology that considers the existence of a multitude of realities, ways of doing and understanding (Creswell, 2003). This stream of thought have led in the sociological field towards PAR (Participatory Action Research) research methodologies, while in the educational field to understand learning as a collaborative process between child and adult and between child and peers, as already emerged in the thought of Bruner and Vygotsky (Clarke & Moss, 2005).

The adoption of such premises allows the traditional roles assumed by researcher and research participant to be questioned, moving increasingly towards an approach oriented towards doing research "with" rather than doing research "on". At the same time, the diversity of experiences of those participating in the research is seen as an opportunity to enrich the process by leading to the construction of new meanings through facilitation processes. Thus, it becomes possible to use tools that allow different subjects to express themselves on aspects that each considers relevant to the problem at hand, using the most diverse instruments: writings, drawings, photos, walking together or building something. According to Giorgi, Pizzolati and Vacchelli (2021), *creative methods* are those that provide participants with the opportunity to express their identities and experiences - and their representations of those identities and experiences - through a process of creation and reflection on what they have created. In composing a methodology that can assist in the understanding of children's experiential lives, the use of different methods and different tools allows for a focus on how they use language, what the conceptual meanings and actions are, increasing the possibility of capturing their point of view in greater depth (Christensen & James, 2000). Keeping this in mind, I constructed the path of my work together with the children.

The classes involved in the research activities are small, between 12 and 16 children. There are three multi-level classes, a very common condition among schools situated in the "montagne di mezzo" area²², which requires special attention in organising the work: activities that suit younger children may not be suitable for older ones and vice versa. The choice of using different methods is a resource to overcome this obstacle, everyone can have different tools at their disposal, increasing the possibility of finding a comfortable way to express themselves, despite differences in skills and abilities. Another element to be considered is that in the classes, not all the children live in the village where they go to school: so, what places would be at the centre of our discussion? For some, the school, home, social network system is restricted to the size of a single village, for others, the

²² In the 2017/2018 school year, there were 79 multi-level classes in Abruzzo schools (Mangione G. R. & al. 2021)

network of daily movements and interactions spreads out into a wider space that is less shared with classmates. There was therefore a need to stimulate reflections on the spaces shared by all the children in the class group and on those that are instead only part of the daily lives of individuals. This required to seek both tools to reflect on the shared geographies of the class and to work instead on the personal geographies of each participant. The research work conducted was proposed to the schools also as geography workshop. It was then carried on in the classes during the curricular schedule of geography study: the time agreed with the schools to conduct the research activities was four meetings of two hours each, with the addition of a final meeting to show the work done and discuss it together with teachers and parents. While I was collecting data for my research, in fact, the children had the possibility to study the territory they inhabit. They acquired specific tools for observing and analysing the places and environments around them and to deepen -through their own senses and bodies- perceptions, memories and ideas on their everyday places. In this experience, research practice and didactic practice overlap, suggesting the idea that schools can be active players in research paths and that academic research can also become subject for primary levels of education, making scientific knowledge a co-constructed knowledge. This also has an important value on the ethical level of research: within my study, I used hours dedicated to children's learning to collect data, while at the same time offering children an opportunity to learn about their own life context. The research activities produced -already in the data collection phase- new knowledge. In addition, working within the ordinary classroom didactics made it possible to propose and experiment, together with the schools, a path of discovery of the territory through the school, which I hope will be useful in offering ideas to continue in the future with educational experiments in line with this approach.

Communicating this step clearly to parents and teachers was not easy. The research work was mostly perceived as a geography workshop - which indeed it was. It was less clear why the study was conducted in that particular schools, although we tried from the beginning to communicate this by sending letters and asking for parents' consent, talking in person with teachers. I had however the opportunity to discuss the topic in more detail with some adults during the interviews carried out in the next phase of the research. From day one I introduced myself in the classes as a researcher, I tried to communicate to children that the role they would assume was that of making themselves researchers of their own reality. In most cases this role was welcomed by the children with enthusiasm and seriousness, many times it was physiologically forgotten in the course of the work, so they concentrated on the individual activities to be completed.

I will now pass to describe into detail how the research activities with children were designed and implemented. Three multi-level primary school classes took part in this research segment: a fourth-fifth grade class from the Barisciano school consisting of 16 children (to whom 3 classmates from Ukraine, refugees following the outbreak of war with Russia, were added during the workshops), a fourth-fifth grade class from the Navelli primary school consisting of 12 children and a first-fifth grade class from the Campo di Giove primary school, also consisting of 12 children. The total number of participants was 43 (aged between 6 and 10, with a great majority between 9 and 10 years old), 12 girls and 31 boys whose voices, ideas and opinions will be reported in the following text, identified with a capital letter dotted, to make their contribution anonymous. All the meetings held were attended by teachers, one or two per class, who supported the management of the work. In all the workshops I needed the invaluable help of a second person, so a colleague with whom I had already worked in workshops with children participated in the construction and realisation of the workshops. It was a very important collaboration both in the management of the classes and in the discussion of the reflections at the end of the activities. The work with the classes was thus organised following two overlapping strands: that of the geographies shared by all the classmates and that of the personal geographies of each. In practice, there was no clear division in the moments dedicated to one or the other strand (Image 03_3.2.3, workshop organisation), but thinking about how to stimulate reflection in both areas was useful in orienting the choice of methods and tools. On the collective level, we reflected on defining and identifying the children's places (Holloway & Valentine, 2010; Malatesta, 2015), places recognisable for them and permanently attended by children within the villeges where the schools are located. Through an initial brainstorming phase, we identified them and represented them by drawing. I decided to use drawing in this phase because, as highlighted in the literature, it can be an interesting and pleasant tool for children to narrate reality, useful for making them feel comfortable in our first encounters. However, the habit and enjoyment of drawing is not common to all children, it depends on the age and abilities of each one. In our case the proposal to draw was received with different emotions in the classes, it was usually the most accessible method for younger children.

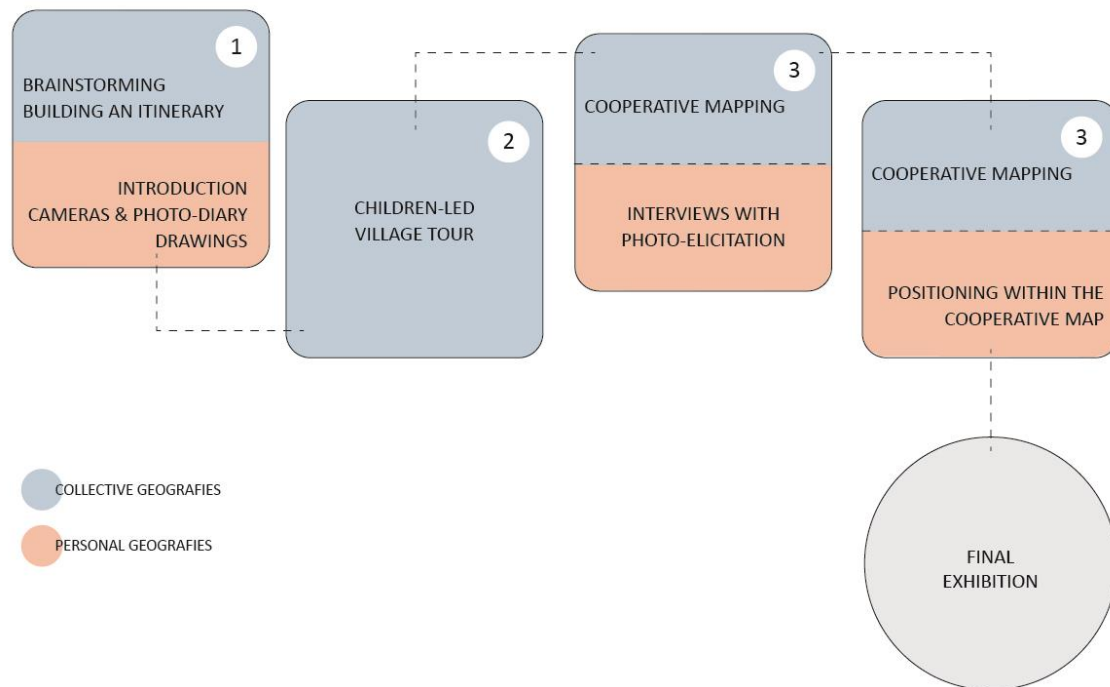


Figure 03_3.2.3 - Organisation of workshops with children

Some of these places chosen and drawn by the participants, became stages of the itinerary to walk together in the following appointment: an encounter dedicated to the tour of the village through the children's places. In this activity -*guided tour* or *walking interview* (von Benzon & al 2021)- the participants were aware that they would be my guides within their reality. I had set myself up -which I actually was- as an outsider, someone who had arrived by chance and wanted to find out what places and games the everyday life of the children in the class was made up of. Guiding me through the village, gave us the opportunity to gain confidence by walking together, exchanging informal chats. It allowed me to see the children interacting with the places of their daily lives and with each other, catching distracted conversations or witnessing unexpected encounters. For the children, the walk was an opportunity to elaborate on their use of places through storytelling, connecting stories and memories of their experience, both personal and collective. Moreover, the route that the participants chose to walk through, or not to walk through, and the stimulus of reflection on this aspect, highlighted the social micro-geographies of places, as well as their invisible and symbolic boundaries (ibid). Thus, places, notes, themes that emerged from the walk and drawings made during the first meeting, became the data for constructing a collaborative map that we called 'the children's map of the village'. It is a mind map constructed on a large white paper, by which we intended to represent the children's village geography through the places they frequented on a daily basis. We then

summarised in symbols the observations we made together - sounds, smells, the presence of animals, vegetation or people encountered during the *walking tour* - the distances in terms of time between one place and another, the route taken to reach them. In the beginning, I chose not to rely on a geographical map of the village, but to ask the children to position each place in relation to another, according to their shared perceptions (image 04_3.2.3, the image will be reused and analysed in chapter 5).



Image 04_3.2.3 - The children's map of Barisciano, step 1.

To reflect instead on the personal geographies of each child, we used the tool of the analogue camera and photo diaries. The use of photography seemed the right method to enter places that would otherwise not be accessible, intimate and often experienced individually by each child. At the same time, the tool of the analogue camera greatly enthused the children, stimulating motivation in the activities, reflection, and creativity. For almost all participants, it was an object they had never seen before, which needed testing and clarification before being used. Although a digital camera would have been more familiar to them, I chose to use analogue for two important reasons: the first is that the number of pictures you can take is limited and this helps you to think before taking the picture, pondering whether you really want to capture that image. The second is that you cannot immediately see the photo you have taken, with a great surprise effect when the prints arrive, aspect that can

encourage conversations and comparisons. On the operational level, once the functioning of the tool had been clarified, the children were asked to form pairs and take charge of a camera to share. The aim was to take photos, either separately or together, of places that in a positive or negative way had meaning for the author, noting the date and place where the photos were taken in a personal photo diary. Taking photos and observing the results provides a platform to then talk and listen. The visual nature of the material collected helps facilitate dialogue between children and adults from the children's point of view (Clarke & Moss 2005). In fact, the photographs taken were used as a stimulus to conduct interviews with the participants using photo-elicitation, or as defined by some authors *photovoice* (von Benzon & al. 2021) when, as in this case, it is the participants themselves who produce the visual material. The conversation on the images was organised in small groups to encourage discussion, but also due to the collective nature of the process and the fact that the children had often taken photographs together. The questions asked during the interviews were intended to investigate the reasons behind the choice of representing a particular place. The children were asked to express preferences among the places in their own collection, and in those of their classmates, to identify details that were interesting to them, and to ask each other questions about their choices.

In order to reknit the ideas that emerged on each child's places and the places of all the children, we overlaid the map of common geographies with each child's homes and daily routes. What emerged was a map full of signs, an interweaving of different trajectories that meet at certain nodes, represented by those places identified as the "children's places" (Image 05_3.2.3, the image will be reposed and analysed in Chapter 4).

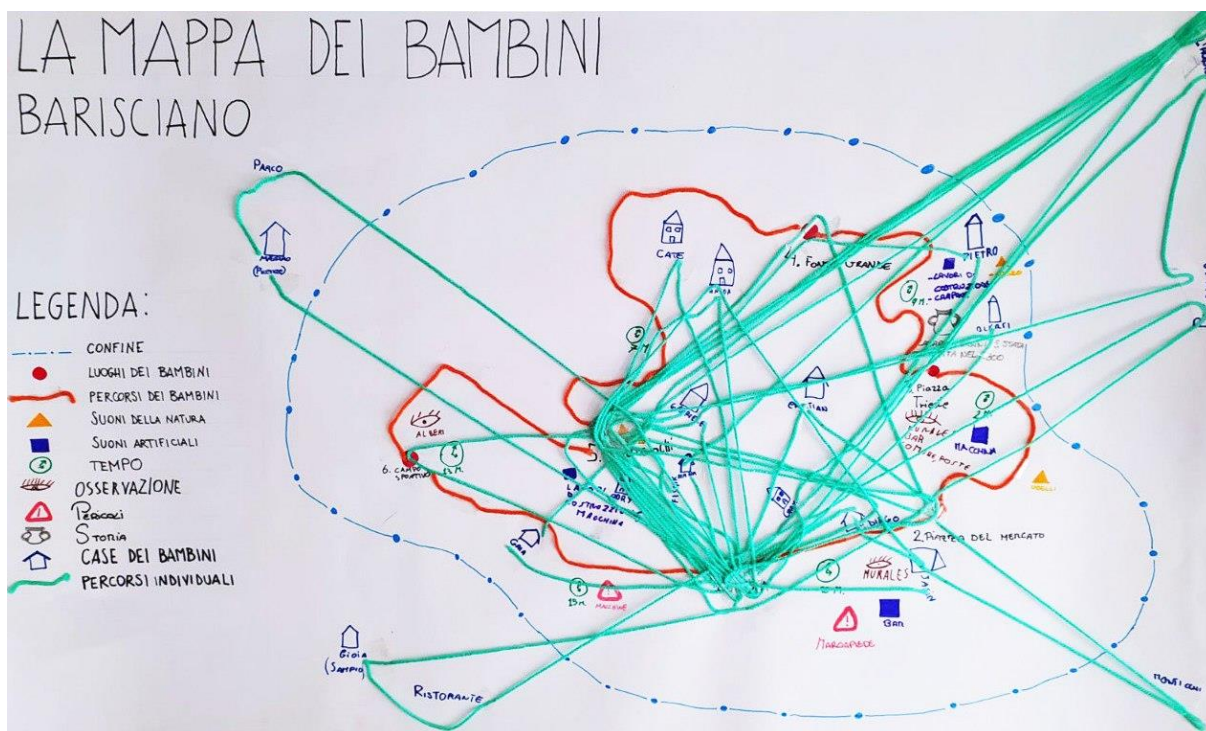


Image 05_3.2.3 - The children's map of Barisciano, step 2.

At the end of the workshops, an exhibition of the work done together with the children was organised in each school. The intention was to extend the discussion and reflection on the children's places and their ideas about the village to parents and teachers as well. In practice, this was more difficult to realise, for a series of circumstances: in two of the three participating schools this moment coincided with the celebration for the end of the school year. This brought great attention to the work produced, great pride of the children in recounting the work they had done, but the adults' desire was understandably to celebrate and admire children's work rather than to discuss it. I therefore reserved the opportunity to talk about impressions of the children's work and discuss the results, individually during the interviews with the adults.

3.2.4 Field survey: the research segment with adults

The work with adults investigates both the point of view of those who, like the teachers, attend the school on a daily basis and animate it from the inside, and the perceptions and values assigned to the school by those who inhabit the territory of the middle mountain. At the heart of the study are once again the narratives that individuals and communities elaborate with respect to the territory and everyday places. One of the objectives in organising the fieldwork was therefore to shorten the distances between researcher and those who participate in the research, seeking ways and times to

make multiple voices emerge and thus give strength to the results (Herbert 2018). In order to make the testimony of each of the participants unrecognisable, I chose to report words and opinions using a dotted and fictitious initial, dealing during the interviewees also with very personal or sensitive topics. A variety of subjects took part in the research (a total of thirty-nine people), which we can, simplifying, gather into three groups: the first consisting of teachers, former teachers and headmasters, the second of parents, and a third of other local residents. In some cases, the participant represented both the teacher's and parent's groups. The topics to be addressed with each group and in each of the three countries where the study took place were modulated on the basis of the participant's experience and previously established relationships, as were the methods used. The table below provides a complete list of the participants, their gender, age and origin, and the method used to gather their contribution.

Name in the text	Group	Sex	Age	Method of survey	Place of the survey	Municipality of residence
N.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	M.	44	Individual interview	Barisciano Primary School	L'Aquila
R.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	F.	45	Individual interview	Barisciano Primary School	Barisciano (AQ)
B.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	F.	40	Individual interview	Barisciano Primary School	Tornimparte (AQ)
G.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	F.	55	Individual interview	Barisciano Primary School	Calascio (AQ)
T.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters; Parents	F.	51	Individual interview	Barisciano Primary School	Barisciano (AQ)
O.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	F.	38	Individual interview	Barisciano Primary School	Poggio Picenze (AQ)
F.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	F.	63	Individual interview	Campo di Giove Primary School	Campo di Giove (AQ)
M.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters; Parents	F.	57	Individual and paired interview	Navelli Primary School	Capestrano (AQ)

C.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	F.	38	Paired interview	Navelli Primary School	L'Aquila
E.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	F.	32	Individual interview	L'Aquila, Castle Park	L'Aquila
S.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	M.	33	Individual interview	L'Aquila, Castle Park	L'Aquila
D.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters; Parents	F.	66	Paired interview	Respondent's home	Barisciano (AQ)
L.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters; Parents	F.	65	Paired interview	House of D.	Barisciano (AQ)
A.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters	F.	52	Individual interview	On the phone	Sulmona (AQ)
P.	Teachers, former teachers, and headmasters; Parents	F.	85	Individual interview	Respondent's home	L'Aquila
E.	Parents	F.	43	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
Marianne	Parents	F.	42	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
Donatella	Parents	F.	43	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
B.	Parents	M.	33	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
M.	Parents	F.	49	Paired interview	Municipality of Campo di Giove	Campo di Giove (AQ)
N.	Parents	M.	51	Paired interview	Municipality of Campo di Giove	Campo di Giove (AQ)
P.	Parents	F.	50	Paired interview	Municipality of Campo di Giove	Campo di Giove (AQ)
M.	Parents	M.	47	Paired interview	Respondent's workshop	Navelli (AQ)

F.	Parents	F.	45	Paired interview	Respondent's workshop	Navelli (AQ)
C.	Parents	F.	49	Individual interview	Respondent's home	Navelli (AQ)
L.	Parents	F.	48	Individual interview	Respondent's business activity	Navelli (AQ)
F.	Other inhabitants	M.	52	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
A.	Other inhabitants	F.	32	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
S.	Other inhabitants	F.	43	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
V.	Other inhabitants	F.	28	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
C.	Other inhabitants	M.	29	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
G.	Other inhabitants	M.	28	Focus Group	Proloco Barisciano	Barisciano (AQ)
R.	Other inhabitants	F.	57	Individual interview	On the phone	L'Aquila
Z.	Other inhabitants	F.	43	Individual interview	Respondent's business activity	Pescara
O.	Other inhabitants	M.	34	Paired interview	Municipality of Campo di Giove	Campo di Giove (AQ)
V.	Other inhabitants	M.	24	Paired interview	Municipality of Campo di Giove	Campo di Giove (AQ)
U.	Other inhabitants	M.	65	Paired interview	Municipality of Campo di Giove	Campo di Giove (AQ)
E.	Other inhabitants	M.	83	Paired interview	Piazza Duval Campo di Giove	Campo di Giove (AQ)
G.	Other inhabitants	M.	85	Paired interview	Piazza Duval Campo di Giove	Campo di Giove (AQ)

In the research segment with adults, I started, in all three centres where the study took place, to work with teachers, for me the easiest to reach thanks to the research activities already conducted in the schools with children. In fact, contact with some of them occurred right from the early stages of organising the camp. We collaborated since the beginning to produce the documents needed to carry out the activities with the classes, to agree on the timetable, and to plan and accomplish the meetings at school. With some of them, we had the opportunity to know each other and confront for a while before formally arranging an interview; those teachers then helped me to reach out to colleagues and former colleagues who, since the schools were small, were in any case aware of the research I was conducting. The issues addressed with the teachers were those of school organisation and didactics -in particular delving into the aspect of teaching in multi-level classes- of the personal teaching experience in small village and city schools, as well as their point of view on children and young people, the family's choices connected to school and their point of view on the future of the area (since the teachers are also inhabitants of the area where the research took place, and sometimes parents.) The method used to work with teachers were semi-structured interviews, sometimes carried out in pairs due to a preference of the participants. In conducting the interviews, I started from a list of topics that I was interested to address, but I also left participants free to bring the discussion to new points that they felt important to address. Only in some cases, when those being interviewed were headmasters or teachers with managerial-organisational roles, their interview took a mixed form - adding to the investigation of personal experiences also a collection of information relating, for example, to the rules governing class formation- making our meeting also an interview with privileged witnesses (Della Porta, 2010).

Contact with the other adult groups took place in different ways in the three small villages: in Barisciano, the help received from the young president of the local "proloco" has been of fundamental importance. I got in contact with her through the association's social channels, then we met during a village festival and knowing the themes of the research, she made herself available to facilitate my meeting with other inhabitants, provide a space to interview them, and organise the meetings. With her support, I was then able to conduct focus groups with parents and other inhabitants, bringing to the plate different experiences depending on the different ages. Focus groups -defined as discussions within small groups of people, moderated by a researcher and oriented towards obtaining information on a specific topic (Blee, Taylor, 2002)- were particularly useful in investigating the collective dimensions (Della Porta, 2010) of the issues addressed by the research. In particular, aspects concerning the values assigned by local communities to the school emerged

clearly. The group discussion allowed some tensions to emerge that I couldn't grasp in the individual meetings, relating, for example, to families' choices on whether or not to enrol their children in small centres schools, or regarding the integration of migrant communities in the village. Moreover, with this mode of discussion, a desire emerged from participants to talk about the territory's past and different visions regarding the future. In general, my approach was to base the discussion on a few themes, in order to guide the conversation, while leaving room to discuss the issues that created greater debate among the participants.

Also in Campo di Giove, I received the crucial support of a person (a *gate keeper*), this time known to me previously, in the involvement of other participants. In this case, I was provided by him with the contact of parents and other inhabitants of different ages whom I was able to meet, in the town square or town hall, and interview individually or in pairs. The paired interview is a modality which seems to me to be very useful in making participants feel at ease if they feel very familiar with each other; in fact, in these cases it often happened that the participants stimulated each other in recounting episodes from their lives or that they completed the picture provided by one by enriching it with different details and points of view. The risk is that, within the couple, one of the two is more talkative, more dominant, than the other. In one case during the interviews, I seemed to pick up on this mechanism, so I subsequently asked to interview the person who seemed to be overshadowed a second time individually. In this case, too, the starting point for the interviews was a list of themes that formed the outline and were adapted according to the subject I was interacting with. Clearly, with elder participants, it was particularly interesting to delve into narratives relating to the past and schooling in the small-village past, while with the younger participants the conversation was more focused on choices relating to staying or going elsewhere. With the parents conversation were more focused on the theme of being a parent in the village, as well as on their own and their children's school experience.

In Navelli, on the other hand, not having a reference person to help me, I began to involve adults, starting with the parents of the children who had participated in the workshops. I had the opportunity to meet them at the exhibition held during the last of the appointments with the classes. On this occasion, I asked those present if they would like to take part in the research by collecting their contacts, and the response was almost always positive. The arrival of summer, however, lowered the initial enthusiasm, making it difficult to arrange the meetings. I was then able to arrange an initial meeting with one of the contacts collected in October, he then provided me with new contacts,

following a snowball sampling (Della Porta, 2010). In this case, the interviews were mostly one-to-one and conducted at the participants' homes or businesses.

3.2.5 Analysis of collected materials

During the field investigation, I collected different and multifarious materials, particularly in the research activities with children. The use of creative methods also requires creativity in the analysis strategies as the material collected is highly heterogeneous. In my case, at the end of the work with adults and children I had at my disposal: field notes in the form of audio recordings, audio recordings of the workshops with the classes (including walks), drawings, maps, children's photographs, recordings of the interviews with the children and those with the adults, recordings of the focus groups with the adults. During the fieldwork I archived the material and transcribed the interviews conducted. Then, once the fieldwork phase was over, I started again from the research questions in order to develop an analysis strategy. I linked the questions to the materials used to answer them and started to approach the analysis from the children's products, with the aim of focusing on various aspects of their relationship with the local context.

The activities with the cameras, carried on during the workshops with the classes, produced 417 photographs, taken by the participants. The request was to photograph the places in their daily lives that, for whatever reason, were considered interesting by the children. The activity was proposed with the aim of getting to know what places the children's lives are made up of in the three villages, how wide are the networks in which children move. Photographs were also used during the interviews as a stimulus to deepen children's visions, perceptions and narratives regarding the places. Bearing in mind the guiding questions at the base of the investigation of visual material (Bignante, 2011), I used the photographs to realise three types of analysis:

- Initially, I analysed the content of the complete collection of photographs taken –“broad selection”- by counting the recurrence in the images of certain types of places. For the coding of the types of places, following what emerges from studies on children's geography, I proceeded by layers: a first subdivision of the material was made by distinguishing between representations of indoor and outdoor spaces (Burke, 2005). Then, in a second level of coding I distinguished - taking from the work of Malatesta (Malatesta, 2015) who identifies a trinomial classification between types of places such as school, home and public places and a fourth category represented by playground and virtual space - the home sphere, the school sphere, social and public spaces and the commercial sphere. In the next level of coding, I then looked deeply in the

category of social and public spaces, which were particularly interesting for the purposes of my investigation. I noted what types of places they comprised and with what recurrence, subdividing this material into street, square, playground, sports field etc. After the first coding I let some time pass and repeated the operation a second time, reorganising the material into each category and proceeding to interpretation.

- Subsequently, the same 'broad selection' of photographs was mapped, georeferencing the images on a map base through a GIS system. This was supported, when possible, by the use of photo diaries filled in by the children. They were asked in fact to mark where and when each picture had been taken. Unfortunately, for the participants, keeping track of the pictures taken was too complicated, so only a few of them filled in the photo diary. When uncertainties arose about the placement of a certain picture, I asked the adults interviewed to support me in identifying the location of the shots. This kind of work was helpful in bringing out the extent of each person's daily movements and the locations of the children's daily life in each village.
- The third type of analysis performed on the photographic material concerned only those images that were commented by the participants during the interviews (around four per participant), which I termed 'tight selection'. Each image was connected to the corresponding part of the interview transcript, connecting the photograph with a narrative related -*narrative analysis* (Kara, 2015). - The aim was to delve into the participants' readings and representations, to see how they positioned in relation to the content and realisation of their photos. Images and associated narratives were then thematised and categorised (e.i. 'child relationships', 'city and mountain', 'displacement' etc.) and then interpreted in connection with the theoretical framework.

The children's places and the breadth of their networks of relations also guided the analysis of the 'children's maps', which were compared with each other, in order to bring out the recurrence of certain spaces in the sociality of the three villages and analysed in their construction process by connecting them to the audio recordings of the workshops. By considering both the finished product and its collective elaboration, it was possible to retrace the reasoning and comments made by the children as they made choices on what to include or not to include in the map, on the places more or less shared, on daily movements, on sociality, providing important data to enrich the interpretation of the maps. On the other hand, it was not possible to listen to the reasoning behind the itineraries

drawn by the children during the walk together as this was a work carried out in pairs, so each pair, privately, reasoned without sharing their thoughts aloud. However, the observation of these drawings made by the children while walking (while the *walking tour* activity was being carried out) compared with the maps made in class, drawn stationary and collectively (children's maps), allowed the role played by bodies in perceiving space to emerge. In these drawings, for example, the representations of the routes we walked take on shapes and directions that are very similar to the movements we actually made within the villages. On the contrary, in the 'children's maps' made collectively in class, the same routes assumed all the same circular shape²³.

The results emerged from the analysis of the materials produced by the children, were the base to begin tackling the transcripts of interviews and focus groups conducted with adults. They explored the issues of the relationship between school and territory, both in terms of aspects concerning the current functioning of schools and their possible trajectories of transformation, and in terms of the value assigned by local communities to schools. In this case, I analysed the material following transversal thematic analysis techniques (Della Porta, 2010), identifying central recurring concepts in the participants' words and grouping them into themes such as "school and teaching organisation", "family choices", "small village past", etc. The themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups were then compared with each other, reassembled when present in different materials and related to the field notes and with children's materials on the same theme. The discussion about this

²³ The results of the analyses carried out on the materials produced by the girls and children are the subject of Chapter 4 of this work

part of the research is the subject of Chapter 5 of this work (Image 06_3.2.5).

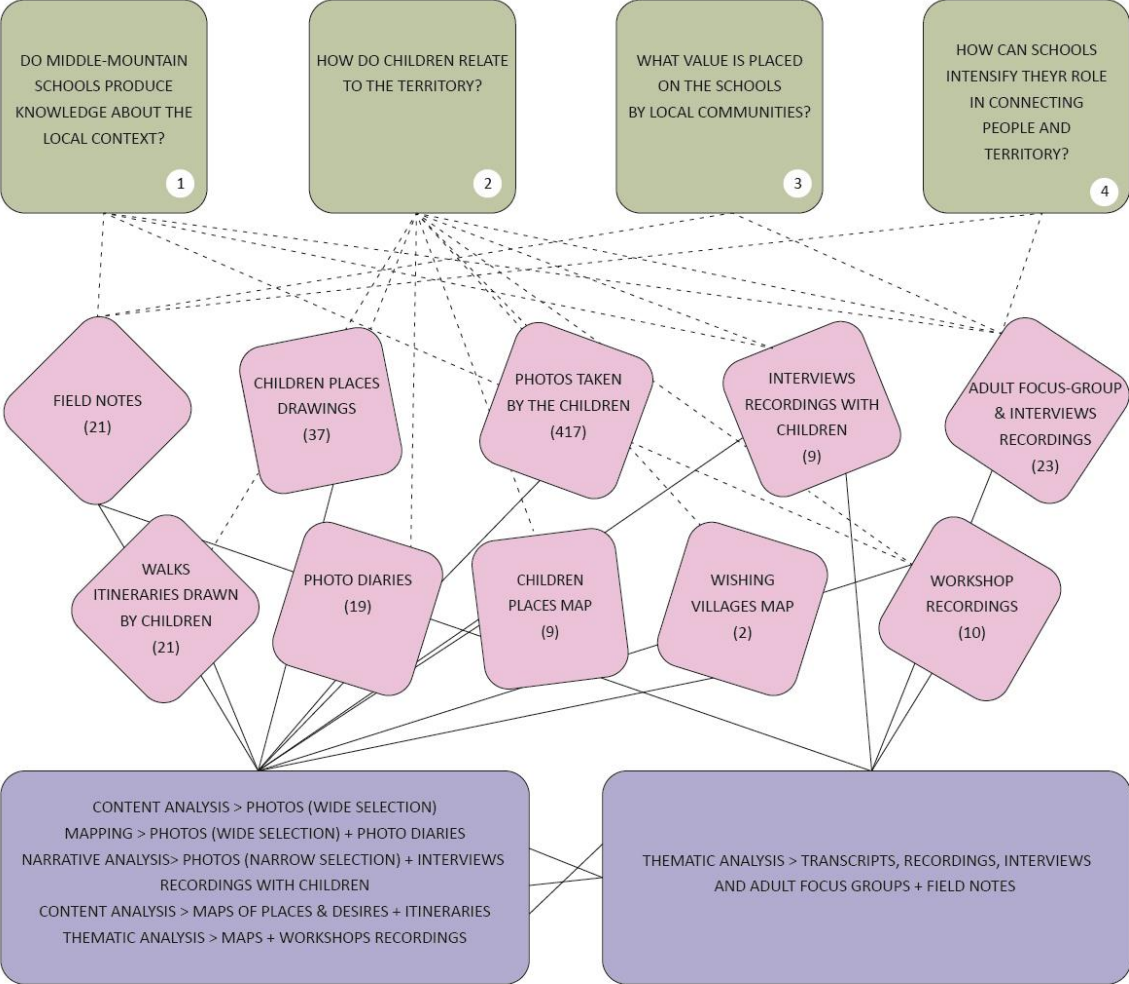


Figure 06_3.2.5 - Analysis strategy for collected materials.

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Extract from an interview on the photographs taken by V., R., and S., primary school children from Navelli (AQ), 28.04.22

...

V: Filomena, la nonna di zio Mariangelo!

Io: allora ragazzi io non le conosco purtroppo queste persone, sapete che io sono di fuori..

R: dell'Aquila?

V: di Milano?

S: di Capestrano?

Io: no

S: e di dove sei?

V: di qualche parte del mondo!

Io: di qualche parte nel mondo che sta più a sud dell'Abruzzo

R: più a sud? in Sicilia!

Io: un po' più a nord

S: e fregate più a nord...

R: al centro?

Io: no al sud

V: me lo dici?

Io: sono campana

R: campana?

Io: sono di Benevento, lo sapete dove sta Benevento?

R: e tu da Benevento, a Navelli?

Io: io da Benevento sono andata ad abitare a L'Aquila per lavoro

V: ma tu non ci sei mai andata a Milano?

Io: allora sì, io lavoro a Milano, teoricamente, però dato che la mia ricerca è sull'Aquila e sulla provincia dell'Aquila sono venuta qui

R: cioè, lei è di Benevento, poi da Milano è venuta a L'Aquila...

V: è bella Milano, ve'?

Io: bella, beh è complicata...

V: ma da quanto tempo ci lavori?

Io: due anni

V: e che lavoro fai?

Io: io faccio la ricercatrice

R: ma ti devo dire una cosa...

S: si vede!

Io: e da cosa?

S: e da...dal punto di vista

R: Giulia! io non so se ci sei mai passata c'è una casa con un cancello e tipo un...

Io: ma dove R., dove?

R: sempre a L'Aquila

Io: ma vogliamo finire questa attività ragazzi, che ne dite?

4. CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHIES AND RELATION TO PLACE IN THE CASE STUDIES

4.1 CHILDREN, SENSES OF PLACE AND IDENTITIES

4.1.2 Looking in, looking out

One aspect that was very clear to me from the very first moments spent with the classes is that the village in which one lives is described by the children participating in the research as the most beautiful place in the world. To the question “do you like living in Barisciano, Navelli or Campo di Giove?” the answer was always a decisive and choral yes, accompanied by resounding enthusiasm. For many, their village seems to be perfect, unsurpassed, and the joy of living there lies in different aspects. The beauty of Barisciano, for its young inhabitants, resides in being in the mountains, in having space, but also in its proximity, its closeness, to other children. For the Navelli’s participants, on the other hand, living there is special both for the beauty of the village itself - the most beautiful village in Italy, according to many of them - and for the freedom and autonomy that the children are aware they have²⁴.

When asked directly “tell me something you don't like about your village”, the answers were uncertain, centred on small details or strongly campanilist. For some, in fact, the worst thing about Barisciano is the too many climbs, or the ruined cobblestones in the central square. For others - almost all the children from Navelli - the worst thing about their village is Collepietro, the adjacent hamlet. The strong attachment to the village, its aesthetics and characteristics, is also built in opposition to the neighbouring villages and hamlets. The constant conflict between Navelli and Collepietro is renewed with small football rivalries (Image 01_4.1), with disputes over the number of tourists visiting (Image 02_4.1), with the battle over the beauty of one and the other centre, discovering, at the end of the day, to be not so different, nor so distant (Images 03_4.1 and 04_4.1).

²⁴ The answers referred to were collected during the first workshop with the classes where the starting activity was to collect ideas and descriptions of the countries and to start identifying the children's places



Image 01_4.1 - Navelli, drawing by I. Image 02_4.1- Collepietro, photo by S.

From a conversation about photo 02_4.1

Io: Però Collepietro invece è abitato come Navelli o un po' meno?

Coro: un po' meno

Io: ma più di Civita?

E: no no no è più piccolo

Io: più piccolo di Civita?

Coro: si si

Io: ed è più abitato o meno abitato?

B: meno

E: meno e anche tanto

S: però d'estate quando vengono i turisti è abitato più di Navelli

Io: c'è una sfida è ufficiale

S: no è che lo sanno, c'abbiamo tipo un ristorante che è pure un affittacamere è sempre lo stesso proprietario che l'estate vengono, un sacco di gente

G: pure noi ce l'abbiamo, ce li abbiamo sopra ci stanno tantissime stanze, mi sa 23-24



Image 03_4.1 - Navelli, photo by B.



Image 04_4.1 - Collepietro, photo by S.

From a conversation about photo 03_4.1

B: bene io ho preso questa (Image 03_4.1), l'abbiamo fatta con M. un giorno quando siamo usciti da scuola. Mi piace perché non c'è né troppo sole né è troppo nuvolosa come questa (si riferisce a un'altra fotografia)

Io: anche tu hai scelto un paesaggio che guarda la vallata, secondo me avete scelto i lati opposti, guardate un po'

E: si è vero!

B: però io non vedo Collepietro che l'ho fatto apposta

However, going deeper into the narratives emerged during the focus groups -based on the photographs taken by the participants themselves- and during work on the village of desires, the senses of place attributed to small centres and their spaces are obviously complex and controversial. Eroding the surface of the pride about the territorial identity linked to the village, a desire for elsewhere emerges. Imagination leads to dreamed and mythical places that are very often highly urbanised contexts. When in one of our meetings I asked "Where would you locate Navelli if you could choose?", answers such as "in Hollywood, in Milan, in Naples" emerged. When I asked why Hollywood or Milan in particular, they defined an imagery of fame and grandeur that has little to do with the directly known territory:

R: perché è bello, ci stanno le palme, c'è la scritta Hollywood bellissima...c'è il cinema, ci stanno le stelle del cinema;

E: eh perché è bella Milano! Anzi no, vorrei che dentro Navelli ci fosse il duomo di Milano²⁵;

Proposing the work on the "village of desires" in Campo di Giove, it emerged that almost everyone would like to live in a bigger centre: more houses, more fields, more animals, and above all the shops of specific brands, a stadium, a cinema, a Neapolitan pizzeria and sushi bar. In the texts and drawings collected, the desire for urbanity shines through, for a world that is fully part of the imagination of children of our time, even in a town of five hundred inhabitants and even if not directly experienced every day. (Images 05,06,07,08_4.1).

²⁵ From workshop recording 4 in Navelli on 8/3/2022

Immagino Campo di Giove secondo i tuoi desideri
 Se vorrei che Campo di Giove diventasse più grande per esempio con le pizzerie, concerti ...
 vorrei un luna park ma così non pagavo e avere anche uno zoo con tutti gli animali del mondo.

Image 05_4.1 - Campo di Giove, text by E.

5/11
 Immagina come fosse "Campo di Giove" se potessi trasformarlo.
 Se potessi trasformare Campo di Giove, aggiungerei un parco acquatico e anche esplanade. Aggiungerei anche alcuni campi per le coltivazioni e animali. Poi anche altri negozi di scarpe e vestiti e alimentari. Infine esplanade Campo di Giove.

Image 06_4.1 - Campo di Giove, text by S.

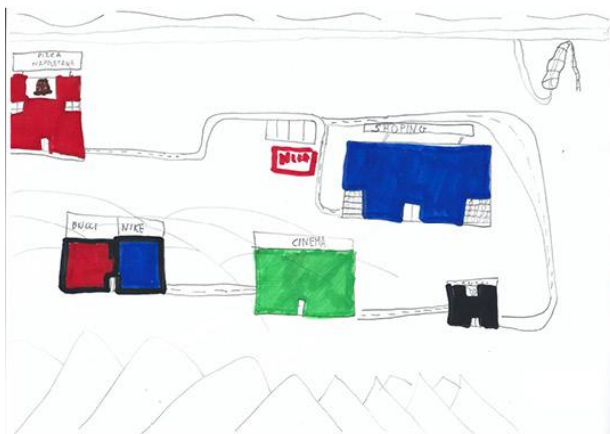


Image 07_4.1 - Campo di Giove, drawing by N.



Image 08_4.1 - Campo di Giove, drawing by F.

4.1.3 Full and empty: the dwelling dimension

Walking through the streets of the small centres, especially in the morning, it is easy to notice how sparsely populated they are. The children, however, are not familiar with the word “depopulation”, it seems almost as if none of the participants can fully affirm that their village has few inhabitants. Perhaps they could admit that the hamlets are less and less lived in, but the centre is not, for them it is always ready to fill up (Image 09_4.1, Image 10_4.1, Image 11_4.1, Image 12_4.1).



Image 9_4.1 - Navelli, photo by E.

From a conversation about photo 9_4.1

Io: allora G. tu che hai scelto? falla vedere ai tuoi compagni

E: la chiesa di Navelli!

G: eh perché è la chiesa dove certe volte ci vado. La parte più bella è che posso vedere i miei amici

E: però per stare con noi, perché a Civita non c'è nessuno

Io: a Civita non c'è nessuno?

G: ci sono tutti anziani

S: però è bello

E: poi ci sono tanti bambini che sono più grandi di lei perché io li conosco, cioè

S: fanno la terza media

E: fanno a botte tutte cose così

Io: ma secondo voi, perché a Civita non c'è nessuno?

G: prima c'erano dei bambini. Quando era piccola mia mamma, poi quello che è successo non lo so

S: sono morti!

Io: e a Navelli c'è tanta gente secondo voi?

Coro: tantissima!

Io: ci abita tanta gente?

E: allora sono 500 persone, ma i turisti che vengono!

Benedetta: domenica due pullman pieni!

Io: ma fatemi capire una cosa, ma a voi fa piacere o no che vengano i turisti?

Coro: certo!

E: solo che la cosa che non mi piace dei turisti è che quelli maleducati buttano cartacce cose e rovinano il nostro paese

S: fanno bene!

B: e allora io vengo a buttare la plastica a Collepietro!



Image 10_4.1 - Barisciano, photo by C.

From a conversation about photo 10_4.1

Io: ma voi abitate in centro storico?

C: io sì

A: io ai confini, alla Provinciale. Pure G.

P: io abito dietro alla chiesa

G: oh se tu vai a via Zingaretto 7 ci stanno tutte le case vecchie

Io: ma, ma secondo voi Barisciano è disabitato? o poco abitato?

P: un poco

A: no, ci stanno 1800 persone!

G: prima però ce ne stavano molti di più

Io: ma per voi è un paese piccolo o un paese grande?

A: eh medio

G: è un paesino di montagna

C: una volta n'amico mio mi ha detto: "ma al paese vostro ci stanno le macchine oppure il telefono? no guardate stiamo in piena montagna!"

Io: ma un amico tuo che veniva da dove?

C: da Milano

A: aaaah

Io: ah ma qualcuno di voi mi aveva detto che ci sono molti bambini che vengono solo d'estate

Coro: siiii

Io: e voi siete contenti?

P: maestra, sai una cosa?

C: alcuni vengono pure da altri paesi, alcuni vengono dalla Svizzera

Io: aspetta, aspetta mi voleva dire una cosa P.

P: prima, a proposito di sta cosa di Barisciano bla bla bla, praticamente quando ci stava la rassegna a Campo Imperatore, di pecore negli anni '80-'90 ce ne stavano 10000 pure di più, mo siamo arrivati che ce ne stanno 2000-3000

Io: eh lo so, tante persone non fanno più i pastori

Pi: no ma so' diminuite, 'na cosa incredibile, mo anche pure i pastori che c'hanno più pecore, se le stanno a vende un sacco, non ci vanno più alla rassegna, anche se ce l'hanno le pecore, non ci vanno più.



Image 11_4.1 - Navelli, photo by E.

From a conversation about photo 11_4.1

Io: ma, secondo voi quanta gente abita a Navelli?

R: 507!

V: no 508 ha detto la maestra Paola!

Io: e a Collepietro?

V: a Collepietro sono cen...

R: 200

Io: e queste 200 e 500 persone secondo voi ci sono sempre oppure sono anche le persone che vengono d'estate

V: ae se prendi quelle che arrivano d'estate so 8000 a noi!

R: sì perché Collepietro è un luogo per turismo, ci vengono tantissime persone

R: ma a me, un giorno io stavo a giocà al campetto co' mio fratello...

V: ah sì, so venuti i camper!

R: no no due autobus! da 30 persone, da 50, da 50/30 persone pieni! e due persone so dovute andà co' la smart

V: e poi 4 macchine...e un camper!



Image 12_4.1 - Campo di Giove, photo by L.

From a conversation about photo 12_4.1

M: dentro non si può entrare

E: però d'estate...

Io: e voi ci andate'? o è più un posto per i turisti?

E: eeeeh

M: no è per tutti diciamo

L: però lo hanno costruito di più per i turisti

E: eh comunque sì

M: diciamo, diciamo

Io: ma fatemi capire una cosa, voi siete contenti che vengano i turisti?

L: sì!

M: sì!

E: non tanto

Io: perché non tanto?

E: perché poi...

L: vabbè che ci sta più movimento

M: qua mo se tu vai in piazza alle 5 non ci sta 'n anima viva

E: stanno tutti a dormì perché Campo di Giove è fatta solo di anziani!

ridono

Io: vabbè magari adesso con l'estate e le giornate più lunghe ci siete voi!

Coro: si si

E: poi vengono i turisti che sempre vogliono giocà con noi. Per esempio già un giorno, so venuti due ragazzi...

L: a me non piace molto socializzare con le persone

M: L. quello là che ti piaceva!

L: quale?

M: quello lì che stava con A., i due ragazzi

Io: vabbè ci sono una serie di persone che vengono... ma tu perché dicevi che non ti piacciono tanto?

E: perché poi vogliono sempre giocà con noi a calcio

Io: e questa cosa ti scoccia?

E: eh si perchè cioè, cioè...boh

Populated, overflowing and at the same time “*Non ci sta n’anima viva*”²⁶ (*There is no one around here*). Villages experience different moments, changing, filling and emptying according to the seasons and events. In Navelli, for example -where one cannot forget the ongoing post-earthquake reconstruction process- on an ordinary day, such as the one when we went for a walk with the class, in two and a half hours we met two people and a dog. Yet, when talking about attendance in the village, the discourse never stays on absences, it always connects to two themes: the past and tourists.

The comparison between the present and a past that seems to be overflowing with people and activities, comes up whenever we talk about the number of inhabitants or abandoned places. A not-too-distant time when, in the memories of grandparents but also of mothers and fathers, things seemed to be different, is also part of the everyday life of this new generation of inhabitants. Girls and boys are obviously used to live in a different time, and under different conditions from their parents, but they have a certain awareness of and connection to what happened in the past in the same place.

At the same time, the village -which is sometimes perceived as small- grows at certain times, filling up with tourists or people arriving in the summer and during festive periods. It seems to live according to the seasons. There is an everyday life in which the children’s routine move freely with its balance between school, friends’ houses, squares, streets, whirling descents by bicycle, football games. Then there are moments when this balance is transformed, new or unfamiliar people arrive and life is reorganised according to this presence. The arrival of tourists or those who, living in other places, return to visit relatives, attracts the attention of the children participating in the research who situate many of the stories they offer me precisely in those extraordinary moments. To the direct question “Do you like tourists coming?” the answers are usually very positive, as long as they do not spoil their village²⁷.

Here too, however, there are ambiguities that emerge from more casual conversations. Campo di Giove and Navelli are touristic centres -they consider themselves such- in different ways. The first is crossed by the so-called “Transiberian Railway of Italy”, or “Ferrovia dei Parchi”²⁸, and was hit by the

²⁶ Interview reference

²⁷ Interview reference (E.)

²⁸ The Ferrovia dei Parchi is a line connecting the cities of Isernia and Sulmona, 128.7 km long, with four intermediate stations in addition to the two terminuses. Only the Carpinone-Isernia section of the railway is now used by regular trains, the remaining part has been used exclusively for tourism since 2011

Source: FAI www.fondoambiente.it/luoghi/ferrovia-isernia-sulmona?ldc - accessed 14/10/23

trend of winter tourism in the Apennines, already fifty years ago. The other, on the other hand, feels that it perfectly fits the identikit of the historic hamlet (*borgo*), attractive to tourists in search of quality local products and ancient walls, rediscovered by many in the period following the Covid-19's pandemic closures. The tourist fortune of Campo di Giove thus comes from the presence of the ski facilities -although today they are in serious crisis due to the lack of snowfall- and the presence of a historic train that crosses the Apennines from Isernia to Sulmona, currently used solely for tourism purposes. For the town's administration, for many businesses, and also for many inhabitants, the presence of this train, which carries one hundred and forty people on each trip, is considered a great asset for the area²⁹. During the walk taken with the children, when we passed near the station, M. tells me that he has taken the train many times, but not from Campo di Giove, just from Sulmona to go to L'Aquila, while the train passing through Campo di Giove he could not tell where it was going. Shortly afterwards, one of his classmate stares at the train stopped at the platform and says: "lo sai che l'anno scorso è passato un treno che ci potevano andare solo i ricchi?" (do you know that last year there was a train that only rich people could enter?), referring to the "Transiberiana d'Italia". The child's statement points out a relationship in his head between rich-tourist and poor-inhabitant, or at least highlights the fact that that train is perceived by him, by M. -and I imagine by their families, their cultural context- as not for them, inaccessible, exclusive. In Navelli, when describing the photo depicting the San Pelino square, E. tells me that the square is the centre of the village, it is important not so much for its centrality in the lives of the inhabitants or for the presence of the school, but because the chickpea festival is held there (image 13_4.1).



Image 13_4.1 - Navelli, photo by E.
From a conversation about photo 13_4.1

E: io ho scelto questa foto perché...praticamente, rappresenta

B: c'è anche la macchina del papà! ridono

E: rappresenta una parte di Navelli che mi piace tanto, e poi qua si tiene la sagra dei ceci che è una festa importantissima per Navelli. Quindi questa foto è come se fosse tutto.

Io: tutto?! bene, interessante

B: è il centro di Navelli

E: è proprio la parte importante, perché proprio qui si fa diciamo tutta la sagra, quindi è proprio la parte più importante

²⁹ From audio recording of workshop 2 at Campo di Giove - 11/04/2022

In E.'s words it is possible to discern, in addition to the territorial pride mentioned above, the influence of a certain type of narrative that makes tourism the only way to revive small towns (Barbera et al., 2022). In the area, in fact, the traditional cultivation of saffron and certain legumes has become the focus of a substantial territorial marketing plan that has made the Navelli plain the Saffron Plain, and Navelli itself a village symbolising the rebirth of the depopulated hamlets of the Apennines. In addition, at the time the interview was conducted, Navelli was competing to become the “Borgo dei Borghi” (Hamlet of Hamlets), a title awarded by the RAI2 television programme 'il Kilimangiaro' which, after identifying twenty small villages of particular historical and artistic interest each year, organises an online vote to determine the winner.

Another indication of the pervasiveness of the production of discourse (Sabatini, 2023; Bindi, 2022) on the villages, comes from the titles that the children of Navelli decided to assign to the drawings representing the itinerary we walked during our tour through the village. In Barisciano and Campo di Giove, children chose titles for their maps that tended to be descriptive of the fact that we had taken a walk through the village. Sometimes the focus of the title was on the village itself (“In giro per il paese”, “Alla scoperta di Barisciano”, “Un viaggio a Campo di Giove”, “Una passeggiata per Campo di Giove”³⁰), other times they centred the title on themselves and their own experience (“La nostra mappa”, “Scopriamo Barisciano”, “Io senza paura”, “Una giornata perfetta con Matteo e Giulia”³¹). In Navelli, the theme of the titles chosen is always the village, its history, its future, and its identity: “Tutto storico”, “Camminata Italese”, “Mappa Navellese 2.0”, “La mappa trovata a Navelli più vecchia”, “Navelli miglior Borgo dei Borghi”³². This small but significant episode leads the reflection on how much even children, right from primary school, are immersed and persuaded with great fascination in the idealisation of the *borgo*.

What has just been said, however, is not meant to deny the value that local festivities assume for the communities, including the communities of children, of the *montagne di mezzo*: in many of the conversations with the participants, the moments of festivity emerged as appointments to be spoken of with enthusiasm and pride. Occasions out of the ordinary, to be remembered, for some the most important occasions of the year that break the monotony of everyday life. In these dates, for a moment the village becomes a centre, people arrive from neighbouring towns, from the nearest cities. From different elsewhere groups of people move to the small centre, subverting the usual

³⁰ “Around the village”, “Discovering Barisciano”, “A trip to Campo di Giove”, “A walk through Campo di Giove”.

³¹ “Our map”, “Let's discover Barisciano”, “The fearless”, “A perfect day with Matteo and Giulia”.

³² “All historic”, “Italese walking (a mixture of Navelli and Italy)”, “Navellese map 2.0”, “The map found in Navelli's oldest village”, “Navelli best village of villages”

logic whereby it is the inhabitants of the village who move to other places. In this regard, I find it interesting to quote what F., a teacher from Campo di Giove, told me during an informal conversation we had. She spoke of the fact that teachers who are called from Sulmona to work at Campo di Giove complain that the village is far away and the road winding and dangerous in winter. The Sulmona-Campo di Giove distance for those who live in Sulmona is great, while for those who live in Campo di Giove “Arrivà a Sulmona è n'attimo” (“Reach Sulmona is very fast”), accustomed as they are to refer to Sulmona for any needs that the village cannot satisfy, and used to face the mountain roads in all weather conditions.

4.1.4 Ideas of “mountain” and “city”

The children’s words reveal a great familiarity with the different places in the three villages, but also a good knowledge of their surroundings. Part of the toponymy relating to the specific folds of the mountains closest to the villages has gradually been lost with the abandonment of pastoralism, mountain agriculture and forest cutting, historically characterising dwelling in the *montagne di mezzo*. Girls and boys, however, at least most of them, still declare to fancy the mountains a lot and frequent them often. What has changed profoundly compared to the past, is that mountains are now seen primarily as a space for leisure (with the exception of those who still carry on trades related to agriculture and livestock farming), not only for who lives in the city, coming to the mountain in search of a break from hectic urban life, but also for those who continue to inhabit the mountain areas. On the one hand, this entails the loss of certain practices linked to production but also to the care of the land; on the other hand, it allows to free people from the obligation, to forget the anger of a past inhabitants, made up of hard lives, leaving the possibility to imagine the mountains in more positive terms. The challenge for those who live in the mountains today, however, is not to forget their specific needs³³.

The relationship with the mountains is in some respects different in the three centres. For the Navelli’s children, living in a mountain village coincides with living in the mountains. For them, the mountain is made up not only of its peaks, but also of the coasts, valleys, cultivated areas, and built-up areas. The answer given to the question “do you often go to the mountains?” seems very significant to me: for some of them there is no need to go to the mountains, the village is already in the mountains, ““Noi siamo in montagna”, “Ci vado spesso certo, ci sto sempre in montagna””³⁴.

³³ See Chapter 2

³⁴ we are in the mountains”, “I always go there of course, I am always in the mountains”, Navelli. workshop 1 - 31/3/2022

In Barisciano, everyone agrees that the village is in the mountains: a small, perhaps medium-sized, mountain village³⁵. P., son of farmers, photographs his sheep in the mountains and tells me that the pasture where they are portrayed “E’ sempre nei luoghi di Barisciano” (“it is still in Barisciano”) (Image 14_4.1). Most of the children state that they go for walks with their parents as a leisure time habit, but they also go to woods and rocky coasts independently. I understand from the children's comments during the focus groups and from the interviews with adults, that children from families with a migration background tend to be less familiar with the mountains and they frequent them less often.



Image 14_4.1 - Barisciano, photo by P.

From a conversation about photo 14_4.1

P: io ho scelto questa

C: ah lo sapevo!

Io: bellissima

P: vabbé a parte perché so le mie le pecore, e poi perché mi piaceva il paesaggio che ci stava dietro perché comunque c'è sta nei monti di Barisciano...è sempre nei...è sempre luoghi di Barisciano

In Campo di Giove, a village that was destroyed and then rebuilt after the Second World War, the boundaries between the central core of the village and its ramifications are less clear-cut than in the other two cases. Here too, the mountain is an identity trait but, unlike in the other two cases, the children claimed to go to the mountains, specifically to do activities such as skiing (Campo di Giove has ski facilities while the other two centres do not), walking, snowshoeing. Many have a relationship with the mountain but feel that it is outside of Campo di Giove, when asked 'Where does Campo di Giove end' they answer 'at the cemetery'. The familiarity with the mountain landscape emerges also here. N. calls the mountain in front of his house “Montagna Uccello” (Image 15_4.1), or I discover that “Pesce di baccalà” -which I had often heard mentioned in children's talk- is actually a steep slope on the western side of the Majella (Image 16_4.1).

³⁵ Barisciano, workshop 1 - 6/4/2022



Image 15_4.1 - Campo di Giove, photo by N,
la Montagna Uccello



Image 16_4.1 - Campo di Giove, photo by S,
il Pesce di Baccalà

During the walk together with the children in Campo di Giove, we talked about wild animals. Everybody claimed to have seen a deer and a fox at least once in their life, almost everyone had spotted a wolf and half of the children encountered a bear. I cannot say whether this is entirely true, but talking about wild animals caused extreme excitement around them. Interesting is the case of L., one of the youngest participants in the research. L., at the time he took the photographs for our work, is six years old, shy and apparently taciturn, one of the most difficult to engage in discussions and comments, but as soon as the situation becomes less controlled and organised by adults, he becomes very lively. L. has taken few pictures with his camera, but the ones he has taken almost exclusively depict mountains: landscapes in which the mountain is the protagonist at different times of the day. Observing his collection of pictures, I thought he was one of those children who frequent the mountains very assiduously and that he wanted to tell me how beautiful the mountains are. (Image 17_4.1). Interviewing his father, however, I realised that L. is indeed fascinated by mountains, but at the same time he is also afraid of it. In fact, he often asks his father probing questions, that mountain he sees every morning when he wakes up is also a great limitation, as his father points out to me:

N: "Si si ci parlo con L., noi ci affacciamo la mattina e guardiamo 'sta montagna. Per lui è una cosa immensa. Mi chiede -papà, ma qual è la montagna più piccola del mondo?- Oppure -ma l'Everest quanti mila metri è alto?- ma per loro è un limite, qualcosa di enorme che gli si pone davanti"³⁶.

³⁶ Interview with N., Campo di Giove - 30/01/23

Interesting is the meaning given by some of the children to the words “ancient” and “historical”. For some, “ancient” - it is not very clear how old an artefact has to be to fall into this category (Image 18_4.1) - is a value in itself, almost comparable to the concept of beautiful. If a building is old then it is worth to capture it in a photo, no matter if one does not really know what it is or what its history is (Image 19_4.1, Image 20_4.1). It is interesting to note how the idea of “village” is associated with antiquity and that of antiquity with serenity, cleanliness. The “city” on the other hand - even L'Aquila, which is a medium-sized centre with a large historic core (Image 21_4.1) - is often associated with an idea of modernity, noise, traffic, insecurity³⁷. This fascination for “the ancient” can also be traced back to the strong attention that the children show in talking about what happened in the past in the same place. The village of the past is imbued with the narratives of the perfect, crystallised hamlet, understood as a treasure chest of tradition, unchanging in its ancient stones, to be valued for what it is, without critically asking what parts really have value for the past and present of the community, and therefore what is worth preserving and what instead could be rethought today.

The love of nature is often declared by children who choose to photograph meadows, mountain shores, pine forests because they associate them with an idea of nature (Image 22_4.4, Image 23_4.1). During the walk together I could observe how contact with open, green space is extremely liberating for the children. Particularly at Campo di Giove among the places on our itinerary was the Casetta degli Alpini, in front of which was a large meadow with a pine forest behind it. As soon as we arrived in the meadow, the children asked to run, to go into the pine forest, they started chasing each other. The little ones, tired at the last stage of our tour, lay down in the meadow, some fell asleep enjoying the gentle spring sunshine (Image 24_7.1).

³⁷ Barisciano, audio recording of workshop 2, village walk - 13/4/2022



Image 17_4.1 - Campo di Giove, photo by L.



Image 18_4.1 - Collepietro, photo by R.

From a conversation about photo 18_4.1

Io: R? la chiesa di Collepietro è molto frequentata?

R: sì, ci fanno anche...

V: sì, c'ha 60 anni!

R: no di più!

T: mia mamma mi ha detto che la chiesa di Navelli tempo fa i cavalieri usavano sia come posto per pregare, però di giorno ci andavano i -come si chiamano...- i pastori!

Io: a riposarsi?

T: sì!



Image 19_4.1 - Campo di Giove, photo by V.

From a conversation about photo 19_4.1

Io: L tu che hai scelto?

V: io? io ho scelto il paese vecchio

Io: e come mai hai scelto il paese vecchio?

V: perchè boh non lo so, mi sa di antico

Io: è affascinante?

V: eh

Io: è una bella foto, l'hai fatta vedere ai tuoi compagni?

E: no no, aaaah sei andata sopra il paese vecchio con tua nonna?

V: no no ci so andata da sola, Questa è la casa più vecchia

E: casa 40! di fronte a casa 40 ci viveva il nonno di mio nonno

V: quindi qua

Io: il nonno di nonno Eligio, e come mai si chiama casa 40?

V: non lo so

E: adesso è 'na biblioteca



Image 20_4.1 - Campo di Giove, photo by M.

From a conversation about photo 20_4.1

Io: ah, che cos'è questa casa rossa?

O: è del sindaco

M: no, ma che dici? no, è una casa proprio vecchia, cioè c'è da tanti anni. L'ho fotografata proprio perché è vecchia, cioè è rotta la casa



Image 21_4.1 - Barisciano, photo by H.
From a conversation about photo 21_4.1

*Io: Ma a voi, piace vivere a Barisciano?
coro: sì!*

Io: e se per esempio doveste trasferirvi a L'Aquila?

G: a me non piacerebbe perché è molto trafficata

C: seh! e i miei mi fanno uscì' a 20 anni. Quando prendo la patente mi fanno uscì!

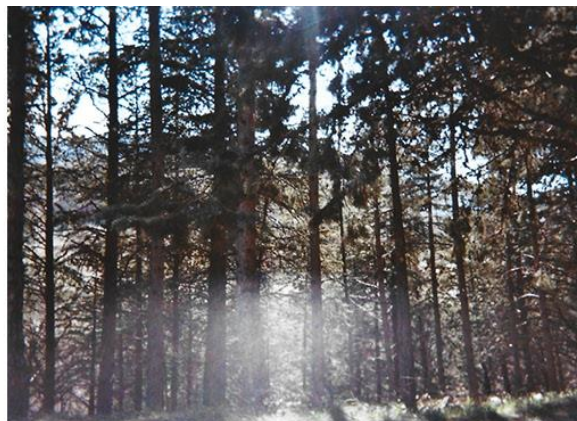


Image 22_4.1 - Campo di Giove, photo by M.
From a conversation about photo 22_4.1

Io: O? tu che hai scelto?

O: l'alberi, lì alberi della montagna

M: no! della pineta!

O: e vabbé sta dentro la montagna la pineta!

Io: come mai hai scelto questa foto?

O: perché il posto mi piace, e la natura mi piace, i fiori mi piacciono, quando lo guardi diventi felice, ti viene l'aria addosso

M: è una bella cosa



Image 23_4.1 - San Pio delle Camere, photo by G.
From a conversation about photo 23_4.1

Io: allora io ero curiosa del fatto che tu avessi scattato delle foto in macchina, ma questo è San Pio?

G: sì

Io: e come mai hai scelto San Pio?

Gioia: perché è abitata, perché a me piace la natura e sta in montagna, ai piedi della montagna!



Image 24_4.1 - Campo di Giove, photo taken during workshop

4.1.5 Growing up in a space under reconstruction

In 2009, when L'Aquila and its surroundings were hit by the earthquake, none of the children participating in the research was born. Campo di Giove, although it felt the swarm of tremors, is far from the epicentre and is not part of the 2009 earthquake crater. Barisciano and Navelli, on the other hand, were strongly affected by the earthquake. The reconstruction, with its dilated timescales and erratic flows, is still in progress. Reconstruction is in fact a discontinuous process: work to repair damaged buildings or to rebuild those that have collapsed, does not all begin at the same time, but according to reconstruction plans and requests sent to the offices in charge³⁸ by consortia of owners and public bodies. Over the years, work therefore proceeds in succession area by areas and by putting together different blocks (*aggregati*). The construction sites transform the appearance and accessibility of an area several times over the years: it may happen, for example, that a street that was accessible until the previous day - and which for years has been fixed in the minds of the inhabitants with a certain image - is suddenly closed. Then maybe the façades of some buildings are concealed by sheets, a part of it is then uncovered shortly afterwards because it needs minor work, or that a temporary passageway is created supported by heavy innocent pipes that will no longer exist after a few months. In the unstable space of the post-earthquake period, changes happen much more often than elsewhere: the opening of a building site, the closing of another, the transport of a special crane that blocks access to some roads for days, are daily occurrences in the time of reconstruction. The physical space, as well as the lives of those who live in a place under reconstruction, are for a long time unstable. Although they did not experience the earthquake first hand, the children of Barisciano and Navelli grew up in this space in transformation. Some of the participants were born in the MAP³⁹ (provisional housings) area, in both centres located immediately outside the central core of the village, made up of temporary buildings, with standardised measures based on family units. Others still live inside a MAP.

The subject of the earthquake has never appeared spontaneously in the children's conversations. The MAP's area is considered as one of the places in the village, some live there, as one might live in this or that area, or in the historic centre. In the adults' conversations, on the other hand, a reference to the earthquake is always there, in almost all the stories I have heard on different topics. When I openly asked the children about the earthquake, some of them said they remembered the tremors

³⁸ USRC – Ufficio Speciale Ricostruzione Comuni del Cratere & USRA – Ufficio Speciale per la Ricostruzione di L'Aquila
These are the offices in charge of managing all reconstruction practices for both public and private buildings

³⁹ Moduli abitativi provvisori

of the 2016 and 2017 earthquakes, others told me about the house where they were born, from which the family then left when they were four or five years old. On the experience of living in temporary housings, opinions differed widely between those who left and returned to live in a rebuilt house and those who had always lived in a house designed to be temporary and still live there (Image25_4.1). For those who have returned to live in a masonry houses, the MAP is small, the proximity to other units and the poor quality of the materials do not guarantee acoustic and thermal insulation. For those who still live there, MAP is home and it is not so bad. There are other children nearby with whom can play, and then it is not so small, with a larger family there are more rooms (larger families are entitled to a doubled module), and then there are friends, always the most important thing⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Data from the conversation on image 25_7.1



Image 25_4.1 - Barisciano, photo by Y.

From a conversation about photo 25_4.1

Y: questa foto rappresenta i MAP, perchè ci so' vissuto ai MAP

Io: e quando ti sei trasf...quando te ne sei andato?

B: 3-4 anni fa?

Y: 3 anni fa

Io: ma ci abitano ancora molte persone ai MAP?

B: abbastanza abbastanza

D: io ci so vissuto ai MAP

Io: per quanto tempo?

D: prima che non ricostruivano casa, quattro anni fa, sì, di più di 4 anni fa...di meno di 4 anni fa cioè, aspè, fino ai...so nato e so andato a casa che c'avevo 5 anni

Io: ok, e tu te lo ricordi quando vivevi nell'area dei MAP?

D: sì!

Io: e che differenza c'è...

B: ci sei nato tu ai MAP!

D: sì

Io. e che differenza c'è tra abitare nella zona dei MAP e abitare su in paese?

D: cioè che la zona dei MAP c'hai solo una strada 'ndo stanno le cose e non puoi disturbà, perchè se disturbi quelli ti...ti iniziano a urlà, dicono vattene. E poi è molto più piccola, cioè la casa dei MAP è piccolissima

Y: e poi fa caldo

D: tipo la casa dei MAP è così: con 2 stanze, io c'avevo due stanze quella dei genitori e la mia, di mio fratello e di mia sorella, il bagno e il salotto insieme alla cucina. Invece mo a casa c'ho molte più cose, perchè è gigante, era 'na chiesa più un asilo

Io: ah! A? e tu che dici?

A: però ai MAP è un po' divertente però, ehm cioè lì primo ci stanno tutti i bambini che ti puoi divertire. Però cioè, lì la cosa che non mi piace è che quando è estate, lì fa troppo caldo

Io: e tu abiti nella zona dei MAP?

A: no

Io: ok, Y. che volevi dire?

Y: ai MAP faceva un po' più caldo perché sono fatti di legno, quindi là fa un caldo!

Io: e d'inverno si sta bene?

Coro: sì, sì

Y: e anche quella cosa che ha detto A. di uscì con gli amici, infatti ho anche un amico che ora lui sta ai MAP e io sto qua

F: sì lo so

Y: aspe' poi ho finito, da bambino che ci gioco con lui, quindi vabbè siamo amici e, in pratica anche una cosa che non mi piaceva, quando uscivo c'era una signora, che era la vicina che era cattiva

F: chi? C.?

Y: appena c'era un po' di rumore, usciva e iniziava a d' "fai rumore, fai quello!"

F: quella coi capelli bianchi, con gli occhiali...?

Io: beh volevate dire qualche altra cosa sui MAP?

B: a me non mi piace tanto perché cioè, la casa è grande

D: no, è piccola la casa!

B: vabbè grande, piccola...però, vabbè poi il giardino

Io: ma tu pure ci hai abitato?

B: no, però la conosco...e ci sta un piccolo giardino, piccolissimo

Io: F. che volevi dire?

F: no perché prima D. ha detto che le case dei MAP sono piccole, però dipende perché ci stanno le case da poche stanze e quelle di più

Io: dipende quanto è grande la famiglia che ci abita, giusto?

D: rispetto a una casa normale è piccola quella!

F: eh sì, però ci stanno quelle co' 4 stanze che è mica male!

Io: F. fammi sentire una cosa, ma a tu stai bene ai MAP?

F: Allora, per il momento va bene abitare ai MAA perché ormai mi so abituato. So 5 anni che sto là e perché ciò pure gli amici

Io: comunque è molto bella questa foto

D: per me riandare a vivere a MAP non ci vorrei riandare, perché mo so abituato con la casa grande, gigante...casa nuova è un...dal 2017 ci sta

Y: io la casa, c'ho sotto è tipo...non una cantina è tipo un altro piano che là ci stiamo d'estate, c'è un portone

Io: la taverna?

Y: sì, tipo. Io là l'ho aiutato un botto papà, l'abbiamo aggiustata e mo abbiamo messo la play, le sedie e quindi mo ci giochiamo!

Regarding the future, for some of the children the upheaval of the earthquake is about to pass, to make way for something more exciting, projects that could perhaps change the face of the village. I ask G. and C. if they think the school in Barisciano will ever return to the old building in the main square of the village, and they plan big⁴¹:

Io: *Ma invece voi pensate che prima o poi la scuola tornerà qui o rimarrà dove è adesso?*

C: *Secondo me il sindaco farà un progetto per ricostruirla.*

Io: *Per ricostruirla, ma secondo voi sarà sempre una scuola, sarà questa scuola che ritornerà lì oppure sarà un'altra cosa?*

G: *Secondo me un'Università*

Io: *Un'università!*

G: *Sì, è grandissima!*

C: *Magari! Un'università qua a Barisciano!*

4.2 CHILDREN'S PLACES IN THE MIDDLE MOUNTAIN

4.2.2 Time together

In general, children spend a lot of time together, in groups, and move freely and independently in the villages they inhabit. Outdoor play, moving through a defined network of places in the village, seems to be the preferred and most practised way of relating with peers.

When asked "why did you choose this photo?" during the focus groups based on the photos taken by the participants, the answers were often "because I'm with a friend of mine", "because I meet friends here", "because it's the church I sometimes go to", "the most beautiful part is that I can see my friends". Friends and positive relationships with peers are crucial for the well-being of children.

Participants state that they spend a lot of time with others around the village, and for those who feel alienated from the group dynamic, the feeling of exclusion is very painful.

The class group seems at first impression to coincide with the group of friends that hang out together over the school time. It is very common in these classes, in most cases multi-level classes, for

⁴¹ Barisciano, laboratorio 3 - 27/4/2022

friendship and kinship relationships to overlap; indeed, having a kinship link, at least distantly, with one of the classmates is almost a certainty. It is not uncommon to go to class with one's cousin, it sometimes happens that one's own brother or sister, a few years younger or older, is also in the class. Looking more closely at the dynamics created between outside and inside the school, however, the divisions are more evident, the children's community becomes more elastic. First, the separation between the children living in the different hamlets composing the municipalities is clear. In Navelli, for example, it is clear how children in the village centre cultivate a daily relationship with each other that goes beyond the limits of the school walls, configuring a strong bonding between a small group of children who are growing up together. A connection that expands, outside the school, with older and younger children who have just entered or recently left primary school. During the summer, or at festive times, this group opens up to children who have come to spend their holidays in the village or who visit their families of origin. At the same time, the children from the hamlet of Collepietro form a cohesive group that only occasionally mixes at school with the one from Navelli, but with which it maintains a constant conflict, not always friendly and joking. In Civitaretenga, on the other hand, a second hamlet of Navelli, the children seem to have disappeared. G. plays with his brother around the house and in order to see his friends he waits until school time or Sunday mass, when he can join in the games of the village's core group.

A similar dynamic is recognisable in Campo di Giove where children in the village centre seem to form a recognisable community among classmates and with other older or younger children living in the same area. In the classroom, the circle widens with children from the neighbouring village of Cansano, about six kilometres away, where, however, another group can be identified that frequents different places and different networks of relations outside school hours. In Barisciano, larger than the first two centres, where the class is more numerous and more heterogeneous in terms of socio-demographic characteristics of the children's families of origin, the segmentation of the class group outside the school walls, even within the same area, appears sharper. There is one group of children that shows great autonomy and knowledge of the village in which it moves freely on a daily basis. Another one, on the other hand, linked to the MAP area, moves around the streets of this separate area, still very close to the rest of the village. For the most part, this group is made up of children with a migratory background, very often born in Italy or moved here when they were very young. While at school a clear distinction between those who were born in families living in Barisciano for generations and those who have lived in the village for less time is not so evident -although in jokes and games the differences are often highlighted- outside school the separation of children according

to community of origin is more clear-cut (Image 26_4.2). Again, for those living in the more distant hamlets, the loneliness of growing up without the proximity of other children creates sadness and a desire to join the group. The school in this case is indeed a great integration resource.



Image 26_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by A.

From a conversation about photo 26_4.2

Io: fatemi sentire A., anche tu hai scelto il parco giochi

A: sì, ho scelto il parco giochi perché cioè, si può giocare quindi...

Io: e tu ci vai spesso?

A: sì

Io: ma giocate insieme maschi e femmine?

A: io gioco qualche volta con loro

D: qualche volta A. viene a giocare a calcio ma noi giochiamo quasi sempre a calcio quindi...

Io: voi fate i tornei, lei ogni tanto si infila...e sennò tu che fai, giochi con le altre bambine?

A: sennò io vado sopra

D: le altre bambine non ci stanno perché non vengono

Y: cioè praticamente usciamo io, lui, lui, A, P qualche volta, C e poi...

D: e A!

Y: pure F

D: F è uscito una volta

B: raramente, certe volte ci viene

Io: e F tu dove giochi?

Fisnik: mmh sì, gioco di più a casa...oppure lì intorno ai MAP, al parco ci vado qualche volta

Io: quindi c'è un altro gruppo di bambini e di ragazzi nella zona dei MAP?

F: sì

Y: sì ce ne sono tanti di bambini

B: gli ucraini

4.2.3 Girls and boys

At the age of the workshop participants (six to ten years old, with a strong majority between nine and ten years old) it is quite common for the strongest ties to be forged with peers of the same sex. In Campo di Giove, the male and female groups are clearly defined and in open conflict one with the other. However, conflict -sometimes playful, sometimes animated by high tones and claims- ensures that the two groups are always in relation to each other and in fact experience social moments together. Places, trees, mountain shores, are contested between one group and the other; if the girls win a tree, which they decorate with little lights and coloured glasses, the boys try to take it away from them. The relationship between one and the other faction passes through a fight for places (Image 27_4.2). In Navelli, the rift between the group of females and the group of males does not seem to be so net, perhaps because the children's group appears to be more scattered between the centre of Navelli and its hamlets, the group's numbers are reduced, and they must make do to spend time with each other; however, even here the conflict emerges in the narratives. In the Barisciano children's narratives, on the other hand, more than the conflict appears the difference between boys and girls in autonomy and the possibility of playing outside freely. The girls tell in some cases that they are more restricted by their families, only sometimes joining the group of boys who freely play around the village, some of them often meet up with other girls to play at friend's houses, for others, instead, they are only allowed to freely frequent certain circumscribed places such as the playground (Image 28_4.2).



Image 27_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by M.

From a conversation about photo 27_4.2

Io: M che hai scelto?

M: l'abero magico

Io: è lui!

ridiamo

io: allora, però adesso mi dovete far capire perché quest'albero è l'albero magico, mi hanno detto una certa storia delle basi da conquistare...

M: eee no no quello lasciamo stà

E: maschi e femmine

M. e L: ma tanto noi ci spostiamo

Io: fatemi capire questa due cose

E: le femmine hanno iniziato a litigare

Io: allora, iniziamo dall'albero magico

M: praticamente, tre amiche nostre I, A e G, hanno trovato quest'albero dove hanno iniziato a mangiare, a fare scampagnate. E allora poi ci hanno portato anche a noi. Poi ci abbiamo passato tanti giorni, e tutto. Poi l'estate siamo andate anche alla Casetta degli Alpini...

E: sono venuti anche altri amici nostri da Roma, Napoli

M: eh da tutto il mondo

ridono

M: e poi verso marzo, aprile

E: no, aprile

M: aprile, so arrivati i maschi!

L: iiii, P, eee

Io. ma è magico perchè?

Lav: sì, perché è il nostro posto, che loro hanno rovinato!

Io: e come l'hanno rovinato?

E: allora, hanno rotto i bicchieri colorati...

M: che avevamo appeso

Io: ah quindi lo avevate personalizzato

E: però, noi, hanno fatto una linea, noi ci siamo ci siamo spostati all'altro campo

L: hanno iniziato a rompere tutto!

E: quel campo è tutto nostro! c'abbiamo due basi, tre

L: ma tanto noi ce ne andiamo! e non lo diciamo nessuno dove andiamo!



Image 28_4.2 - Collepietro, photo by R.

From a conversation about photo 28_4.2

R: questa qua l'ho scattata avanti a casa mia che ci stanno delle scalette e questo è praticamente un giro che porta alla chiesa

V: sì, alla chiesa e alla casetta

R: alla casetta che noi sappiamo

Io: e qual è sta casetta che voi sapete?

V: è dei ragazzi

R: quelli più grandi

V: noi ci andiamo a nasconderci male (ride)

T: invece ci sta una casetta al campo sportivo però non ci puoi entrà perché è sporchissima

V: vabbuò puliamola e sta a posto

...

R: c'è il vuoto, qui non c'è più niente. Questa casa ha una parete e poi non c'è più niente

Io: è abbandonata?

V: qua ci stava una stalla, ci stavano dei maiali

R: e poi da qua vicino, c'è un'altra foto che ho scattato, o no? questa qua è casa mia

Io: ma voi abitate vicini V e R?

in coro: no

V: non tanto, io tutti i giorni mi faccio 50000 chilometri con la bici a chiamà tutti

Io: perché tu abiti fuori dal paese? fuori da Collepietro?

V: no, no io sto a Collepietro

T: un giorno mi ricordo avevo comprato la nuova bicicletta bellissima

V: eh io il primo giorno ho fatto la capriola mannaggia...

T: ci sta una strada tutta sterrata, molto bella io la faccio tutti i giorni

V: ma quando ti jetti con le bici?

T: sì, allora ci stava una pietra, mi so impuntato con la bicicletta nella pietra ho dato una facciata...e niente

V: aaaah solo quello ti sei fatto!

4.2.4 Activities and games

Apart from a few references to virtual games, played by some of the male participants alone or with friends, most of the play time is spent by girls and boys outdoors. Hide-and-peek, football, “rialzo”, are the most popular games among the groups, but some of them also say they do parkour.

Looking at the photographic material collected, the first clear finding that emerges is the overwhelming majority of photographs depicting outdoor locations (396) compared to those taken indoors (21). This result was perhaps influenced by the discussions we had with the classes in the first of our appointments in which, in identifying the list of places frequented by the children, we only focused on open spaces. However, it is then supported by what I was able to observe in the time spent with the children, by the stories linked to the images collected and also by the interviews with the adults.

The architectural and morphological conformation of the three villages, as well as the political choices of those who administer them, make the space differently experienced in the three centres, even if they have some features in common. A first substantial difference is the presence or absence of cars. In Navelli, a center with an obvious medieval structure that follows narrow alleys climbing up a hill, much of the historic core is impassable to cars and therefore effectively pedestrian. Navelli Alto, the village's historic core, is therefore the perfect setting for the adventures of children, who move within it with great freedom on foot or by bicycle. Here, they often meet in the square -the access point to the historic centre at the base of the hill- without making an appointment⁴². From there, the games start moving between streets, squares, without a substantial difference between places designed to welcome children -*places for children*- and places that children freely take possession of -*children places*- (Rasmussen, 2004). Even in Campo di Giove the central square is a meeting point, but the presence of cars and the more fragmented building fabric do not allow the same fluidity in the group's movements. It is better to move around by bicycle⁴³. It is difficult to play in the square, since cars use the central fountain as a kind of roundabout, so it is necessary to find more sheltered spots to be safe, such as the back of the Nanni building.

⁴² Navelli, workshop 1 - 31/3/2022

⁴³ Campo d Giove, workshop 2 - 11/4/2022

The bicycle is both a means of getting around with great autonomy, and the protagonist of amazing adventures. The descents from the mountain coasts or through the alleys of the village at speed, reserve great emotions and legendary falls (Image 28_4.2, Image 29_4.2).

In Navelli, the children strongly wanted to include in their map what they call “beaches” (*spiagge*). They are strongly downhill “*piagge*” surrounding the historical core, from which they launch themselves by bicycle, just as the children of Barisciano tell of climbing “behind the Madonna” (“dietro alla Madonna”) and then launching themselves by bicycle along a broken road.

The game of football seems to be the most practised among boys, while hiding in abandoned or not always inhabited houses, reserve the thrill of discovery and the thrill of defying danger (Image 28_4.2, Image 30_4.2). Places that are hidden, secret, even invisible to the eyes of an adult, take shape through children's games. This is the case of the mysterious L.'s fort (Image 31_4.2) or the disputed “magic tree” of the girls in Campo di Giove (Image 27_4.2). Again, “the masks”, “That little house that you know” (“Quella casetta che sai tu”), are part of those places which apparently are not places, but which in the movements of everyday play instead take on an important meaning for children.



Image 29_4.2 - Barisciano, photo G.

From a conversation about photo 29_4.2

Io: G. tu che hai scelto?

G: il paesaggio di Barisciano

Io: e perché l'hai scelta?

G: perché vivo qui...

A: ma ndo' l'hai scattata? dietro la madonna?

G: dietro la Madonna

C: dietro il cimitero che sta qui!

Io: ok, e voi ci andate a piedi da Barisciano? ci andate da soli?

G: si a piedi tante volte

A: ah ti ricordi quando nel video là, dietro alla Madonna?

C: non mi ricordo, io e te?

A: eh quando volevamo caricà su You Tube ti ricordi?

Crì: aaaah

P:: voglio vedè

Io: falla vedere anche a P. e ai tuoi compagni

A: poi qua sopra guarda, aspè fammi vedè 'ndo si trova...ah si! praticamente se tu stai qua è 'na salita no? se tu vai qua con la bici e scendi qua sotto si va molto veloce

C: fai 'na discesa estrema!

A: e poi ci sta 'na curva...

C: la co' la bici ti diverti un botto, metti la sesta...

A: e ti rompi le corna! Là appena becchi un sassolino



Image 30_4.2 - Collepietro, photo by R.

From a conversation about photo 30_4.2

Io: allora, io e T. volevamo sapere perché hai scattato questa foto

R: allora, perché questo è un luogo molto bello...

V: aspetta, te lo racconto io

Io: uno alla volta, vai R, poi parlerai tu

R: allora praticamente c'è un buco nel muro

V: noi qua ci nascondiamo, cioè è duecento metri lungo

R: sai chi si nasconde qua? un uccellino. Qualche volta la mattina quando mi sveglio prima che passa lo scuolabus vado a trovare questo uccellino, che poi scappa perché...perché è un cacasotto

(ridono)

V: io prima di uscir stamattina...

R: cioè noi ci nascondiamo qui dentro perché stanno un accumulo di rocce e ci mettiamo dietro alle rocce. Oppure ci mettiamo qui sotto. Però diciamo che qualche volta è efficace e qualche volta no perché passano, non c'è più il muretto, si girano e ci vedono

Io: ma vi vedono chi?

R: eh, quelli che devono trovare!

The playground is used like other spaces for free play. Yes, there are swings and other rides, but children also go to the playground to play football or rope (Image 32_4.2). As Colin Ward (2000) writes "The truth is that children play with anything and everywhere. Just because an area of the city is designated as play space in a city plan, it does not at all mean that it will be used as such, much less that other areas will not be". In observing the play and the movements of the classes participating in the research, it appeared to me that this was indeed the case: all the spaces experienced in the everyday life of children are freed from a rather dangerous adult logic that increasingly tends to limit the uses of space within very specific boundaries. A logic that pursues the separation of society into groups with the aim to avoid the mix. In this logic, aiming at avoiding creating problems rather than dealing with them, is better to remain far apart, in the name of an idea of "security". In the city

where I was born and grew up, there is only one public park, which is well fenced off. Inside, it is forbidden to trample on the lawn, ride a bicycle, bring in dogs. The basic idea is that this green space should be used for peaceful walks, admiring a well-kept lawn, which, however, should not be touched. To avoid pedestrians and cyclists having to get along, it is better to eliminate the presence of the most annoying ones, and to avoid educating dog owners to keep clean, it is better not to let them in. In the city where I live there are two beautiful parks, one of which has a children's play areas, a sports area, and a silver sports area (for the elderly). The municipal regulations for children's play areas dictate that adults cannot enter them, unless they are accompanied by a child. I believe that the free play of children through the different village spaces is a real antidote against the negative effects of this kind of policy. The children's presence and the ways they use the space, are the bearers of valuable diversity that forces people to self-regulate, to find a deal to share spaces. It's a process that can pass through tensions and conflicts that cannot be eliminated, however, since eliminating them means erasing the educational dimension of public space, which is precisely that space where we learn to be together.

Some of the children practice sports in dedicated facilities, only in one of the villages there is a football school, for the rest families are forced to move. A few afternoons a week, the children are accompanied by their families to the nearest medium-sized centre (L'Aquila or Sulmona)⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ Adult interviews



Io: L. ma mi vuoi spiegare che cos'è questo fortino?

L: è tipo un albero con una retina

Io: che è un tuo posto segreto? e l'hai costruito tu?

E: è qui

Io: ah quindi tu ti infili qua sotto?

E: ti prendi il tetano!

L: no, perché qua dentro c'è un buco quindi posso entrare sia da qua che da qua

E: e non ci può entrare quasi nessuno sennò quello ti stacca la testa! io: me ne so dovuto scappare 2 km verso casa mia perché mi voleva picchiare! è un assassino!

Image 31_4.2: Campo di Giove, photo ny L. & conversation about photo



Io: e anche tu hai scelto il parco giochi...

B: sì, però quello di sopra

Io: ma c'è una di..cioè, fate cose diverse tra sotto e sopra?

D: seeee

B: sì, allò sotto giochiamo a calcio e poi di solito, hanno portato una corda, tu giri la corda e salti

D: non ti devi fa' prende!

B: là di solito al piazzale e poi invece sopra ci stanno i giochi ti diverti... sull'altalena...ma pure là giochiamo a calcio.

Image 32_4.2: Campo di Giove, photo by L. & conversation about photo

4.2.5 Children's places

Much of the work carried out with the classes was aimed at identifying the network of places in which the children's communities in the three villages move (*children's places*), the extent of this network, the uses attached to the different places and the perceptions connected to them.

The *children's maps*, based on the routes walked during the tour of the villages, were a useful work for identifying and reflecting on collective geographies, but also for connecting these to the personal geographies of each one. It was a work carried out in several steps, in which a first version of the map returns the shared geography of the class, and a second version overlays the homes and daily movements of individuals on it. Looking at the maps of the three centres in their first version, similarities and differences appear with respect to the types of places the children chose to include (Image 33_4.2; Image 34_4.2; Image 35_4.2). In all three maps are present the school, the central squares of the villages -Piazza Mercato and Piazza Trieste in Barisciano, Piazza Duval in Campo di

Giove, Piazza San Pelino in Navelli-, playgrounds, sports fields -bocce court in the case of Navelli- and some historical-architectural emergencies which take on different uses or meanings depending on the context. Barisciano's Fonte Grande is an imposing fountain dating back to the 1820s which, although it is included in the daily games as a theatre for hide-and-seek and parkour, it seems to have been included more for its symbolic value as an ancient monument. In Campo di Giove, on the other hand, Palazzo Nanni, a public palace used for exhibitions and events in the village, has been included for its courtyard housing a stone amphitheatre and a garden protected from car traffic, perfect for playing football. In Navelli, the Mura Rotte (Broken Walls), remnants of ancient and evocative arches destroyed by abandonment and earthquakes, are included in the upper part of the village's historic centre -Navelli Alto- and are located almost at its summit in a crossroads of narrow alleys, steep steps and abandoned houses that children frequent assiduously.

The children from Campo di Giove then included the church -which they indicate on the map, however, as being frequented by adults- and the "Casetta degli Alpini" where they get involved in summer activities, it in fact should be considered as a unicum with the meadow in front, the pine forest behind and the adventure park that come alive during summer. In Navelli, on the other hand, the class wanted to add to its map the bar, there are two in the village, and they seem to be frequented by both adults and children, the town hall where recreational activities and catechism are organised, and the "spiagge" from which one can enjoy a view of the picturesque valley, often crossed by bicycle.

If we then look at the maps in the second phase of the work -when the participants were asked to place their own homes on the sheet and trace their recurring movements with a thread- we can observe that some places within this network form tangles of threads decidedly thicker than others, concentrating more intense flows of passages (Image 36_4.2, Image 37_4.2, Image 38_4.2). In Barisciano a large knot is created around the school and around the playground. Less dense is the tangle around the Piazza Mercato and the Fonte Grande. Contrary to what emerges from the interviews, in the map it would appear that children also frequent some of their friends' houses a lot. In Campo di Giove the thickest tangles are created around the school and the sports ground. Immediately after are the square and Palazzo Nanni, less frequented are the playground and the Casetta degli Alpini. The neighbouring village of Cansano appears outside the border, where a new network of places is drawn by the children of that village, moving between the square, the playground and the sports field. In Navelli, in addition to the school, an intense flow of movement goes to the sports field. The square, playground and "spiagge" are also frequented. The sports

ground is the only one of the places identified outside the village centre, the other movements are within a few hundred metres. In Collepietro, as in Cansano for Campo di Giove, another micro-geography is drawn by the children of the hamlet who add the Collepietro sports ground and the local bar to the map.



Image 33_4.2 - Barisciano, children map, step1

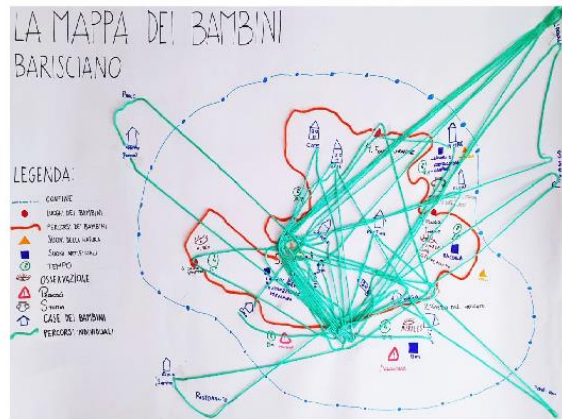


Image 36_4.2 - Barisciano, children map, step2



Image 34_4.2 - Campo di Giove, children map, step1

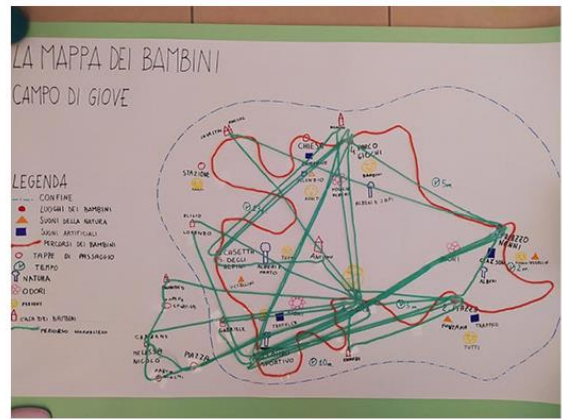


Image 37_4.2 - Campo di Giove, children map, step2



Image 35_4.2 - Navelli, children map, step1



Image 38_4.2 - Navelli, children map, step2

If -when recognisable- we place the 417 photos taken by the participants on a map, the distribution of the photos seems to reflect what emerges from the children's maps. In Barisciano most of the pictures can be placed within the village - however, it must be considered that only in this village, some of the participants finish their set of photos during the walk together (Image 39_4.2). Many photos were taken in what we identified as the *children's places* and the photos often appear very similar to each other. Four photographs were taken outside the village centre, all on the route connecting Barisciano to its mountain and to Santo Stefano di Sessanio, a village nearby.

In Campo di Giove the distribution of the images also includes the small town of Cansano, the subjects portrayed in the photographs appear to be more scattered and follow the elongated morphology of the village (Image 40_4.2). The places indicated as *children's places* are present in almost every set, especially the sports field, the playground, the square and the Nanni palace. There are many photographs here whose viewpoint from the village turns outwards to the surrounding mountains, which were snow-capped at the time the photos were taken. Almost absent is the small historic centre of the village, while driveways and 1970s buildings often appear.

The built-up area of the village with its alleys and stairways is the undisputed protagonist of most of the Navelli class sets, but the distribution of the images covers a large portion of the territory, including the hamlets of Civitaretenga and Collepietro (Image 41_4.2). The places identified by the class as the children's places are present, but in reality, there are many glimpses of the built-up area, as if the children had taken most of the photos while walking through the village. There are several photos dedicated to the surroundings of the village, rural churches scattered around in the countryside, and farm animals.

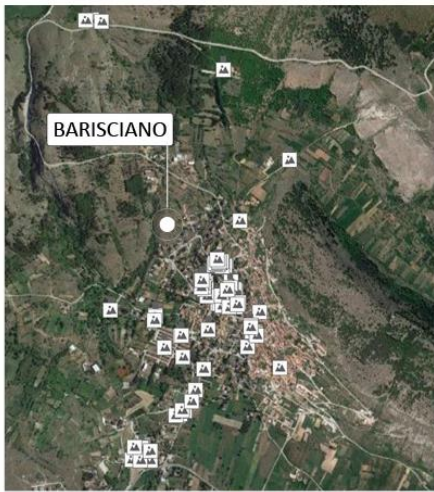


Image 39_4.2 - Barisciano, spatial distribution of the photos



Image 40_4.2 - Campo di Giove e Cansano, spatial distribution of the photos



Image 41_4.2 - Navelli, Collepietro, Civitaretenga spatial distribution of the photos

Looking at the content of the photographs taken, it is possible to dig more deeply in the spaces of everyday life that children's lives are made of. I tried to group the images according to content starting from the work done by Malatesta (Malatesta, 2015); I identified macro-dimensions (domestic environment/school environment/social and public spaces/commercial environment) by the type of places represented and then I delved deeper into the social and public environment, which is most represented, dividing the images into: street, square, playground, sports field, built-up area, unbuilt-up area, public equipment to which I added the special categories of fountain, murals, friends and animals. In the social and public sphere fall 353 images out of the total 417, while the domestic and school spheres make their appearance in only a few cases (31 the former, 22 the latter).

These data are strongly representative of the extent to which children's lives are projected into a collective dimension in which the theatre of events involving them is primarily public spaces. The domestic sphere's pictures mainly depict facades of their own houses, or those of relatives, and streets in the immediate vicinity of the participants' homes, all seen from the outside. Several are gardens of participants' homes, the rest of the photographs in this category depict animals, mainly dogs, but also horses, chickens, their own stables or those of friends and relatives. The photos depicting the school were mainly taken as initial test photos, portraying class details or classmates. The others, which are not part of these experiments, look out of the windows depicting trees and streets in the vicinity of the school or were taken outside in the schoolyard. Interestingly, the commercial sphere is almost completely absent (6 cases) contrary to what the literature (Malatesta, 2015; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Ward, 2000) notes about contemporary children's tendencies in the urban sphere, in frequenting commercial spaces as everyday spaces. The commercial space represented is in 4 out of 6 photos however a familiar space -the café of the family of one of the participants- portrayed by several of his classmates as a frequently frequented place. In the accounts of the three different villages, the bar or the pub seem to be part of the network of places in which children move. Indeed, the recent opening of a bar in Navelli is recounted by the children as a turning point, a place to absolutely see if passing through the village⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Navelli, audio recording workshop 3 - 28/4/2022

As regards the zoom on the types of spaces in the public sphere, the largest number of shots is dedicated to the representation of landscape views⁴⁶ portraying parts of the villages or views of valleys and mountains. For the rest, streets, squares, sports fields, playgrounds and public facilities (which appear in pretty much in equal numbers) seem to make up the network of everyday places in which the children's community moves, without a *de facto* distinction between places designed for children and children's places (Rasmussen, 2004). Play, which begins in squares, then overflows into streets, playgrounds, and sports fields.

In the category "landscape views with buildings" we enter the bowels of the villages, between the houses, in the streets (Images 42 to 48_4.2), but we often also find images of the village seen from outside, as to capture a whole, to describe a unity (Images 49 to 53_4.2). Other times, instead, the photos allow us to look out from the village, they are shots from the edges, where the built-up area becomes rarefied and leaves space to valleys, mountains, cultivated fields (Images 54 to 59_7.2), often with great poetic and authorial glance in taking these photographs.

⁴⁶ Of the total number of photographs depicting views, in 91 of them some buildings appear while in 25 buildings are not present.



Image 42_4.2 - Navelli, photo by I.



Image 43_4.2 - Navelli, photo by M.



Imm. 44_4.2 - Navelli, photo by I.



Image 45_4.2 - Navelli, photo by V.



Image 46_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by G.



Image 47_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by A.



Image 48_7.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by N.



Image 49_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by H.



Image 50_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by G.



Image 51_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by A.



Image 52_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by B. ed E.

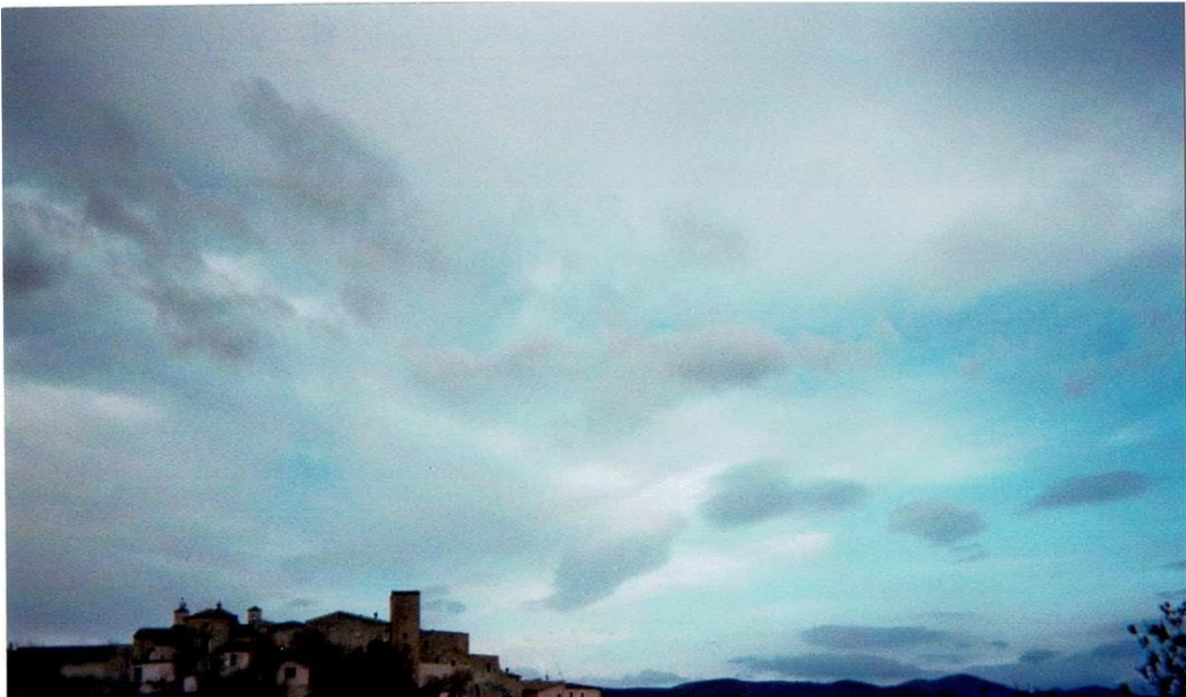


Image 53_4.2 - Collepietro, photo by S.



Image 54_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by L.



Image 55_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by N.



Image 56_4.2 - Navelli, photo by L.



Image 57_4.2: Collepietro, photo by R.



Image 58_4.2 - Navelli, photo by L.



Image 59_4.2 - Collepietro, photo by R.

In the “unbuilt landscape views”, we can see the force expressed by natural elements and the relation with the everyday life of mountain children, together with the fascination they exert on them. Sunsets illuminating ridges against the light (Images 60 to 63_4.2), snow-capped mountains, trees, forest, ponds (Images 64 to 67_4.2) describe a familiar landscape, to which all of them express a strong attachment.

Squares (37 pictures) play an important role in children’s social life. In the various villages, I was told that the central town square - Piazza Duval in Campo di Giove (Image 68_4.2) and Piazza XX Settembre in the hamlet of Cansano (Image 69_4.2), Piazza S. Pelino in Navelli (Image 70_4.2) and Piazza Mercato in Barisciano (Image 71_4.2)- is the place where people meet even without dating. However, the square is also experienced as a place of representation, a symbol of the town, where there is often an iconic statue or a fountain that children, for some reason, feel they must photograph as 'important monuments'. A key point to note is that the squares almost always appear empty in the pictures. None of the children wanted, or perhaps could, photograph a moment of collective gathering. As empty as the squares, are the streets, mostly village alleys, narrow passages, steps (Images 72 to 77_4.2) minus the driveways, often located at the edge of the village (Images 78 to 81_4.2).

Playgrounds and sports facilities, especially football pitches, are important places in the everyday life of children. All three villages have a playground with rides (swings, slides and the like) and, at some distance, football pitches and in some cases basketball courts. It would appear to be the result of the same type of interventions by administrations in the early 2000s because these spaces in the three villages and their hamlets look very similar (Pictures 82 to 85_7.2). What is important to note is that in these specially designed places for children, play and relationships are mostly unmediated by adults. Places, indeed, where adults are not present. Even the use of the fields is in some cases by reservation, but then it is the children who manage the game freely, as there are no football schools or sports associations working with children. In Campo di Giove, the presence of the ski resort means that almost all the boys and girls in the village are familiar with skiing and frequent the slopes assiduously throughout the winter season. The only space I have identified -besides the school- as a place where adults control and organise the children's activities is the Town Hall in Navelli, where the children do activities dedicated to them and catechism courses, the same happens in Barisciano in the proloco headquarters.

In the 59 images of public facilities there are numerous photos of churches (19) active, temporary or disused (Images 86 to 93_4.2) public buildings such as town halls (Image 94_4.2), the railway station at Campo di Giove (Image 95_4.2), the former school in Barisciano (Image 96_4.2) now housing municipal services. An important place in the lives of girls and children in Barisciano and Campo di Giove is the so-called “Casetta degli Alpini” which is opened during festivals or events organised in the village and which is recognised by girls and children as a place of recreation and entertainment (Images 97 and 98_4.2)

In addition to the above-mentioned categories, it is also possible to identify special categories, not exactly places but recurring details that can nevertheless tell us something about the geography of children. A special value seems to be assumed by the various fountains and drinking fountains found around the villages. Both in the count of the photos taken (15 photos of fountains) and in the class outings, fountains are an element to which the participants pay great attention (Images 99 and 100_7.2). During the walk in Navelli, arriving to a small fountain in the heart of the historical core was a source of great joy for the children, who rushed en masse to drink. The same thing happened in Campo di Giove where, having arrived at the last stage of our walk, finally in a meadow, children rushed to drink at the small fountain there. We can perhaps connect their attention to outdoor play, when one is on the street for many hours the need to drink appears natural and therefore for children the drinking fountain is a resource they keep in mind when moving around. This aspect could also be linked to the value and use that collective fountain had until the recent past in these villages, where there was no running water in the houses. Washing clothes, vegetables, fetching water to take home were daily activities and rituals up to fifty years ago, which in some ways echo to the present time.

In Barisciano, two murals (Images 101 and 102_4.2) were recently (in the last three years) created, which appear in the photo sets of many of the participants. When I then asked them to explain why, the reasons were on the one hand the beauty, the pleasure of seeing colour, art in their own village, and on the other the symbolic meaning, linked to peace, of one of them. In the Barisciano’s class at the time we did the research workshops, three classmates had just arrived from Ukraine following the Russian invasion of the country. Their arrival caused an emotional jolt, a strong sense of solidarity between children, which emerged in many speeches.

The pictures depicting animals and friends also belong to the special categories, which are clearly not places, but represent the relational component (Augé,2009) that helps to construct them (pictures 103 to 107_4.2).



Image 60_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by G.



Image 61_4.2 - Navelli, photo by L.



Image 63_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by E.



Image 64_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by L.



Image 65_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by N.



Image 66_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by M.



Image 67_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by S.



Image 68_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by P.



Img. 68_4.2 - Piazza Duval, Campo di Giove, photo by M.



Img. 69_4.2 - Piazza XX Settembre, Cansano, photo by O.



Image 70_4.2 - Piazza S. Pelino, Navelli, photo by I.



Img 71_4.2 - Piazza Mercato, Barisciano, photo by D.



Img. 72_4.2, Barisciano



Image 73_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by G.



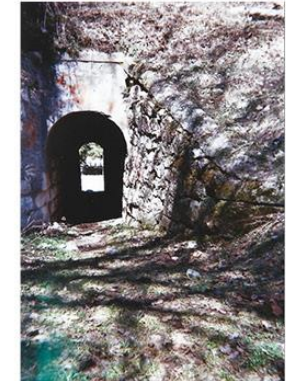
Img. 74_4.2, Collepietro



Img. 75_4.2 - Barisciano



Image 76_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by Y.



Img. 77_4.2 - C. di Giove



Image 78_4.2 - Cansano, photo by O.



Image 79_4.2 - Cansano, photo by M.



Image 80_4.2 - Collepietro, photo by R.



Image 81_4.2 - Collepietro, photo by S.



Image 82_4.2 - Collepietro, photo by S.



Image 83_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by A.



Image 84_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by M.



Image 85_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by E.



Image 86_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by E.



Image 87_4.2 - Cansano, photo by N.



Image 88_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by G.



Image 89_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by A.



Image 90_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by P.



Image 91_4.2 - Collepietro, photo by R.



Image 92_4.2 - Navelli, photo by M.



Image 93_4.2 - Navelli, photo by M.



Image 94_4.2 - Navelli, Municipio, photo by T.



Image 95_4.2 - Campo di Giove, stazione, photo by L.



Image 96_4.2 - Barisciano, ex-scuola, photo by A.



Image 97_4.2 - C. di Giove, casetta alpini, photo by M.



Image 98_4.2 - Barisciano, casetta alpini, photo by B.



Image 99_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by O.



Image 100_4.2 - Cansano, photo by N.



Image 101_4.2 - Barisciano, murales, photo by G.



Image 102_4.2 - Barisciano, murales, photo by H.

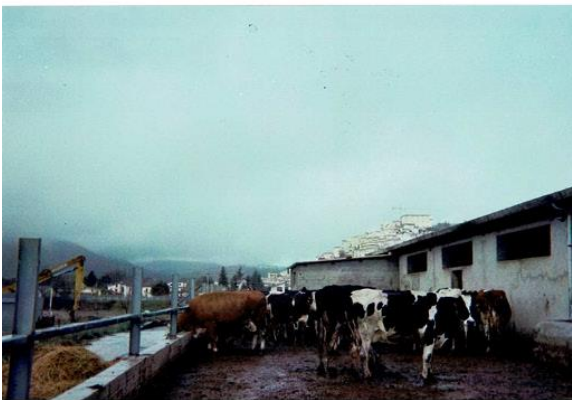


Image 103_4.2 - Navelli, photo by L.



Image 104_4.2 - Navelli, photo by B ed E.



Image 105_4.2 - Campo di Giove, photo by a.



Image 106_4.2 - Navelli, photo by B. ed E



Image 107_4.2 - Barisciano, photo by A.

4.2.6 Extent of place's networks

The analysis of children's maps complete with homes and daily movements is also useful in defining the extent of the networks of places practised by children. It is clear from what has been said so far that the beating heart of girls' and boys' collective life is the network of spaces identified as *children's places* and usually located within the built-up areas of small towns. In support of this, we can also look at how the borders of their own village were positioned by the participants in the three maps (Pictures 33-35_7.2). These, like the route taken together between the *children's places*, are represented as a circular line slightly wider than the one representing the route. The village basically coincides with the space practised by the children. Or we can note the fact that, although they were free to choose any place for their photos, none of the participants proposed images of L'Aquila or Sulmona, all the sets portrayed the village, its hamlets, its surroundings of mountains, countrysides, roads.

With regard to the relationship with what lies outside the nucleus recognised as a village, the situations are slightly different from one centre to another, also in relation to the distance of each nucleus from the urban centres of reference. Barisciano, in fact, is a twenty-minute drive from L'Aquila on a straight provincial road (SS17) on which one travels at a speed of eighty kilometres per hour. Navelli is about half an hour from L'Aquila, continuing after Barisciano on the same road, and its inhabitants for needs such as shopping or medical assistance can also refer to the centre of Popoli (PE), which is about twenty minutes by car from Navelli, inhabited by about 4,700 people. The inhabitants of Campo di Giove, on the other hand, for needs that the village cannot satisfy, go to Sulmona, which is about thirty minutes away by car on a very winding and sloping road.

The morphological characteristics of the three centres must also be taken into consideration. Barisciano is located at an altitude of 940 metres above sea level, and develops following the contour lines that rise gently on the mountain slope. Administratively, it has only one hamlet: Picenze, which, however, is closer to the municipality of Poggio Picenze than to Barisciano itself. The built-up area of Navelli, 760 metres above sea level, is distributed strongly uphill over a central core and the two hamlets of Civitaretenga and Collepietro, located, respectively, about four and seven kilometres from the central core. Campo di Giove (1064 metres above sea level), instead, spreads mainly on a plateau, except for the historic core -which however seems to be not so practised by the children- with larger buildings, one quite far from the other, and driveways connecting the parts.

Looking at the maps of the villages constructed by the children (Pictures 36-38_7.2), we can see that in Barisciano only two of the participants are located outside the village boundary. Their homes are actually in the hamlet of Picenze and the neighbouring village of San Pio delle Camere. All the others, place themselves inside the border, more or less around the orange line that describes our walk. Outside the border are L'Aquila, Paganica and Monticchio, in the opposite direction to how they are actually located. San Pio is also in the opposite direction, while Picenze is in a plausible position. If inside the village the relationship between one place and another fairly reflects the real one, outside the village boundaries there is definitely confusion. The space of the village is practised on foot and in autonomy, the connections covered by car are all represented in the wrong direction compared to the real one. Intense is the flow of travel to L'Aquila, at least for half of the children it is a usual movement. Outside the village boundary is marked Paganica, a village in L'Aquila where one participant has relatives, and Monticchio where there are sports facilities, both centres are located on the road connecting Barisciano and L'Aquila.

In Campo di Giove compared to Barisciano, the travel network is less dense (there are fewer participants) and less extensive outside the village boundaries. The places chosen as children's places are also fewer in number. The only movements outside the border are those of the children living in Cansano, who draw a parallel micro-geography in their hamlet. In Navelli, on the other hand, there are many displacements, although the number of participants is the same as in Campo di Giove, but all within the three nuclei that make up the village. In fact, the hamlet of Civitaretenga, where one of the participants lives (consistently positioned), the hamlet of Collepietro where three of the participants live, and the farm of the parents of one of the children, appear represented just outside the border.

4.2.7 Freedom and autonomy

Girls and boys are generally very autonomous in their choice of places to go, on foot and on their own they can easily reach the network of places in which everyday life moves, then by bike they can push on to isolated peaks and mountain climbs where play becomes particularly adventurous. The participants showed great awareness of the autonomy and freedom of play and movement, they declare to enjoy this aspect much of living in the village. For them and their families, this represents a value that only living in a small centre can guarantee. Some of the parents interviewed say that the

tranquillity of being able to let their child play freely in the open air in the streets is one of the reasons for staying in the village or to move in⁴⁷.

The village and the hamlets are made up of familiar places and people. Children know perfectly well the connection between streets, how to get from one point to another, as well as the connection between people, who is brother or cousin to whom. They are perfectly able to orient themselves and give directions by taking this or that hill, the house of a known person, or grandma's wood-fired oven as a reference.

In the literature, several positive aspects are connected to children's autonomous mobility (Vercesi, 2008; Prezza, 2007; Rissotto&Tonucci , 2002), Alietti et al. (2011) dwell on the importance of autonomous movement for the acquisition, elaboration of procedures and structuring of environmental knowledge. With regard to this last aspect, it may be useful to observe the itineraries drawn by the children on our walk together. During the activity, I asked the participants to quickly sketch out the route we were taking as we went along, with the support of just a sheet of paper, a pencil and a hard card. In general, the sketches of the routes were quite consistent with the route followed, and the children tried to put the movements made by the group on the paper, also adjusting themselves through the orography of the terrain. An uphill corresponds to an upward line on the sheet -from the bottom to the head of the paper- on the contrary, a descent is a downward line. Left and right were also spatial orderers used in the representations: if from the school we headed to the right to reach the square, the square was represented on the sheets to the right of the school. Shorter routes are usually represented by smaller lines while longer ones by longer lines. There are few circular routes, while, in the children's maps h the village, constructed collectively, all three classes represented their routes as a closed circuit. The drawings are mostly simple, made up of dots and lines, which is also due to the fact that the children drew while standing or walking.

Although simple and at times confusing, the itineraries represented in the drawings provide images linked to the morphology and physical characteristics of the villages: Barisciano and Navelli are developed in height, the schools are placed at the foot of slopes where historic centres begins. In Barisciano, 5 out of 9 maps are constructed as elongated rectangles in a vertical direction, following the course of our route uphill to the Fonte Grande stage and then downhill to the playground and back to the school (Images 108-111_7.2). In Navelli, the climbs are more sloping and the streets more curved; the route we took together, which started from Piazza San Pelino, south of the historic

⁴⁷ Reference to interviews

centre, then crossed it from east to west, running through a maze of alleys where the houses are very close together (Image 112_7.2). This movement can be discerned in the connections with wide curves, or in the disconnection between the different stages, of the children's represented itineraries (Images 113 and 114_7.2). Campo di Giove, on the other hand, as experienced by the children, develops more flatly, horizontally, with greater distances between one point and another (Image 115_7.2), corresponding to this more rarefied and multidirectional maps that represent, for the most part, the route as an open broken line (Images 116 and 117_7.2).

Contrary to the routes drawn by the children during our walks, when we constructed the children's map of the village together in class, the 3 routes shown on the maps assume approximately the same shape in the three countries. In the representation, the spatial relationships disappear, as if coldly with only a blank sheet of paper in front of them and without the aid of the living perceptions of their bodies, the children had eliminated the orographic component from the representations of their countries. The distances between one point and another are more or less all the same, while in the itineraries, it can be observed how the length of the pen strokes between one stage and another vary according to their physical distance. The mental itinerary disengaged from the physical dimension of the territory has become circular everywhere, confirming how bringing the body into play in geographical knowledge is a fundamental dimension of learning about places (Calandra, 2016; Malatesta, 2011).

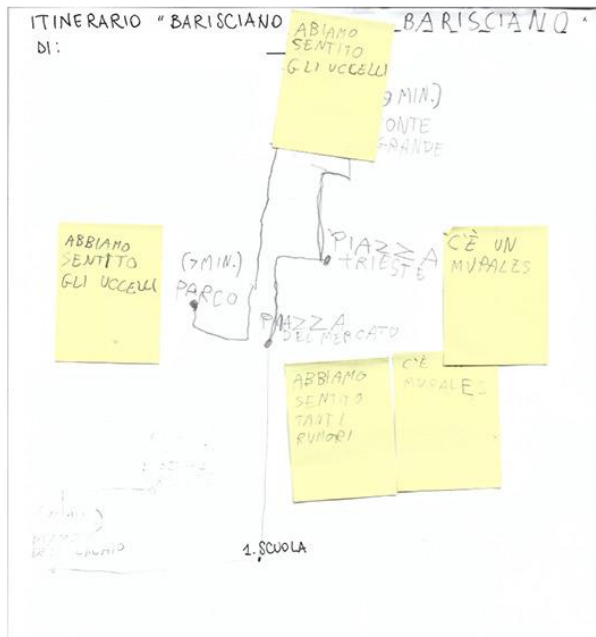


Image 108_4.2 - Barisciano, itinerary by F e P.

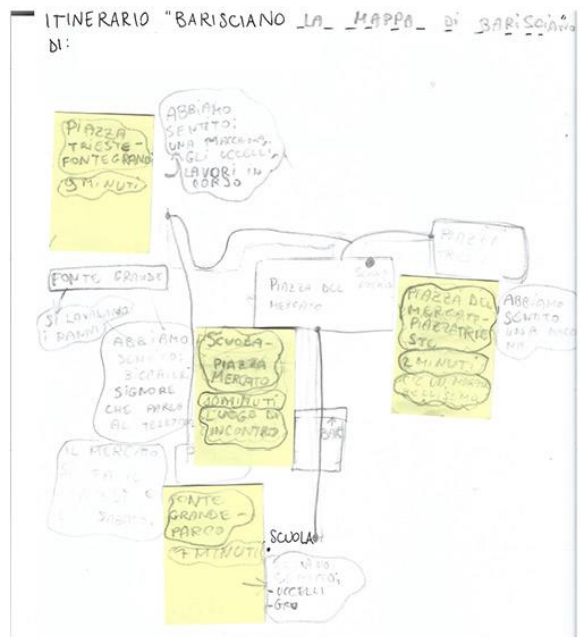


Image 109_7.2 - Barisciano, itinerary by H. e M.

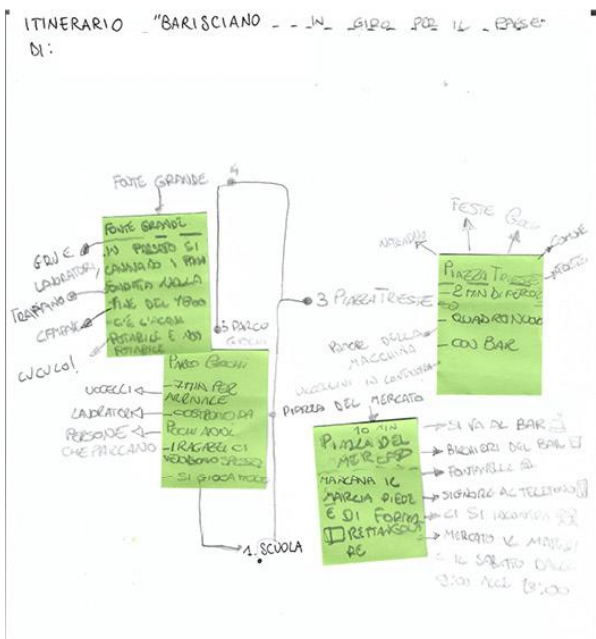


Image 110_4.2 - Barisciano, itinerary by C. e G.



Image 111_4.2 - Barisciano, common itinerary



Image 112_4.2 - Navelli, common itinerary

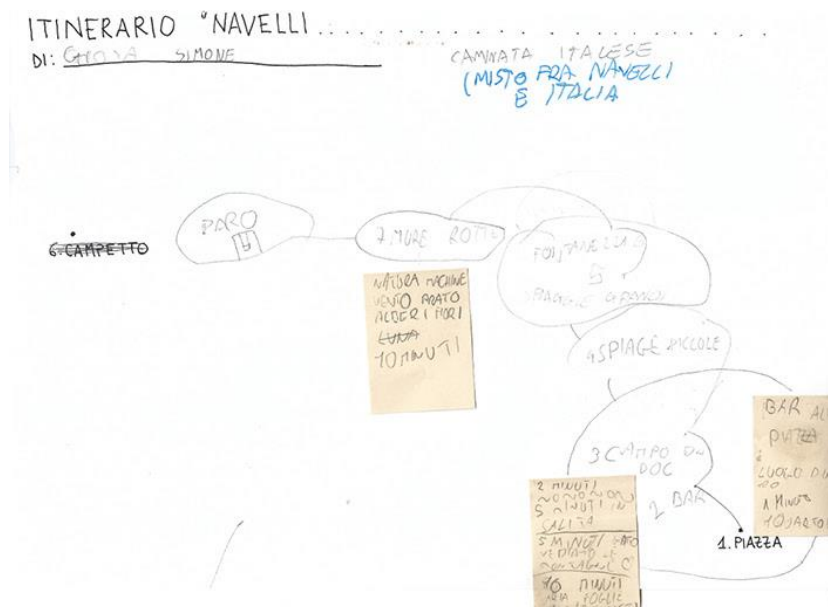


Image 1113_4.2 - Navelli, itinerary by G. e S.



Image 114_4.2 - Navelli, itinerary by V. e R.



Image 115_4.2 - Campo di Giove, common itinerary

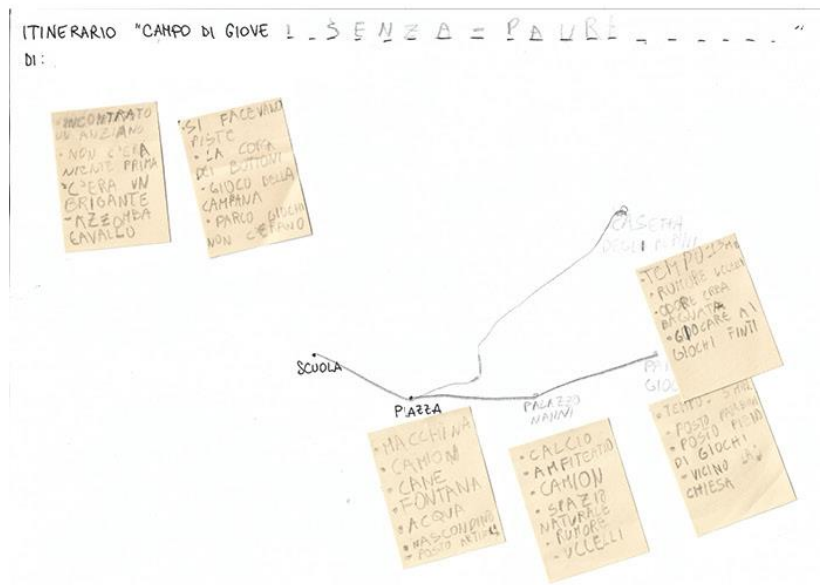


Image 116_4.2 - Campo di Giove, itinerary by E. e G.

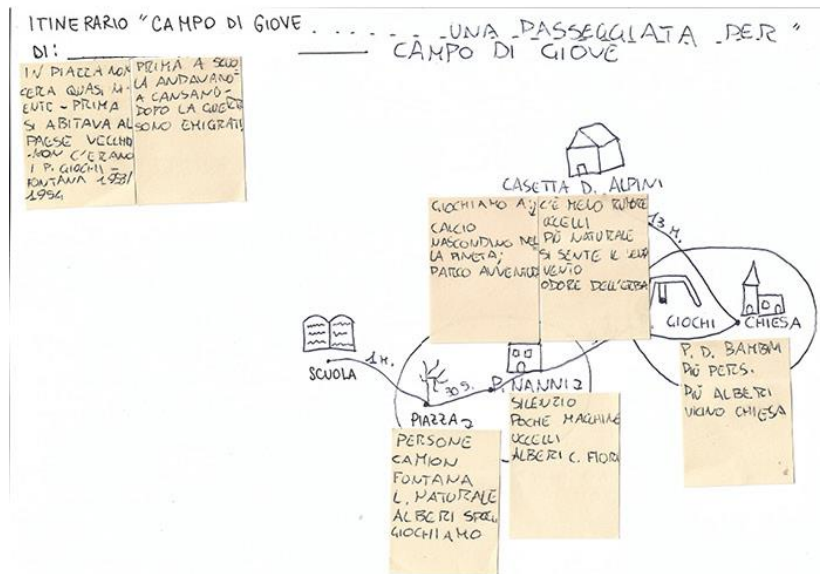


Image 117_4.2 - Campo di Giove, itinerary by M. e L.

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5. SCHOOLS, INHABITANTS AND TERRITORY

We have seen in the previous chapter how children's life moves through the villages where the research take place, what senses girls and boys express referring to local places and what imaginaries are connected to the elsewhere. We also delved into their collective and personal geographies insides the three centres by identifying a network of places that can be called children's places, and how wide this network can be. In the following pages, we will explore the adult's world. We will start from what happens inside the school, how do they organise and what kind of bonding are created between people inside and outside of the school building. Then we will go trough the analysis of how school is connected to familiar decision in the small centres and what values and meanings school assumes for the local communities.

5.1 TEACHING IN A MIDDLE MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

Sixteen between teachers, former teachers and headmasters took part in the research⁴⁸. Many of them currently work in the three schools of Barisciano, Navelli and Campo di Giove (eleven), the others are teachers who have taught in these schools in the past and are now retired or they are teaching elsewhere. The personal histories and career paths of each are obviously different: two of the interviewees are young teachers who, at the beginning of their careers, found themselves doing annual substitutions in the middle mountain schools where the research took place. The teachers currently working in the schools are of different ages, some are also mothers of children and young people who attend or have attended the schools in Barisciano, Navelli and Campo di Giove, some are inhabitants of the villages where the school is located, others are from the area around, and others travel every day for work. Some of them are precarious teachers, some have recently stabilised as tenured teachers, others have been teaching for many years in the institutions and have seen the changes occurred over time. The three retired teachers interviewed left the school at different times: the year before the interview, three years before, twenty years ago.

When P. started her work as a teacher it was the year 1958. Her first experience in a village school was in Pescomaggiore, a hamlet in the municipality of L'Aquila, in '69⁴⁹. To reach the school she travelled by bus every day from Borgorose (RI) where she lived, in the Valle del Salto, on the border between Lazio and Abruzzo, about fifty kilometres away. Schools located in mountainous

⁴⁸ The interviews with teachers, former teachers and headmasters were collected between May 2022 (almost at the end of the work with children) and February 2023 in Barisciano, Navelli, Campo di Giove and L'Aquila

⁴⁹ Interview with P., L'Aquila 15.02.23

municipalities⁵⁰ and attended by very few children, such as the school in Pescomaggiore, were defined as “localizzate in un’area disagiata” (situated in a disadvantaged area) by law 90/57. P. says that it was cold, she remembers never taking off her coat in a year of teaching. School was held in a large room with a wood-burning stove, there were six students: two in the first, two in the third and two in the fifth level, the most difficult classes according to P., plus the children had different levels “it was practically individualised teaching”. According to her, the abolition of small classes and the merging into bigger schools, in the more populous villages in later years was undoubtedly an advantage for the children.

The former teacher L., on the other hand, began her career in '83 as “maestra unica” (sole teacher)⁵¹ in Castel del Monte (AQ). This village counts today 430 residents on paper, and in '81, when the demographic curve was already fully downhill, had just under 1.000. Already in those years there were few children, L. recalls that there were two multi-level and one single-level class in the school, the first class she was assigned was a third-fifth grade of about fifteen students. L. says that the school was considered of fundamental importance to the village, she speaks of the immediacy of the relationship with parents and the ease in organising initiatives. The mayor wanted the school to always remain open:

...Manco con un metro di neve chiudeva, perché la scuola doveva funzionare. Ma proprio quel fatto di mantenerla...perché lui aveva sempre quest’assillo di mantenere la scuola. Io mi ricordo il sindaco fece anche una campagna feroce, andò perfino a Roma per mantenere questa scuola a Castel del Monte e quindi con le unghie e con i denti ha cercato di mantenere la scuola, perché Castel del Monte sta proprio fuori dal mondo in realtà, quindi, tolta la scuola finito il paese.⁵²

Instead, at the beginning of the 2000s, the school closed. The few children left in Castel del Monte now attend the school in San Pio delle Camere, L. has not taught for a couple of years now but her career has continued for a long time in the school in Barisciano, alongside D., her inseparable colleague and friend. I interview them together at D.'s house, they are complicit and close, like those who have been through so much together. They both talk about their years of teaching with light in their eyes and with a great desire to talk about a job they have lived with passion. They tell me of

⁵⁰ Established by Law 991 of 25 July 1952

⁵¹ Law 148 of 23 May 1990 brought about a radical change in the Italian primary school: the 'module' system was introduced whereby subject areas were divided between teachers. Until then, the teaching of each class was entrusted to a single teacher for all subjects

⁵² Interview with L. e D., Barisciano, 28.01.23.

nights spent formulating end-of-year assessments for children, they say that until ten years ago the assessment system was much more accurate, that the school had a more human approach:

D: ...Noi dicevamo: "l'abbiamo pittato", nel senso che riuscivi veramente a dire di un bambino quello che era, no? dal punto di vista dell'apprendimento, del comportamento, della personalità, dei pregi che aveva, dei difetti, sempre detto con...mo insomma io e lei, non ci siamo mai trovate, nonostante vivessimo qua -lei è proprio di qua, io mi so' sposata e so' venuta vive qua- noi non abbiamo mai avuto problemi a relazionarci coi genitori. Mai, mai, mai, perché abbiamo comunque sempre detto la verità però...

L: Però, però era vera. Allora io sono andata in pensione l'anno scorso...;

D: Erano cose che pure loro potevano riscontrare. Tu vedevi, che ne so, un difetto, una defaillance, una debolezza e lo dicevi non, non era un'accusa;

L: Io ripeto, sono andata via l'anno scorso, sono andata in pensione. È vero che c'è stata una pandemia, per carità, ma certi giudizi prestampati che non si potevano guardare. Cioè, l'apprendimento "abbastanza, soddisfacente" che significa? C'è era una griglia già impostata dove tu dovevi solo aggiungere gli aggettivi. Hai detto tutto, non hai detto niente. La scheda mia poteva essere uguale alla sua, cioè non si differenziava in niente. Quei giudizi erano di una tristezza... allora, poi vengono letti dalla macchina. La cosa terribile è che si affida tutto alle macchine, ma io penso che la persona umana, ha la macchina per una cosa tecnica ma non per un vissuto interiore.

Yet, one of the positive aspects in the small schools researched, highlighted by many of the teachers, is precisely the attention to the subjectivity and individuality of each student. When I asked P. what is the most complex thing about being a teacher, her answer was " essere attenta a tutti, avere un'attenzione per ciascuno in particolare. Considerare i singoli, ecco perché le classi numerose sono tremende."⁵³ In the course of her career, she happened to have more than thirty students in a first grade class, she was a very young teacher, she remembers losing her smile because she could not keep up with them all.

S.⁵⁴ is a young teacher, he has been working in a primary school in L'Aquila for a couple of years while in previous years he was a substitute teacher in several small schools. He says that what he misses of the small class is comprehend the children in depth, knowing the strengths, the weaknesses of each

⁵³ To be attentive to everyone, to pay attention to each one in particular. Considering individuals, that's why large classes are terrible.

⁵⁴ Interview with S. and E., L'Aquila 08.06.22

one: “È come se oltre all’insegnante curriculare fossi anche l’insegnante di ripetizioni”⁵⁵, he says. Many of the teachers interviewed agree that having a few children in the class is a great advantage, because one can take care of each one's progress, from enhancing the children who are faster and more curious in learning, to giving attention to those who show difficulties. Moreover, T. a special education teacher, who has been working in Barisciano for six years, where she has lived for twenty, points out that in small villages schools, you can get to know each children personally, his history, whether there are family problems, if someone is going through a difficult time. E.⁵⁶ who teaches in L'Aquila, but has in the past taught in several plexuses of the IC Navelli, adds that in small school's education, when it is possible to continue from infancy to secondary school as in Barisciano, attention can be given to the history of each one, exchanging with other teachers between the various levels, and taking special care. Of course, E. herself recognises that the teaching group is not free of prejudices and that the constant exchange between teachers who take over a child's school history can also be a limitation, as can the fact of maintaining a very homogeneous group of classmates over time⁵⁷ " ti costruisci un'etichetta che ti rimane addosso, nella dinamica del paese tu cresci, ma sei sempre quello ⁵⁸."

5.1.2 Multi-level classes and small numbers: opportunities, prejudices and needs

The attention *per ciascuno in particolare* (for each one in particular), to borrow P.'s words, would seem, for those unfamiliar with the theme, difficult to devote in a multi-level class. Often the formation of these classes arises from a condition of emergency, from the impossibility of forming a homogeneous class that is considered the standard, the norm. Yet, as M.⁵⁹ reminds us, “anche in una monoclasse i livelli sono diversi, ci sono le necessità di ognuno, non si fa mai un lavoro unico, è giusto così. Non c'è mai una classe di venti bambini tutti uguali⁶⁰”.

Seen from outside, the multi-level class might seem an old, outdated institution. P. herself, who is now eighty-five years old and has not taught for twenty years, was very surprised when I told her that in many schools multi-level classes still exist, “accipicchia!” she commented. Instead, in Italy, in the 2020/2021 school year there were 1,325 schools with one or more multiple classes, 53 of which are

⁵⁵ 'It's as if in addition to being a curricular teacher I am also a substitute teacher'

⁵⁶ Interview with E., l'Aquila, 03.06.22

⁵⁷ Interview with E. and S., L'Aquila, 08.06.22

⁵⁸ you build yourself a label that stays with you, in the dynamics of the village you grow, but you are always that

⁵⁹ Interview with M., Navelli 01.02.23

⁶⁰ Even in a single class the levels are different, there are everyone's needs, you never do one-size-fits-all work, it's just right. There is never a class of twenty children all the same.

in the Abruzzo region (Bartolini et al., 2023), and they are considered by many teachers to be an opportunity from an educational point of view. An assertion that is also supported by numerous studies in the pedagogical field that look at the multi-grade classes as an important educational opportunity, particularly for small schools (Parigi L., 2023) if appropriate strategies are used.

In the three schools where the research was carried out, multi-grade classes have been the norm for several years now. Campo di Giove represents a borderline case where the school manages to remain open despite having, for eight years now, only one class from first to fifth grade⁶¹. A much more common condition is the one of the schools in Navelli and Barisciano where multi-grade classes keep two or at most three levels together: in the primary school of Navelli, for example, in the school year 2021/2022 there were a first-third class and a fourth-fifth class.

The teachers interviewed, for the majority, agreed on saying that the multi-level class does not represent an obstacle in the children's learning; however, for the teacher it implies more preparation work than the single class and often teachers do not receive the right training on methods and strategies to deal with the multi-level class. For F., who has been teaching in Campo di Giove for thirty years, the multi-grade class is the norm and he has tested various techniques over time to make it work best. For example, with the reading activities she organises it like this: the children know that on Mondays the reading is checked. It is the fifth graders who start, who are asked to read fluently, "non leggere scattoso" (don't read jerky) says F., when there is a difficult word, you have to slow down and scan the syllables well but not stop, so as not to interrupt the flow. Then it is the turn of the fourth graders and so on down, precisely so that the younger students can listen many times and learn from the others this way of approaching reading. At other times, F. uses the opposite logic: the moment of the explanation of a content in the first class becomes a review for the others, thus beginning the explanation from the simplest topic upwards. According to F., this constant going back and forth between the contents over the years is extremely positive because the students can go over a concept several times, moreover, when a topic is introduced to the children at a level, it is almost never completely new to them, they already have it in their ears because they heard it before. F. says that she has built up her method over time, but she never received specific training on multi-grade classes, nor is any training given on this to the teachers who are annually assigned in Campo di Giove's school. Given the frequent turnover of colleagues, this is a major critical issue, because those

⁶¹ Interview with F. Campo di Giove, 23.05.22

who arrive are not familiar with these methods, so it takes time to learn how to interface with such a particular class and, once familiar, it is already time to change locations.

N. is a school referent in Barisciano⁶², he has been working as a teacher in multi-grade classes for three years and enjoys them very much. In his previous experience he worked as a teacher in kindergartens, generally run as a mixed nucleus of children between three and five years old, and he is deeply convinced that the mixed group is very positive for learning. According to N, in fact, in a single class it can happen that the stimuli provided by the teacher are too much for some, too little for others. Now that he works in mixed classes, it seems to him that there are more opportunities for the children. Different ages interact naturally, learning from each other, *peer tutoring* mechanisms are the key to working with the multi-level class. For N., who comes from a varied educational background, both as an educator and as a teacher and who has taken many public competitions, the theory concerning multi-grade classes was not new, so he was not displaced by entering a multi-grade class for the first time but learned further in the field.

R. currently teaches Italian and history in a second-third grade class in Barisciano, she lives in the village and is the mother of three children who attend the school. She chose for them Barisciano's school from kindergarten to middle school and she feels very satisfied, she regrets "che molti non ne capiscano il valore" (that many do not understand its value⁶³). R., like several of the other parents, known that her first child would be attending a multi-grade class, frightened, since she had no experience and she thought there was a lower quality of teaching compared to a single-grade class. Then, at the beginning of the school year, she gave herself a month to assess the situation and if necessary to transfer her son to a school in L'Aquila. She recounts that instead she was very happy with how it went, "sulla pluriclasse mi sono dovuta ricredere come mamma e come maestra" (about the multi-level class, I had to change my mind as a mother and as a teacher), she says. As a teacher, she admits that the work is harder, you have to organise the material at home and plan all the activities, you cannot improvise in class. In her second-thirds class, however, she sees very good results: for the third graders who have difficulties, having the continuous reinforcement on the syllabus is a success, moreover, the fact of being able to compare themselves not only to those who

⁶² Interview with N., Barisciano 18.05.22, the school referent is a teacher who assumes an organisational role of contact between the teachers of the small school and the management of the Istituto Comprensivo, which in this case is located in a different school. He or she carries out many of the bureaucratic and organisational tasks such as organising teacher substitutions, organising the school timetable, managing administrative office materials, distributing circulars and communications, collecting and evaluating class coordinators' project documents within the school, reporting any problems with the structure, etc

⁶³ Interview with R., Barisciano 18.05.22

are going faster but also to those who, being in second grade, are further behind with the content, is very motivating. Conversely, for the younger ones who are particularly talented and curious, being in close contact with their third-grade classmates is a great stimulus to learn more and more.

Headmistress A.⁶⁴ has a long experience in managing schools with a strong presence of multi-grade classes, she tells of having directed a school in the Marche region, where a multi-level class included students from the first grade of primary school to the third grade of lower secondary school.

According to her, having a multi-grade teaching experience is highly formative in a teacher's career:

...è come una vera e propria palestra, un'università per insegnanti, tutti i docenti dovrebbero fare esperienza della pluriclasse, si assume una competenza unica. Il docente di una pluriclasse deve essere come un direttore d'orchestra, se il docente è capace -perché poi l'altro problema è che non c'è formazione specifica- nella pluriclasse si ottiene un potenziamento delle competenze dei bambini, però ci vogliono le risorse.

In the interviews conducted with parents of children attending schools in Barisciano, Navelli and Campo di Giove, we repeatedly addressed the issue of how the multi-grade class is judged and experienced from their point of view. Generally speaking, for parents who choose to enrol their children in schools in small centers, the presence of multiple classes is accepted as a normal condition. It seems to be very much appreciated that the numbers remain small: *i bambini sono seguiti tutti allo stesso modo, vanno avanti tutti insieme, quando c'è un problema c'è tempo di affrontarlo se si è in sei, in otto, in dodici* says a mother from Barisciano⁶⁵.

In Campo di Giove, M., mother of a child attending the fourth grade, tells me that the multi-grade class is only viewed badly by those who do not experience it: she has never heard parents speaking ill of the multi-grade class when their children attend them. She claims that, once the fifth grade is over, the children from the Campo di Giove school have always had a very good transition to secondary school.

...Alcune mamme sono spaventate dallo shock che ci potrebbe essere nel passaggio dalla classe piccola a quella numerosa ma comunque viviamo in un paese turistico, i bambini sono abituati a

⁶⁴ Interview with A., telephone, 31.01.23

⁶⁵ "children are all looked after in the same way, they all move forward together, when there is a problem there is time to deal with it whether there are six, eight or twelve of them" from focus group with inhabitants of Barisciano on 18.01.23

*presenze diverse, non sono alieni. In estate si arriva a 20.000 persone, sono bambini che fanno sport il pomeriggio, sono bambini normali.*⁶⁶

Some of the parents who have children in primary school, and have not yet experienced the higher levels, consider themselves satisfied with the school their children attend for now but, unlike M., cannot say whether in the future attending a multi-grade and small school will create any difficulties for the children. Some of the mothers interviewed in Barisciano, who also have older children, claim that in the transition to more populous schools, to the “city school” they did not encounter any major difficulties. One of them says that, while when she was a child her parents could not choose -the only option was to attend school in Barisciano- today you can choose whether to take your children to Barisciano or to L'Aquila. The difference lays for this mother, in the fact that they – as parents who have chosen to let their children stay in Barisciano- “believe in it” and want their children to stay there, in the small school, where they are better looked after, children grow up together and parents they are serene. They know that the teachers are good, “sono gli stessi che hanno lavorato anche in città, qualcun altro invece ha ancora il pregiudizio che la scuola di paese sia peggiore”⁶⁷, says this mother. Not all parents in small centres choose to enrol their children at school in the village where they live, this creates a lot of friction between the inhabitants, who often talk to me about this issue. Parents and teachers who choose to stay in the village often feel their decision as a political stance, they get almost hurt by those who instead make different choices. They say that the motivation for enrolling children in a city school is prejudice against the village school. A father from Navelli wonders whether his villagemen are not victims of a “trend”: “genitori con la puzza sotto al naso che vogliono portare i figli a Pescara o a L'Aquila”⁶⁸. For some parents, however, the choice of having their children attend school in L'Aquila or Sulmona is also a matter of necessity linked to family organisation. Many, almost all of the inhabitants of the small centre -excluding those who run businesses, work in agriculture, pastoralism, or are employed in the public facilities there- work in the city. In L'Aquila, it is possible to attend full-time schools, a possibility that does not exist in the three villages. For those in the village who cannot rely on the presence of grandparents or a family network that can take care of the children outside school time, the choice of attending a larger school, that offers extended time

⁶⁶ Interview with M. and P., Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

⁶⁷ “they are the same ones who have also worked in the city, someone else still has the prejudice that the village school is worse”

⁶⁸ “Parents with a stink under their nose who want to take their children to Pescara or L'Aquila” from interview with N. and F. parents, Navelli 25.02.23

or taking advantage of the educational services present in the city, is actually an important opportunity.

5.1.3 Social bonds in the small schools

By all the teachers and former teachers interviewed, the schools in Barisciano, Navelli and Campo di Giove are described as good schools. G., for example, lives in the small municipality of Calascio (AQ), she has been teaching for fourteen years in schools in small centres in the province of L'Aquila. She arrived in Barisciano a year ago and says she is very happy to work there, “c’è collaborazione tra gli insegnanti ma anche con i genitori. Il clima è disteso, collaborativo, positivo”⁶⁹. S⁷⁰. describes it as “una scuola sana” (a healthy school), where there is a wonderful atmosphere between the teachers, and desire to help each other. He makes the comparison with the school in L'Aquila where he is now teaching and says there is much less collaboration there, among colleagues you do not know each other and what the other is doing in class, with some colleagues you never meet. M. and P., teachers from Navelli, say that: “nei paesi, tra docenti è come essere in una famiglia, se c’è bisogno ci si aiuta. Qua ci parliamo, ci pigliamo il caffè, c’è un clima diverso”⁷¹.

The alliance between school and families seems actually to be very strong. The relationship between teachers and parents is personal and direct, for B.⁷², a teacher from Barisciano, mother of a girl now attending school in L'Aquila, teachers are in the village’s school “quasi consiglieri, amici, parenti con le famiglie”⁷³ also for L.⁷⁴, a mother from Rome who moved to Navelli just over a year ago, “c’è un rapporto diverso con i genitori. Nella grande città il rapporto con la maestra è solo quando vai a colloquio, a Navelli con la maestra ti incontri all’uscita, se devi chiedere qualcosa puoi sempre farlo, è tutto più umano”⁷⁵.

In the words of some of the teachers, the aspect of a less critical attitude of village school parents than that adopted by city parents, on the work of teachers, shines through, which they consider advantageous. Teachers are often annoyed when parents are *troppo presenti* (“too present”) in the

⁶⁹“there is cooperation among the teachers but also with the parents. The climate is relaxed, collaborative, positive” from interview with G., Barisciano, 18.05.22

⁷⁰ Interview with S. L'Aquila 08.06.22

⁷¹“in the villages, among teachers it's like being in a family, if there is a need we help each other. Here we talk to each other, we have coffee, there is a different atmosphere” from interview with M. and P., Navelli, 03.06.22

⁷² “almost advisors, friends, relatives with the families” from interview with B., Barisciano 18.05.22

⁷³ Almost advisors, friends, relatives with families

⁷⁴ from interview with L., Navelli 02.03.23

⁷⁵ there is a different relationship with parents. In the big city the relationship with the teacher is only when you go for an audience, in Navelli with the teacher you meet at the exit, if you have to ask something you can always do it, it's all more human

dynamics of the school, many of them using the expression *mettere becco* (“prying”) into the teacher's work, to say that parents ask questions and complain about what the teacher proposes to the students. They speak of the small village context as a place where the families' attitude is more respectful, sometimes reverential, towards the teachers, who can thus more freely exercise the decision-making power that their role assigns them - or that teachers feel entitled to have - without having to question themselves too much. The habit of sharing programmes and educational choices with families and children does not seem to be widespread among teachers, who usually feel that they are the only ones - together with headmasters - who must make decisions on how to run classes and what is taught. This does not deny that feeling supported by families is an important aspect of a teacher's work and in the motivation with which they approach the task of teaching.

Moreover, it is fundamental for teachers to feel that they have a network of organisations around them ready to participate and take care of the school's needs. First and foremost, the continuous collaboration that the schools in the three villages manage to have with the municipal administrations is of fundamental importance. The mayors actively participate in the life of the school, they are involved in the initiatives promoted, contacted for any needs- They are also responsible for the school services they organise side by side with the schools. In the small-village context, institutions are generally made up of “real people”, very often known to both teachers and children, with a mobile phone number that can be contacted in case of need. But not only the administrations are present, there seems to be a community in the villages ready to respond to the school's needs. Teacher T. tells me of the presence in Barisciano of many associations from which the school receives support, both to organise initiatives and events and as help in responding to concrete needs. The “Comunità Montana” provides school educators, home educators -that's its task, as managing body of the social services per group of municipalities- it is ready to collaborate on specific projects such as the psychological help desk. The Schola Cantorum for example organises singing courses at school and helps with teaching materials, the Ski Club seems to have taught skiing to *a generazioni di bariscianelli* (“generations of Barisciano's inhabitants”).

Teacher O.⁷⁶, on this subject, says that:

...la scuola del piccolo paese vive del contesto sociale e culturale in cui si trova. È una scuola che deve affrontare molte criticità, molti alunni stranieri, a livello economico un territorio che subisce una crisi non indifferente. Nonostante il Comune supporti tanto ci sono delle situazioni anche borderline, che si

⁷⁶ Interview teacher O., Barisciano 18.05.22

trovano anche in altre scuole, ma che magari altrove ci sono più risorse per gestirle. I bambini per la maggior parte sono figli di allevatori, vivono la realtà in cui si trovano, vivono la natura, sono proiettati in quella idea di futuro⁷⁷.

The teachers recognise in children growing up in the village a great unity that goes beyond the classroom dimension, as also found in the work I conducted and reported on in the previous chapter. E.⁷⁸ describes the children in the small centre as:

...un gruppo di pari che cresce insieme, in città sono più soli, il gruppo non c'è, non hanno libertà devono chiedere il permesso per fare tutto. Bambini meno bambini, meno svegli, meno vissuti. Il bambino di paese forse ha viaggiato di meno, però sa stare con la gente, sa parlare con gli adulti perché è abituato a farlo⁷⁹.

Her colleague S.⁸⁰ agrees, saying that in the village “i bambini sono una banda sia dentro che fuori la scuola” (the children are a gang both inside and outside the school). In the school where he currently teaches, on the other hand, some of the children never see each other outside. It is as if they go to work together, he says that once a child spoke about his classmate saying he is “il mio collega di studio” (my studies’ colleague). D. and L.⁸¹, retired teachers, recount having seen both classes in which the cohesive group consisted of only a few, leaving the others out, and classes in which the group included all the different individuals in the class. Some of these classes were so cohesive that in the transition to higher school levels, in L'Aquila, parents asked to separate their children into different sections, because they were too complicit.

Teachers' and parents' narratives on homogeneity and compactness in children's groups, as well as on the active participation of parents in school life, falter when it comes to the inclusion of children with a migrant background, and even more if we speak about the inclusion of their families of origin. Teachers, headmasters and local administrators are well aware of the fact that, if village schools still manage to guarantee the minimum numbers to remain open, it is thanks to the strong presence of girls and boys from families of foreign origin, a share of students around 30% in the IC Navelli, for

⁷⁷ “...the school in the small town lives from the social and cultural context in which it is located. It is a school that has to deal with many critical issues, many foreign pupils, at an economic level an area that is suffering a not inconsiderable crisis. Although the municipality supports a lot, there are also borderline situations, which are also found in other schools, but perhaps elsewhere there are more resources to handle them. The children for the most part are children of farmers, they live the reality in which they find themselves, they experience nature, they are projected into that idea of the future”

⁷⁸ Interview teacher E., L'Aquila 03.06.22

⁷⁹ “a peer group growing up together, in the city they are more alone, the group is not there, they have no freedom they have to ask permission to do everything. Less children, less awake, less experienced. The village child may have travelled less, but he knows how to be with people, he knows how to talk to adults because he is used to doing so”

⁸⁰ Interview Master S., L'Aquila 08.06.22

⁸¹ Interview former teachers D. and L., Barisciano, 28.02.23

example, do not have Italian citizenship. The histories of these children are different: some of them were born in Italy from families who have lived there for some time; others, arrived in Italy very young, and still others are part of migrating families who, doing seasonal jobs, only enrol their children for a limited period. The type of migratory presence in the territory and within the institute has various characteristics and origins. In the province of L'Aquila, particularly in the band of municipalities closest to the city centre, there is a long tradition of migration from Albania and Macedonia dating back to the early 1990s. These families are permanently settled in the area and in the classes many of the children from these groups are second-generation Italians, although, given the shortage of work in the area, some families are now migrating to Switzerland. Those from Macedonia and Albania are obviously not the only migratory flows in the area; the relative availability of jobs in agriculture and construction fields, especially after the earthquake, also attracts workers from other Slavic countries, Romania and North Africa. In some cases, these are seasonal workers, who are only in the small village for a few months. The numbers in the classes thus remain changeable throughout the year⁸².

During the period in which I carried out my fieldwork research -between February 2022 and February 2023- the effects of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine opened a new migratory flow that brought Ukrainian children and mothers fleeing the war into schools, they often had no previous idea of the context in which they would be welcomed and who did not speak Italian. It is not always possible for schools to support these children with language mediators. During the hours when there are no specific support figures, it is very difficult for teachers, who already have a multilevel class to follow, to cope with the needs of these pupils. In Barisciano, an attempt was made to compensate by providing tablets to the Ukrainian children who, through the online translator, were supposed to translate the content proposed by the teacher and participate in the lesson. As predictable, the children preferred to use the tablets to play games and do personal research, attracting the attention of their classmates and making the normal functioning of the class very difficult. Some of the parents have expressed concern about the inclusion of these children in the classes, however, the emergency situation that these children are experiencing and with which their classmates have also come into contact, has nothing normal, somehow, I find it natural that their arrival should cause a profound upheaval in the class.

⁸² Interview with teacher M., Navelli 01.02.23

In the 2022/2023 school year, right after the time when I carried out the research activities with the children, in Campo di Giove, children arrived from Ukraine, Syria, Nigeria and Venezuela, always within the school's one first-fifth grade class. This was thanks to the SAI (Sistema Accoglienza Integrazione) project "Maiella Accoglie", strongly desired by the municipal administration precisely to increase the number of children enrolled in the village's school. "Siamo una scuola di montagna-multietnica" (we are a mountain-multi-ethnic school), says the municipal administration proudly⁸³, the problem is that, as happened with the sudden arrival of the Ukrainian children, without an adequate support for the specific needs of these students in integrating with the already formed class, doing school becomes really challenging. It's worth to wonder very seriously, when conditions become so extreme, whether there is the basis for offering all children a valid educational experience or whether, perhaps, if it is worth merging resources of different small schools, joining forces with other small centres and looking for ways of doing school in a broader learning environment.

A different story is the role that children with a migration background who were born or have lived in the village for many years take on in the class groups. For some of the teachers, these children are fully integrated into the class context. For others, however, these pupils, although part of the village children's community, seem to remain more on the margins: "sono una sfera un po' più esterna" (they are a bit more of an outside sphere), according to Teacher G.⁸⁴ The depth of the children's integration also seems to be linked to the relationship that their families of origin establish with the village. Teacher E.⁸⁵ says that if the family is known, has an activity in the village, the school also manages to involve parents who otherwise remain more tied to the communities of origin in the area. In her experience, foreign parents rarely enter the life of the school, unless specific kind of projects promoted in the past to give these families a truly active role. One of those projects was a sewing workshop in which mothers of foreign origin were able to use their skills without excessive language barriers and teach all the children. Schools often activate specific projects to strengthen the integration and skills of children with migrant background, but rarely those activities involve their parents. It is also difficult to involve them in moments that villagers experience as strongly identifying, those of local festivals and fairs, which are usually linked to religious festivities or culinary traditions that migrant families do not feel are their own or from which they feel very distant.

⁸³ Interview with N. and O, inhabitants of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

⁸⁴ Interview with teacher G., Barisciano 18.05.22

⁸⁵ Interview with teacher E., l'Aquila 03.06.22

5.2 VIEWS FROM OUTSIDE: THE VALUE OF THE SCHOOL FOR THE ABRUZZO MID-MOUNTAIN REGION

5.2.2 How small can a school be?

In the small towns where the research was carried out, the possibility of the school being closed, merging it with other schools and centralising teaching activities in a single pole in the most populous centre in the area, is a very real prospect. Certainly, this is more realistic in Campo di Giove and Navelli, where the number of students is very small, less so in Barisciano, a larger centre that works as a collector for the needs of the surrounding area.

At the time the research was carried out and even more while I'm writing, the topic of school sizing is at the centre of a lively debate that remains open. Until April 2023, the distribution of schools across the territory was regulated by DPR 233/98, which established a school population between 500 and 900 students as the ideal number for the formation of a comprehensive institute (istituto comprensivo). This number could be reduced to up to 300 students for comprehensive institutes located in small islands, mountain municipalities and geographic areas characterised by ethnic or linguistic specificities.⁸⁶ For the formation of a class, on the other hand, DPR 81/2009 identified a minimum number of 15 students and a maximum of 26 for primary schools. Even in this case there was an exception for mountain and island municipalities and in geographic areas inhabited by linguistic minorities, for which the minimum number of students per class could be reduced to 10 in a single-level class, 8 in a multi-level class.⁸⁷ With the 2023 Legge di Bilancio (L.197/22), the Government intervened on the existing legislation to implement the reorganisation of the school system envisaged in the "Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza" (PNRR) and established a new discipline for the assignment of school heads, general and administrative directors to each comprehensive institute, establishing one head for every 900-1000 students. Starting from the school year 2024/2025, for the following seven years, the regions are in charge of implementing the downsizing gradually. With Interministerial Decree 127 of 20 June 2023, for the school year 2023/2024 a headmaster and a director of general and administrative services are assigned only to school institutions with at least 600 students, 400 in mountain municipalities. For the Abruzzo Region this means 179 headmasters, compared to the current 190.⁸⁸ This change does not necessarily mean

⁸⁶ PRESIDENTIAL DECREE 233/98: www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/decreti/aut2.html

⁸⁷ Legal references on school sizing: temi.camera.it/leg19/temi/dimensionamento-scolastico-e-number-of-pupils-per-class.html

⁸⁸ A further change is introduced by Law 159/23, which provides for a derogation from the minimum number of pupils per class set by Presidential Decree No. 81 of 2009 for schools located in small islands, mountain municipalities, geographic

that institutions that do not reach the set parameters will be cancelled, but that their management will be combined with that of other institutions. To give an example, the Istituto Comprensivo Navelli (462 students enrolled in the 2021/2022 school year), which is already today located in an area of about 30 kilometres and gathers users from at least eight different municipalities, could be merged with the Istituto Comprensivo San Demetrio-Rocca di Mezzo, organising under a single headmaster an area of more than 60 kilometres and around twenty municipalities, with great differences within it.

The new measures have met with fierce opposition at the national level. First and foremost from the regions of Toscana, Emilia-Romagna, Puglia and Campania, which opposed them by filing appeals against the dimensioning measure, which was then rejected by the Constitutional Court. In Abruzzo, too, the application of the new dimensioning is encountering great resistance: After the regional council at the end of July 2023 called on the provinces to produce dimensioning plans in accordance with the parameter of 600/400 students per institute.⁸⁹ A wave of protests was raised by trade unions, local administrations and associations, which prompted the Region to intervene again with a resolution⁹⁰ that, in October, turned the corner on this point, allowing a derogation to the limits of 400 and 600 students, but without indicating to the provinces a new criterion for downsizing. A third regional resolution⁹¹ granted an extension to the provinces to submit their plans until 18 December, and thus the approval of the Regional Plan scheduled for 30 November is currently scheduled for 31 December. However, the front of opposition to the sizing continues to make itself heard, the unions are calling for the withdrawal of Decree 127, supported by ANCI -which has spoken out harshly against the new regulations. The matter of sizing was moreover one of the criticalities that animated the 17 November school strike. The presidents of the provinces of Chieti and Teramo rejected the proposal of mergers made by the Region, while the Province of L'Aquila aligned itself with the proposal of eliminating three institutes.⁹² In the coming months, the situation will be clarified and if, as it seems, the planned measures are maintained, it is possible that the two Comprehensive Institutes under investigation will be reorganised.

areas inhabited by linguistic minorities, in contexts of youth distress or characterised by the presence of pupils with learning difficulties in the regions of Abruzzo, Basilicata, Campania, Molise, Apulia, Calabria, Sardinia and Sicily, starting from the school year 2024/2025

⁸⁹ Decree no. 460 of 31.07.23

⁹⁰ Decree no. 681 of 17.10.23

⁹¹ Decree no. 831 of 28.11.23

⁹² References from the local chronicle: provincia.teramo.it/novita/dimensionamento-scolastico-la-regione-scarica-le-proprie-respresponsabilita-sulla-provincia/; www.ilpescaira.it/attualita/sindacati-critiche-dimensionamento-scolastico-penalizzazione-abruzzo.html; flcgil.it/regioni/abruzzo/dimensionamento-scolastico-abruzzo-non-basta-la-proroga-occorre-tornare-indietro-sui-tagli.flc; www.ilcentro.it/pescara/sulle-undici-scuole-da-cancellare-si-rompe-il-fronte-del-no-ai-tagli-1.3217773; www.ilgerme.it/dimensionamento-scolastico-sindacati-sul-piede-di-guerra/; last consulted 12.12.23

Local administrators and inhabitants of the small municipalities in the mountainous Abruzzo region are very clear about the direction that policies are taking with respect to the presence of small schools in the sparsely populated mountainous territory: the creation of the so-called “polo unico” (“single hub”) that gathers the school needs of a large basin of municipalities. A direction profoundly contrary to the way of feeling and living of the local communities that attribute to the presence of the school a fundamental role in the future of the small centres and a very high symbolic value.

F.⁹³ is a local administrator, he says that schools in small centres are destined to disappear. It will come to the point that they will close all the schools because, with the number of students that the municipalities of the Piana di Navelli can currently reach, it is impossible to maintain all the plexuses existing. They cannot even rely on the presence of foreign citizens to raise the numbers because they too are leaving. In Barisciano, five families have left in a year, that is, twenty-five young people, which, in such a small village, really make a difference. The trend towards the elimination of schools in small municipalities seems unstoppable: in the area, in the space of fifteen years, the schools of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Ofena, Calascio (where there was also a middle school) and then Castel del Monte have closed. According to F., a choice should be made in agreement with all the municipalities in the area, so that if in one centre the primary school is maintained, in another the middle school will be housed, in one the nursery school, arranging a good school bus system. He does not believe, however, that this is an easy solution to implement; it is difficult for the administrators to convince the citizens of the different centres, who want to keep their own school, understand the value of this programme.

Teacher M.⁹⁴ also says that as long as the school can, it must work, but when it is no longer possible to do without a single hub, this should not be realised as a centre with all levels, she would like instead a distribution with one level in each village, leaving however one school in each centre.

In Campo di Giove at the beginning of the school year, reaching the minimum numbers set by law is a challenge that schools and administrations have to face with difficulty. N.⁹⁵, a parent but also a local administrator, says that the sharp drop in population of the village occurred between 2000 and 2010 and has to be connected, according to him, not only to the decrease in births and the ageing of the population, but also to a cultural change in the inhabitants of the village. Many young people, in fact, started to study outside at university, to do Erasmus, to go abroad and then to work elsewhere, which

⁹³ Focus Group Barisciano, 18.01.23

⁹⁴ Interview teacher M, Navelli 01.02.23

⁹⁵ Interview with N. and O, inhabitants of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

led to the growth of depopulation and ageing, the effect of which is no longer having people enrolled in school. Keeping the school open is, for him, a real struggle for which it is also possible to put aside the quality of teaching, because the will of the community is clear: it is too important for the village to have the children in kindergarten and primary school next to their parents and grandparents. For his colleague M.⁹⁶ the limits set by the dimensioning laws are a real injustice, she does not find it acceptable that the numbers are the same in completely different territorial realities:

*...ma noi siamo una scuola di alta montagna, non ci possiamo paragonare a nessun'altra scuola, né a Roma, né a Sulmona, né altrove. Noi non siamo uguali, cioè, noi siamo tutt' un'altra cosa...*⁹⁷

For her, it is not a matter of comfort, the school in the village works really well, the small numbers allow the teachers to follow the children carefully. So, among the solutions that have been found to guarantee the minimum numbers is the Maiella Accoglie project, a reception project that started in 2016-2017 and that has brought five or six families to Cansano and Campo di Giove. The Ministry (of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation) says N., was aware of the centres' need to reinforce school attendance with the project and has always favoured the arrival of families with children of pre-school and primary school age. So, since then, they have always reached the number needed to keep the school open. In the 2022/2023 school year, the kindergarten has around ten children, and it has been possible for them to activate the afternoon break and the canteen, while in the primary school it has been possible to reach 12 students.

Thus, in order to keep the school open, administrations and citizens are ready to find all possible solutions. In several of the interviews I conducted, I was told that some schools in the area even appealed to fictitious enrolments at the beginning of the year: they convince relatives and friends living elsewhere to enrol their children in the small schools to guarantee minimum numbers, then in September these students are transferred to other schools, meanwhile the school year is saved for the rest of the children in the village. This fact gives the measure of how much the communities in the Abruzzo middle mountain region are attached to the idea that the school must remain in the village at all costs, but why is the school such an important issue for the inhabitants of small villages? The reasons are diverse and deep, some shared, others very personal. I will try to describe them in the following paragraph.

⁹⁶ Interview with M. and P., inhabitants of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

⁹⁷ ..."but we are a high school, we cannot be compared to any other school, neither in Rome, nor in Sulmona, nor elsewhere. We are not the same, I mean, we are something else"...

5.2.3 For every village a school and for every school a community

In the interviews conducted with residents and teachers in Barisciano, Navelli and Campo di Giove, we have always basically talked about schools, the stories connected to them, and the changes that have taken place over time. More directly, I tried to explore the value that communities assign to schools by asking the question “what would change in the village if the school were no longer there?”. Often the answer was preceded by a heavy silence; for many, imagining the village without a school is painful, bringing with it a sense of sadness, of defeat. More rationally, for some the presence of the school in small towns has a political value, for others it is fundamental in the family choices related to living in the middle mountain area. There are also discourses that cross the symbolic plane whereby the end of the school is linked to the end of village life.

A first group of answers connects the presence of the school to the inhabitability of the territory: if people want to continue living in small centres in the *montagne di mezzo*, the school, like basic medicine and the stimulation of the local economy, require specific investments. L.⁹⁸ says that the school for small centres is fundamental “è un motore” (it is an engine). Life in the village, for her, cannot be made up of waiting for tourists: “Ora puntano tutti al turismo, ma il turismo quando si fa qua? Se non c’è occupazione è normale che i paesi vadano a morire e se non si possono soddisfare le necessità di base è impossibile abitare⁹⁹”. So even if they are a cost, mountain schools must be protected and the State must invest to maintain them if doesn’t want them to depopulate. L. adds that the presence or absence of the school in the village is decisive in the parents' choices, as previously mentioned, many work in the city and for them the closure of the school would be the final push towards relocation. L. and D. have already seen this happen in the course of their careers, in Castel del Monte, which became increasingly depopulated after the school closed, as did the neighbouring hamlet of Civitaretenga where only three children now live.

Teacher N.¹⁰⁰ highlights the connection between the school, the economic system of the small town and family organisation. If the school disappears, so does the micro-economy linked to it made up of the bars where parents stop for coffee on their way to school or the grocery store that prepares snacks for the children. At the same time, for those families who have decided to stay in the village and work by investing in small productive enterprises related to agriculture or handicrafts, without

⁹⁸ Interview with former teachers L. and D., Barisciano, 28.01.23

⁹⁹ "Now they all point to tourism, but when is tourism here? If there's no employment, it's normal for villages to die, and if you can't meet basic needs, it's impossible to live"

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Maestro N., Barisciano 18.05.22

the school there would be real difficulties in reconciling family and work needs, once again incentivising the move to the city. For C.¹⁰¹ and F.¹⁰², mothers and residents of Navelli, the aspect of family-work reconciliation, and the role of the school in this, is particularly delicate. They both find themselves in a precarious work situation so that if the school in the village did not exist, they would perhaps have chosen to move to L'Aquila. The absence of educational services to take care of the children outside school hours has in the past been a major departure from their professional careers for them as they returned to work after their children started primary school; if they had to deal today with their children's daily commute to L'Aquila in the morning to attend school, and perhaps also in the afternoon for sports and recreational activities, it would be impossible for them to work.

Teacher O. also maintains that: "se non c'è la scuola il paese si sgretola, se non c'è la scuola si va tutti fuori, di conseguenza si è tutti proiettati verso la città"¹⁰³, and adds that the disintegration materialises in a loss of identity of the place because "quello è la scuola: l'identità del paese" (that is the school: the identity of the village). For her, who lives in the small centre of Poggio Picenze, about six kilometres from Barisciano, where she went to school surrounded by a group of classmates who over time have remained the friends, to whom she still feels truly close, it is through growing up together that the bond with the small town is built: impossible for her to establish if during the school years one is scattered in different places.

On similar grounds as those stated by O., many of the collected answers are to be found:

...fino a quando ci sono i bambini in un paese uno, due, tre, quattro, sei o dieci che siano, è giusto che almeno nella scuola di base frequentino la scuola nel loro paese, perché i bambini così formano proprio la loro identità, del loro territorio. È vero che i paesi sono vicini, ma sono completamente diversi. Se a questi posti togli la scuola, le poste e il medico ce ne andiamo tutti in città. Queste scuole vanno tutelate¹⁰⁴ ...

Or during the focus group with some inhabitants of Barisciano¹⁰⁵ :

A: forse si perderebbe già da ragazzetti piccoli il senso di comunità, perché andando a scuola insieme si uniscono.

¹⁰¹ Interview with C., mother and resident of Navelli, 02.03.23

¹⁰² Interview with F. and M., parents and inhabitants of Navelli, 25.02.23

¹⁰³ "if there is no school, the town crumbles, if there is no school you all go outside, consequently you are all projected towards the town" from interview with teacher O., Barisciano 18.05.22

¹⁰⁴ Interview with teacher M., 01.02.23.

¹⁰⁵ Focus group with the inhabitants of Barisciano, this conversation piece takes place between three inhabitants aged 27-34, 18.01.23

B: *ma poi, se tu calcoli, nella giornata passi più tempo con gli amici tuoi che con la famiglia, perché vai in piazza e li vedi, vai a scuola e li vedi...*

A: *esatto!*

C: *semplicemente tutti questi gruppetti di piccoli che vedi in giro, se andassero a scuola a L'Aquila non ci sarebbero.*

For teacher E.¹⁰⁶ it is precisely the activities of the school that keep people together “in un modo che in città non esiste” (in a way that does not exist in the city). She gives the example of the young people of Barisciano, referring to a group of girls and boys aged between 20 and 35, whom she describes as “attivissimi” (super active) because they organise local festivals and many of the initiatives held in the village. According to her, this group manages to be so united and active for the village also because they went to school together, even though life then led many to study or live elsewhere.

The idea that the school is a node that generates relations that are fundamental to the life of the village, is shared by many, not only for the relations between children, but also those involving families and other inhabitants. Teacher T.¹⁰⁷, who has lived in Barisciano for 20 years, says that without the school they would lose the energy to do things, to organise initiatives that go through the school and that are also done with the desire to keep the school open. “Un giorno senza scuola non lo riuscirei nemmeno a immaginare” (A day without a school I couldn't even imagine) she says, although she admits that the attachment of small municipalities to the school is also a result of the campanilism of which the inhabitants are victims. Her colleague A. also expresses a very similar view:

...il fatto che ci sia una scuola influisce su tutto quello che avviene all'esterno, anche andare a messa la domenica, tutto si organizza a scuola: “ci vediamo domenica a messa, ci vediamo domani al campetto”, il paese soffrirebbe proprio a livello pratico di organizzazione delle iniziative di quello che si fa in paese¹⁰⁸.

In Campo di Giove, O.¹⁰⁹ says that families are linked to the activities of the school and on occasions such as the organisation of the carnival party or the end-of-year play, birthday parties, the community

¹⁰⁶ Interview with teacher E., L'Aquila, 03.06.22

¹⁰⁷ Interview with teacher T., Barisciano, 18.05.22

¹⁰⁸ the fact that there is a school affects everything that happens outside, even going to mass on Sundays, everything is organised at the school: 'see you Sunday at mass, see you tomorrow at the playground', the village would suffer precisely on the practical level of organising what is done in the village

¹⁰⁹ Interview with O. and N., inhabitants of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

is strengthened. So also M.¹¹⁰ says that when the nuns who ran the kindergarten left in 2001, the village suffered greatly. Besides being attended by the children in the mornings, the kindergarten in the afternoons organised courses, activities involving different groups of people, it was a space that kept people together.

For some, the prospect of school closure is connected to an idea of the end, it would be experienced as a kind of condemnation, a sentence that ascertains the death of the small centre.

M: *Vedere qualsiasi edificio chiuso ci può stare, vedere una scuola chiusa è come se il cuore si fosse atrofizzato, è proprio una cosa brutta.*

F: *si può proprio dire: muore una scuola, muore un paese.*

M: *muore una comunità.*¹¹¹

Or:

*...un paese senza scuola, non è retorico, è un paese senza futuro. La scuola a Campo di Giove crea quelle radici per cui tu puoi pure andare via, ma ti resta dentro quell'esperienza, quel rapporto... Dal punto di vista amministrativo una sconfitta per il territorio. È una sconfitta perché vengono meno posti di lavoro, economie. Poi un paese senza bambini è un paese che muore. Se vai a fare il 25 aprile e non ci sono i bambini in piazza, che vai a fare? Sarebbe un paese dormitorio, un paese di passaggio, in cui i bambini nascono e poi passano solo*¹¹².

5.2.4 Schools in the post-earthquake period

How important schooling is for imagining the future of small centres was evident immediately after the earthquake of 6 April 2009, when, having recognised the value that going to school could have both in collectively dealing with the trauma and in building a new everyday life, efforts were made to get lessons started again quickly.

In the centres where the school facilities had not suffered damage, children and young people entered school after about two weeks. In the Navelli's school,¹¹³ which was not damaged by the

¹¹⁰ Interview with M. and P., inhabitants of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

¹¹¹ Interview with M. and F., parents and inhabitants of Navelli, 25.02.23

¹¹² ...a village without a school, it is not rhetoric, it is a village without a future. The school at Campo di Giove creates those roots so that you can leave, but you are left with that experience, that relationship.... From an administrative point of view, it is a defeat for the territory. It's a defeat because there are fewer jobs, fewer economies. Then a village without children is a village that dies. If you go on 25 April and there are no children in the square, what are you going to do? It would be a dormitory village, a village of passage, where children are born and then only pass away words by N., from an interview with inhabitants and administrators of campo di Giove, 30.01.23

¹¹³ From the interview with M. maestra di Navelli, 01.02.23

earthquake, the Protezione Civile headquarters had been temporarily placed, while school activities were moved to the nursery school, which was also undamaged. As one of the few school facilities that withstood the earthquake, the Navelli school welcomed many children from L'Aquila as well - where the damage to the schools was severe- who attended classes in the village until the end of the school year. Children also arrived in Barisciano from L'Aquila, but here the school suffered heavy damage and the old structure, even at present, is only accessible on the ground floor, where some municipal offices have been temporarily located. Barisciano was fortunate enough to receive the assistance of the Colonna Mobile of the Piemonte Protezione Civile from the day after the earthquake, which, according to the townspeople, was particularly efficient in organising the tent camps and the subsequent arrangement of the temporary structures. The school found place inside the containers for about a month after the earthquake, where it remained until February of the following year. There were two classes inside a container, L. and D.¹¹⁴ remember many physical discomforts, especially in winter when it was cold and condensation formed on the floor, which became slippery; to go to the bathroom, you had to go outside. D. says that the containers were grey, sad, one of the children called them "un rettangolo di scuola" (a school rectangle), so the first thing they did when classes resumed was to decorate them. At the entrance they painted a sun, collected children's drawings and newspaper articles that could give hope. The children were scared and so were the teachers, they talked about their experience of the earthquake together with a team of psychologists from L'Aquila and Piemonte, they worked a lot through drawing. The return to school was hard but fundamental to think they could go on. The fact that school had resumed, that there was a place to meet and talk about what had happened, was central in the formation of a strong sense of aggregation that characterised the first post-earthquake period. L. remembers that for her son, who was sixteen at the time, the presence of the volunteers who organised activities for the children outside school hours was also of great importance, today his son remembers that period almost with pleasure, she says.

At the end of January 2010, thanks to a donation from the La Stampa- Specchio dei Tempi foundation in Turin, the pupils of Barisciano had a new school, also built to be temporary, but in masonry. On the one hand, they feel lucky: the structure is seismically safe and their colleagues in L'Aquila still teach in MUSPs (Moduli a Uso Scolastico Provvisorio, practically large containers), but on the other, the school where they work has all the limitations of a building designed to last three, maybe five years, certainly not thirteen. Inside the building there is no gymnasium, so the pupils have to leave the

¹¹⁴ Interview with former teachers D. and L., Barisciano, 18.01.23

building and go to the sports field to do physical education; there is no canteen, nor spaces for laboratories. The classrooms are very small, which, given the small numbers is usually not a problem, but during the pandemic the classroom was not livable, there were no spaces to ensure the distance needed. Many of the teachers say that the children, who have always attended school in a temporary building, do not seem to feel the need for a different school, they are used to the size of the classroom as a place to do all activities. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine something that one has never had. The problem is that spaces such as the canteen and gymnasium, as well as attending a decent school, should be guaranteed by right to all students, while in L'Aquila and its surroundings they are a privilege. Teacher E., who has been teaching in L'Aquila for two years, comments on the situation as follows:

...non ho mai lavorato in una scuola di mattoni, nel MUSP fa caldo d'estate e freddo d'inverno, non c'è la mensa e si mangia sul banco dove si fa lezione. Io non so cosa significa insegnare in una scuola vera. A L'Aquila la prospettiva della ricostruzione delle scuole è ancora lontanissima, la prospettiva di entrare a breve in una scuola di mattoni non c'è e i bambini lo sanno che quella è una baracca, non hanno rispetto. Una baracca con la rete esterna, non sicura, perché il MUSP è cadente, cadono i termosifoni, le finestre. Ok, sei al sicuro dal terremoto ma i muri sono di plastica una macchina che va a sbatterci contro lo sfonda¹¹⁵.

The teachers, on the other hand, who have been working in Barisciano since before the earthquake, remember with nostalgia the old school, located in the main square of the village. P.¹¹⁶ says that she misses the school as “organizzata in un determinato modo: aule funzionali, spazi funzionali, palestra incorporata nel plesso, mensa adeguata... com'era prima”¹¹⁷, having the school in the central core would also be useful for hypothetical outings in the area, because the proximity of the current school to a large driveway is a danger and a limitation for teachers. The administration promises that it will be possible to return to the old school in a couple of years, the planning of the building adaptation has been completed, now the tenders must be made to award the works and the building site must start¹¹⁸. Re-opening the school in the centre with the school orders from kindergarten to secondary

¹¹⁵ Interview with teacher E. L'Aquila, 03.06.22, here E. refers to a tragic news incident that took place on 18 May 2022, when a car parked in front of the Primo Maggio kindergarten in L'Aquila, went berserk and, breaking through the school fence, ran over and killed a four-year-old boy who was playing in the garden. For an in-depth look at the story: www.ilcapoluogo.it/2023/01/30/incidente-asilo-laquila-altri-due-indagati-per-la-morte-del-piccolo-tommaso/; last consulted 13.12.23

¹¹⁶ Interview with teacher P, Barisciano 18.05.22

¹¹⁷ “organised in a certain way: functional classrooms, functional spaces, gymnasium incorporated in the plexus, adequate canteen, as it was before”

¹¹⁸ Focus group with some inhabitants of Barisciano, 18.01.23

school is a fundamental objective according to F. because it will be important for the life of the square, for the commercial activities all around, to activate a sociability that has been lost and is only partly alive thanks to the market. Being able to maintain the market for a small centre like Barisciano is a great value, there are about ten stalls on Tuesdays and Saturdays, and it is a vital service for the elderly who are thus able to be autonomous to make essential purchases. In this glimmer of a future, the school would once again help to keep the centre alive.

5.2.5 Parents in a small centre

The school, as was also strongly evident in the first years after the earthquake when it constituted an important resource for the inhabitants to move forward together, is an important resource for families living in small centres, while the absence of other services dedicated to children and young people weighs on the management of work and family life. In the interviews, I tried to explore the advantages and disadvantages, for the parents interviewed, of having their children raised in the village.

Some families are originally from the small centres where they live, both parents were born and raised in the village, N.¹¹⁹ for example jokes that in Campo di Giove it often happens that people get married among villagers: “uscendo poco, poi gira e rigira, ti innamori di qualcuno del paese” (by going out a little, then you fall in love with someone from the village). Then, in all seriousness, he says that parents often choose to stay in the village because they love it, but they know that their children have right to the same opportunities as children growing up in the city and therefore, in order to guarantee sports, cultural and recreational activities, they accept to travel almost daily to the larger centres. He admits that this is a sacrifice for parents and children, and says that when he takes his children to the swimming pool in Sulmona in the afternoon, they fall asleep on the way, they are tired. As they grow up, children who travel to city’s school in the morning, lose the desire to travel in the afternoon as well and are often inclined to give up their interests. At the same time, however, N., who has also lived in Bologna, Rome and Lanciano (CH), says that the quality of life in the village is very high. Asked then what quality of life is for him, he firstly replies that it is the serenity of his family, the knowledge that his children can go out and live their childhood in a happy manner, elsewhere it is difficult for a seven-year-old to go out alone: “La qualità della vita è che i bambini dopo i compiti aprono la porta e ti dicono -papà, vado in piazza.”¹²⁰ In addition, in the village it often

¹¹⁹ Interview with N. and O., inhabitants and administrators of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

¹²⁰ “the quality of life is that the children after their homework open the door and tell you -dad, I'm going to the square”

happens, as it did for him and his wife, that they inherit a house from the family and do not have 30-year mortgages on their shoulders, as well as the possibility of spending Sundays with his parents, going to visit his mother whenever he wants, counting on the support of his grandparents in the management of the children, knowing that he can see friends, be part of an association, a cooperative because there is enough free time. O., who is younger and has no children, also intervenes on this aspect, he says that for him living in Campo di Giove was not a choice, he is there for now out of necessity, because with the pandemic it was no longer convenient to pay a rent in L'Aquila and he returned to live with his parents. He says that between L'Aquila and Campo di Giove there is a different rhythm, in L'Aquila the day runs faster, you have to do many things. In Campo di Giove it's different, "ti godi ogni momento, tutto avviene senza fretta, si riesce a fare tutto per bene, senza ansia"¹²¹.

In other families, however, it was one of the spouses who moved to the village, albeit without travelling too many kilometres. C.¹²², for example, is a mother who lives in Navelli but was born and raised in Filetto, one of L'Aquila's mountain hamlets located at an altitude of 1,200 metres, about 36 kilometres from Navelli. Her husband is from Navelli as well as is her son G., who is 12 years old. I ask her what are the advantages for a parent of raising up their child in the village and she tells me about the tranquillity of knowing everyone, of living on a human scale: "Noi siamo abituati alla vita di paese, anche io vengo da un paese. Ho fatto la stessa vita che fa G. Per me è naturale una vita così"¹²³. The discomfort she finds is also for her in guaranteeing sports activities for her son, you have to travel, but on the other hand, she says, even in the city you have to move around.

On the other hand, among the parents there are those who live in the village for opportunity, for the alignment of a series of conditions such as those that led M. and F.¹²⁴ to live in Navelli. Both were born and grew up in hamlets in the municipality of L'Aquila close to the centre, and after the earthquake they knew they did not want to leave the L'Aquila area, also to be close to F.'s elderly parents; at the same time, M., who works in Chieti, was looking for land to buy to build a small wooden house, which he had long wanted, and he was up against the fact that land in L'Aquila cost too much. At the suggestion of a colleague, he heard about the opportunity to buy land at a good price in Navelli, which was an ideal solution for being halfway between L'Aquila and Chieti. So, ten years ago, M. and F. settled in the village, their son V. was born there and feels fully Navellian. Initially

¹²¹ "you enjoy every moment, everything happens without haste, you manage to do everything well, without anxiety"

¹²² Interview with C. mother and resident of Navelli, 02.03.23

¹²³ "we are used to village life, I also come from a village. I lead the same life as G. For me, such a life is natural."

¹²⁴ Interview with M. and F., parents and inhabitants of Navelli, 25.02.23

it was easy to fit into the life of the small town, the other inhabitants were welcoming, but over time they say they were unwitting victims of the village's dynamics. M. says: "quando tu sei forestiero non conosci le storie per cui quello ha litigato con quell'altro perché il nonno non gli ha restituito una pala nel 1918 (ride) e quindi rischi involontariamente di pestare i piedi a qualcuno"¹²⁵. However, they say they are happy to live in Navelli, one of the advantages according to F. is knowing that their child is serene, he goes around on his own. M. adds that for those of his generation (M. is around 45 years old) who, like him, had the good fortune to grow up 'in the wild on the street', to think that his son in 2023 can grow up with the same freedom is priceless. He thinks it is crucial for the development of the individual to start from an early age to relate independently to society, to confront different situations in which he will encounter the bully he has to answer to and the more fragile boy he has to protect. For them too, the village's disadvantage lies in the absence of structures that are useful for the children's growth, as mentioned above for F. not having had a nursery school (which now exists in the village) and an after-school centre, did not allow her to work in the past, and today that V. does breakdancing, accompanying him to L'Aquila to respond to this desire is a struggle.

For L., on the other hand, a mother who has lived in Navelli for just over a year and previously lived in Rome, the times when she accompanies her son to L'Aquila to do sport are an opportunity to meet people, to do different things; she is used to see people and just few people pass through the village. For her and her husband, the move to Navelli stemmed from a desire to lead a quieter life and to be able to go to the mountains more often. As a child, she frequented the village because her father owned a house there, then after the earthquake for some years she had stayed away because the house was being rebuilt. When it was returned to her, her son was young and the city was too messy for her, so her husband left his job and they decided to open a bar in Navelli. She says that her son R. is very happy, he gets on well, he is always out with his friends, he knows everyone and they, as parents, feel much more relaxed.

5.2.6 After School: Young people, the past and the future in the Abruzzo mountains

After working with children from Barisciano, Navelli and Campo di Giove, I was struck by how passionate they were about the village where they were growing up. However, I wondered, and I asked the adults I interviewed, what happens after primary school, what are the next stages in which many move away from the dimension of the village, both in a physical sense and in terms of

¹²⁵ "when you're a foreigner you don't know the stories why that one guy argued with the other because his grandfather didn't return a shovel in 1918 (laughs) and so you unwittingly risk stepping on someone's toes"

emotional ties, and what are the future prospects for those who remain. After primary school, the girls and boys of Navelli usually move a few kilometres away, to the middle school in San Pio delle Camere, also part of the IC Navelli; from Campo di Giove they go to school in Sulmona by a good half-hour bus ride, while in the Barisciano complex they can also attend middle school.

In Barisciano, up to the age of ten to eleven, children tend to stay in the village, are driven to L'Aquila for afternoon activities, but are basically engaged in free play in their own network of places, described in the previous chapter. In the middle school years, on the other hand, they start attending L'Aquila on their own, sometimes taking advantage of the presence of some older friends to reassure their parents. The mothers interviewed¹²⁶ report that groups in the village are made up of girls and boys of different ages, with a range that includes young people between the ages of eleven and seventeen. One mother says that this is good, the youths are free and their parents do not transmit anxiety and fears to them because they know that even when they go to L'Aquila on Saturday afternoons, they always stay in the group, or at least this is what they say to their parents. A., who is thirty-one years old, says that it was not like that for her: when she was hanging out too much with friends in Barisciano she felt the desire to get away, to see other people, and she still does, even though she has very close friends in the village and with them it is good even if you just spend an evening at the bar or at the proloco, “senza fare niente di speciale” (without doing anything special).

Growing up, says P.¹²⁷ it is normal that the desire to feel free leads one to perceive the gaze of the neighbour, the uncle, the mother, their control, as a burden. But then, according to P., you turn back. Once one has asserted his own freedom, tries to bring friends to the village where, for example, it is easier to find a place to have a dinner among friends or to go to celebrate Easter Monday somewhere. For young people it is important to know both ways, the village and the city, to deal with different dangers. For teacher F.¹²⁸ the detachment occurs in the high school years: “è come se il paese poi diventasse una sorta di impedimento, si cercano altri spazi” (it's as if the village then becomes a kind of impediment, you look for other spaces), but maybe later, after the age of twenty to twenty-five, the desire to regain possession of the village returns, with her nephews it did. T.¹²⁹ thinks that there are physiological phases in life and that the desire to go out sooner or later comes

¹²⁶ Focus group with some inhabitants of Barisciano, 18.01.23

¹²⁷ Interview with teacher P., mother and resident of Barisciano, 18.05.22

¹²⁸ Interview with teacher F., resident of Calascio (AQ), Barisciano 18.05.22

¹²⁹ Interview with teacher T., mother and resident of Barisciano 18.05.22

for everyone. Sometimes the link with the village is lost, many work outside, and relations with the peer group with which one grew up with become less frequent, but T. says:

quella libertà di poter giocare ancora fuori, in piazza, per le strade, nei vicoli, secondo me, lascia una base proprio forte che è bellissima, sia per la tua struttura di persona -sapere che ti puoi fidare- sia dal punto di vista della creatività ti dà tanto, perché poter giocare da solo senza la mamma che ti sta sempre addosso è tutta un'altra cosa.

His first daughter is twenty-four years old, she chose to go to university in Rome and was happy about it but then she wanted to return to Barisciano and bought a house, she chose to live there. I ask if for those who want to, there is a real possibility of returning to the village. T.'s opinion is that young people no longer have the orientation of her generation - the one that is now in its fifties - and of the previous one, of wanting to build material things in life, young people today think of doing jobs that they like, that can make them happy. If you reason in this way, Barisciano offers the necessary services, it can be a good "base camp" that allows to have a simple lifestyle and then travel: living costs less than elsewhere and free time can be used to travel, to do what you want in other places. Of course, many have also gone out and stayed there, several live in Milan, but they work from morning to night to pay the bills at home. Thus, T. finds "un miliardo di motivi per restare" (a billion reasons to stay).

Not everyone agrees that imagining a future in the village is so easy, life often brings elsewhere. F.¹³⁰ for example, claims that with time some manage to return, but there is no chance for everyone. According to him, if you stay away for more than five years then it is difficult to go back. Work is a serious problem, even those who live in Barisciano usually work elsewhere, except for those who have a small business, those who work in public offices - which have increased with the reconstruction - and those who work in agriculture, in local products, but in this case it is very difficult to move on, especially if you have a family. For F., depopulation is irremediable, the number of those who die and those who leave is too high for those who arrive. Also, according to L.¹³¹ the territory is in difficulty: Barisciano has always been a village of farmers and shepherds and its wealth was once given by the production of wool. Since these activities have been abandoned, the decline has begun. Industry for a while gave work to many, but now that even that is in crisis,¹³² there is nothing to

¹³⁰ Focus group with some inhabitants of Barisciano, 18.01.23

¹³¹ Interview with D. and L., residents and former teachers of Barisciano, 28.01.23

¹³² In the small town of Bussi sul Tirino (PE), about 30 km from Barisciano and about 20 km from Navelli, an important industrial centre was active from the early 1900s, where many of the inhabitants of the Navelli plain found employment. Here, exploiting its proximity to the Tirino river, an important tributary of the Pescara, electricity was produced at the

sustain the lives of young people, there are only tourists for a few months of the year. Today, the local farms mainly produce seeds (legumes and spelt) but farming is a second job because it does not yield enough to live on. The shepherds on the other hand -those who remain- live off livestock and make a very hard living, few young people choose that path. The land around the village is hard, stony, what is practised is subsistence farming. L. remembers her mother working land in the mountains three hours' walk from the village, leaving with the donkey at midnight to arrive at the fields with the first light of dawn and start the day's work. If there was any possibility in agriculture, it was not invested in time to make it an opportunity in the present: Spelt used to be cultivated but was then eliminated because it was not liked, now it is back in fashion, so the chickling peas that were given to the animals, are now a prized dish; historically in Barisciano there were vineyards but no one directed the producers towards the right vines and these crops have disappeared because the quality was low, just as the almond trees of the Navelli plain, today a wasted heritage, were a feature of the town that no one thought to enhance.

That of agricultural work in the mountains is a memory that the inhabitants preserve through the stories of the elders, which seems, however, to belong to a remote past, far to life in the village today, even though it is not so distant in time. Over the last seventy years, the mountains have slowly passed to being a space for leisure and pleasure, practised only at certain times, while for previous generations it was the place of daily work. During a focus group¹³³ with the inhabitants of Barisciano, A. argues that probably every inhabitant of the village owns a piece of land in the mountains that he has inherited and does not even know he has. The previous generations of Barisciano's inhabitants used to frequent the land at high altitude every day but it was a very hard life, made up of extreme hard work and small earnings, which slowly, since the beginning of the last century and more rapidly after the Second World War has been abandoned:

B: ...diciamo che la generazione di persone che sono un po' più adulti di noi, l'hanno vissuta come un superare un ostacolo la montagna, perché prima la montagna era proprio il contenitore che ti

beginning of the century. During fascism, the site was converted for the production of so-called 'mustard gas', an extremely harmful acid used for war missions in Africa. The site was closed in 1943, then rehabilitated and expanded in the 1960s for the production of chemicals by the then Montecatini company and was active until 2002, when management was handed over to Montedison. In 2007 it became public knowledge that for forty years the site had been pouring poisons of all kinds, hazardous waste, tons and tons of slag into the surrounding land, resulting in contamination of the soil and water that local residents had been drinking for years. In 2014, a lawsuit was filed, which, despite the fact that ARTA certified heavy environmental damage, definitively established the acquittal of all the defendants. For further information on the subject: www.ledmagazine.it/montedison-di-bussi-storia-della-discardica-piu-grande-deuropa/ ; www.terredifrontiera.info/i-veleni-di-bussi/; www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/09/28/news/discardica_bussi_cassazione-207632005/ ; last consulted 17.12.23

¹³³ Focus group with some inhabitants of Barisciano, 18.01.23

racchiudeva. Invece poi la cosa è stata proprio quella di poter spazia' oltre. E pure una maledizione, perché era un po' inevitabile il fatto che tu dovessi anda' a lavora' in montagna, dovessi anda' a coltiva' la montagna. Certo, è un'indole naturale penso, però il discorso è, che ci sta proprio dietro tutta l'etica del lavoro quotidiano e la quotidianità ti porta pure a odia' qualcosa. Invece mo, diciamo, ci sta il fatto di volerci anda', frequentarla, è una cosa più piacevole e uno se la vive in maniera diversa.

F: le nostre nonne l'hanno odiata quasi tutte (la montagna), soprattutto le donne. Perché era un lavoro duro. Oggi sono rimaste le ultime persone di novanta-cento anni, mo sono rimaste in poche. Però mi ricordo la generazione di mia nonna la odiava la montagna, perché loro ci andavano per lavoro era proprio un sacrificio, i nostri terreni sono veramente...facevano un sacrificio per arrivare dove andiamo mo noi a camminare, al rifugio di Chiusola, per arrivare a un piccolo pezzetto di terra e poi quanto potevano riportare giù con gli asini? Un lavoro veramente faticoso.

B: cioè, andare a coltivare la terra a quattro ore di cammino da qua, e farlo a piedi soltanto per andare a lavorare, cioè quindi vuol dire otto ore di cammino al giorno, per andare a lavorare sei e zappare solo tre ore, cioè tornavano stremati.

E: e lasciavano i figli da soli eh.

C: pe' du' chili de patate...

B: mio padre mi diceva che ci stava G., uno a Barisciano, che dormiva dentro a una stanza e ci stava un buco nel tetto, dormiva a un angolo, col fuoco davanti, sulle frusce delle marrocchie.¹³⁴ Ma cose proprio indecenti, cioè condizioni estreme che la gente non sapeva di che mangiare. E non stiamo a parla' di tanto tempo fa, cioè persone che se lo ricordano.

Campo di Giove also shares an agricultural and pastoral past strongly linked to the mountains, although today it is a town that bases its primary economy on tourism. According to N.¹³⁵, however, although the subsistence relationship between inhabitants and the mountains has been overcome, there is a difference in the relationship that his generation -who are now more or less fifty years old- has built with the highlands and the one that younger people have instead. He says that his generation was born in the mountains, right from the morning there was a relationship with the mountains, clothing was mountainous, there was a clear awareness of being mountain dwellers, and

¹³⁴ Espressione dialettale per indicare le foglie esterne delle pannocchie di granturco.

¹³⁵ Interview with N. and O., Campo di Giove 31.01.23

this was given by the fact that certain traditions of the mountains - and of agricultural life - were still strong and deep-rooted and marked the different moments of the year. For example, the families of the village all still had a few farmyard animals, the slaughter of the pigs was a ritual moment when villagers got together to work the meat, just as they got together for the family production of wine or the harvesting of chestnuts, the cutting of wood from the forest to feed the stoves. These practices made a difference to the city children who lived in a palace instead. Although these habits have not been entirely lost, they are certainly less widespread, and today's children - according to N.- are like city children: they have the same technology, watch the same television, go to the swimming pool, imagine the same things. Now children talk about mountains at school, but with an approach that starts from sustainability, from respect for nature, for animals, which is absolutely necessary but is not the perspective of the villageside tradition, in which practices such as hunting are strongly rooted. According to N., it is up to the parents to transmit that idea of the mountains that comes from Campo di Giove's past, and this would perhaps also create new opportunities to imagine a future in the village. In fact, N. says that he is son of a generation that wanted to get out of poverty, his grandparents were semi-illiterate and the goal was for his grandchildren to learn to read and write, get a degree and secure a better future elsewhere, which meant being a lawyer, accountant, engineer, architect. Today, in a mountainous village, these professions are difficult to pursue, and bringing young people closer to the culture of the mountains from an early age could lead them towards studies that are spendable in the area, such as veterinary, agricultural or botanical skills, in the field of tourism economics or territorial marketing.

N.'s vision opens up a new prospect for the future of small mid-mountain villages, which others of those interviewed also share, but some of them raise doubts about the political will, at a higher decision-making level, to invest in this territory and to address its existing criticalities. V. and U.¹³⁶ say that politics has no intention of creating incentives to really populate the mountains and that the villages are only seen as a place to spend holidays. According to V., only one hundredth of the villages are suitable places for holidays, but "le aree interne" ("inner areas¹³⁷") have very much generalised this view without understanding the real problems of those who inhabit the area. For example, PNRR funds are being used for high-speed trains, for new railway lines that cross the territory without

¹³⁶ V. and U. inhabitants of Campo di Giove, interviewed on 30.01.23

¹³⁷ Here V. refers to the National Strategy for Inner Areas -which does not include Campo di Giove- and the season of discourse that has opened since this policy created a strong interest in the public debate with respect to mountainous countries and areas. For a more extensive treatment of the topic: De Cunto G., Macchiavelli V., Mariani E. and Sabatini F. (2022). Rhetoric and manifestos on inland areas. A reflection from the experience of Emidio di Treviri. Dislivelli.eu, 113. Text available at: www.dislivelli.eu/blog/ (last consultation [date](#) 16.12.23)

stopping, while transport needs for him are at another level and include, for example, the possibility for his teenage son to return from Sulmona by public transport if he wants to go out with friends in the evening. So also Z.¹³⁸, claims that “con i borghi ci riempiamo la bocca ma poi il problema è mantenerli” (with the villages we fill our mouths but then the problem is to maintain them). There has been no transfer of knowledge with respect to traditions, mountain communities, and then in order to stay there is a need for work, it is necessary to understand what we can do to maintain these communities:

ci credo molto poco nella salvezza di questi posti, Linea Verde ti fa vedere delle bomboniere, ma poi questi come campano? Non c'è stato investimento, se ne è parlato tantissimo, ma dei soldi stanziati non si vedono i risultati.

Of a different opinion are many of the inhabitants of Navelli, who in the summer of 2021, when the Covid 19 pandemic was still widespread but it was possible to travel, albeit with some restrictions, saw an extraordinary influx of tourists that gave them hope that they could focus on that sector for the future development of the village. For C.¹³⁹ Navelli is depopulating, as are all mountain centres, many of the elderly who used to live there are no longer there and loneliness begins to feel, although the summer gives hope, when everything is different due to the return of many families who have a second home there and a group of young people between the ages of twenty and thirty-five who have stayed in the village that is very united, animates the festivals and is also involved in proposing activities for the youngest. For her, staying was a decision taken out of love for village life, the closeness to the affections of the extended family and by virtue of her husband's strong bond with the land: although he is a clerk, he grows chickpeas and saffron (the typical crops of the valley) out of passion. Those who live in the village usually open a business, she is a hairdresser at home, moving around the small centres in the valley, but if that was not her profession, she would perhaps have decided to run a bed and breakfast, in the village there are six or seven and they are often full. According to her, tourists are an important economic source, the previous summer was wonderful because of their presence, she says they are an important resource for all small centre because they buy houses, they turn the economy around.

According to M.¹⁴⁰ on the other hand, the village is “in spopolamento, ma solo di autoctoni” (depopulated, but only by locals), with the post-earthquake restructuring many houses are seasonally

¹³⁸ Interview with Z. environmental educator, Capodacqua (AQ) 25.01.23

¹³⁹ Interview with C., mother and resident of Navelli, 02.03.23

¹⁴⁰ Interview with M. and F. parents from Navelli, 25.02.23

inhabited by people from England, Canada, southern Italy - there is a community of people from Bari in the village -, there are some Romans fleeing the city and finding refuge in Navelli. F. also agrees that those who have always lived in the village are now inclined to leave, for the elderly it is difficult to stay and find assistance, unless you are very attached to the farmland, staying in Navelli in the long term is not convenient. For them, the village has very high tourist potential, especially after the earthquake, which made it possible to fix up very old and uncomfortable houses. What is lacking are services, travel is difficult even for tourists for whom, without their own transport or an organised tour, it is impossible to get to the village. In perspective, tourism is a sector that can grow a lot according to M., he says that the small villages have been revalued by the pandemic because on the one hand for the inhabitants of the most marginal areas the closures and social distancing were not as severe as elsewhere, there were resources to go out and be outdoors for almost everyone, in fact, for him it was the time to set up the vegetable garden he had wanted for a long time. On the other hand, tourists during the pandemic have discovered Navelli, the increase in the influx has been exponential and he believes it will continue to rise, but services also need to grow. For M. Navelli is in the phase where supply and demand chase each other, the tourist would like a better service and the people of Navelli chase it, he thinks that once reconstruction will be complete the situation will improve.

Emblematic of how the tourist wave of the pandemic has created new expectations is the story of L., who, as mentioned above, decided from Rome with her husband and son to move to Navelli in 2021. L.¹⁴¹ says that tourism in Navelli is a recent phenomenon, in the past it was done by Romans like herself who owned second homes in the village, or by people from Puglia who bought houses en bloc 20 years ago. Since reconstruction has made it possible to equip houses with heating, people are returning to the village more often, even in winter at weekends. A few years ago, tourists did not even know Navelli existed, she says, while her entrepreneurial idea, to open a bar in the heart of the ancient core of the village, was driven by the fact that there were people around who could have a coffee, buy some saffron, stop for a sandwich. She says that her business is kept going thanks to tourists even though the inhabitants, even the youngest, frequent it often, and for the reconstruction workers her café is a great resource. During our interview L. tells me that the first year of the bar's opening went really well, he had streams of customers from Easter until the summer, and a few more until the All Soul' day in November. During the following summer, that of 2022, there were already far fewer tourists, "con le riapertura la gente è andata al mare" (with the reopenings, people went to the

¹⁴¹ Interview with L. mother and resident of Navelli, 02.03.23

seaside), says L. I then saw L. again in September 2023, we had a coffee together and exchanged a few ideas about the village, she told me that the season was worse than the previous year, she is very discouraged and hopes that the end of the reconstruction, in three to four years according to her, will bring new people. A lot of tourists say they want to buy a small house, they want to live there but without work you can't do it, she and her husband were crazy to open a business in Navelli.

5.3 THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TERRITORY AS A RESOURCE FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

After having explored the role of the school for the inhabitants of the area investigated by the research, then discussing how schools are seen from the outside, in the following pages I will delve into the issue of how the school, from the inside, relates to what is outside. The territorial context in which pupils grow up has long been recognised by the schools' educational offer plans as an important lever in learning processes, as has the relationship with various educational subjects gravitating around it. Moreover, in the small schools in the mountains of Abruzzo, the closeness between inside and outside, as we have seen, is stronger than elsewhere. The relationship of immediacy with the surroundings, makes the boundaries become more blurred in a relationship of proximity (Mangione et al.,2021) between inside and outside the school. However, there is to wonder: how much does the school, in practice, actually support this effective interaction with the living ecosystem? (Calandra, 2016). How much does school, as it is organised and practised today, enable experience of the local context and how can this aspect be encouraged?

5.3.2 Between ordinary and extraordinary, the difference is substantial

Getting out of the classroom, exploring the surroundings, doing activities in the territory is not part of the daily teaching practice of the schools participating in the research. Certainly, with the aim of enriching the educational offer as much as possible, teachers and headmasters are committed to participating in many of the projects financed by the PON¹⁴² and in the extra-curricular educational proposals that arrive from outside. Teacher M.¹⁴³ tells me that in the IC Navelli many experiments have been activated within the framework of the PON: a theatre, art and music workshop; a project dedicated to the promotion of reading with several library points within the schools; furthermore,

¹⁴² PON: The National Operational Programme (NOP) of the Miur, entitled 'For Schools - competences and environments for learning' is a plan of interventions that aims to create a high quality education and training system. It is financed by European Structural Funds and runs for seven years. Definition from:

[www.istruzione.it/pon/#:~:text=The%20National%20Operational%20Programme%20\(PON,seven-year%2C%20from%202014%20to%202020](http://www.istruzione.it/pon/#:~:text=The%20National%20Operational%20Programme%20(PON,seven-year%2C%20from%202014%20to%202020). Last consulted 18.12.23

¹⁴³ Interview with teacher M., Navelli 01.02.23

the institute adheres to an Erasmus project aimed at teachers and in addition, with the Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne, important resources are arriving to support extracurricular activities but also for the opening of small theatre spaces in some of the centres where the IC is located. In addition to this, the schools where the research took place are located in or at the foot of national parks (Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park the schools in Barisciano and Navelli, Maiella National Park the school in Campo di Giove), which also promote educational programmes involving the schools. As far as the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga Park is concerned, the authority does not directly manage activities in schools, but every year it launches a call for applications addressed to the third sector, which allows them to enrol in a register of bodies qualified to propose educational courses that schools can participate in through a call for applications called 'il Parco in Aula'¹⁴⁴. These are eight-hour courses per class, with a workshop format, on themes proposed by the Park, ranging from local fauna and flora to the traditions and customs of the area, but also proposing paths of representation of the territory (e.g. videomaking activities). The Park's offer in schools is therefore mainly carried out by third sector organisations, or cooperative societies with educational purposes.

The enhancement offered by extra-curricular activities centered in the territory as their subject is certainly an excellent opportunity for children to deepen their knowledge of the places they live, but it is very different from making the territory the subject of ordinary teaching or proposing a form of knowledge more oriented towards direct experience. All the teachers and parents I spoke to consider it a positive thing that children study and experience the local context but they do not imagine that ordinary lessons, the everyday activities of the school, can start from the living environment in which the school is located. On the contrary, for many teachers, going out is a time of great stress and the children's free exploration is a serious concern. From what I was able to observe during the walks I took with the classes in the workshop route proposed to the schools,¹⁴⁵ for the teachers, the school is not allowed, or perhaps even cannot, to go beyond certain limits: the adult is still a teacher and the child a learner, going out is allowed but only if it is done in a row of two, following the teacher who is the guide.

In Navelli, for example, the children had agreed with me, during the first meeting, on a route to get to know the places of their daily lives. The itinerary we had constructed together was perhaps too long for the time we had available but, in this kind of activity, it is very difficult to predict precisely what

¹⁴⁴ From a telephone interview with one of the managers of the educational sector of the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park.

¹⁴⁵ See previous chapter, p. xx

the exact route will be, how long we will stop at each stage, or whether in the meantime stages will come up that we had not thought of at first. Maintaining a certain degree of uncertainty in the planning of the activity is then necessary. So, during the walk, the girls and boys propose a new stop to show me a cluster of abandoned houses and winding stairs leading to the top of the historic core of the village, and then descend to the next stage of our journey, lengthening the route. The teacher who was with us strongly objects:

maestra: no no, ue! Là sopra no eh! Ma che ve state a 'mpazzi?!'

R: sì maestra

maestra: no! no! Assolutamente no! Cambiamo giro, io tutte queste scale non ve le faccio fare, scendete.

B: dai maestra!

L: ma io le ho fatte con la bicicletta!

maestra: e con me non le fai, scendete.

R: ok scendiamo.

vociare

maestra: io ve l'ho detto di non mettere cose troppo...ve l'avevo già detto questa cosa, no?... voi avete fatto il percorso troppo lungo, nella scuola non è consentito fare tutti questi tragitti lunghi.

R: ma il campetto?

io: se scendiamo verso il campetto?

vociare

maestra: voi fate i belli a parlare (si rivolge ai suoi alunni), ma noi abbiamo delle responsabilità nei vostri confronti, ok? abbiamo degli orari da rispettare.

io: quindi a che ora escono loro?

maestra: a meno un quarto, ma a e 20 devono stare a scuola perché devono prepara' gli zaini.

io: ok.

maestra: la campanella suona sempre 5 minuti prima.

The bell, the backpacks, the responsibilities of adults, become in daily practice insurmountable obstacles in a school system that ends up being regulated by the logic of programming to be respected, of tests, of grades, and not by the educational experiences that are proposed to the students. In the work on "the village of wishes" that we carried out with the Navelli class, I was very struck by a thought -extremely imaginative- by R. who says:

...vorrei che la scuola fosse in un aereo schiantato, incastrato negli alberi della giungla, perché così impari come si fanno le cure, i veleni, quali sono gli animali velenosi, che veleno hanno¹⁴⁶...

For some, R.'s proposal might seem bizarre but, the school he imagines expresses a very simple desire for learning based on the idea of knowing from what one can directly experience. It strikes me, that to make this desire possible, R. thinks an improbable event must happen, like finding himself in a plane stuck in a tree in the jungle, where he can finally satisfy his curiosity of discovery about animals and their poisons. How many discoveries about animals could the children of Navelli make without having to go into the jungle, reaching the woods behind the village? How many herbs could R. find in that forest, from which he could learn about their healing properties? This is more or less the idea of a school also imagined by U.¹⁴⁷, a young man who finished primary school in Campo di Giove in 2009 and, from what he remembers, in his school experience there was never any integration of the topic of living in the mountains or with respect to the local natural environment. According to him, however, it is very important for the territory to be included in the teaching already in primary school because, according to his experience and that of his brothers: “abbiamo sempre studiato sui libri che parlano della foresta, dell’Africa, della giungla, quando si potrebbe studiare tutto prendendo il materiale reale che sta sul territorio. Stesso discorso si può fare per la storia, per l’arte, eccetera.”¹⁴⁸ But natural resources are not the only source that schools can draw on, Z.¹⁴⁹, an environmental educator, argues that schooling in the mountains needs to be completely rethought:

...può essere tutt’altro, esistono tantissime attività antropiche che sono una scuola di vita, mettiamoli su un trattore (i ragazzi), andiamogli a far fare la legna nel bosco così le persone anziane hanno la legna da mettere nella stufa. Poi andando a fare la legna impari a contare, impari la fotosintesi, impari la storia...i carbonai. Così come ci può essere un’attività nel forno del paese, si può avere uno sviluppo a 360° dell’individuo... Poi i ragazzi devono stare insieme, anche tra età diverse. Noi lavoriamo a compartimenti stagni, ‘sti ragazzi prima stanno in una sfera, poi passano all’altra, i passaggi sono improvvisi, è una sofferenza per loro. Noi dobbiamo pensare che la scuola è una salvezza, dobbiamo partire dal presupposto che molti hanno solo la scuola. Sempre di più, la

¹⁴⁶ “I wish the school was in a crashed airplane, stuck in jungle trees, because then you learn how to make cures, poisons, what poisonous animals are, what poison they have”. Registration workshop 4 Navelli, 06.05.22

¹⁴⁷ Interview with U. and V., inhabitants of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

¹⁴⁸ “We have always studied in books that talk about the forest, Africa, the jungle, when you could study everything by taking the real material that is on the territory. The same can be done for history, art, etc”

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Z. environmental educator, Capodacqua (AQ) 25.01.23

maggioranza ha solo la scuola. Per affrontare questa vita loro devono imparare prima di tutto a conoscere se stessi.

5.3.3 Barriers between school and territory

If an idea of a school practised in the local area is in the minds of children, young people and adults, but is not in fact the reality of everyday schooling, one has to wonder what limits, what obstacles, are involved because the school continues to be projected inwards. A first aspect is pointed out by teacher T.¹⁵⁰ who argues that for the teaching staff, knowledge of the territory is not, in the specific context of the context investigated, an emergency on which to intervene, because in any case the children know very well “il paese, i fiori e la natura” (the village, the flowers and nature) and therefore one chooses perhaps to intervene on other priorities. If on the one hand it is true, as I was also able to observe during the workshops, that children build their relationship with the places in the village outside school and that their knowledge of the places comes from practising them independently and with their own families, on the other hand it can be discussed whether the depth of this knowledge is sufficient to say that the children already know enough about their own territory. Children often know their way around the village, they know how to get from one place to another, they know the inhabitants, but less commonly they know the history of the places, how they were built, how old they are, just as many know how to recognise a nettle plant because their families have passed on this knowledge, they know that nettles sting because they have been stung by them while playing, but they do not know, for example, that this plant can be used as a natural dye, that its fibres were spun into textiles in the past, or that it is an anti-inflammatory plant. There is a knowledge of places, which is strongly based on the daily experience of children outside school, that schools could deepen and put to use, as Tuan (1975) argues, to know a place is to be aware of it, not only in the bones but also in the head.

T. also brings up a second obstacle in the construction of a more open school: he recounts that a few years ago it was proposed to experiment in Barisciano with the “senza zaino” school¹⁵¹ but the proposal clashed with the perspectives of individual teachers. The teaching staff, in fact, should have been all united in this direction but this is very difficult if a working group is not formed in advance to share a vision, objectives, methods, only then can an alternative school be tried. In this regard, U.¹⁵² argues that a new school idea is not easily realised without action on the part of the academic world,

¹⁵⁰ Interview with T. teacher and resident of Barisciano, 18.05.22

¹⁵¹ For information: www.senzazaino.it

¹⁵² Interview with U. and V., inhabitants of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

the Ministry of Education (and Merit), on the part of those who impart school objectives from above. Then he adds that there is also a question of teacher education, if a teacher is not aware of the need to train students in a certain direction, it is obvious that he will not be able to take initiatives in this regard. N.¹⁵³, administrator of Campo di Giove, adds on the topic that it is difficult for a single school to make the change, certainly there has to be the cooperation of the comprehensive institute, of the management that has to agree to take a direction. However, much teachers and communities feel that schools are strongly tied to a centralist and standardised approach, and without denying the need for a specific training phase for teaching staff, in reality the margins for experimentation do exist and are guaranteed by law: in fact, starting with the Decreti Delegati of 1974 - which inaugurated a "social management" of schools (Cambi, 2005)- a package of formal regulations, policies and institutional initiatives has been promulgated, such as the law on school autonomy (DPR N. 275, 8 March 1999), which allow for diversified forms of open and participatory management of the school service¹⁵⁴. Undoubtedly, when it is individual teachers who undertake experimental paths in didactics, the heavy discourse on the responsibilities of adults towards children comes into play. According to V., when it is individual teachers who experiment, facing possible opposition from parents who are not always happy about children leaving the classroom or doing activities "fuori dalla norma" (out of the standard), the responsibility should not lie with an individual teacher. D. and L.¹⁵⁵, who have not been teaching for a few years now, argue that in the past, up to a decade ago, it was much easier for teachers to experiment in the curriculum time, to create connections with the surrounding reality, because the logic of projects and extra hours that teachers are - rightly - paid for outside the regular timetable had not yet been introduced. They speak of a *more human* school in which initiatives were driven by greater spontaneity; today, between the high turnover of teachers and the formal projects in which they are already heavily involved, it is difficult for them to undertake other initiatives. For Z.¹⁵⁶ an educator who often accompanies groups of children and young people in the mountains, sees on the part of the teachers a lot of fear in going out, in having to deal with unexpected events and uncertainties, in the possibility of encountering dangers. But her reasoning is that, even if there are obviously dangers in the mountains, implicitly in those who choose the job of educating there is the choice to take responsibility: "se la responsabilità non se la prende un educatore, chi se la deve prendere?" ("if the responsibility is not taken by an educator, who should take it?") she says.

¹⁵³ Interview with N. and M., administrators and inhabitants of Campo di Giove, 30.01.23

¹⁵⁴ A more extensive discussion of the development of school autonomy regulations can be found in Chapter 1.XX

¹⁵⁵ Interview with former teachers and residents of Barisciano D. and L., 18.01.23

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Z. environmental educator, Capodacqua (AQ) 25.01.23

What is needed, therefore, is an alignment in the awareness, at various levels, that the knowledge of the territory promoted by the school can be fertile ground for strengthening ties with places, “per farsi venire idee per restare, perché se un territorio non esiste per diciott’anni di vita come puoi pensare di restarci?”¹⁵⁷ together, however, with the awareness, on the part of the teachers, that teaching implies taking on responsibilities.

In the course of the interviews, many other needs that small schools feel they have been also highlighted, such as that of the availability of greater economic resources to be allocated mainly to teaching staff in order to better manage multi-level classes with hours of co-presence of teachers, this would allow, at certain times, to propose different activities for different class levels. Not only that, having more resources would make it possible to manage more effectively the inclusion of children with a migrant background and other educational needs by providing specific figures who can support classes in their inclusion and help overcome language and cultural barriers. Another aspect considered fundamental is that of building a relationship with other schools, of different sizes, which would allow children to come into contact with different realities, so that they can enrich their universe, thus going beyond the local context, to connect with what lies outside the village.

CHAPTER 5 - BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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¹⁵⁷ “to get ideas for staying, because if a territory does not exist for eighteen years how can you think of staying there” Words of U. see note 86

6. CONCLUSIONS AND NEW QUESTIONS

In the previous chapters, we explored everyday life in small schools in the mid-mountain region of the central-southern Apennines, analysing how children, teachers and families in this context relate to the territory they inhabit and what values and meanings local communities attribute to schools. The fieldwork, as discussed in Chapter 3, was carried out in three primary schools located in the Abruzzo mountains, the small villages of Barisciano, Navelli and Campo di Giove, in the province of L'Aquila. The research activities involved both adult participants -teachers, headmasters, parents and other inhabitants of the study area- who were involved through the organisation of interviews and focus groups, and children with whom I worked by organising classroom workshops involving the use of different creative methods.

In this conclusive chapter, I will connect the results of the research to the questions introduced at the beginning of this work: how are the small schools in the middle mountains organised today? Do they produce direct knowledge of the territory in which they are located? How do children relate to the context in which they live? What role does the school play in the inhabitants' family choices? What value is placed on schools by local communities? And finally, how can schools contribute to intensifying the relationship between people and places in middle mountain villages?

6.1.2 Small schools in the middle mountain: organisation and promotion of local knowledge

In the three schools that took part in the research, many of the characteristics common to small schools in areas with low population density and difficult accessibility, as described in Chapter 2, were highlighted, such as the strong presence of multi-level classes, the frequent turnover of teachers, the complex organisation of school services, and the absence of extracurricular educational offerings. The interviews conducted with headmasters and teachers in coordination roles, highlight in particular the difficulty in managing class formation. The regulations lay down numerical thresholds (e.g. a minimum of ten children for the formation of a class, if this threshold is not reached the classes are automatically merged by the school offices) which must be strictly respected but sometimes it would be better to adapt to specific situations, following the principle of creating the best possible conditions for the children.

For the teachers and parents interviewed, small student numbers and a strong presence of multiple classes do not seem to be a limitation; on the contrary, if certain conditions are met, these aspects are considered important strengths. The position with which most of the teachers agree is that they

see the multi-grade class as an important teaching resource, especially if it does not group too many different levels within it, even though it takes more preparation time for the teachers themselves. However, many of them emphasise the need to receive specific training on the methods and strategies to be used, in addition to the resources necessary to carry out some co-presence hours with other colleagues, thus being able to divide the class into levels at certain times. To make the most of the experience gained in the management of multi-grade classes, it would be important for teachers to be guaranteed greater continuity in their stay in a plexus. From the point of view of the quality of the children's learning, the teachers interviewed seem to have no doubts about the effectiveness of the multi-class. They pointed out excellent results linked both to the frequent repetition of the topics addressed, as children can thoroughly internalise study topics, and to the mutual help relationships that develop between children. Indeed, the multi-class is a space that can embrace different educational needs and different learning speeds that can be met regardless of age. One result that I did not expect to record is that the multi-class is also considered a non-disadvantageous condition by the parents of the children who attend it. For them, it is a common condition, which does not represent a limit but, on the contrary, allows the children to relate to a larger and more variable group of peers.

Classes with few children are considered by teachers and parents interviewed to be the real strength of the small school. It is a condition that allows teachers to be attentive to the needs of each individual and to collectively address children's problems. The time available in the school timetable and the scheduling cut down on a small number of children appear to be sufficient to deal even with problems and needs that arise outside of teaching. In addition, the close relationship that is created over time between children, teachers and parents makes it possible to take care of each child's growth process, tackling any problems by cooperating between school and family, based on a relationship of trust and mutual knowledge.

It should also be emphasised that the teachers interviewed state that they are satisfied with their professional life, the working environment, the positive relationships that can be established with colleagues and families within small schools, and the serenity that managing a small number of children allows. However, the continuous comparison that the teachers themselves propose with larger schools highlights the weight of prejudice that they feel comes from the outside -as present in common sense or proposed by parents by whom the teachers feel judged, or perhaps by colleagues who teach elsewhere- to small schools in the village. In the interviews, they often remark that in their school too they participate in extra-curricular projects, that their school is also good, and that

the teachers who teach in the village are the same as those who have also taught in the city, as if the condition of working in the village and a small school constituted in itself a deficit to be justified.

A similar attitude is common among parents who choose to have their children attend school in the small centre. For many of them, this is experienced as an important decision, which, as seen in Chapter 5, takes on political value and something to be proud of, a kind of declaration of commitment to the future of the small village. However, it is once again a decision that parents often feel they have to justify as if they somehow feel they are being blamed by the common opinions of the people around them for choosing a school for their children that is worth less than the others.

From the teaching point of view, the schools where the research took place tend to follow a traditional approach. The territory does not enter into the daily experience of classes, it is sometimes the subject of meetings and events, but these are sporadic experiences, linked to specific projects or particular events. Deepening knowledge of the territory, although considered relevant by teachers and parents, is not commonly considered a priority aspect in which the school should intervene. Some of the teachers claim that children growing up in small villages are nevertheless able to get to know the territory through the time they spend with peers in the open air, free play in the village and the education they receive from their families.

The children's relationship with the environment and the space in which they grow up is constructed mostly outside the school. This is a very practical knowledge, linked to experience, which the children acquire autonomously through a way of being together and practising space that is typical of living in small villages in the middle mountains, which is also possible thanks to the presence of the school in the village. This direct knowledge, however, lacks a more conscious and guided deepening, involving the activation of reflective thinking, which the school should take care of. Instead, in line with what happens in most schools, pursuing transmissive and tendentially context-disconnected didactics, the school participates more in the construction of senses of places elsewhere than in the critical production of senses of places closer to home.

Thus, however much the small schools involved in the research endeavour to adhere to the projects proposed to them, which often concern the local area, its history and its environment, there is no widespread culture among teachers, headmasters and parents, which could lead them to imagine a school that has the local context as its object of study, which can be done outside school spaces, in which the contents and methods of lessons are modulated on the surrounding reality. The projects

and initiatives promoted are always outside ordinary teaching, involve extra-curricular teaching and last for a limited time.

This consideration should not lead anyone to think that there is no relationship with the outside world; on the contrary, these are schools that are deeply embedded in the context in which they are located thanks to the relationships of proximity that they weave with heterogeneous subjects. The schools in the three small centres enjoy great attention from parents, local administrators, and associations, always ready to respond to the needs that emerge from the schools, because of the high symbolic value that the communities in the villages assign to them. One example is the importance given to the involvement of schools in local initiatives and festivities, considered a tool through which to involve children. What is lacking is the habit of setting up more formal and lasting collaborations with these different school stakeholders, calling them together to co-design an educational offer that can go beyond the limits of time and strictly school-related spaces, implementing more open and participatory forms of schooling, even accepting to question some of the teachers' certainties, such as the fact that parents must passively accept the didactics proposed by them and should not be involved in decisions relating to them.

6.1.3 Children and places

The research activities in which the children took part, immediately revealed a strong attachment to their living environment. The participants show -almost flaunt- great pride in the centre in which they live, praising the beauty of its architecture and monuments, the fact of being in the mountains in direct contact with natural spaces, as well as the possibility of playing outdoors. What seems to define a broader idea of territory is the relationship, in common with the other inhabitants of the area, with the mountain. This exerts a great fascination on most of the participants; for some of them it is considered part of the context where they live, while for others it is outside the space of the village, but it is a character that defines it, which contributes to generating the idea of the “small mountain village”.

The sense of the village is not only defined in opposition to the neighbouring hamlets and villages but also in opposition to the city. The city that the children have in mind seems to be very different from the nearest urban centres (L'Aquila and Sulmona) that are characterised, according to the participants, by chaos and pollution, and by an alleged “modernity”. While the village is characterised for the children by the combination of “small” and “ancient”, the city is “big” and “chaotic”. Although when asked directly, the participants declared themselves happy with the size of the village as the

best place for them to grow up in, sometimes referred to as "the most beautiful place in the world", when the research activities explored the dimension of desire, a desire for the "urban" emerged strongly, a curiosity and fascination for big cities, such as New York, Los Angeles or Milan, but also more simply, a desire to have shops, pizzerias, sushi bars.

These children, although fully children of their time, "normal children", as I have often heard their teachers and parents say, have the opportunity to spend a lot of time together, outdoors, moving freely between the spaces of small villages. The village coincides with the participants' perceptions - as can be seen from the "children's place maps" analysed in Chapter 4- with the space they practise independently on foot or by bicycle. Most of their daily activities take place in a network of spaces within the settlement context, where children know how to orient themselves, trace routes, and give directions. Parents' cars make it possible to reach the nearest villages to attend afternoon sports and recreational activities, but the connection between the village and these other places is not clear in children's minds.

As shown by the photographs taken by the participants, social life mostly takes place in public spaces, practised daily with peers, without direct adult supervision from the age of six to seven, playing the most varied games. The children are very aware that they enjoy a possibility that does not exist elsewhere for children, as are their parents, for whom this possibility is sometimes the reason for staying in a small centre. Indeed, great value is placed on the autonomy and freedom with which these children grow; it is a way of cultivating strong interpersonal skills both with peers and with adults, with whom it is necessary to negotiate spaces and their usage; one learns to be with others and to test oneself with everyday problems, without, however, being completely alone, because the adults one meets are mostly familiar faces, helpful in case of need.

About the types of spaces frequented by children, it emerged that there is no substantial difference in usage practices between spaces designed for children and spaces that are not. Play moves without much difference between the playground and the main village square, the football fields, or a large lawn. There is, however, a network of spaces, identifiable within each centre, which we recognised during the workshops as "children's places" because they are familiar to them, practised daily, places where it is possible to meet some friends even without making an appointment. There is also the spirit of exploration that leads to the discovery of houses in ruins or to launching oneself into whirling descents by bicycle of the surrounding hills.

Children's communities are composed of various geometries depending on the time of year and time of day. The class group outside school hours loses some members who live in the hamlets or in the most isolated houses, who in the afternoons meet with children and adolescents from the neighbouring area, forming local micro-groups. On the other hand, there is a nucleus of the class group that continues to relate also outside the school, when it is enriched by the presence of older or younger children; the habit is in fact to spend time together even among children and adolescents several years apart. In summer and during holidays, the children's communities then expand to include those who come to visit relatives, second-home owners and tourists. For the children who are part of the stable core, these are the most exciting times of the year, when everyday life breaks down and experiences multiply.

Festive times are special moments for children. At such times, the village is at the centre of attention that it does not usually enjoy, and for them, used to going elsewhere for whatever they need, the feast or festival corresponds to a sudden turnaround that makes the village a centre where others go. This generates great enthusiasm in the children, just as, following the same logic, it generates enthusiasm in the presence of tourists in respect of whom the children usually feel fascinated and proud, also because the adults around them feel rather confident in tourism as a form, almost unique, of revitalising the territory in which they live, and they devote great effort and attention to this issue.

6.1.4 School in inhabitants' family choices

From the interviews conducted, it is clear that the presence or absence of school is a key factor in the choice to stay or to move. For parents who work in small villages, often in commercial or entrepreneurial activities, the presence of the school when their children are young is of fundamental importance in managing the work-life balance. For parents who already work in larger urban centres, on the other hand, if the school were to close, there would be an important incentive to move permanently to the city. In both situations, the help they receive from grandparents, extended families and the network of friends living in the village, who are asked to help pick up their children from school and take care of them outside of school hours, is considered essential by the parents interviewed. There is no direct educational service for children beyond school in the small villages, and no activity aimed at them in the afternoon hours, except for catechism. There is therefore no public support in these areas for childcare, and in the small schools where the research took place, the option of extended time is not available. This is particularly critical for those parents who cannot

rely on a family support network. This absence sometimes means that mothers have to give up their jobs or at least reduce their working hours to take care of their children.

The absence of dedicated activities for the youngest children affects the lives of parents and children. Parents are concerned that their children should be “normal” and that nothing that is offered to children in larger centres should be missing from them. They therefore make themselves available to carry their kids to the city at least two to three times a week, for those with more than one child even daily. They are fully aware of the deficit that the territory generates in terms of educational offerings, the problem is that a parent's effort cannot substitute for the lack of a territorial system and therefore, while accepting to sacrifice their own lives and free time to offer the best to their children, this still means for the children having to face long journeys that, depending on the distances to be covered and the age of the children, can be more or less demanding, but in any case it takes a toll on their time and their tiredness.

What has just been described is not the only aspect of the relationship between school and family choices that emerges; another clear fact is that for many families, that consciously decided to stay and live in the village (or move to it), having their children enrolled in the village school and having them grow up there, is a position that for some takes on political value. Part of the decision to stay is sometimes a consideration of the kind of childhood one wants to offer one's children. For some, the quality of life for themselves and their children is the peace of mind of being able to raise them in an environment they perceive as safe, the opportunity for children to play in the street, to have an autonomous social life, to form deep relationships with a group of peers. Parents often compare the experience of sociability that their children are experiencing to their own, they claim that there is, in the way of growing up adopted in the village, the root of a strong bond with the territory.

I wondered whether the small school could be perceived as a lack of opportunity to confront different realities - and I believe it is partly so, although in making this decision, as seen, there are also great advantages - while the parents do not seem to be concerned about this aspect. First, they consider the context where they live as a “mobile” context according to the seasons, and when tourists arrive the opportunities to get to know and confront different realities exist. Moreover, being few does not necessarily mean a lack of diversity, an example being the high rate of foreign children in these schools. Again, in the village (except for Barisciano) one only attends primary school, and then from secondary school, one is forced to move around and meet other realities. For the parents, it is the specific childhood phase that makes particular sense to spend in the village, it is the young children

who have greater autonomy and social skills than in the city, the discovery of elsewhere can therefore wait for them.

The issue of choosing between school in the village or the city for one's children sometimes creates friction among parents. For those who choose to enrol their children in the village, as mentioned above, there is almost a perception that they are fulfilling a mission to carry on local life, to commit themselves to the future of the village. At the same time, these parents feel they must always emphasise, as pointed out above, that the small school is good, and that it has nothing to envy from other schools as if there were an implicit accusation against them. Also under indictment are parents who decide to enrol their children in larger schools, often out of work necessity and the availability of extended time, accused by other parents of wanting to follow a fashion that leads to the city or of snobbery towards the village. This quite explicit conflict is one of the signs of how central the issue of schooling is in small-village communities, as we will explore in more detail below.

6.1.5 The school's value to local communities

The research participants assign schools a very high symbolic value; it is clear from the interviews how attached the local communities are to the idea of having a school in the village. For them, school represents a possibility for future life in the small village, while its closure is associated with a condemnation towards definitive abandonment. To keep it, they are willing to accept, at times, even compromises that lower the quality of teaching or to find unscrupulous solutions as long as the school remains open. On the one hand, in this strong attachment to the school, there is a certain parochialism and rivalry between centres in the same area, whereby having a school means being a little more than in the neighbouring village and still enjoying certain services. However, there are many other aspects to this position, some of them very concrete, others connect the school to political ideals and values.

Firstly, the issue of habitability related to schools is raised: if we mean to continue dwelling in a low-density area, schools, like other basic services, are of fundamental importance in the management of families' lives. The school is considered by the inhabitants as a necessary asset in which to invest primarily to ensure development, and to be able to imagine a future for the territory.

Then there is the aspect of small economies related to the school. Another element that the inhabitants cherish is the presence of small businesses that the school helps to keep alive. The micro-economy that provides snacks for the children, coffee for the parents who meet on the way in and

out of school, and the purchase of exercise books, pens and whatever else is needed by the scholars, not only enlivens the squares and streets but materially contributes to keeping alive necessary and vital commercial activities for other categories of inhabitants, such as the elderly, for whom their presence constitutes a concrete possibility of maintaining autonomy and coping with basic needs on their own.

It is also a common belief among those interviewed that without the school, the community falls apart. For many, the school is the glue that holds the community together, allowing them to recognise each other, as a place of common experience, but also materially collaborating and motivating collective initiatives. It is also a common opinion that the sense of belonging to the village, the territory and the community is formed during the primary school years, in that group of friends with whom one grows up, who can remain points of reference throughout one's life. The school allows, in this view, to bind oneself to the place, even if life then takes one elsewhere.

School closures, the merging of schools between various centres, is, therefore, a prospect to be avoided at all costs because it is considered the final step that increases depopulation and directs the lives of inhabitants towards the city. The school is thus experienced as a bulwark to cling to, something to fight for, one of the missions entrusted to local administrators who are also judged by their voters on the choices they make about the school, and how hard they fight to keep it. These positions are often supported by the fact that the phenomenon of small school closures is a trend that has been going on for decades in the middle mountains and progressively involves villages from the highest to the lowest altitudes. In the smaller villages at higher altitudes, the school has already closed down for some time and the inhabitants further down the valley, report that this has led to a decrease in population.

It is difficult to say whether school closure comes first and then depopulation in small villages or vice versa; whether the villages where the school was closed would have depopulated less by keeping it open, we cannot say for sure. It must be considered that the choice to merge schools is sometimes a necessary choice to offer children an acceptable educational experience, but it is difficult to say when the time is right to do so or whether there may always be alternative solutions. I believe, however, that it should not be a numerical threshold that determines when it is appropriate to merge, the presence of one child more or less does not change the situation, it is rather a process that should be experienced with lucidity and sharing, affecting a very slippery subject that, as we have seen, is extremely important for the communities involved. Perhaps the radicalisation of some positions by the inhabitants is also triggered by the direction that policies have been pointing in for years, namely

that of rationalising the school system, which is a logic that makes the inhabitants of territories with low educational density feel excluded from the decisions that affect them and less important than others.

The idea I have come up with is that there is missing a shared decision-making process on the idea of a possible school in an area with the characteristics of the central-southern Apennines, with the serious involvement of citizenship. The point, before arriving at the threshold of no return, is not so much to focus on how to survive another school year or to debate whether the single hub is better or worse than the constellation of small plexuses, but rather to try to imagine a radically different school, one that does not resemble the school of the major urban centres and that does not have to compete with it.

6.1.6 Transformation trajectories to intensify the school's role in connecting people and places in the *montagne di mezzo*

The research carried out shows the centrality that the school assumes within the communities' lives in the small villages of the Italian middle mountains. If a future is to be built in these areas, it is necessary to question the logic of dependence on centres, described in Chapter 2, to recover a deeper relationship with the territory and its resources, and to imagine new forms of living. In this perspective, schools constitute a central element on which to work. However, schools too need to emerge transformed from this process: if the territory, with its characteristics, its qualities, its fragilities, does not enter into the knowledge that is cultivated during an individual's school career, if the imaginaries promoted and reinforced also by the school tend to project, from childhood onwards, towards other places, it is difficult for the middle mountain to become the horizon in which to plan one's future existence.

The efforts of administrators, teachers, and parents to keep small schools alive usually take a short-term perspective; they try as best they can to hold out one more year by circumventing stringent regulations and trying to promote the school's activities as best they can. What rarely appears in this effort, however, is the prospect of change, of experimentation, the perspective of breaking the comparison with the "city school" and building something else. The tools, as we have seen in Chapter 2, do exist, they are guaranteed by the laws on school autonomy and by the forms of collaboration that can be established with different actors in the territory. Imagine a small school in which didactics is tailor-made, in which it is possible first and foremost to have authentic experiences in the area, and to study the environment by being in it, is possible.

It is true, on the other hand, that the obstacles that arise are not few: there is a common feeling that “different” teaching is not as valid as “normal” teaching, a feeling that is also reinforced by the school system's standardised evaluation methods, whereby the criterion against which schools are measured is the children's level of learning. If aspects such as, for example, the well-being of children at school were also included in the evaluation framework, perhaps small schools could be looked at differently. Moreover, the thrust towards innovation in these schools comes from individuals who are unable on their own to trigger a change in a culture that seeks “normality”. There is then a need for support, for guidance, coming from higher levels that can promote a gradual path, that provides specific training to teachers and that is stable over time. In this process, an important resource could prove to be the network of actors present in the area and attentive to the school, with whom it is worth experimenting with new forms of collaboration, imagining an educational offer that fluidly expands beyond the school perimeter and curricular teaching schedules. In this, contact with other experiences, other small schools that have already embarked on similar paths or even larger schools adopting interesting strategies, can be useful. This is the direction that INDIRE is already investigating with the Small Schools Project, but if through research the Ministry of Education promotes projects that look at strengthening these structures, on the other hand, policies send conflicting signals to the territories. An example of this is the new law on school sizing, which we discussed in Chapter 5.

Once the need to rethink the school in the middle mountain area has been affirmed, as in other contexts with low population density and poor accessibility, finding the balance between solutions that do not damage the social fabric of the villages but that are also able to guarantee valid educational opportunities for children is an issue for which there is no single solution and which needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. What is certain is that, in addition to needing a deeper knowledge of their local area, children also need to experience the world, to come into contact with different people and situations, and this is an issue that must be taken into account when rethinking schools in these areas.

6.2 POSSIBILITIES AND NEW QUESTIONS

The results of the research carried out relate to the network of relationships involving primary schools and the protagonists of the investigation were girls and boys aged ten and under. A topic of great relevance, which would be interesting to investigate in the future, is what happens to children's communities once primary school time is over. Indeed, the dynamics within peer groups change with age but also with the schools attended and where these schools are located. As they grow up, certain

factors begin to weigh more heavily on adolescents' lives, such as, for example, the issue of travel and inadequate public transport in mountainous areas. It would therefore be interesting to explore how schools at higher levels relate to the middle mountain area by carrying out similar research involving secondary schools.

In addition, the work carried out showed how the use of different creative methods with the children was an excellent tool to erode the surface of words and go deeper in describing their relationship with the territory and places. From the interviews based on the photographs taken by the participants, themes and discourses emerged that allowed us to go deeper into the children's experiences and ideas. In the same way, the use of the maps they composed made it possible to trace similarities and differences between the different realities. Not only that, there is in the use of creative methods a great advantage, which is that of being able to adapt the tools very much to the context and to the questions that emerge as the research progresses, also to indulge intuitions and ideas dictated by the field, enriching the collection of data with details and particulars. It would be interesting to try working with groups of adults with different methods as well. For me, due to the time and resources of the research and the initial knowledge I had of the field, interviews emerged as the most suitable tool for involving adults. However, organising workshop paths with them as well could have brought out new subplots in the themes investigated, just as it could have been useful to involve subjects that it was difficult to reach or go into depth with, such as migrant families.

In conclusion, from a future research perspective, it would be interesting in a comparative key to look for diversities and similarities with other areas characterised by similar conditions, such as small islands, or sparsely populated mountain areas located abroad, probably in the context of southern Europe, to be able to analyse how different educational policies affect the organisation and management of schools but also how the very idea of school and the values assigned to it by local communities change depending on the cultural context.

