"La scuola si Nutre del Territorio nel Quale Alberga" "The School is Nourished by the Local Context"

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Abstract. During the 2020/21 school year the "Small and rural schools" (Piccole Scuole) INDIRE research team set up a research activity with a group of teachers active in the Madonie area (Sicily) grouped as RESMA network. The research topic dealt with planning a didactic unit linked to the enhancement of the territory.

Recorded interventions, projects, logbooks produced by teachers during their experimentation in the classroom are the basis for documentation analysis which attempts to describe the ways in which schools have tackled activities centred on the relationship with the territory. Meetings and interactions have been carried out entirely at distance due to the pandemic.

This article aims at proposing ideas for analysing the relationship between contextual curriculum, emerging curriculum and national curriculum in the context of small Italian schools. It also gives some insights into the theme of the relationship between the local and global dimensions of the curriculum in order to overcome subject boundaries according to three parameters borrowed from Morin's work: the need to carry out "disciplinary encroachments", i.e., multidisciplinarity able to restore meaning to learning pathways. To establish a balance between the micro and macro dimensions, between the context and the global, to reconnect the observation of reality with "high" knowledge. Refine and provide students with the "complexity" (sociological, political, psychological, affective, mythological, etc.) of the vision that affects reality.

The findings of the investigation can be identified into the richness of the teachers' journeys and are also analysed in relation to the awareness they have gained.

Keywords: Small schools · Context · Local curriculum

1 Introduction

Piccole Scuole has been dealing for years with the small schools located throughout Italy. Recently, research carried out by a group of researchers [1, 2] has been able to conduct a census, revealing surprising data: the overall number of small and rural in Italy schools are 8.848. Among them, 7.204 are primary schools and 1.644 lower secondary. The small and rural schools have 591.682 students enrolled and 1.460 schools have
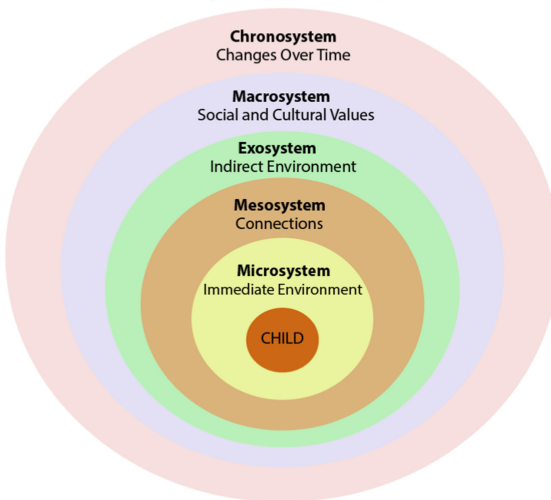
multigrade classes. Small primary schools are 45,3% of all the Italian primary schools. Small lower secondary schools are 21,7% of all the Italian lower secondary schools.

Approximately 54% of small schools are located in inland areas of the country, which are characterized by problems of isolation, remoteness and cultural marginalization.

Small schools are therefore a very important reality in our country [3]. One of the main features deals with the multiage classroom which usually also includes a reduced number of teachers. Moreover, some of Italy's small schools are in areas at risk of depopulation. These areas present economic difficulties: younger generations move away in search of job opportunities as well as cultural stimuli. Often the school is the only cultural institution and a functional element in the life of the community and society [4, 5].

These schools usually establish a strong relationship with their territories, for the aim of this study they represent a privileged observatory. The theme of the relationship between school and territory is not a new one: it belongs to a pedagogical tradition that draws its main inspiration from the John Dewey's thoughts [15], who advocated a strong link between school institution and reality outside, understood as a small community (the family, the neighborhood) and as society in its entirety. The school, as well as its components, teachers, and students in particular, as Bronfenbrenner reminds us, are at the center of a system of concentric circles which, starting from the family nucleus, reaches the organization of planetary government and the media [6] (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Bronfenbrenner ecological system theory.

The model proposed by Bronfenbrenner represents an "ecosystem" made up of different levels (Macrosystem, Exosystem, Microsystem and Chronosystem) in which the individual is rooted. The ecosystem is the environment necessary for the development of the person in his or her entirety.

This approach must be accompanied by the constructs of "environment", "context" and "territory" [7]. If the "environment" can easily be traced back to the "learning environment" in which spaces, objects, materials and didactic (and not) tools are aimed at achieving educational objectives, the "context" is given by the set of expert relationships that involve subjects among themselves and are always in progress [8]. In these relationships, the physical space is a *pedagogical object* [9] because it is a medium that transfers meanings as a) it is a structured system, b) it acts by means of functions, c) with communicative purposes.

And finally, as far as the "territory" is concerned, it has recently become the main character of educational activities carried out outside the classroom. In late sixties in Italy pedagogist such as De Bartolomeis (2018) have identified the territory as an "extended schooling system" which could offer opportunities to avoid educational poverty and at the same time to strengthen students' identity. More recently, there have been an increasing number of reflections and experiences connecting education and territory, also with reference to natural spaces and the environment [11, 12].

The relationship between local and global dimension is at the heart of today's reflections on the theme of ecology in its broadest sense.

Edgar Morin (2000), theorist of complexity, has placed it at the centre of his thinking, indicating the importance of a closer connection between elements often considered antithetical as the Indicazioni Nazionali (National Curriculum) promotes: "There is an ever-increasing inadequacy between our disjointed, fractionated knowledge, divided into disciplines on the one hand, and increasingly multidisciplinary, transversal, multidimensional, transnational, global, planetary realities or problems on the other. (…) More and more, all particular problems can only be correctly posed and thought of in their context, and the very context of these problems must increasingly be placed in the planetary context. (…) Relevant knowledge is that which can place all information in its own context and, if possible, in the whole of which it is part. It can also be said that knowledge progresses primarily not through sophistication, formalisation and abstraction, but through the ability to contextualise and globalise" (*ivi*, p. 5)[1] tracing the idea of an ecosystem-world, of a "community of destiny" that is inevitable today. Morin's work invites us to reconnect dimensions and knowledge in a horizon of meaning that aims at answering the great questions of our time, often prompted by questions arising from contingent and local needs, but which have an obvious correspondence with the more general questions that concern society in its entirety.

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[1] English translation from Italian version by the authors: "C'è un'inadeguatezza sempre più ampia tra i nostri saperi disgiunti, frazionati, suddivisi in discipline da una parte, e realtà o problemi sempre più polidisciplinari, trasversali, multidimensionali, transnazionali, globali, planetari, dall'altra. (…) Sempre più, tutti i problemi particolari possono essere posti e pensati correttamente solo nel loro contesto, e il contesto stesso di questi problemi deve essere posto sempre più nel contesto planetario. (…) La conoscenza pertinente è quella capace di collocare ogni informazione nel proprio contesto e se possibile nell'insieme in cui si inscrive. Si può anche dire che la conoscenza progredisce principalmente non con la sofisticazione, la formalizzazione e l'astrazione, ma con la capacità di contestualizzare e globalizzare" (Morin, 2000, p. 5).

2 The Project

It is precisely the relationship between micro and macro dimensions that our research is interested in, approaching a privileged observatory such as that of small schools. We present a research project carried out with a network of small Italian schools (The Resma Network) located in the Madonie area, in Sicily. The RESMA Network has been active for a few years and aims to activate and encourage exchanges between schools in this area in the province of Palermo. The project, which assumes the model of action-research, has involved researchers and teachers for a few months of the 2020/21 school year, in the middle of the pandemic time. Schools, represented by primary and lower secondary school teachers, were involved in the design and development of digital educational content, with the aim of enhancing the territory and the relationship with it, to include it in the curriculum.

Considering the study of the territory as an important part of the curriculum, we often speak of a "contextual curriculum" by referring to the possibility offered by the law which allows schools to devote 20% of the total quota to subjects identified by the school as being linked to territorial needs.

The project aims to start a reflection on the theme of the relationship between "standard" curriculum (the macro dimension) and "contextual" curriculum (micro). The use of contextual curriculum is an established practice in schools involved in the network but, sometimes they run the risk of celebrating localism, removing the connections between local contexts and globalization. The research has sought to study the two dimensions (local and global) towards a reconnection between them.

The teachers that participated in the research activities were asked to design a teaching activity closely linked to their teaching subject considering elements of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinary connected to the theme of the territory. The course started reading several passages from Morin's work [13, 14], which served to emphasize the concept of "relevant knowledge". The subject of reflection was also the nature of interdisciplinary practices.

3 Methodological Design

The project was designed using an action-research methodology and included a training-mentoring activity, which consisted in listening to the teachers in order to understand their needs and their opinions. The course included a series of meetings in which teachers were invited to discuss some concepts. We used theoretical cues that addressed the issue of the relationship between micro and macro, in a perspective of revisiting the curriculum in a contextual key. The National Curriculum [17] was also a constant reference for our work. Reflection was also fueled by cues of a practical nature, through the analysis of learning products already realized by some schools and based on in-depth work on the theme of the territory. The online conversations were recorded and constitute an important source of analysis, along with the documentation that the teachers designed such as teaching plans, logbooks kept by those who were able to experiment with the planned pathway and, lastly, the content produced (which not all of them were able to complete in the planned time frame, partly because of the worsening of the pandemic situation). The

initial meetings served to bring the teachers closer to the theme in question, through the analysis of products (CDDs) already realized by colleagues. Each meeting allowed us to reflect on the relationship between institutional and contextual curriculum, on the role of the student in a process of designing and producing digital educational content, and on their function within a training program. Teachers were then invited to produce a class design, which was then discussed by the group. Finally, a collective analysis of the products was carried out.

The material collected constitutes a very rich source of analysis and allowed us to investigate teachers' approach to activities linked to the territory. An initial reading of the recorded conversations, diaries and plans led us to define an analysis grid which was then applied to a second careful reading of the materials in question. The grid is structured in the following dimensions: Curriculum & Territory, Didactic contents, Effects (on students), Teacher professionalism. Each dimension, which has subdimensions, has been identified after Morin and Guerra's approach to the relation with the territory.

4   Findings

The research activity started with a problem-based approach. The whole group of teachers agrees on a problem: too often students, children, and young people, show a superficial knowledge of the area where they live. They do not know territory traditions, as well as the native language, partly forgotten or removed by young people. According to teachers' opinion, regaining possession of a shared memory can help students to build their own cultural identity. "Cultural identity is built through the process of discovering reality" teachers told us. It is not enough to say that "the learning environment is the child's experience", we can go further to try to establish how much of the experience of each pupil is now made up of elements belonging to the immediate reality (the family, the school, the village, the neighborhood, the city) and how much instead is linked to an imaginary that include, for example, the whole symbolic horizon experienced through the media. "The question starts from close up, but the answer comes from far away" says one teacher, describing almost a method that was implemented in the development of the projects. The projects were designed from the "choice of a topic that motivates the pupils, linked to cultural and social themes, allows an interdisciplinary approach, and opens up collaboration with the territory".

In proposing the themes, the teachers listened to the students, trying to intercept what the authentic questions are, taking care to ensure that the adults' needs do not overlap with those of young inhabitants of the Madonie: "Are our narratives the same as those of the young?" wonders one of the teachers. And how can we be sure that we are not attributing to them a need that is instead felt by generations still tied to tradition? The problem exists. It is a question, then, of seeking "the pupils agency in a work of tradition" as another teacher said.

Teachers admit the awareness that the school cannot close itself up in a dangerous horizon of self-referentiality: "The school cannot remain closed within four walls". Its task is also to recover traditions that would otherwise be lost, a cultural and social world to be defended: the theme of memory is therefore the leitmotif for many of the planned activities. "Starting from my teaching subject, English, and having emphasized the main

language, as the language of the heart, of emotions and primary affections because it is spoken from birth, we shift the focus and reflect on our mother tongue, the language that Sicilians speak with old relatives. It is with regret that I learn that the pupils do not identify their mother tongue, but rather think of Italian or even Latin". So, one of the teachers wrote. She has chosen to work on "Siculish", the perfect blend of English and Sicilian. The course will allow the analysis and discovery of a language that is unknown to most people, but still widespread in the United States.

The same aim is supported by a group of teachers who are collecting stories and proverbs from the Sicilian tradition: the chosen topic is, in fact, "the rediscovery of 'cunti' and proverbs from popular tradition, combined with the intention of appreciating the expressive value of the dialect and protecting our roots from oblivion".

Teachers denounce a sort of "uprooting" taking place: the students sometimes show that they inhabit the territory without taking possession of it. This happens by many were not born in the inhabited area, but it also happens to those belonging to families who have lived in the area for generations.

The school, moreover, has a varied population today: "It finds itself operating in a heterogeneous and articulated social reality. On the one hand, it welcomes pupils from families that are attentive to the emotional and cultural growth of their children; on the other hand, it has pupils who, regardless of their family background, present situations of hardship, including pupils from a family home for minors". The situation requires attention to diversity, the ability to include and also to deal with the complex issue of identity: "inclusion has become more difficult and the school has had to open up to new strategies, more flexible and more adaptable to new situations in order to meet the needs of all pupils, especially those who, for different reasons, require special attention".

This is one of the aims of the projects: to transform the undefined space of everyday life into a place full of personal and collective meanings: "The project ties in well with the themes linked to the school's local area, since it rediscovers and highlights the most important aspects of it, reinterpreted and 'experienced' by the pupils in a personal way; this is how a 'non-place' becomes a 'place' for them. Our school believes strongly in the value of the history of its territory, which it has enhanced over time in the vertical curriculum".

Some projects intend to work on themes that automatically contain a sort of progression from personal events to planetary, social and political issues, passing precisely through the relationship with the territory to which they belong: "What the project proposes is a difficult journey around man, in a labyrinth that begins in the folds of the soul of the boy who, as he grows up, discovers he is different. (…) The role of the community becomes important, whether it is understood as a school, family or civil society, because it must be able to tell the boy's story, to give him roots, to comfort him in his search for himself, consoling his loss'. A sort of 'sentimental education', as one teacher defined it, which is nourished by relationships with the world".

The projects carried out by teachers therefore aim to make the students more familiar with the area in which they live and at the same time to build connections between elements of the surrounding reality and other areas, other dimensions. This knowledge of the area also serves to illuminate several experiences that operate in the direction of

enhancing the area itself, of a commitment to the recovery of resources, cultural enrichment and development. One of the schools has, for example, intercepted the experiences of professionals who have chosen to invest their professionalism in the area, in some cases renouncing attractive opportunities that would have made them move away from their land. "We first worked on the creation of the video 'ReStare' concerning the collection of interviews that the children had posed to young Madonie entrepreneurs, and from which emerged, significant positive and encouraging messages and enthusiasm for the life choices made".

"We put in place paths that we could call 'the courage to stay': the knowledge of the territory underlies the idea of creating a strong relationship with the territory. Alongside these reflections comes the bitterness of being forgotten by small and large-scale politics" writes the teacher, revealing her profound civil sensitivity.

The activities proposed by the teachers are structured in such a way as to start from stimuli linked to the reality close to the children, but with subsequent openings that establish a bridge between particular and general horizons of meaning. The fairy tale, for example, represents an emblematic element of this relationship between local and global, between a common structure and the variant linked to different contexts: "I have, at this stage, broadened the horizon by reflecting on the fact that these stories were perhaps born in Gangi or near our village but that there are similar stories which, although told in the same period, have been heard by a large number of people and for this reason have been saved to a greater extent from the wear and tear of time and we often find them in children's storybooks". Thus, the connections we have referred to several times are established.

5   Conclusion

Through our research, we tried to analyse the relationships between school and territory, investigating the different perspectives, in relation to (a) the curriculum, (b) teaching, (c) the effects on students, (d) teacher professionalism.

a. In relation to the *curriculum*, the territory emerges in different ways:

   1. In many cases *the territory is covered in some school activities.* The curriculum is thus enriched with themes that cannot be found in textbooks or general texts but require research in the field or from a variety of sources.
   2. In some cases, *the territory becomes a "sounding board" for the school's activities.* The school comes out of its own walls and communicates some of its activities to families and the village, taking on a proactive role in relation to the territory itself.
   3. More rarely, *school and territory fully cooperate through community alliance* drawn up between school and administration, associations and other bodies present in a certain area.

b. In relation to *didactics*, from the diaries and conversations, as well as from the analysis of the products produced by the schools, we were able to verify how the

work on the territory carried out in the classes opened didactic opportunities in different directions. In particular, the learning paths followed were characterised by:

1. *Interdisciplinarity*, involving teachers from different disciplines in common projects.
2. The paths are also characterised by *a close relationship established between local aspects and more general issues.*
3. Paths designed and implemented are also characterised by that "*complexity of vision*" so often called for by Morin, which means looking at problems from different perspectives such as psychological, social, anthropological, scientific, and political.

c. In relation to *students*, from the analysis of the teachers' diaries the research has limited itself to recording the teachers' perceptions in this area; it would be interesting to deepen the data collected with observations, focus, and interviews to be administered to the students themselves [see Design Documentation]. Teachers state that within training courses that envisage the development of digital teaching contents centred on the territory's themes, *students develop transdisciplinary competences*; among these, above all *digital competence and citizenship competence.* Teachers also note a general increase in *motivation* on the part of the students, who are more involved in the training courses.

d. In relation to the development of teaching professionalism, some important elements have emerged:

1. Some teachers stated that they had become aware of a kind of "ecology of action", that is, of conceiving the circularity of their work and the need to establish connections between different teaching actions. The keyword is "planning".
2. Teachers stated that they give more importance to the development of a strategy, rather than emphasising the importance of a programme to be completed. The use of the contextual curriculum legitimises the possibility of "choosing" certain themes, in the direction of essentialising the curriculum, which is one of the frontiers of research today.
3. Teachers show a greater willingness to take a "gamble" attitude, that is to say according to Morin's lexicon, the attitude of being able to grasp, within didactic paths, that extemporaneity that characterises every authentic and virtuous educational path.

Finally, looking more deeply into the theme of the relationship between the local and global dimensions, we can summarise the following:

- At the basis of authentic knowledge there is always a question that is solicited by contexts and situations. Reality tasks (but also what someone has called "unreality" tasks if they are linked to imaginary dimensions) start from questions raised in classroom by one or more students, from questions or problems arising in the everyday context or prompted by readings.

- The answer to these questions, the search for solutions, triggers paths that are a real opportunity to learn a research method that consists of learning how to read sources (of various kinds), compare information, select and evaluate them.
- Research that explores neighbouring realities enables students and teachers to open up a clearer knowledge of territories, but also to connect local issues with the more general questions at the centre of contemporary interest.
- Knowledge can be said to be "solid" if it is re-read and systematised through operations of 're-writing' carried out by the learner.
- Knowledge is solid if it is shared, i.e. it is generated by a comparison with knowledge mediated also by the synthesis of different points of view, of multiple reflections.
- Knowledge is sound if it is rooted in context, if it develops a method that can be applied to knowledge in general. If it proceeds from the micro to the macro, if it combines near and far.
- In a process of reading and reinterpreting elements of the territory, the school performs the fundamental task of "memory archive", working in this way on the concept of cultural identity, a concept which is as controversial as it is topical today.

Summarising, we can conclude that "What did the children experience with this activity? The aim was to fill the children with hope" as a teacher wrote in her diary.

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