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Vol. 2

**Cultures,
Practices,
and Change**

Organizers and partners



EXISTING SCHOOL NETWORK AND TEACHERS' SENSE OF AGENCY AS STEP-PING-STONES TO ENHANCE THE SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL ECOSYSTEM

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Small and Rural Schools (SRS) are a key component of the Italian school system, not only for their number but also for their vital role in fostering social cohesion. The study focuses on primary and lower secondary schools and investigates the connections, established in the post-pandemic period, between each school and social services, educational and cultural associations, municipalities, and private citizens. A desk research based on the institute official reports and projects creates a preliminary vision of the socio-educational ecosystem. Using an interactive participatory approach, school staff and the researchers build each school specific mesogram (diagram displaying relations between school and other institutions) and the one that encompasses the whole institution. The researchers investigated whether differences in each school's understanding of relations, as they emerged during the fieldwork, could be traced in specific teachers' sense of agency, captured through a survey. Confirmation of this hypothesis could orient the school inclusive pedagogical leadership

Education Outside the Classroom; participatory research; socio-educational ecosystem; agency; mesogram.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Small and Rural Schools (SRS) are a key component of the Italian school system as they are 33,1% of all pre-, primary and lower secondary schools (Bartolini et al., 2023). Schools in remote and marginalised territories have a strong effect on social cohesion and depopulation. SRS usually have tighter connections with their communities, both because they need support to provide quality service and because the small size allows for personal connections built through multiple venues of encounter (Mangione et al., 2021). SRS can explore the concepts of Education Outside the Classroom (EOtC) and Open School at a deeper and more immediate level (Mygind et al., 2019). The smaller size implies proximity between inside and outside. In SRS standard curriculum is often naturally enriched by the local curriculum, creating great opportunities for meaningful learning based on authentic tasks, socio-emotional connections and familiar learning situations. These schools often move from research carried out by the school on its surroundings, to research co-conducted by the school and communities, to community involvement as co-

responsible in the educational process. (Chipa et al., 2022). The process can change both school and community.

Relationships among students, teachers, principals and different actors have a strategic importance in developing school projects and creating an educational community. The concept of socio-educational ecosystem can guide us in identifying current and future networks at school disposal (Esteban-Guitart & Iglesias Vidal, 2022).

This research analyses the socio-educational network surrounding the Istituto Comprensivo (IC) of Casina and Carpineti, located in the mountain area of Reggio Emilia province. The IC encompasses 4 pre-primary and 2 primary schools with multi-age classrooms, that respect Indire's Small School definition (Bartolini et al., 2023); 2 middle-sized primary schools and 2 low secondary schools.

The dimension of agency has been considered and explored in relation to the design of teaching and learning activities (Leijen et al., 2024). Teacher agency refers to the capacity to act by integrating personal abilities with contextual factors. It is a dynamic process influenced by cultural, structural, and material conditions, affecting decision-making within professional settings; these decisions are informed by accumulated expertise and directed by future-oriented purposes. In this study, teacher agency is examined through an ecological model, providing a comprehensive view of the educational ecosystem under consideration.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research examined how primary and lower secondary schools have developed connections with agents in their territory in the post-pandemic period, guided by the following question and subquestions:

- What system of relations is built with other local actors around an IC located in a sparsely populated area?
 - How are these connections described in official documents, in the mesogram (visual display of connections) and in the narratives of the staff?
 - How can a sense of agency be transformed by the quality of relations within the ecosystem?

Researchers analysed institutional reports and school project documentation (Three-Year Educational Offer Plan – PTOF 2022-2025; Self-Evaluation Report – RAV 2022-2025; Improvement Plan 2023-2024; Civic Education Curriculum), gaining an overview of the social and educational networks supporting the schools.

The educational mesogram (Coll i Salvador et al., 2020) was used to investigate the relations of each school and the IC with the territory. During 3 workshops, school staff and researchers collaboratively developed a customized mesogram for their group. The researchers, in agreement with the principal, decided to group the primary schools based on their respective municipalities (Paullo and Casina; Carpineti and Valestra), while the two secondary schools participated together because of their similar planning and common objectives. Details on workshop

organization and reflective tools employed can be found in previous work (Biagini & Landi, in press). Through an interactive, participatory approach (Mortari & Ghirrotto, 2019), during each session the staff together with researchers reflected on the type and quality of the connections with the territories. The process allowed to focus connections that could be strengthened or further explored to orient school future choices. The comparison between different schools' mesogram and field notes collected during the workshops, shed light on the different socio-educational ecosystem and support collective improvements and developments.

A possible explanation for these differences could also be traced in specific teachers' sense of agency (Leijen et al., 2024) captured through a survey. The survey, administered to all IC teachers, included three areas: biographical and professional details, agency scale, teaching activity. The second part, designed to explore the sense of agency, consisted of 24 items on a 7-point self-anchored scale. Teachers were asked to reflect on the influences that guide their professional decisions. 3 dimensions oriented the analysis, as defined by the ecological model: Iterational (professional and personal competences), Projective (short/long term goals), Practical-evaluative (the working environment with its potential and constraints) (ibidem).

Based on the data from the teachers' survey, the authors looked for common characteristics in teachers working in the same school that could explain why they displayed a higher number of quality links with external agents. The hypothesis was that teachers with a higher agency worked in better connected schools. The researchers considered which dimension of agency influenced more teachers' actions and whether any specific dimensions could be traced back to teachers' workplace.

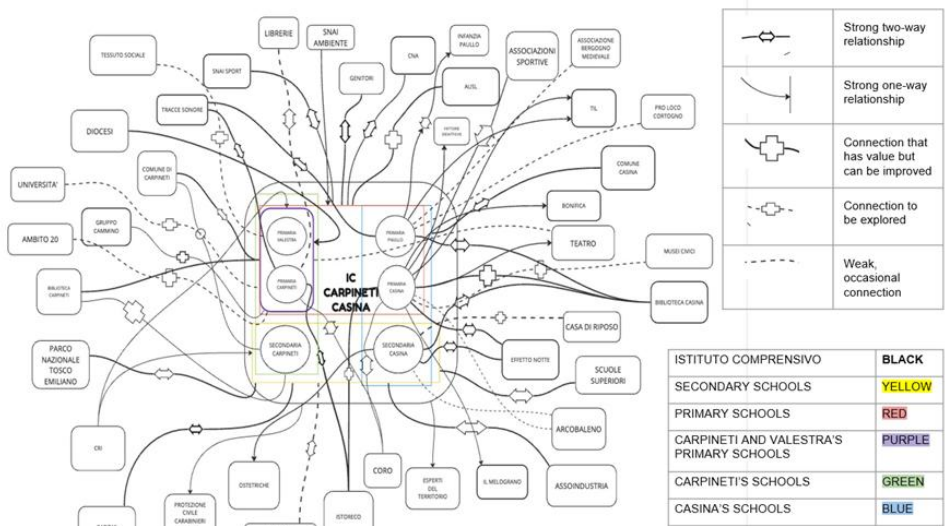
2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Relations according to the mesogram and the schools' documents

During the 2023-24 school year the IC presents itself as a place rich in connections: 41 local agents involved in school activities, 128 outings and 54 experts coming to class. This richness is not random and disorganized but linked to precise choices that put pupils' growth at the center. As the principal claims "The IC supports all types of relationships that are beneficial to the development of students' well-being and learning"¹. The principal has the systemic vision of the socio-educational ecosystem and puts time and effort to support this complex system bureaucratically and financially.

¹ Interview to the principal, Sara Signorelli, as the researchers presented her the mesogram.

Fig. 1: The complete mesogram of IC Carpineti-Casina.



This systemic vision is confirmed by the strong correspondence between references to external stakeholders in the official documents and the connections outlined by teachers in the mesogram. Teachers identify 41 connections, only 12 of which are not mentioned by the documents. On the other hand, of the 33 entities that are named in the documents only 3 are not made explicit by the teachers. These connections include institutions (municipality, police force, the ministry, the national park, social services), non-for-profit associations (Red Cross, cultural and local heritage associations, walking groups), businesses, families and local experts. The documents offer a bureaucratic description and do not detail the quality and intensity of connections that emerge from teachers' narratives. Teachers recognize different agents separately, with their own identity, even when they all collaborate on one specific project (e.g. safety).

Tab. 1. Number of connections declared by each teacher group.

School building	Number of connections
Primary Carpineti	20
Primary Valestra	17
Secondary Carpineti	11
Secondary Casina	14
Primary Casina	21
Primary Paullo	15

Tab. 1 indicates the number of connections identified during each workshop. For primary schools 6 of these relationships are common to all, while 2 are shared among schools in the same municipality. 5 relationships are exclusive to Casina, 3 to Paullo and 3 Carpineti. Most teachers, Paullo and to a lesser degree Carpineti,

being exceptions, even when acknowledging the importance of strengthening certain relationships, place the burden of changing on external agents.

Paullo teachers describe relationships clearly, discriminating the provision of services, from the construction of reciprocal relationships based on joint planning. They declare fewer connections than the other schools, yet demonstrate awareness of these relations as resources, and as co-designers and co-conductors of school activities year after year. The thrive by IC leadership to homogenize activities and proposals, made necessary for an administrative rationalization and to give uniformity to the educational proposals, is seen negatively as it makes it more difficult to relate to the territory, build ties and take children's ideas into account. The Paullo teachers are the only ones who analyse their own relationship with the other schools in the IC, identifying some connections as stronger and more bilateral (Paullo preschool and Casina), others as growing (Valestra) and the rest as inexistent. Other schools refuse to qualify connections with parents or other schools claiming that they are not external.

In Casina teachers initially state that external agents should be grouped by types, they discriminated only when requested to consider the quality of relationships. Relationships are valued (positive/negative) based on efficiency, ease of contact and communication; and organizational ability to accommodate school requests. Therefore, they consider as strong and bilateral the relationships with associations that offer standardized educational experiences from a catalog in a timely manner. Co-designing and goal sharing do not increase strength. In Casina no relationship is identified as needing to be strengthened: either teachers are satisfied, or the relationship is abandoned.

An exemplary case of the different perspective on connections between Paullo and Casina is the relationship with the Casina library. For Paullo it is a positive, strong, two-way connection, despite some difficulties and slowness in communication, while for Casina is unsatisfactory, and cannot be improved, because the library has shown inefficiencies in the past.

Teachers in Paullo and Carpineti can discriminate better between connection types, can point to changes that have occurred over the years in the quality of connections, and can identify the ones that can and should be improved. For Carpineti there are relationships that are at an early stage, but worth exploring such as the one with the nearby Conservatory and Theater. Only Carpineti school considers relationships with entities that deliver teacher training. All others focus on projects for students.

Teachers from Valestra, the other multi-age classrooms school, tend to confirm connections identified by Carpineti. School surroundings are not considered a resource. Even if they recognise strong community ties and a rich relational fabric in the village, they state that the school is neither a part of it, nor want it to be. One teacher states: "we would have a lot of ideas, but we don't have funds for transportation". Basically, learning opportunities are far away and there is nothing we can do to make it happen. This attitude is evidence of low relational awareness and lack

of agency.

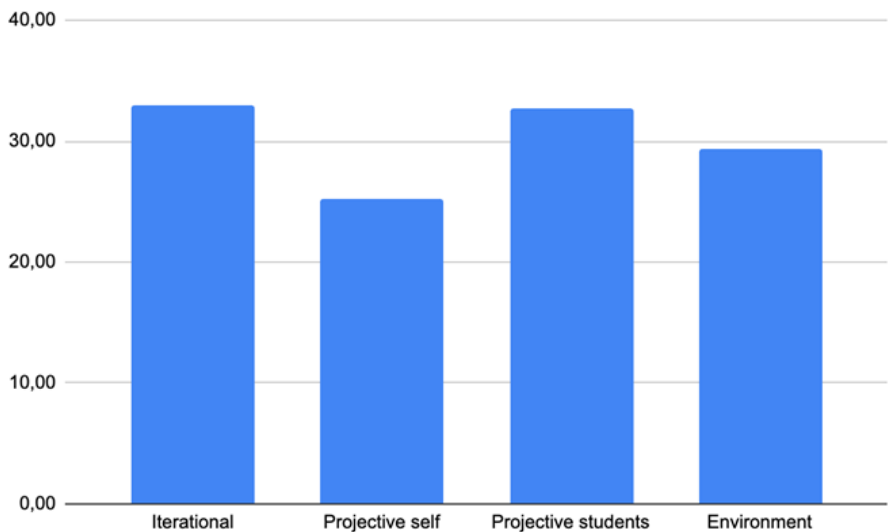
The 2 secondary schools have similar networks. Of the 14 relationships declared by Casina secondary and the 11 declared by Carpineti secondary, 6 are in common. These are connections established on common issues: environment, sexual education and students' life projects. Secondary school teachers link relations to specific projects and qualify them as "for learning" when the disciplinary target is clear. In contrast, they struggle to see the learning aspects of relationships built around soft skills, such as the one with the Red Cross.

2.2. Teachers' agency and school connections

Of the 90 teachers in the IC, 61 (56 females) replied to the survey. 57% of respondents are primary school, 31% lower secondary school, 11% preschool teachers. 16% are special needs education teachers, equally distributed in primary and secondary school. They are well-educated and experienced teachers. 34% have been teaching 7 to 18 years, 33% 19 to 30 years: according to Huberman (1989) those are the most productive professional years. 64% have a college degree, either bachelor's or master's program.

Their professional and life experiences are the strongest motivators for their actions (mean=33), as can be seen in fig.2, while future goals connected to their professional development (mean=25) have the lowest impact. They do not perceive the environment, both at classroom and school level, as having strong effects on their agency (mean=29).

Fig. 2. Elements promoting agency by components (max level of the scale 42)



Statistically we could not find correlations between teachers' role, the school they thought in and their age or degree with specific teaching profiles or with agency profile. Moreover, teachers' ideas on teaching and learning and agency profile also do not seem to be connected.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Each school in the IC interprets relations in its own way. Most teachers have a more IC-based and instrumentally oriented idea of connections. Some teachers, especially in secondary school, demonstrate a lack of awareness of how territorial agents could help develop transversal skills and lifelong/lifewide learning in students. Thus, they are often unaware of how to foster relationships actively. They seem to expect the IC management or the external agents to take care and invest in the relations while they collect the benefits. Paulo teachers have a stronger identity and consider their school separately from the others in the IC: They focus on their own few, deep and rich connections, and can project how to improve them. The mesogram workshop allows these differences to emerge and to identify relationships that could be further explored. Yet, this global awareness arises not within the teachers, but with the principals who used the research to isolate relations that need strengthening and planning further actions.

The lack of agency of some teachers emerges from their narrative, but given the small number of teachers in certain schools it is hard to capture building related causes with the survey. This effect of territorial connections on agency should be further explored. The implementation of EOtC experiences could produce shifts on the environmental and projective-on-self-development components of the agency. This could be an interesting area for further research.

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