

# SMALL SCHOOL NOTEBOOKS

Year 2021 - Notebook No. 1 - Tools 1

# 1

## 2021

## The small school as an educational community

Michelle Pieri and Manuela Repetto - INDIRE

Stories

Tools

Studies



*The educating community*

*English version*

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#### SMALL SCHOOL NOTEBOOKS • TOOLS

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ISBN/A - 978-88-99456-99-3

Our thanks go to the teachers Roberta Avondetto and Francesca Marletto of the Rodari Comprehensive Institute of Torre Pellice, and the teachers Laura Campobenedetto and Donatella Malafronte of the Bussoleno Comprehensive Institute for their contributions to the compiling of this toolkit.

Published online on the website of the Small Schools Movement

[piccolescuole.indire.it](http://piccolescuole.indire.it) - March 2021



Programmazione dei Fondi Strutturali Europei 2014-2020  
 Programma Operativo Nazionale plurifondo  
 “Per la scuola competenze e ambienti per l'apprendimento”  
 FSE/FESR-2014IT05M2OP001 - Asse I “Istruzione” - OS/RA 10.1  
 Piccole Scuole - CUP: B59B17000010006  
 Codice Progetto: 10.1.8.A1-FSEPON-INDIRE-2017-1

The *working library* is an innovative and unique publishing work designed and directed by Mario Lodi.

From 1971 until 1979 the project was managed by a group of educators: Fiorenzo Alfieri, Francesca Colombo, Tullio De Mauro, Caterina Foschi Pini, Alberto Gianola, Angelica Gianola, Roberto Lanterio, Palmira Maccarini, Luciano Manzuoli, Giocchino Maviglia and Francesco Tonucci.

The working library was an alternative to the schoolbook. The format should be functional to teacher's activities. They collected 80 issues of “Documents”, “Letters”, “Guides” and 68 sheets with ideas, activities and practical tips for teachers so as they can use according to the classroom needs.

A sort of collection of good practices experienced in Italy. A catalogue that teachers, parents and students can use in every social and geographical situation. Learning activities that have a different approach to the traditional lessons and use tools for effective teaching activities. Mario Lodi and his colleagues wished that students' families and teachers know them.

Everybody wants a better school, a warm and scientifically correct place where the students' experience comes first. The working library had this goal.

*Cosetta Lodi*

*President of Casa delle Arti e del Gioco*

<http://www.casadelleartiedelgioco.it>

After so many years from the *working library*, the idea of creating a better school is still alive. Today's model of schooling is still a traditional one, which is difficult to remove from the daily practices and belongs to the image of the standard school.

Indire main goal is to give support and highlight teachers' research activity to "learning experiences, classroom organisation and learning environment that foster the students' autonomy so as they can develop permanent competences and skills" (*Indicazioni Nazionali. Nuovi scenari*, 2017).

The tools in Lodi's *working library* were effective because they used a clear and simple language, essential format, a research work that came from teachers' daily activity. The tools contributed to disseminate innovative teaching method based on the active learning and an inclusive and democratic school model.

Documentation and teaching methods offered in the *working library* allowed teachers to practice and experience innovative pedagogy.

The *Small Schools' Notebooks*, divided into "Stories", "Tools" and "Studies", wishes to pay homage to this experience that is a good practice of research and innovation in schools.

We wish to thank to Mario Lodi's heirs to allow us to use and re-think to the *Working Library*. We also wish to thank to Grandi & Associati which collaborated to the editorial activity and publishing of this volume.

Research team - INDIRE Small Schools  
<http://piccolescuole.indire.it>

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## The reference context

The “Small school as an educational community” model has been developed as a part of the “Small Schools”<sup>1</sup> project, coordinated by INDIRE and co-financed by the Italian Ministry of Education, (MIUR). Among the main aims of this project is to help schools in disadvantaged areas to survive, above all by bolstering their role as educational, social and cultural centres in an attempt to curb the growing depopulation, of these areas. Thanks to the advent and dissemination of information and communication technologies (ICT), schools on small islands and in mountain areas have begun to experiment with joint ways of working and this collaboration has contributed to the creation of a small schools movement, initially represented by just four territorial spontaneous networks of schools. This small group of schools contributed in some way to the creation of a National Small Schools Movement<sup>2</sup> joined by signing a Manifesto, being a tool to share activities and values. Among the methodological models that the research group is now working on to seek solutions to the main problems that normally characterize small schools and to improve the quality of their teaching, is the “Small school as an educational community” model designed for primary school multi-age classes, but by its nature adaptable to different needs on both organizational and didactic levels. This model can also be used in “standard” classes, not only in primary schools, but also in lower and upper secondaries.

Small schools have different needs, which depends not only on the human, technological and economic resources available to them, but also on the particular cultural vision and social context that distinguishes them. INDIRE Small Schools project, identified, in a sample of small Italian schools, several educational and organizational needs, specifically related to the management of multi-age classes or homo-

### Notes

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1. <http://www.indire.it/progetto/piccole-scuole/>

2. <http://piccolescuole.indire.it/>

geneous classes characterized by a small number of students. These are the main needs which emerged/the following main needs emerged.

1. Strengthening education for groups of students of a similar age. These students, whether or not they are part of a multi-age class, need to focus on developing age- and discipline-specific skills as well as cross-sectional competence through individual or group work. As far as individual activities are concerned, it has proved necessary to define customized learning strategies backed up by technology. Instead, when it comes to group activities, it is necessary to identify collaborative learning strategies, again backed up by technology, which encourage peer-to-peer comparison in order to overcome the boundaries of single- or multi-age classes and involve students of the same age from other classes or schools. Collaboration between students in “open classes” therefore makes it necessary to define procedure to share teachers and certain parts of the educational curriculum, as well as identifying processes which can optimize both the time and resources used.
2. Exploiting the potential of multi-age classroom. But the designing of activities that can satisfy different age ranges is often complicated and expensive, although students in multi-age classroom work this way. The key is to use approaches to learning which, aligning curricula and spiral study mechanisms, fulfil the training needs of students of different ages and encourage them to work together and achieve specific training goals. Also in this case, horizontal distance learning, using both synchronous and asynchronous activities, can increase opportunities for students and lighten the teachers’ workload.
3. Helping small schools to put down roots across the local context. To strengthen education for groups of students who are of a similar age. School social cultural function can be pursued thanks to innovative learning activities which can include ICT, in order to involve

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the learning community and highlight local tradition and cultural heritage. A school is not merely a pairing of teachers and learners, but is, or should be, a learning community that includes teachers, students, parents, and members of the local community all working together to improve the school institution and to increase the students’ learning opportunities and wellbeing (Epstein, 2018)<sup>3</sup>. This learning community proves invaluable for small schools which are frequently located in isolated contexts lacking the cultural opportunities present in urban contexts (Bauch, 2001)<sup>4</sup>.

ICT can provide many benefits for schools located in isolated areas with a small number of students; for example, they can allow the students and teachers at these schools to reach out to experts or other classes, to take part in virtual integrated teaching and learning activities (Hargreaves et al., 2009)<sup>5</sup>, and access all the resources to be had online. In fact, through the use of ICT, small schools can overcome both space and time constraints and network with other small schools as well as “standard” schools (Laferrière et al., 2016)<sup>6</sup>. ICT could therefore provide useful solutions to keep the school population within the local area, while encouraging further education and lifelong learning. And yet, despite the undeniable benefits it is able to offer, ICT is still far from ubiquitous, even where its use would ensure that leap in quality which many small schools aspire to. Moreover, from the observations made, it has emerged that in Italy, even in the most innovative contexts of small schools where ICT is present and is used regularly, it is tightly bound up with single subjects and a specific topic which is often the theme of one or more off-the-cuff lessons. What is obvious therefore is the absence of a more interdisciplinary and continuous vision of didactics and an overriding theme – elements which are fundamental in project-based learning or competence-based education – steering and bringing consistency to the teaching activities proposed and carried out by the teachers.

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3. Epstein, J. L. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools. Second Edition*, New York Londra: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

4. Bauch, P. A. (2001). *School-Community Partnerships in Rural Schools: Leadership, Renewal, and a Sense of Place*. *Peabody journal of education*, 76(2), 204-221.

5. Hargreaves, L., & Kvalsund, R., & Galton, M. (2009). *Reviews of research on rural schools and their communities in British and Nordic countries: Analytical perspectives and cultural meaning*. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48(2), 80-88.

6. Laferrière, T., Métivier, J., Boutin, P., Racine, S., Perreault, C., Hamel, C., Allaire, S., Turcotte, S., Beaudoin, J., & Breuleux, A. (2016). *L'infrastructure d'orientation et de soutien de l'École en réseau : quatre cas d'illustration*. Québec: CEFRIQ.

In order to fill these gaps and meet the needs of the context, a pilot has been launched which aims to create an innovative model applicable to the day-to-day activities of small schools. This experimentation was with a research-intervention method carried out on some mountain schools in Piemonte Region, involving two schools of the Bussoleno Comprehensive Institute in the school year 2017-2018 as well as another four school, one of the Bussoleno Comprehensive Institute and three of the “Gianni Rodari” Comprehensive Institute in the school year 2018-2019. This action-research activity led to the creation of a “denominated learning” model.

## The structure of the model

The schools that took part in the pilot activities were selected according to specific characteristics, recurring in the small schools located in the mountainous areas around Italy: high teacher turnover, limited technological resources, many small school building with multi-age classes. A Design-based Research<sup>7</sup> method was applied. It helped to identify the problems of the participating schools and set up research-intervention aimed to overcome these problems through innovative solutions. The methodology adopted for the research is named Design-Based Research, according to which, after having identified the problems of the participating schools, a “research-intervention” is set up aimed at overcoming those problems through innovative solutions that, once applied, are then reworked and represented through a theoretical model; following further research conducted in similar contexts, the model is further refined and validated. The sample which took part in the research consisted of two comprehensive institutes located in mountain areas of Piemonte Region, for a total of 25 teachers and 170 primary school students aged between 6 and 11. The first experiment, conducted in the school year 2017-2018, involved two branches of the Bussoleno Comprehensive Institute, and

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included two second- and third-year multi-age classes for a total of 33 children. During the following school year (2018-2019), with research designed to improve and enrich the “Small school as an educational community” model developed in the first version, a third small school/building of the Bussoleno Comprehensive Institute and three small schools of the “Gianni Rodari” Comprehensive Institute became involved, with all eight of their multi-age classes participating for a total of 117 children. The districts/municipalities where the selected institutes are located are primarily responsible for safeguarding their own school building and seek to strengthen their role as socio-cultural strongholds (ABG-Bengtsson, 2009<sup>8</sup>; Marklund, 2000)<sup>9</sup>. In addition, these small communities seek to exploit their local cultural, natural and landscape heritage and are inclined to promote any activities that help the local population put down roots. For their part, the schools are acquainted with project-based learning geared to skills development (Repetto and Pieri, 2019)<sup>10</sup> and, given that they are very small, are used to establishing direct relations both with families and the various regional and local bodies (Kvalsunda and Hargreaves, 2009)<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, the key elements, that have taken part in the experimentation, are exploitation of the available assets, repopulating of the territory, and the presence of relations with those bodies who are an integral part of it.

This model includes the construction of a pathway in six phases, to be located within a time horizon which can vary in length from a few months to the entire school year.

1. *Pairing small school building* – The school leader and the Board of Teachers identify the small school building that will take part in the project, as well as the teachers and multi-age classes that will be involved, bearing in mind any constraints and the resources available. The building need to be equipped with the necessary ICT to enable remote connections from the classroom and allow activities in small groups. According to the teachers’ availability, a

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7. Barab, S., & Squire, B. (2004). Design-based research: Putting a stake in the ground. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 13(1), 1–14. Retrieved from <http://website.education.wisc.edu/kdsquire/manuscripts/jls-barab-squire-design.pdf>

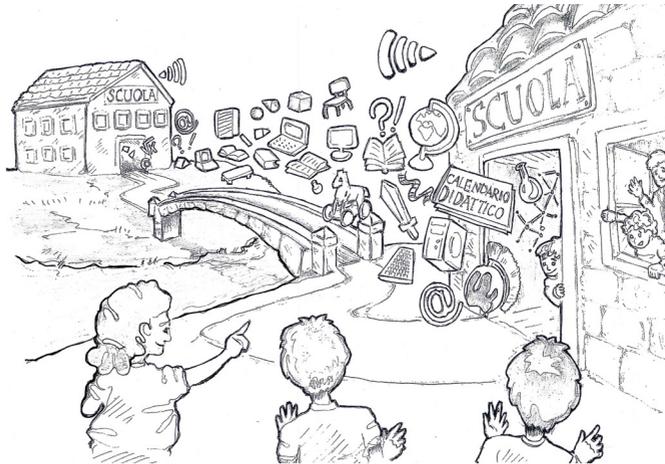
8. Aberg-Bengtsson, L. (2009). *The smaller the better? A review of research on small rural schools in Sweden*. *International Journal of Educational Research* 48, 100-108.

9. Marklund, I. (2000). *Skolan mitt i byn [The school in the centre of the vil27 I QUADERNI DELLE PICCOLE SCUOLE lage]. O "stersund, Sweden: Glesbygdsverket*. <http://www.glesbygdsverket.se/publikationer.asp> Retrieved August, 2001.

10. Repetto, M., & Pieri, M. (2019). *Il modello "Piccola scuola come comunità educante": l'esperienza pilota della Val di Susa*. In D. LUISI, F. TANTILLO (a cura di). *Scuola e innovazione culturale nelle aree interne*, «I Quaderni della Ricerca». Torino: Loescher Editore, 53-64.

11. Kvalsunda, R., & Hargreaves, L. (2009). *Reviews of research in rural schools and their communities: Analytical perspectives and a new agenda*. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48, 140-148.

calendar of the project meetings between the teachers of the various school buildings involved is drawn up and the face-to-face and online activities for the multi-age classes are planned in advance. The building can be part of the same institution, but may also count on other institutions in far-off areas.



Twinning the school complexes

2. *Choice of focus* – The students of the pilot schools have been invited to choose a topic which are meaningful for them in term of identity and have an high affective value. This topic can be inherent to a natural, cultural or landscape asset that is a part of the heritage of their own area. It is however possible to find an asset in common for two branches, which might assume quite different connotations in the area where it is located.

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3. *Involvement of the surrounding area* – The teachers and students contact all the local bodies (institutions, associations, professionals, volunteers) which have anything to do with the topic identified and involve them actively in the project, inviting them to school or meeting them in situ, using interviews, field observations, educational outings and first-hand experience.



The involvement of the territory

4. *Family involvement* – In this phase, which may proceed in parallel with the previous one, the students involve their family members by asking them for a contribution which may be linked to the learning activities carried out, or be of an organizational type, to do with travelling around the local area, preparing artefacts, or setting up programmes of events.

5. *Development of expertise* – this phase develops the expertise in the chosen topic. The students become experts in the chosen topic both thanks to the learning activities in the classroom, carried out with

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the contribution of experts, and through the outings and first-hand experiences that the students have had in the surrounding area. This phase represents the heart of the model and must be planned by the teachers from the different school building taking part to the project, with particular care in defining the training objectives, expected skills and the tools to identify the results achieved and the outcomes. The joint planning needs to focus on continuity, an interdisciplinary approach, and a tallying of the activities carried out independently by individual multi-age classes with those carried out in collaborations between different multi-age classes.



*The development of expertise*

6. *Sharing with the community* – The very last phase involves sharing the products of the different schools participating to the project with their respective communities. This may take the form of a final event during which the students present what they have realized or some form of public exhibition.

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## The role of technology

ICT is not the main focus of the “Small school as an educational community” model, but it is crucial for to its creation/exploitation. The model requires good relations among the teachers in the same school building, as well as among teachers from different school buildings, both in the planning and realization phases. Relations with the many local players are equally important, since the local community is the pool to draw on so that students can develop expertise in the pre-chosen topic. However, they also represent, the target where the students return the skills they succeeded in developing, thereby strengthening the cultural and collective identity of the community as a whole.

ICT can change the daily life of both teachers and students and influence how teachers put together teaching resources, and design and change classroom activities.

The presence of an IWB in specific locations – in the classroom rather than in a common room – can influence how teaching activities are carried out.

- The use of an IWB in a dedicated common area, in addition to expanding the potential number of students involved, can in fact also affect how local groups are formed who will end up interacting with outside groups online. The groups may also include multi-age class students and other multi-age classes students of the same school building, fostering active collaborations for “open multi-age classes”.

The use of IWBs in the classroom increases the opportunities for students to make use of technology.

The availability of other technologies in addition to IWBs can further enhance the teaching strategies employed in multi-age classes. For

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example, the availability of at least one tablet or laptop per group allows better structuring of collaborations and allows students to create digital artefacts without too many interventions by the teacher, further enhancing the role of protagonists that the “Small school as an educational community” model already allows them to have.

### Benefits for students

In multi-age classes, students of different ages participate in creative, collaborative and interdisciplinary activities, supported by technologies and centred around the topic they have chosen. This model gives an active role to the students who, in addition to choosing a topic of interest linked to their own area, also actively contribute to a definition of activities and the involvement of family members and other members of the local community as witnesses or experts in the chosen topic, in a virtuous circle in which the students themselves can also develop skills profiles that will resonate within their own community.

*1. Hyry-Beihammer, E.K., Hascher, T. (2015) “Multi-grade teaching practices in Austrian and Finnish primary schools” International Journal of Educational Research Vol. 74 (2015), pp. 104-113*

### Benefits for teachers

The model trials and promotes the adoption of two specific innovative educational devices for multi-age classes: curricular alignment and the local curriculum. These can free teachers from the belief that a small school needs needs to work necessarily like a “standard” school a “standard” school, which forces them to try to emulate, with considerable effort and poor results, “mono-level” educational pathways, and to adopt stereotyped generic curricula.

The model, which uses project-based learning and is based on a chosen common topic around which to develop all or a great deal of

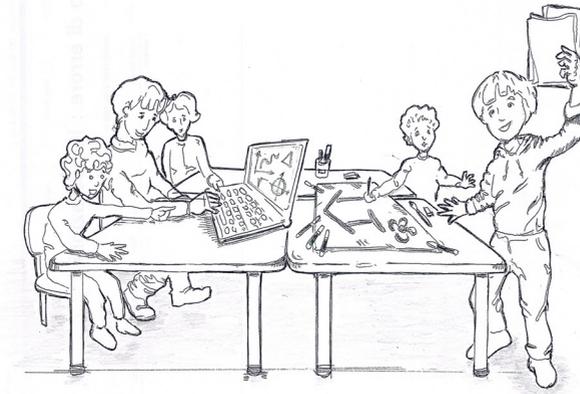
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the learning activities, adopts curricular alignment as a preferred device to optimize the efforts of the teachers to design a pathway that meets the needs of students in all the relevant age groups.



*Curriculum alignment in multi-age classes*

### The local curriculum

The model bolsters and promotes the development of a local curriculum: elements such as the strong involvement of local players in the path to give value to their heritage, the interdisciplinary approach of the curriculum, the collaboration between the institute’s schools which are participating in the same learning path and focusing on the same topic, all contribute to the definition of an school – curriculum which is local, in addition to being vertical and skills-based, and can also be divided at the school and multi-age class levels, developed as a joint venture and marked by an organic, unitary scheme.

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*The multi-age class as an innovation laboratory*



*Local curriculum adoption through the valorisation of the territory*

## Examples of educational pathways

The educational pathways that follow the six phases of the “Small school as an educational community” model can take many forms according to the characteristics of the multi-age classes involved and of the educational and organizational needs created. The learning path proposed in the following paragraphs was carried out by teachers from the small schools involved in the experimentation.

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## Implementation by the Bussoleno C. I. branch

### 1. Pairing branches

The two schools A and B of the Bussoleno Comprehensive Institute who had participated in the research-intervention the previous year and were ready to re-apply the model independently the following year, involved school C in a new research-intervention followed by INDIRE researchers, during which the “Small school as an educational community” model became a part of the annual planning and acted as a guiding thread of it. First and third-year multi-age classes were involved in planning open class activities, along with a second-year single-age class. This branch was paired with a school of the “Rodari” Comprehensive school which was also taking part in the experimentation.

### 2. Choice of focus

The school chose “The Four Seasons” as the main topic, for its flexibility and because it was eminently suitable, considering the branch’s location in a mountainous area.

### 3. Involvement of the surrounding area

The deputy mayor was contacted, who volunteered to accompany the children on their outings around the surrounding area during the chestnut and grape harvests and also offered to explain to the children how wine is made. A retired art teacher also volunteered to help the class teacher create artworks related to the various seasons. The Pro Loco and the Municipality also became involved in the realization of two beehives at the two entrances to the town hall.

### 4. Family involvement

The children’s families participated and collaborated throughout the year with great enthusiasm.

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5. *Development of expertise*

AUTUMN – The children participated in the chestnut harvest and the chestnut fair, organized in collaboration with the Municipality. In the classroom a poem on snow was presented. Second- and third-year pupils working first collectively and then in small groups produced, with the support of an IWB and PCs, a winter story made using PowerPoint. In the second-year class the structure of a narrative text was introduced. The third-year students worked on deepening their lexical knowledge. The students picked and tasted fox grapes.

WINTER - The children presented the game they had made via Skype to their companions at the school of Torre Pellice (Turin). Collective work in multi-classes. In the classroom a poem about snow was presented. In open classes, and in a small group, the students produced narrative descriptions set in a single season and dramatized them for the primary school children, who had to guess which season was being described. Work was done on increasing concentration using an interdisciplinary approach. The second- and third-year children first filled out an individual questionnaire on the subject, then collectively produced a conceptual map on the IWB about concentration and possible strategies for improving it. Later, the older ones learnt a game which they then taught to their younger classmates. In open classes, and in small self-managed groups, all the students played “Get it Wrong to Win”. Next, working in small groups they produced new playing cards on the topic “The Four Seasons”. By exchanging playing cards among the groups, they checked that the questions produced were viable. The children presented the game they had made to their companions at the school of Torre Pellice (Turin) via Skype.

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*A moment of group work in multi-age classes*

SPRING - First grade students and 5-year-old students of pre-primary school paint – this activity links the two educational stages - some beehives which are placed as an embellishment of two roundabouts at the entrance of the town. Students realise with recycled materials some photographic cameras with which they undertake an outing to observe the first signs of Spring. After the outing, there is a collaborative small groups game, based on matching descriptions with the flowers collected. Without school class division, students produce narrative texts set in one season, and perform them for the children of pre-primary school, who have to guess the season.

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*The seasons in disciplinary activities: some work realised by the students*

SUMMER - Visits to the waste dump and lavender cultivations of a town are organised and students write poetry and billboards which are displayed in the exhibition set up by the children. First grade children prepare the billboards; children of second and third grade write, in small groups, the texts on the computer and insert the photos for the PowerPoint presentation to be projected during the exhibition. Besides the specific activities relating to each season, which are carried out during that specific time of the year, activities relating to all the seasons are carried out during the year in arts and history with the project vegetable garden, where, in turns, observation and classification of seeds, seeding, periodical observations and the bean harvest take place.

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**The pathway “small school as an educational community” of two school complexes of the “Rodari” unified school district.**

1. *Twinning of school complexes*

All the teachers of the three primary school complexes with multi-age students are involved, pursuant to resolutions of the teachers’ board and the school board.



*The sharing activity with the “Bussoleno” unified school district community, at the end of the project pathway*

2. *Choice of focus*

After appraising some themes, the students chose to carry out a series of activities concerning the forest, something present in the surrounding area which they wanted to give value and analyse from different perspectives, in an interdisciplinary approach.

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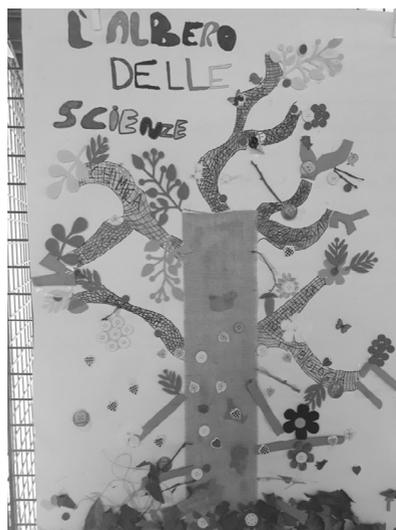
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3. *Involvement of the surrounding area*

In relation to the theme chosen, local organizations and associations such as the Valdese Cultural Centre, the Forestry Carabinieri, Legambiente, and the Miramonti retirement home were asked for help. The students achieved a significant result in terms of personal growth and knowledge thanks to the contribution offered by these local bodies.



*The territory teaches*

4. *Family involvement*

The children's families were involved right from the start of the project. Families have been invited in a meeting to discuss the dynamics and educational consequences of the activities. As in every community, some families were more active than others.

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5. *Development of expertise*

All the pupils of the two small schools participated in the project for the entire school year in open classes. The teachers planned the work, provided possible strategies, but “limited themselves” to mentoring the children during the various experiences. Identifying the issues to be addressed and the problems to be solved, contextualizing the environments, making the resources available as good as possible, giving value to the formulation of hypotheses, overcoming a partial vision of the disciplines and evaluating changes, were the educational models used here. The teachers acted as observers or facilitators. All the works displayed at the year-end exhibition were collected systematically on the Edmodo platform, as were the works carried out in the classroom as well as the direct experiences monitored in the field.

The key phases of the two branches' pathways were:

- a project in French managed by the Valdese Cultural Centre, with reading and analysis of Jean Giono's book “The Man Who Planted Trees” followed by comments;
- a graphic-pictorial activity to use images to tell of real and fantastic forests, with the sending, via a web platform, of photographs of anonymous drawings accompanied by tables in which the companions of the other branch had to report simple comments about the emotions experienced while observing and analysing the works;
- the creative writing activity based on the continuation of a tale about the woods, which was started by the students of the other school complex by working in small groups made up of students of different ages, and was sent to their school mates in order to discuss in video conference, common issues and possible solutions in the two different realities;

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*Classroom extended through ICT in the "G. Rodari" unified school district*

- The outings on the territory to observe the woods by sharpening the five senses, in order to create a didactic vegetable garden and a flowerbed, and the relating activities carried out in the classroom by producing texts and artifacts built with cardboard or with recycled materials;
- Drawing and listening activities about trees and animals of the woods carried out with the residents of a care home;

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6. *Sharing with the community*

The students of the two branches set up an exhibition in the Royal Customs House, exhibiting their works to the public and explaining their project and the activities carried out. Lastly, the "Small school as an educational community" project was presented in a multi-purpose function room, in the presence of the students, family members, associations and members of the local population. The pedestrianization of the entire area encouraged a relaxed atmosphere and provided spaces for convivial meetings open to the communities of both branches.

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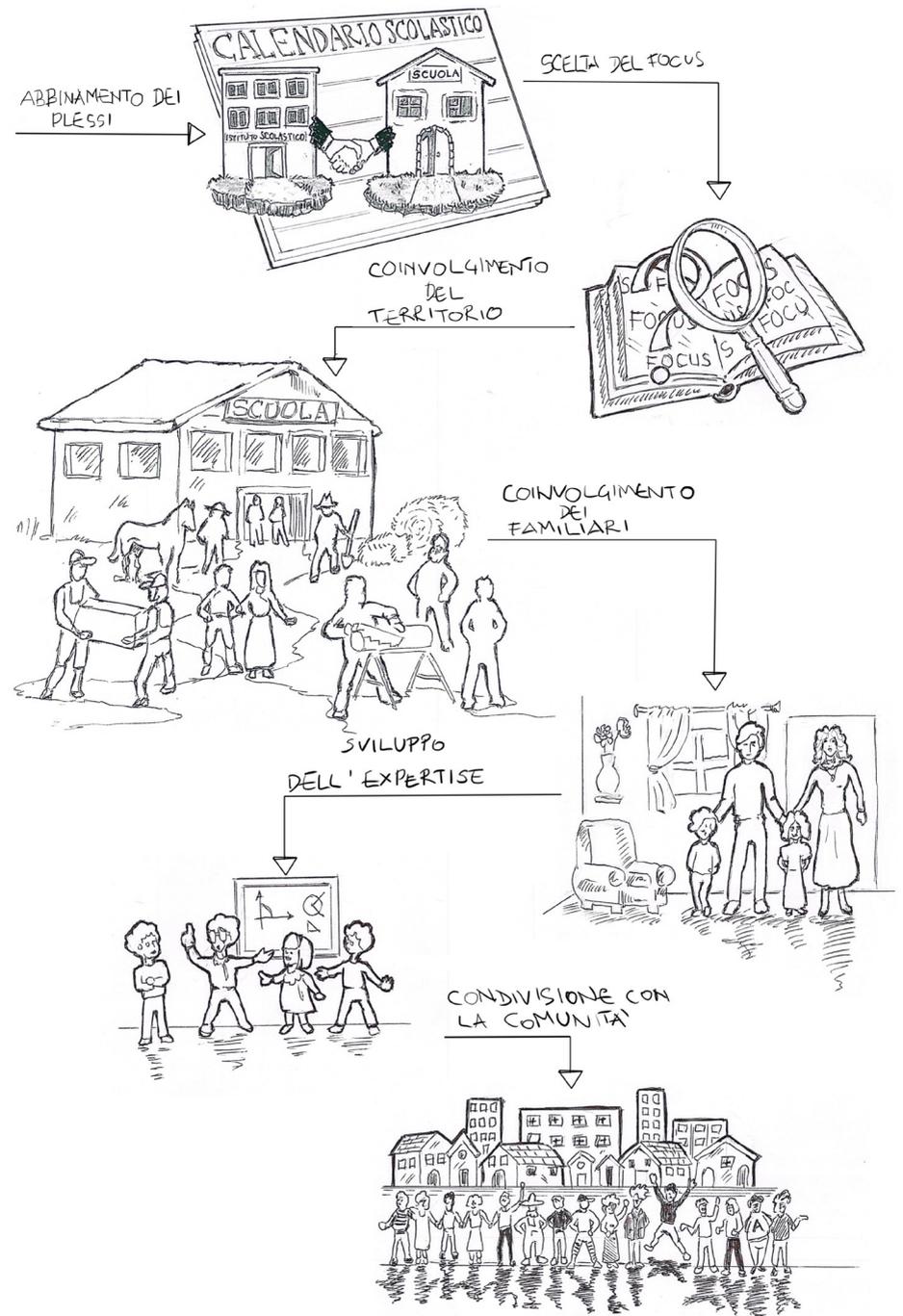
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The phases of the model "small school as an educational community"



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