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Breathing Space

Everyday juggles in the practice of care in an Italian youth centre

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Giulia Bisogni

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Members of the Examining Committee:

Roy Huijsmans

Farhad Mukhtarov

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Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Inquiries:

International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460
e: info@iss.nl
w: www.iss.nl
fb: <http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl>
twitter: [@issnl](https://twitter.com/issnl)

Location:

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

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List of Acronyms

CDG	Centro Diurno Giovanile (daytime youth centre)
CAG	Centro di Aggregazione Giovanile (youth gathering centre)
DPGSCU	Dipartimento per le Politiche Giovanili e il Servizio Civile Universale
MIUR	Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (Ministry of Education, University and Research)

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Abstract

This research paper presents the case study of a youth centre situated in a small town in northern Italy. On the basis of ethnographic research, I investigate the care practices performed inside this centre between staff and youth. The variety of data and the layers of meaning of the place and of the interactions inside of it require a post-structuralist approach that allows to understand these practices in their everyday evolution.

The physical space of the centre is where this dialogue can start and the location of the centre in the disadvantaged outskirts of the town brings additional meaning to it. The migrant youth frequenting the centre are labelled as disadvantaged, yet, such labelling plays little role once at the centre where they find a place to enjoy privacy, exercise agency, have control over the labels attached to them and to allow themselves to face their vulnerabilities or to take a breather from them.

The guiding research question is about the practice of care being performed beyond policy guidelines. The ethnographic fieldwork, in addition to my previous work experience in the same place, allowed me to read the fine print of the place and of the people who live it and to work it out against the bureaucracy surrounding both the profession and youth centres. The lack of clear-cut guidelines on both sides generates an unclear and composite reality and facilitates diversity in implementation leaving the needed flexibility of action that is core to this type of work.

The closing of the work is that this unscripted practice of care is so fundamental that running a youth centre exclusively following the rules would strongly diminish the efficacy of the intervention.

Relevance to Development Studies

From the development and migration debate perspective the centre users are part of transnational families and experience first-hand the shift of the burden of care on women even when they emigrate (Amelina and Lutz 2018). Those kids' mothers often work in Italian homes as elderly carers, baby sitters or cleaners and they sustain their children with this work and at the same time send themselves remittances home. Many of their families are female headed, single mother ones with father figures that are either completely absent or involved in another migration project and send remittances to the family in Italy. All of these aspects play a role in the care deficit of the participants to this research at different levels.

This care deficit can be considered the long run result of the capitalist society demand for productivity inside the modern welfare state and it is relevant since social work and care work are that "re-embedding social relations [...] via state social intervention" that Gough and Wood talk about referring to Polanyi (Polanyi 1944 in Gough and Wood 2004, p. 4). In Esping-Andersen classification Italy is a conservative and corporatist welfare regime (2008 p. 21) where much of the care responsibility is left to the household. In the specific case study, I look at, however, non-state actors and not the family, are those mainly involved in the provision of care and the population investigated in the research benefit more from local community level welfare provision than from an overarching state project or their private household. I see this case study as being connected with the fourth dimension of the "square" that Gough and Wood talk about adding to state, market and family: the community

dimension (2004, p. 5). Community is what allows the type of care, of “looking after and providing for the needs of human and non-human others” (Tronto 1993 in Bauhardt and Harcourt (eds) 2018, introduction) that is needed and the centre does so relying on a space made available by the local municipality, but also benefiting from a global dimension (Gough and Wood 2004, p. 5) represented by the EU funding (European Social Funds) that feed the activities offered by it. Local and global meet in the unique space of the centre I investigated and contribute to another aspect of its fluidity and, as I will present later, the looseness of regulations is what facilitates the “*informal community arrangements*” (Gough and Wood 2008, p. 6, italics in the original) that make it work. The centre space and the staff function as temporary home and family in certain cases and for specific needs they are preferred to both as the elective ties that sometimes are preferred to family ones (Razavi 2013).

The care aspect in this community with global ties dimension united with the looseness of policy is rarely studied in the Italian context and this is where this research can offer an interesting insight.

Keywords

care, practice, youth, place/space, policy, ethics

Homecoming

The night before my first day of fieldwork I did not sleep. My mind could not rest for a second thinking about all the things that could go wrong; no collaboration, no signed modules, no time to do interviews etc. I knew I was welcome there; my former colleagues were more than glad to have me around. Next to this certainty, I was facing many unknown factors.

The day arrives and I drive to the place. I arrive early as I have been enrolled as a volunteer and I still have to fill in and sign all the required forms. As I walk in, I immediately feel like in a *déjà-vu*. Despite some changes because of renovation work, the centre still looks as I remembered it. The office has remained the same too, but on the right-hand rear corner there is now a pile of stuffed toys that occupies almost half of the wall. Due to COVID-19 everyone, kids included, enters from this door. Previously, they would enter from the big room door that opens on the supermarket parking, but the current regulation requires different paths for entrance and exit. The office is also where everyone gets a temperature check before being allowed in.

Since no kids have arrived yet. I take a “tour” of the centre. The former library and Italian course area is now the reuse and recycle one. The books are still there, but they are surrounded by shelves, racks and boxes full of second-hand clothes, bags, shoes and knick-knacks of all kinds. This narrow corridor is so packed that the light of the window at the back is barely visible. I proceed to the big room and I see a new sofa and a new table soccer. Some of the toys from the reuse area have spilled into that area too; as I learned subsequently: this is evidence of the ever-evolving feature of the place.

The first person arrives and the day starts to roll. The routine has not changed much from how I remember it. The main difference is that there are less kids and more silence. The homework moment is still delayed as much as possible. Youth casually enter the centre, greet everyone, have their temperature measured and slowly stroll toward the big room to sink into one of the sofas. Their headphones on, of course. They could stay there forever, unless you call them. In most cases they give no sign of being willing to start their homework. It is almost a game they play with the staff. They are the reluctant learners and staff and volunteers are the regulators. They are honestly not very willing to start their homework (who would be!) but there is a playfulness in reassessing daily their will to do something else than homework. They only push to start working when they need to catch up for a low grade or a test is approaching.

One of the doubts that I had before the beginning of fieldwork was that I would not have been able to help with homework again. I was worried that I may have forgotten not only the topics, but also *how* to do it. Homework is a delicate moment where this youth’s vulnerabilities are stripped bare and education and care combine at a very subtle level. There is a closeness, an intimacy between them and the educator that balances on a precarious and fragile equilibrium. Trust must be established in a short amount of time and can be lost as quickly. With this in mind, I sit down next to one of the youth and start working. The understanding of the fact that I am the outsider now, strikes me. Current volunteers know the recent past of these youth more than me and the sense of ownership that I had in the previous years has faded. I am almost an absolute beginner. It is a challenge and I need to make it work. This boy and I start to go in tandem and to work our way through the long text that they have to read. Minutes pass by and we are both more relaxed. We sit more comfortably on the chairs and start chatting in between exercises. The kid starts gossiping about school, complains about the boring text and shares about extra centre summer activities.

The more the day goes on, the more I regain the rhythm that I feared I had lost. It is, of course, a mental status that I have to regain, but it is also related to how I react to the place and to the space. The centre that was so familiar to me was an up-beat, noisy and buzzing space where at times it was difficult to hear each other speaking over the incessant chatter of the kids. During winter time it was freezing and during summertime, way too hot. The front door opened frequently and everyone could hear it clearly because it squeaked on its hinges. Depending on how it was opened (softly or not so much) and on the time, one would guess who was coming. If they were late, everyone would expect a lecture from the staff. The centre was extremely alive and the stream of people coming and going was a key feature of it.

The centre I found during fieldwork vibrated to a completely different frequency. Due to the sanitary regulations, it was possible to enrol only half of the usual number of people and it has been necessary to spread them between morning and afternoon in order to keep the adequate distancing. The big room that was usually teeming with busy people was now half empty with two people per big desk. The air conditioners were strong enough to cool the air of the room and during homework I could hear what my colleagues and the other kids were saying so clearly that sometimes we commented on each other's work.

The silver lining to this was that I had the possibility to focus more on the observation of the care supplied there which is often composed of subtle exchanges, delicate concessions and personal barriers removal or respect. Youth truly construct the place with their behaviour and their needs stir the practice of the staff creating a specific lived experience of this centre's space and its care practices. The puzzle I was faced with was one regarding the relationship between rules and regulations and the work "on the street". I observed different episodes that showed how much flexibility is required in the social work inside the centre, but I also noticed that flexibility was not explicitly requested by kids, for instance, but it was offered to kids with a rationale that was not evident, it was not on the books. On the side of the kids there was often a *showing* of what they needed, rather than a *telling* of it and staff regularly worked out a response. Flexibility beyond protocol is a key trait of this type of work, as I observed.

This youth centre sits between school and home and performs alternatively functions that pertain to both offering education support and reinforcement, but also the intimacy and liberty that usually a home offers. These characteristics gain relevance once we look at the place where the youth centre is located, a marginalized area where the opportunities for youth to socialize are limited.

The research questions and conceptualization of the work, therefore, follow from the above-mentioned reflection on the fact that those care practices look based more on the staff's ability and willingness to read between the lines the needs of the kids than on prescribed policies. The variability, both in terms of quality and in terms of time, of these needs is what informs the composite practice of care supplied by staff.

Research questions

How are the care needs of youth in a youth centre catered for in practice, how does this relate to prescribed policy guidelines and what does this say about an ethics of care?

Sub questions

- How youth use a space like the centre to find room for being themselves and for coping with difficulties?
- How do youth and staff negotiate this tacit dialogue of care in everyday practice?

In this research I aim at understanding the ethics of care rationale and its flexible practice in relation to the framing of guidelines for social work which, I recognise, is a type of care work.

I argue that, since youth at the centre, and the population they represent, presents a care deficit, in order to address this deficit, social workers have to practice care in a way that goes beyond prescribed rules. This practice is informed by the ethics of care core to social work. I also argue that the day-to-day practice is not linear and needs continuous re-adjustments which are necessary in the light of the relational nature of care.

Methodology

The research is based on ethnographic participant observation. I chose this method because the research problem required to be able to witness and understand the everyday practice of social work in that space and the activities of youth in it

The 20 participants I worked with were 12 females and 8 males, age ranging between 14 and 18 years of age and belonging to 11 nationalities or ethnic affiliations. This includes 3 Italians. Attended the facility either in the morning or in the afternoon. Both moments had homework and free time slots. During this second one I organized several workshops, carried on focus groups, one-to-one non-structured interviews, role plays or had them guiding me for tours around the neighbourhood.

I recognized early on in the fieldwork process that care was key to it and that care and ethics are intertwined, so I kept both to the fore of my practice. I exercised it every day carefully and repeatedly explaining to them my role as a researcher, where I studied and why I was interested in the topic; whenever they showed curiosity about my “foreign university” and asked questions about it I always extensively responded and when I needed the parents’ clearance, I made sure to have it in written form well ahead of the activity.

This research was not designed to land on the centre as a spaceship harvesting for information and then leaving as an impermeable, self-contained experience. I wanted to build a dialogue and leave a trail of breadcrumbs, so to speak, that reminded them of the research. I also did not want to drop the crumbs myself, but I wanted them to. This is the reason why I proposed to co-create a podcast that would be available to them and to the non-profit. Three of them enthusiastically agreed and came for a fourth week of extra opening only to work on that. They wrote the script, produced the background sounds and designed the

cover. My position as former staff helped me in this sub-project as the non-profit approved of it and of the fieldwork extension because of the trust relationship built along the years.

I decided to anonymise all the participants attributing to them aliases (see annex) and to anonymise the names of the town, the centre and the non-profit as well. Participants did not request it themselves and always opted for using their real names instead of aliases when asked about it during interviews. However, I found myself describing episodes that are intimate and delicate and it is part of my ethics of care to protect those I worked with not disclosing their identities.

Conceptualization

Theoretically accounting for the practice of care in the paper and in order to properly address the puzzle I found, I looked for a form of the paper conceptualization that could respond in a fair way to it; for this reason, I turned to post-structuralist theories

The understanding of how relevant space is in social interactions is informed by Doreen Massey when she says that “All social (and indeed physical) phenomena/activities/relations have a spatial form and a relative spatial location. [...] the social is inexorably also spatial” (Massey 1994, p. 265 cited in Rodgers 2004). Walker et al. (2017) are in dialogue with Massey when they conceptualize a “fluid space” as one where people experiencing distress can find beneficial conditions in a space that addresses their needs, without naming or labelling them. Though Walker et al. write from a psychology perspective, the feature they describe is present in the centre I researched.

Psychology and social work indeed bear ties and it is by virtue of these that I bring in the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari¹ who offer an apt ontology to support my findings. Deleuze and Guattari in “A Thousand Plateaus” (1987) propose to move away from the “arborification” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 15) model of analysing texts, books, phenomena etc. that is highly hierarchical and works in terms of a before/after, up/down pattern and to move instead toward the concept of rhizome, in natural sciences a horizontal underground plant stem that can produce a new root plant system (Encyclopedia Britannica 2018).

In the centre space, people and relationships co-construct each other without a fixed hierarchy. In facts “a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 8) and “it [the rhizome] is composed not by units, but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 23). The centre is indeed constructed by actions (motions) and its still units have very little meaning and power without the motion imparted to them by the individuals who constitute it.

Nigel Thrift’s “non-representational theory” (Thrift 2008) helps me here to make sense of “the geography of what happens” (Thrift 2008, p. 2 italics in the original) because “non-representational theory tries to capture the ‘onflow’ [...] of everyday life” (Pred 2005 quoted in Thrift 2008, p.5) like when I saw a bag with plants reserved for one of the kids who loves home gardening. Reserving items for kids is not common, but this boy was a sad in those days because he could not join his family in their trip to the home country. The plants were a small token of care to cheer him up for something unrelated to the centre, but related to the person’s life. The centre and its frequenters are in dialectic relationship and the sense of

¹ A psychotherapist himself

what is happening inside there is something that fails to be grasped by evident signs, but is a tacit dialogue between the parts.

Lejano (2020) delineates the relevance of relationality inside different aspects of policy making. Those who work on the streets, or in the field – the so-called street level bureaucrats, often are able to successfully carry on their work as a result of “a seeking out of harmony between action and relationship” (Lejano 2020, p. 8-9); the same author quotes from Gilligan (1993) calling this relationship an ethic of care, which has to do with “feeling connected to and empathising with the other.” (quoted in Lejano 2020, p. 7). Rachael Dobson (2015) presents relationality in social work considering “social reality as always in movement, processual and fluid, constitutive of and through dynamic and unfolding relations, social networks, social ties, social bonds and intra personal relations” (Roseneil, 2013: 7; Emirbayer, 1997 quoted in Dobson 2015, p. 688).

The centre staff-users relationship is characterized by that fluidity and her questioning of policy related phenomena as “ontologically imagined as monolithic and homogenous entities ‘over’ and ‘up’ there, discursively constructed as ‘top-down’ powers that (or who) hold control over ‘us’, and anthropomorphically configure as ‘they’” (Dobson 2015, p. 691) is in dialogue with my point about not presenting a hierarchy in the paper. For the structure of the paper itself I draw again from the concept of rhizome by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). I chose the rhizome in an attempt to move from a strictly hierarchical order to one that holds its coherence in the conceptual dialogue between its parts because the space and the practices inside of it do not have a detectable hierarchy. There is not a before and after, or an up and a down, but a continuum. Chapters in the paper present inner conceptual coherence that should not be modified, but I invite the reader to bear in mind that the chapter order presented, except for the first and last one that introduce and close the work, is only one of the possible options available; this absence of hierarchy is also the reason why chapters have no numbers which by default would hierarchize them. The rhizome builds itself in a network-like way and changes according to the environment.

The centre according to us: the Podcast



Podcast_RP_ISS 2021_nn.mp3

With the podcast² I wanted to grant the participants ownership of the research process I have involved them into, following Christensen and Prouts “ethical symmetry” (Christensen, Prouts 2002) and recognizing youth as social actors and as active co-constructors of the research. The podcast is structured like a first episode ending with the cliff-hanger “This is the centre according to us, tell us what is your centre!” so that we can potentially add more episodes. Below a condensed vignette narration of the work we did together.

Two boys play ping-pong in the empty big room. It looks like they are having a ball with this old-fashioned piece. The third boy is sitting at a desk with his headphones on and his nose almost poked into the pages of the anime comic of the day.

I look at them and hope this whole thing will work out. The day before I have been waiting for them for an hour and a half and nobody showed up. The excuses being, “I have to be with my cousin”, “Sorry today I have personal duties” and the last, who I called home just honestly said “I forgot. I am sorry. I fell asleep watching Netflix” ...the appointment was at 2pm. Now we have only 8 hours to put this together. The erratic attendance to the centre has been one of the limitations imposed on fieldwork.

I pull out my laptop and sit in front of the one who is reading who slowly puts away the headphones and the anime while the others join us. I have all their attention now and those three pairs of quick eyes reassure me a bit about the outcome of this adventure. I proceed to explain to them why I want to do this and that I would like it to be about the centre. They will write a brief script and then we can add music, sounds and record everything. My laptop is carefully examined in the meantime and it receives the approval of the tech-geek of the trio. “This -pointing at the processor adhesive on it- is a good one, a powerful one”. He is more satisfied than me about my laptop. I take the chance and show them the recording software functioning. They are very focused and ask a lot of questions. To give an example I play for them a trial recording that I had made in the previous weeks.

“How do we make it?” one of them asks. I propose that they could make a couple of sketches related to things that happen there. They disagree, “Naah, too difficult”. Got it. I propose also an ASMR of the centre, “I hate ASMRs” one replies. Ok, got this too. I propose that they brainstorm a bit about the centre and while they do it, I jot down key point on a file.

“Do you remember when we did water games in summer?” “Yes yes! That was sick!” and they go down the memory road for about three quarters of an hour. Most of the recollections are about funny moments during the Halloween parties, when they re-decorated the place or when they had the meetings for the exchange programmes.

“So, how do we present all of this?” I ask. “What do you suggest?” One asks me. “Mmm, I don’t know, maybe something like a chat. I would like it to be natural, you don’t have to act” They like the idea and proceed on that throwing ideas here and there.

² The podcast embedded here is an anonymized version where the kids’ names and the centre name have been cut or silenced.

The second day they create the script which is now officially in the shape of a chat at the bar where two of them, who attend the centre, talk about it to the third one who, though initially very sceptical, eventually decides to enrol.

The incipit of the conversation is about homework. “I finished them”, says one, “I have only maths left” chimes in the other, “But, how!? I’ve done English only” exclaims the third one and the others jointly say “Eeeeh, but we go to centre!” From this point they move on describing what it is and the words after school and summer camp come up, but this is just for the first seconds of the script while later they focus on the fact that the centre is for free, which is a key feature for them, and the fun part of it. Nothing more about school.

The sceptic says “But I went to such a place and I did not like it that much. I mean, there are already so many rules in school, I don’t want to be told what to do in the afternoon too here the boy refers to the fact that there are places that offer similar services in town, but they disliked them. In fact, I had to mediate here in order to avoid naming those places. The non-profit collaborates with some of them so I did not want to mention anyone in a negative way, however, I can say that one of the reasons they cited as the basis for their dislike was the lack of availability on the staff side and the fact that they did not really help with homework. The reply from one of the boys who attend the centre is “Nooooo! It’s not the same: here educators behave like friends. The atmosphere is more like at home than in school. People are nice, friendly and quiet (though not always)”. In this sentence they highlight the importance of the relational part (Lejano 2020, Dobson 2015) especially in contrast with the school setting where rules are perceived as particularly restrictive.

The sceptic boy challenges this apparent perfection of the centre saying “Yeah, I don’t believe you, you mean that you always get along with each other?” and the honest reply is that “It depends, everybody says what they mean, but we can have a conversation about it”. In this exchange there is the evidence of these youth’s expression of their individuality. At the centre they share space and common rules, but they do not think the same way about things and they are never asked to conform in this. The educational purpose is to facilitate dialogue, not to change people’s ideas. There are also things that they really do not like about this centre “Well, if we really want to find one thing that is not too positive, we can say that it is the reuse corner...it takes space and it doesn’t look good either” but they go all the same because “Yeah, it’s a cool place anyway. We also do things outside the centre...”

These remarks help us to “explore how particular spaces resonate, obtain their particular ‘atmosphere’ (Brennan 2004, Sloterdijk 2005a, 2005b in Thrift 2008, p. 16), so that the whole is more than the sum of the parts” (Thrift 2008, p. 16).

Creating this atmosphere and co-creating the centre means also that rules can be broken...and things too! “Ah! And once came an artist-restorer and helped us to build the new sofas from the old ones. So, she allowed us to totally destroy the old ones and that was fun. After that we re-built the new ones with screws and other stuff and they are the ones we have here at the centre now.” Being allowed to break something, albeit in a controlled way means that it is “a space of production, consumption, conformism, resistance and rebellion” (Lincoln 2012, p. 41).

In the podcast the centre is a container that acts as a catalyst for the action while remaining in the background; the background noise (or lack of it) of the centre is something that stood out this summer for all of us, we recorded the landmark sounds of the centre-in-pandemic-time. The ping-pong and the table soccer have been recorded and used to convey the sonic atmosphere of it.

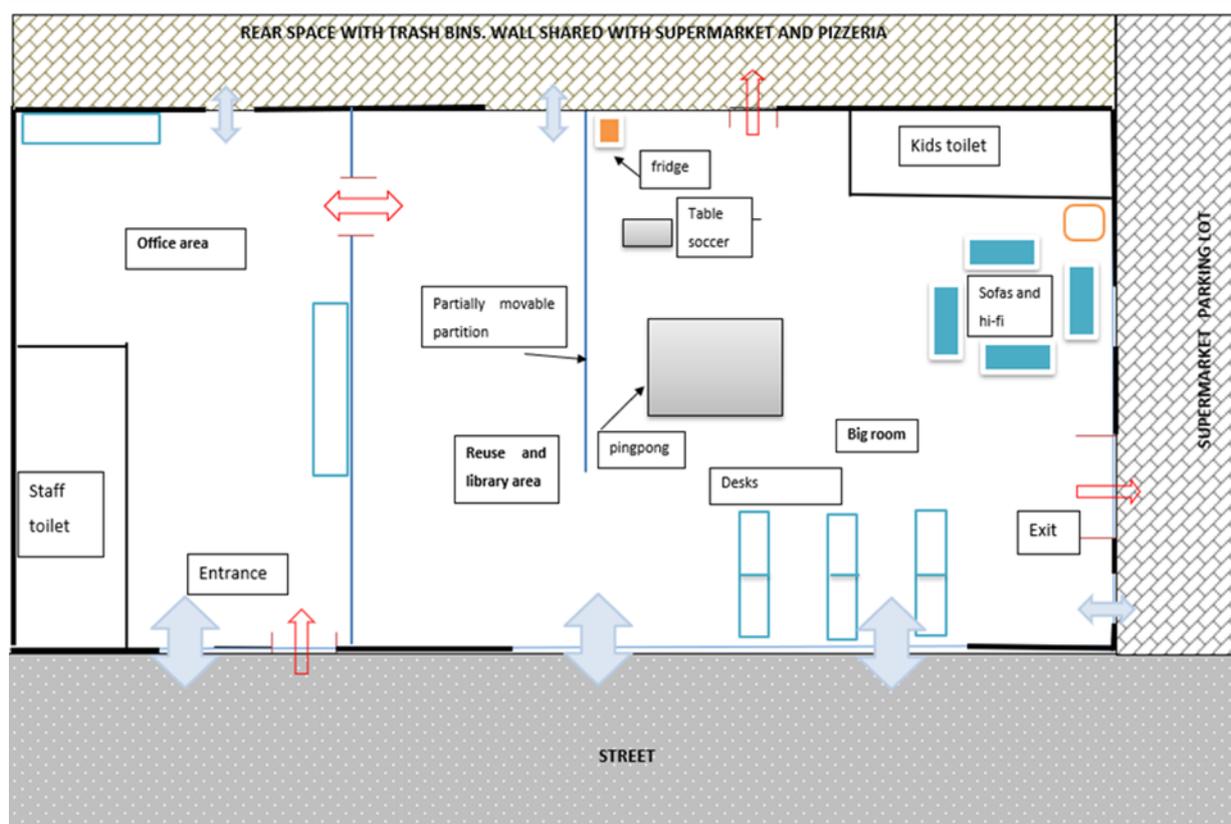
Overall, the podcast is a snapshot of the youth journey at the centre from their arrival for school-related issues to their consolidated presence through interaction with staff, objects and place. It shows also that some of them have a strong sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis

2006) towards the place. I pointed out to them that the podcast almost sounded like a promotional message and that it did not have to be like that, nonetheless they opted for this very positive format. The podcast has been created to be put on website or Facebook page of the non-profit, so we recorded it with an audience in mind and this is the story that they want to tell to the outside.

The centre

The podcast introduces the centre as the background of the narration and of the short story told by the kids. We hear the centre and we feel the fun of being there while we get a glimpse of what brings people to it and now I introduce the physical centre itself.

The map below helps to visualize the inside of it and I invite the reader to keep this structure in mind when reading the vignettes in the chapters that follow. This section is also meant to present the point of the need of a place for care that is neither home, nor school, but that presents features of both (sofas and desks).



Map by the author

The centre is a large square space divided in an office area where the staff works and where one-to-one meetings with participants, parents or social services and the weekly staff briefing are held. On its door there is a partially discoloured paper stating “Do not open, interview in progress”. Youth know that, when the door is closed, they must not open it and enter the place. The same applies to short term voluntary staff who, especially at the beginning, is not involved in meetings where sensitive issues are discussed.

Outside the office there is a sort of corridor created by a large half sliding partition. One wall is covered bottom to top and almost entirely in its width by bookshelves loaded with

schoolbooks, it is the library. Next to it, divided by a narrow space where one can barely walk, there is a row of small tables which are also covered with school books, but, in this case, they are the selection of schoolbooks ready to be given to the kids. The wall opposite to the library and the two walls to its right and left plus the remaining part of the library wall are occupied by the reuse area. This is a relatively new feature of the centre developed in order to offer the opportunity to put into practice a non-wasteful lifestyle and to enhance the circulation of people from the neighbourhood inside the centre. The presence of some of the local underdogs does not encourage the local middle-class families to come, however, so a real class mixing does not occur.

On the other side of the sliding partition there is the big room where most of the activities take place. There are desks and stationery trolleys for the homework time, closets with arts and crafts materials, a ping-pong table and a table soccer one, four sofas and an amplifier. The organization of the space is flexible, but its use is time-determined. The desks are used in the two hours dedicated to homework and the sofas are used only after that. They are not allowed to sit there before.

The centre is not an independent building. From the outside the block comprising the centre, the supermarket and, since about 5 years ago, a pizzeria looks like a continuum of commercial activities. This is contrast with what Yanow presents as a key feature of the community centres she analyses which were designed to stand out and become the focal point of the area like a “central plaza” (Yanow, 1996, p. 161). In this case, it looks like there is no planning behind it and little interest in making it visible to the public.

The perimeter is constituted by top to bottom windowpanes with light curtains installed during the pre-pandemic time renovations. Homework desks are positioned right next to one of these window walls so that when you do the homework, you can see people passing by. This makes the centre a porous space where inside and outside are visually difficult to separate. When I worked there, during the summer days, from time to time I would look over my computer screen and see the coming and going of the people of the neighbourhood. I learned the daily schedule of many, I knew when they walked the dog, when they went to do the shopping or came back to school. I could guess who was the grandchild of whom from how they went to the supermarket together. I learned the rhythm of the place, you notice that those who live there are more visible because they use the bus and come back from the open market loaded with heavy shopping bags, trudging in the sun or in the rain or in the snow depending on the season. Life there moves in slow motion with entire hours where nothing happens. The busy moments are the ones connected with the clock-in /clock-out of the shift workers.

This centre is owned by the municipality and it has been operating now for 19 years. Initially meant as a ballroom for elderly people, it eventually became an afterschool facility previously run by municipality staff and later by the staff of the non-profit. Current activities include: afternoon homework support for junior high and high school students, Erasmus + youth exchanges (organization and training), job search workshops, cv writing workshops, healthy relationships and anti GBV workshops, finance management workshops, summer camp, clothing swap-parties, reuse and re-cycle hub, distribution of childcare articles to the neighbourhood families and the student’s ones, organization of block parties, annual talent show and annual Christmas stall market. Youth enrol on a voluntary basis and have to re-enrol every year in September, with priority to those enrolled in the previous year. There are reserved slots for social services users. Once the full capacity is reached, a waiting list is set.

Studies about the importance of space for youth have been conducted by Wridt (2004), Sriskandarajah (2017) and Raffo (2011). These authors work out the relationship between space and youth identity with Raffo working also towards a connection between youth, space/place and education, he says “my argument is that particular combinations of scarcity

and spatial processes linked to particular places have significant impacts on young people's educational identities – identities that I argue mediate the conversion of educational resources, such as schooling, into educational attainments or achievements” (Raffo 2011, p. 2).

The specific group I worked with fits into this stream of research because the centre is a facility created with the official mandate of supporting disadvantaged youth both in their school performance and in their socialization. My interviewees stated, in facts that, “Well, when I arrived at the centre the first time, I felt like a [emotionally] closed person [...] eventually I met many friends” (Riccardo 17 years old, boy 26th July 2021) or “There is affection for ***³ [...] I grew up a lot coming here” (Rosa 18 years old, girl 26th July 2021) and “there is always a place for me here” (Margherita 18-year-old girl, 23rd July 2021) and “at the beginning I was a very closed person, very shy, I would close up, people would...people...I was afraid of people. Because, I mean, having had, ehm, having had some things in the past that were not so nice. [...] now, instead, with time passing, my character has changed, before I was a bit a stupid. Now I matured, I know how to behave with other people, I know who I can trust and who I cannot, I can tell a real friend from a false one. There has been a bit of, ehm, a radical change in my life.” (Margherita, 18-year-old girl, 23rd July 2021).

Statements like “there is always a place for me” and the ones about the growth they recognize occurred inside there speaks to what I introduced at the beginning of this section as the need of a space that allows this growth, this expansion of the field of care beyond school and home and the possibility to benefit from such a space has a positive impact on the school performance as well. The quotes show also the relational nature of the place where the care practices of welcoming and listening create a positive impact on the individual who then brings them outside as well.

What type of centre?

This section presents the law framework in which a centre like this is classified. The fragmented landscape that I present here is the consequence of inadequate central youth welfare policies, but is also the condition that facilitates the flexibility of the work allowing non-profits like the one in charge here to plan and design their intervention with a good degree of autonomy.

The centre is a CDG and these centres are regulated and organized at a municipal level. No general description of CDG is available for the province or the municipality of this town specifically, and nothing is specified at the minister level about CDG. At the minister level there are indications about another form of youth centre, the CAG-Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile that is comparable to the CDG. The CAG Manifesto of the province of Milan written by the province Department for the Development of Professionality, Volunteering, Associations and Third Sector therefore offers a useful outline of the its functioning. CAG have the mission to counteract the loss of spaces where interaction among members of different social classes have the chance to meet and mingle “*Il nostro lavoro educativo si fonda sull'eterogeneità, agisce contemporaneamente prevenzione e promozione, contrasta la segmentazione sociale attraverso occasioni di convivenza*” (our educational work is based on heterogeneity, it acts at the same time at the prevention and at the promotion level, it contrasts social segmentation offering opportunities to be together) (Manifesto CAG 2006, p. 15 italics in the original).

On the municipality level the specific centre is described as having the goal to prevent juvenile distress, facilitate the integration of youth of same and different ages and to promote

³ The person is referring to the centre managers

intercultural integration (Municipality website). Users' age range is between 6 and 21 years of age and they offer after school support, workshops, language classes, games and outdoor activities and they are open during weekdays in the afternoon (Municipality website). The centre activity is framed inside Italian youth policies which are developed within a multilevel governance framework where different actors at the national, regional and municipal level cooperate on the typology of interventions. Specifically, at the central level the DPGSCU Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri promotes and coordinates the government's activities in the field, but the legislative part is developed in cooperation with the regions, the provinces, the autonomous provinces and the municipalities; while the design and planning of interventions on the territory is developed bottom up from the associations of the so-called "third sector" which is the one related to social work and non-profit ([DPGSCU, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri-Governance 2021](#)). The funds allocated at the national level trickle down to the local level where they are collected in the Piani di Zona ([Regione Lombardia 2021](#)).

From the historical point of view in Italy youth centres develop from oratori which were the playfield spaces nearby a Catholic church. Oratori were born in XVI-XVII centuries in religious contexts in Italy and France (De Nicolò 2008) with the mission of offering a safe space for education and socialization to youth coming from the lower classes. The original evangelization mission today is highly diluted into a more pragmatic social cohesion one. A report shows that in a city in Lombardy one third of youth who go to oratori are of Muslim religion (Sanfrancesco 2015).

Another key space in the Italian social landscape are social centres. As Mudu describes in his article (Mudu 2004) social centres were born in Italy in the 1970s as a reaction to the difficult socio-economic moment that the country was facing. The complex Italian political situation at that time saw the concomitant presence of a 50 years long hegemony of a Christian Catholic values inspired party, which rose to the power after the 20 years long fascist experience, and the presence of the strongest Communist party in the western world. Social centres were born in the spirit of this second stream of political consciousness as experimental spaces of direct, non-hierarchical democracy (Mudu 2004). The very first time that such an organization appeared in the country it was in the shape of the workers' associations, mutual aid societies or "Case del Popolo" (People's Houses). From there on they have taken different forms, but have kept the mission of being sites of political and social resistance continuously challenging the oppressive State structure (Mudu 2004).

The youth centre researched for the RP is not politically connotated and has no religious affiliation and the goal of their action is chiefly social. Specifically, the non-profit's objective is to support the integration of immigrant families across the territory of the province. Integration is supported helping minors during school placement and the orientation of families to the network of territorial welfare services⁴. Language courses in school and inside the non-profit's facility are also available and so are summer camps run in the local schools' premises; all activities are free of charge. Funding comes from agreements with the municipality, the province or the region either directly applying to calls or participating in consortia with other non-profits. They also participate in activities and projects funded via European fundings, such as the POR-FSE (European Social Fund) fund and part of the regional or municipal funds are also derived from EU projects (Non-profit website 2017).

⁴ In Italy welfare is regional and regions are autonomous entities (Costituzione art. 114)

Migrant youth

Since the majority of the population attending to youth centres is of immigrant origin, I present here the national and local situation of migrant youth.

Being a young migrant in Italy means being part of a larger immigrant community of 5.923.000 people as per 1st January 2020 who reside in the country; 20,2% of them are minors and they represent the 14,8% of youth with Italian citizenship (ISMU 2021). In school 10 students out of 100 have a migrant background. This unfortunately does not mean that they are performing better in school: in fact 30% of them are lagging behind in their studies and 32,8% of them drop out in comparison to 11% of natives (ISMU 2021) and this trend has been exacerbated by the pandemic. The non-profit which runs the centre launched in 2020 an online charity action to collect internet data cards for the kids' distance learning.

The municipality of the town has 70.971 residents (Demo ISTAT 2021-Residents in the municipality) of which 10.004 are of immigrant origin and 634 are in junior high of high school age (Demo ISTAT 2021-foreign residents in the municipality). They are the main beneficiaries of the 23 afterschool facilities available (Municipality after school facilities leaflet 2020-2021) most of which are free of charge.

During fieldwork some of the kids attended consistently, while some others did not attend more than a couple of times. This was not correlated to my presence as the trend has started already before my arrival. However, it is interesting to notice that the motivations behind non-attendance were different between males and females.

Boys and young men called in sick or simply disappeared for a few days (or weeks) and neither them or the parents answered the phone calls from the centre. For girls and young women, the most common reason was that they had to look after younger siblings, do the shopping or running the errands for the family. Another option was that they babysat for other family members and were compensated for this.

In the last case they were more than happy to skip a day of homework for a compensated job, but in other cases the girl was not and expressed her preference for the centre rather than being involved in those activities. A couple of situations showed the typical traits of parentification, defined as a child being assigned roles of an adult (Engelhardt 2012) that impaired their participation in activities more appropriate for their age.

These same families sent the daughters to the centre when they needed support with specific tasks like filling in the house benefit requests or preparing the papers for a subsidy, all services that the staff offered on a regular basis. This is a specific way of using the centre that links to Yanow's "functional supermarket" (Yanow 1996, p. 140) concept. There are services supplied and people are free to choose how much to use of it and how much to commit to the mission of the place. When kids decide not to attend, they are also expressing their agency and deciding whether they want to foreground their vulnerabilities or not, to opt for a structured socialization or to go their own way for the day. They lead this conversation.

Staff officially demands of kids and their families to commit to the educational project represented by the centre in the very moment of the enrolment. They should attend and they should always let staff know if they do not come and if this happens for too long, they may lose their spot. However, this hardly ever happens and staff are flexible about it often glossing over reiterated absences with the only purpose of not losing the kid. This freedom (granted and taken) is an ethics of care choice; keeping the tie is ultimately more important than enforcing the rule and youth are the subjects who ultimately will shape the day. Their decision to foreground or background the centre and what it means is also exercised through objects as the following chapter shows.

A teddy bear

Objects fill the space and they are tools to express oneself and to cope with difficulties. As I present in the first part, they also allow youth to indulge in moments of peace and intimacy.

One quiet morning, Monica, 14 years old, is going around the big room of the centre holding tight a 40cm tall stuffed teddy bear just to sit on the sofa to hold it on her laps. The scene is odd. She is barely visible under it. I record the event, but do not pay too much attention to it in that moment and move to the office to continue what I was doing. After a bit Monica comes in and heads to the door with the big bear, stops in front of the colourful closet next to the entrance, lifts herself up on the tiptoes and puts the bear safely on top of the closet. I look at my colleague and frown in doubt. She explains to me that the bear is Monica's, chosen because she likes it and since it is too big to bring at home, she leaves it there and cuddles it whenever she feels like. The girl nods in agreement with a timid smile, exits the place and bikes home.

The bear arrived at the centre as a donation for the reuse area, but all the reuse objects are also available for youth and staff. For Monica the bear is not just a toy and the possibility to keep it there is important. Space availability at home has been an issue for her family since I know her and it causes tension among family members often leading to intense rows.

Monica does not have control over what she can or cannot own so the teddy bear at the centre is a safe act of rebellion: she owns something forbidden and she can enjoy it without having to deal with the restrictions that she would face at home. She is also performing a very intimate act there. She is exposing her desire for something infantile and tender. The fact that she can choose whether to cuddle it or not is also part of that foregrounding/backgrounding movement mentioned above; for the time being, she can choose to show her softer side one day and not to do it another day. Objects which are usually marked for the common good can become private if this is the best thing for the person. This elasticity is fundamental to nurture the affect inside the place as “context seems to be a vital element of the constitution of affect. Very often the source of emotions seem [sic] to come from somewhere outside the body, from the setting itself” (Thrift 2008, p.176).

What's in an object

As the teddy bear sketch shows the centre offers also room to live intimate and private moments. It is a private space in the sense that, there, youth can be what they cannot be at home or in school, can express themselves in ways not possible in those two other settings and they are allowed time “on their own” there whereas they cannot have it at home due to lack of physical space due to bedroom shared with their siblings, small houses, intrusive parents and demands from families to do the chores etc.

Inside the centre objects carry stories and support the different functions of it: the educational and the recreational to name a couple. As Yanow explains in chapter 6 of her book “How does a Policy Mean? Interpreting Policy and Organizational Actions” (1996) objects and artifacts have an enormous relevance when it comes to dealing with space and, I would say, with affect. The whole space serves the function of offering these youth “a pleasant atmosphere of social and cultural well-being which is often *absent from* their [...] dwellings” (“Community Centres in Israel”, 1971, emphasis added, quoted in Yanow 1996 p. 170). Inside the centre there are few relevant objects that carry more meaning than others and that are used by the resident youth in particular ways.

The desks in the big room, six large grey tables on steel stands that can accommodate about six people and chairs, are where school activities take place. They are disposed in three rows and contribute to the school-like aspect of the place. The desks make the place look like a school and convey the sense of tidy discipline that education demands.

Sofas, on the other hand, mark the relax corner. In the timing of the centre, homework come first and relax after, the movement is first at the desks and afterwards on the sofas.

In the corner between two of the sofas there is a wi-fi with big amplifiers. It has been optimized by a former frequenter of the centre and now has a powerful sound. None of the kids have something like this at home so it is a, shared, prized possession. The hi-fi is also a tool to make kids stay together while they negotiate on the tracks to play from their personal playlists. Sometimes, of course, this negotiation does not occur and they start quarrelling about it. Staff do not put any restrictions on music except that sexist and offensive content such as blasphemy are not allowed. Nonetheless the music corner is one of the favourite spots of the room.

The hi-fi is also the object that contributes more to the private room atmosphere. I put this characteristic of the space in dialogue with Siân Lincoln's "Youth Culture and Private Spaces" (2012) work on British youth's bedrooms and her description of the participants rooms and private spaces "as an identity space" (Lincoln 2012, p. 41) "a space of autonomy, of escapism, one that is removed from the public sphere, a space of ownership and control". The centre is a space where all of the above mentioned are possible and in most cases happen. In the interviews and in words like "freedom" and "joy" have been associated with the centre which sometimes is referred to as a "second home" (Riccardo 17-year-old boy, 16th July 2021 and Alessandro 18-year-old boy, 22nd July 2021) or as the second place, after one's room, where they can express themselves or feel themselves represented.

Music is key in youth lives because it is as a chill-out moment, and escapist practice and a cultural re-assessment or sharing. It is not unusual that they put on their home country music, but it is even more common that they listen to Italian music, oldies included. This summer they played at the highest volume possible a song from the famous children song contest "Lo Zecchino d'Oro". The song is not much more than a nursery rhyme and, still, they were singing from the top of their lungs. Volume is a playfield to affirm and reaffirm their presence. Sometimes it is so high that it makes it impossible to speak also inside the office. In this case the staff would either pop their head out of the door and shout "Turn it down please!" or go there and tell them to turn it off. On extreme cases they would turn it off themselves.

Other objects such as photocopiers and computers contribute to the place's "functional supermarket" function in that they meet "the largest number possible of residents' wishes" (Yanow 1996, p. 140). A former user or someone who is not assigned⁵ to that day, may pop in just to make photocopies or print material free of charge. The centre nature is to satisfy some kind of need by offering a range of "prepackaged goods" (Yanow 1996, p. 141). In a neighbourhood where few households have a pc and a printer these objects link the centre to the outside. The type of goods is also customizable to a certain extent; as soon as a need rises, a new option is readily made available. For example, as soon as the number of youth in need of additional training in Italian has become relevant, a course has been activated. The same ratio has been applied to the rising evidence of a need in job search support from both the youth and the other residents of the neighbourhood. Youth would drop out of school and of the centre in favour of temporary jobs, but they would go back to it when they need

⁵ For homework support they have days of the week assigned to them according to their school grade and place capacity

help to write a new cv or to ask for orientation about a new job. The ethics behind this is again a care one where the dialogue with the context and the people propels the action. Free photocopies are not a policy prescribed feature and they weight on the limited funds of the non-profit, nonetheless staff never refuses them because they are a tacit request for support and that is the main goal.

In this chapter objects are tools of care, tools of privacy, tools of education. They concur to the place's meaning and to how the place looks from the outside, namely, those who pass by notice the desks and the bookshelves and they assume that it is a school, but they are also used by the kids for their own purposes (amusement, status reassessment) and by staff to convey the educational goal, but also a homely atmosphere that is what ultimately consolidates the attendance to the place, as the podcast in the beginning shows.

I guess that this must be the place

The importance of a dedicated place and homely one can only be understood in relation with the area and neighbourhood where the centre is located and this aspect is explored in this chapter.



Source: Google maps, 9th October 2021

The title of this chapter is not only an obvious quote from a line in the Talking Heads 1982 song “This must be the place” which is dear to me, but it is also what everyone says the first time they get to the neighbourhood. It is such an unknown place in the town, that most locals, including me, have no idea of where it is until they have to go there for work. There is no indication of the neighbourhood in the municipality maps, not in the street signals or in the bus signs. The first conversation with volunteers or other collaborators who start to work at the centre is always about how surprised they were to discover such a place existed.

In the satellite photograph of the area of the neighbourhood the yellow cross indicates where the centre is located, the orange dotted line indicates where the public housing buildings are and the light blue dotted line indicates the area where upper class villas, detached houses or apartments are.

The area is mainly countryside and it is situated in the outskirts of the town with only two bus lines that reach it and that do not enter the neighbourhood, but stop at the borders where the roundabouts are. The last service is at twenty-past-eight in the evening during summer and at ten-past-nine during the school year. Movement to and from there is difficult and the majority of the families do not own a car and therefore both parents and children’s lives are marked by the downtime in between the bus rides.

Though the neighbourhood is immersed in the green, the small parks and green areas situated inside the public housing part are neglected by both the municipality and the locals in addition to being drug dealing and drunkards loitering sites. For these reasons they are not spaces for youth to spend time in and they gather instead in the internal courtyards of their blocks or in the parking lot in front of the forgotten public library. The two identities, luxury detached houses with private gardens on the one hand and social housing gated compounds on the other, are divided by a green area that, though public and open, serves only as a division between the two areas and the respective populations. The main point of contact

between the two being the local supermarket, which is also home to the only bar of the entire neighbourhood; an unusual feature for the Italian landscape.

The centre is the only place dedicated to youth in the whole area and the only one where they can meet and gather all year long.

Exploration

During fieldwork one of the activities that I proposed to the kids was to take me on a guided tour of the neighbourhood, which I do not know, and to show me the blocks where they, the areas where they hang out and the general topography of *their* neighbourhood.

Stepping back from what they might perceive as my position as expert and passing this “title” to them was again part of my care ethics and also part of the awareness that I developed regarding being an outsider in that neighbourhood. As Sriskandarajah argues “being from a particular neighbourhood or social field informs one’s perspectives and actions.” (Sriskandarajah 2017, p. 20) and I come from a different neighbourhood and a middle-class, white, ethnic Italian background.

I went on two tours with two different groups and both highlighted a number of features that I could not have detected alone. They divide the social housing area into a “good” and a “bad” part. The former is the one where some of them live and where there is a good atmosphere and relationships between neighbouring families are not tense. The latter is identified with those blocks of apartments where live people under house arrest, squatters, drug dealers or zingari (gypsies). An interesting observation about this last category is that there is a Sinti⁶ girl who attends the centre this year and she is well integrated and never reported about any discrimination and no discriminatory behaviour has ever been witnessed by the operators.

The division is quite clear cut with some rare exceptions and in those cases, they accurately pointed me the windows that belonged to the good families and the ones which belonged to the not so good ones. It felt important for them to mark this distinction and to show me that they were not part of that type of families. When they stress the fact that they do not belong to the blocks or apartments that have a connection with crime they make a statement about being the good part of the neighbourhood. They are aware of the fact that they come from a disadvantaged setting, but they are also keen of detaching themselves from those who act against the law. The latter ones being those who mostly contribute to the bad name of the area.

We strolled up and down the two streets that represent the division between public housing and upper-class villas. In one group they reported never to walk up the streets that run around the villas and that they do not know the people who live there. Lucia said that she has school mates who live in that part of the neighbourhood, but that they do not speak because those ones behave as if they were “high up there” (*si comportano come se stessero troppo lassù*) (Lucia 17-year-old girl, 19th July 2021) underlining this statement with an eloquent gesture of the hand. None of the members of this group ever ventured too far from their home and gathered mainly in the park a lot.

The second tour I took was longer and provided a different insight. I went with a volunteer and with Stefano, a 16 years old boy, who took me all around the borders of the neighbourhood and also in the upper-class area. The front gardens, often with a swimming

⁶ Sinti, as well as Roma and other related communities are generally referred to with the derogatory term “zingari” in Italian.

pool, are carefully inspected and he knew what the most recent changes were. There, is his “Instagram spot” where he takes pictures or selfies for Instagram and records Instagram stories. This is an aesthetically nice spot with a well mowed lawn and trees. He apparently did not shoot Instagram stories in the area directly surrounding his house.

Stefano’s map of the neighbourhood included a number of anecdotes about his adventures, some of which included trespassing the villas’ construction sites or vandalizing road signals. All of this was said with more than a drop of pride. Teenager bravado is part of this pride, but there is also a part related to showing that they own the neighbourhood in all its parts, even those which are precluded to them. Class divisions are visible and sensed by them and discourses of money and affordability are their households’ everyday reality, so violating those boundaries is an act that reasserts a sense of ownership and somehow power over the neighbourhood.

As the previous paragraph shows, it is not possible to understand the centre and the kids without understanding the neighbourhood and its relevance is underlined also in Wridt’s work (2004) where she focuses on “the block” (Wridt 2004, p. 199, introduction) and similarly also the neighbourhood and the centre are the places where “you spend most of your time when not at home or in school” (Wridt 2004, p. 204). Some of the kids made clear that they do not hang out in the neighbourhood anymore in their free time. This is connected to them growing up and having the possibility to move more freely, but also with a feeling of having better opportunities to enjoy themselves in the city centre or out town altogether. For some, conversely, this is the favourite place to be in any case due to its quiet and to the familiarity of that context. This point struck me particularly because, thinking through my position lens, I do not value the quiet uneventfulness of a place as something positive, however, this is informed by my habitus, meant as “the way through which the objective outside world or fields becomes internalized” (Sriskandarajah 2017, p. 20). Reflecting on it, I understood that I had always lived in very safe and “quiet” neighbourhoods, therefore did not value them. On the contrary, their experiences were different.

Not so important

During observation and during some role plays I noticed how meaningful was the centre and its spatiality in the sense of “the ways in which the social and spatial are inextricably realized in one another; to conjure up the circumstances in which society and space are simultaneously realized by thinking, feeling, doing individuals and [...] the many different conditions in which such realizations are experienced by thinking, feeling, doing subjects.” (Keith and Pile 1993, p. 6, in Nairn and Kraftl 2016) but then when I asked them to elaborate on that or even with direct questions about the relevance of the centre inside the neighbourhood, they answered in a way that was not consistent with what I saw.

When asked about the importance of the centre replied that it has a “medium role. It is not super important, but it is not useless. Because people come here, not only us, people in general come here to ask for information, ask questions, do things, volunteer” (Lucia 17-year-old girl 21st July 2021) and this thought echoes the one of Margherita who states that the centre has no function at all inside the neighbourhood. In both cases the statements are particularly interesting because their household rely on the centre for different things and one of the mothers also volunteers and occasionally works for it. This is another part of the puzzle that I am faced with in this research demanding of me to read between the lines because the importance of the place is felt, not said. It is difficult also to articulate the more amusing part of it “Those who do not come here cannot understand, I mean, is not that they cannot understand how it works, but they cannot understand the fun, so to speak, that we

have here for those who come regularly know how it is” (Lucia 17-year-old girl. 21st July 2021).

Articulating care is difficult because it means that they have to rationalize the fact that they need it. The concept itself of care is something that they struggle with as I learned during a role-play we did where they were asked to create sketches connected to key words that I gave them and when they found the word “cura” (“care” in Italian, which means both care and treatment) they immediately related it to taking an aspirin. That surprised me and made me understand that I had given for granted the notion of care itself.

I ragazzi

If care is difficult to articulate, the need to express themselves is not. The centre offers the possibility to do so and to be in control of their statements. This chapter therefore deals with how they negotiate their cultural belonging, but also how they use the space and reclaim ownership on its practices and objects. Ragazzi and staff are in dialogue in the chapter because they respond to one another in the daily practice of the centre.

The kids who arrive at the centre have gone through a more or less formal process of labelling; ultimately, they enrol because they cannot cope in school, but school is often just a symptom of something else because it acts as a catalyst for all their issues and it occupies a significant amount of time in their lives, action again is based on “perception [...] is based on symptoms and evaluations rather than measures and properties” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 528). If the flag does not come directly from social services, and this represents a meaningful act of categorization, it comes directly from the family. A nervous mom (less often a dad) would walk in and shily (or very heatedly) complain about the school problems of the daughter/son. She would describe the situation to the staff who, in return, explain how the centre work. If capacity allows, then the kid would be enrolled. This is the beginning of the care machine work and that beginning of an autonomous journey of growth and identity building outside school and family but still open to both.

Once in the centre youth can “reproduce dominant scripts and rupture others” (Sriskandarajah 2017, p. iv). In some instances, they will assert resolutely their belonging to their country of origin or original culture “[a place where I feel that my voice/identity are respected] are the mountains. Because they are part of my native hometown” (Margherita 18-year-old, girl, 23rd July 2021) or “down there⁸ at my place [i.e. northern African country], I feel much more at ease, because, there, people are like you” (Lucia 17-year-old girl, 21st July 2021)⁹, while sometimes they would assert their Italian identity like when they refer to have partied when Italy won the Euro Football Cup. In other cases, they would play on the ethnic stereotypes that affect them, speaking with the accents or mannerisms associated with their culture showing acute awareness of how their communities can be perceived: one of them offered to record the podcast in an Indian waiter accent.

The centre allows for a comradeship that would not be possible inside the household environment or in school. A scene that I witnessed can serve as an example: one afternoon during the post-homework moment three kids discuss clothing and styles that they like or dislike and at a certain point one of them, a male, tall and by all traditional standards very “manly” looking and with a beard goes to the reuse and recycle clothing corner to see if there are interesting trousers. He picks a pair and shows them to the other for approval. They say they are women’s trousers. On my side I could not really tell as they looked regular baggy, black, sweatpants. He says they are not, but the other insist so he decides to try them on and goes to the kid’s toilet to get changed. He comes out posing like a top model and the trousers actually fit pretty well. The others insist that they are more for females, but I must admit that I do not see such a marked feminine look. He is about 1m 90cm tall and the funny fact is that they are too short for him. They all (the model guy included) laugh along and he goes back to the toilet to reappear in his previous clothes. In another occasion girl tried clothes on and asked for our (staff) opinion on how they looked in them.

⁷ The kids, in Italian. I use this word because is the one staff and myself use to identify those who go there.

⁸ It is common in Italian to refer to South as down and to North as up.

⁹ Both girls are born in Italy.

The youth at the centre are pre-teenagers and teenagers; this is an age of transition and transformation where they build their identity and their “public persona”. They are not yet adults, but they are definitely not children and this distinction is made also by the choices of leisure activities that they make. Playing videogames is popular, listening to music too, but playing with toys for instance it is not. The centre is full of toys and it is common to see them playing along with those. They also experiment with music that they would not listen to usually at home. Private space means dancing and twerking to lively music far from the indiscreet (and judgmental) eyes of the parents or of the other siblings. Trying on clothes in front of friends is an activity that, especially girls, usually take place inside one’s own room, but they are done in this public space. It means that they feel comfortable/safe enough to both have fun in trying on clothes “destinated” to the other gender and to somehow expose themselves and their bodies to the others; to ask to being “judged” about their appearance knowing that they will not be hurt by other people’s words.

Kids live the space continuously reclaiming their ownership of it through objects that become reserved for them like the favourite chair, the lucky pen, through taking food from home and leaving it in the common fridge without anybody touching it and, of course, they also use their bodies to assert their presence in a determinate place.

Small practices

In normal times physical expression would not be restraint and they would hug, they also hug us as a greeting, especially if it has been a good day in school, they kiss on the cheeks, a common, not intimate, greeting practice in Italy.

Where they decide to stay is as important as a means to convey their state of mind, their emotions, their need or to resist something. When there is a bad day and a hug is not sufficient is not uncommon for them to ask to sit in the office for a bit; they may engage in a casual conversation with staff members that serves as a recharge moment before the homework or to distance themselves a bit from the harsh feelings connected to school. Sometimes they would simply be around staff, asking openly or not, without doing anything special, but just being there a bit. If there are no privacy issues involved such as phone calls to make, meetings or interviews they are allowed to do it and staff respects the fact that sometimes they need to take a moment “off” from everything, but also a moment to stay away from other kids after a disagreement or a heated discussion.

Being in the office, which is the designated space for staff, is also a way to state a status that they have inside the centre. The possibility to be inside the only place where at times they are not allowed to be is in itself a statement. Those who have been attending for longer are entitled to “small privileges” which are based on the accountability credit acquired through the years. Those privileges can comprise being allowed to handle the tea boiler alone, helping out in the office with photocopies, tidy up and rearrange closets etc. they are also those with whom there is a bit more flexibility about the days when they can or cannot come.

Staff pay attention not to concede too much, but such distinctions exist. This example is particularly connected with the specific care service/care attitude that is performed at the centre. The care present there is highly reliant on observation, attention and far less on open requests. If one side this can sound unexpected, on the other it is entirely reasonable in such a space; the continuous dialogue between staff and kids require that rules are never rigidly applied and the everyday needs dictate the course of action.

Educators

The care ethics that inform the educators' practice does not (only) cater for the direct and openly stated need, but it goes beyond, in the realm of relationship and rapport. Something that you learn when you work there is that there is that what you do not see is often more important than what you see. Direct needs are ones like having the school books that they cannot afford or the school support, but others are more subtle, less evident. When it comes to learning, for example, staff is always alert to detect a special need that may arise or a difficulty that they were not aware of.

Staff play a role that is closer to the one of guardians in some cases and they have to balance the official policies that would suggest to create boundaries between educators and participants and the common sense needed in social work that tells you that in order to achieve a goal, rules cannot be always followed. Social work, however, is not an aseptic work that lends itself to being performed with the expectation that the professional involved will leave her or his feelings at the door. As Ingram (Ingram 2013) writes "emotions are a prerequisite for making sense of the complex information and circumstances that a social worker is required to make sense of" (Ingram 2013, p. 9) and in the same article he also indicates how important it is to "aspire to a system that recognises the fluid and unpredictable relationship-based aspects of practice" (Ingram 2013, p. 13). They are also "civic entrepreneur" (Durose 2011, 2007 in Dobson 2015, p. 693) who design solutions and interventions according to the situation they find themselves in. The fluidity and unpredictability of this type of care reflects, in the case of the centre educators, also in a regular stretching of working hours beyond the official ones. In fact, most of the activities are designed and planned after the end of the day and after the kids are gone at 6pm.

The above-mentioned importance of emotions in the face of complex situations, but also the importance of relationships (Lejano 2020) find correspondence in the deontological code of the profession (ANEP 2015) to which permanent staff, who are educators, can refer to. The code strongly focuses on the personal traits that educators must have in order to successfully perform her or his role "must be a mature person, responsible, open and flexible in ideas and actions, with good self-esteem, balanced and with good level of self-control; the educator should be aware of her/his skills and limitations, should be able to maintain an optimistic outlook, patience, awareness, emotional distance when facing issues in often difficult and frustrating situations" (ANEP 2015). From this vague, yet meaningful, description one can see that that profession is based on personal skills even before than on professional ones. On the one hand this is understandable in the light of a highly relational job, but on the other it implies a non-objectivity in defining who has those skills and how one should exercise them.

The code delineates also the basic instructions on how to deal with the so-called "users" of the service. It is stated that the educator should not act as a "problem solver" (ANEP 2015, p. 3) of the issues presented by the user and it should keep the users' family as the main "social group" (ANEP 2015, p. 4) for them and the educators' intervention should aim at preserving the family bond when possible. One of the duties of the educator is to "avoid any relationship with users that goes beyond professional requirements and that can lead to affective or intimate dependency that result advantageous for the educator" (ANEP 2015, p. 8). The educators I worked with at the centre always worked showing a high level of work ethics and, to my knowledge, never created situations of inappropriate power imbalance with the users, however, defining what is a "professional requirement" and how far an intervention can go without stepping into the realm of family duties. Since families are often unresponsive to children's needs and school requests, the centre educators have to step in. For

this reason, in the enrolment form there is a number of “extras” that range from non-school related activities to having access to the school records’ passwords, or having the authorization to drive the daughter/son home after a celebration at the centre.

In the latter cases, it is clear that the centre’ staff go beyond the official role. In the school record case this is connected to the space’s function of support because regular check on the school situation is what allows them to steadily support the students and intervene as soon as possible when the situation is getting difficult.

One may ask why parents allow for all this responsibility shift to the staff; there are different motivations behind this behaviour. One is related to the widespread lack of access to IT facilities (no internet at home) which makes accessing and navigating the heavy school platforms close to impossible. Another one is connected to the language barrier faced by most families; they are not able to read the school records except that for the grades that are expressed in numbers. Paperwork coming from the school is often signed off without really grasping the meaning of it.

Another aspect is connected with the frequent pattern of parents who are scarcely involved in their children’s lives. This is a feature common to many and sometimes there are reasons that go beyond the actual will of parents who cannot meet or adequately respond to their children’s needs due to unemployment, overnight shifts, time consuming commuting, physical or mental health issues. However, the practical consequence is that they do not monitor their children and they are not involved in anything regarding their everyday life. They do not go to teacher-parent meetings even when they concern serious matters like the risk to fail a year or behavioural issues including the suspect of the child being bullied.

The result of these situations is that the centre staff takes over in the nurturing and care part. Children not only refer to it for any matter that concerns school (books included, since they collect second hand in course books to distribute) and the private sphere too. Staff can be the recipient of very personal and intimate conversations that are felt to be possible only there. Interesting to note that, though of course the centre managers are those who have more trust granted from the students, it is true that medium-long term volunteers or community service volunteers are often part of this dynamics too. This, I believe, is partially due to the fact that the centre builds an environment of trust that spreads to whoever is involved in it.

The deep relationship between staff and kids is not free from frictions. The more personal a relationship gets, in facts, the more possibilities there are for disagreement to arise. There is a structure in place, albeit loose, and it has to be respected otherwise it would be chaos and the principle of equity that is at the base of it must be constantly reinforced exactly to counterbalance the myriad of big and small ad hoc adjustments to the practice that I have described in the previous sections. One example of these frictions is the following episode.

Staff members go on the sofas with the kids and propose to pick a game to do together. For no apparent reason this summer “Assassino” (killer) is the number one favourite. It is a card game and they play infinite rounds of it and seem never to have enough. The majority picks it today too. One girl, Linda, who usually participates says she does not want to do it. She knows how it is, she finds it boring and she does not want to do it. Me and other volunteers tell her that maybe she could try a couple of rounds and then she can move to doing something different. The reply is a resolute: “No!”. In the meantime, the other kids are sitting on the sofas and wait patiently (and amusedly) for the inevitable to unfold. The trial of strength between staff and Linda has started. The girl is stubborn and outspoken about her not being willing to do it, then why should she do it. We remind her that she knows how it works here because she has been coming for six years and the basic rule of engaging in common activities before individual ones has always been in place. The deal is the same for all of them and it has the objective to facilitate socialization. She continues to stick to her

position, so the final rebuke from our side is that she is exaggerating a bit given that she is also eighteen years old, an adult now and a senior in the centre. In the meantime, she alone has been able to frustrate the very meaning of the moment because, by monopolizing the staff, she is allowing the others to use their phones undisturbed indulging in non-collaborative and self-contained activities. The episode lasts about 10 minutes and Linda make several times the point about how unfair these rules are.

In the end she just sits still on the sofa without watching anybody, holding the card in her hands, but not engaging in the game. She is not using her phone, but she is not playing the game with her peers. She is passively resisting the rule waiting for the game to finish and when it does, she regains her usual liveliness and moves to an activity that she prefers.

The role of rules is important in the episode; staff has tries to enforce them as consistently as possible, but they sometimes clash with the will of the kids. It is also part of the care ethics to allow for resistance. Compliance to the basic rules is encouraged and the fact that kids did not take sides during the episode is also due to the fact that they know that those who follow the rules in the long run gain credit with staff and can potentially enjoy more freedom. They are also smartly exercising their agency seizing the chance to use their phone while staff is busy. The girl in this vignette voiced a common complaint and there is no doubt that others had the same feeling toward the activity but did not speak out. The episode offers a snapshot of the everyday routine at the centre as well and it shows that this type of care work ethics is difficult to carry out. The attention granted to those kids has set the bar high in terms of expectations and so have the quantity, and quality, of activities proposed during the year.

Those activities become even more relevant during the summer because is the moment where some of them feel on their skin the divide between them and more affluent, mostly Italian, kids. Not only Italians tend to go on holiday somewhere out of town, but if they do not, they frequent expensive summer camps where they can go on trips to the mountains, to the seaside, take up new sports or artsy activities. The centre kids cannot afford all of this, but they love the summer offer where they are entertained and stimulated with workshops, competitive games (with prizes) or days at the swimming pool. This summer the swimming pool option was not feasible due to COVID-19, but workshop or other organized activities were scarce too. The ones proposed for the research covered only a few days as fieldwork took place in the final month of summer camp only. Youth was somehow disappointed by the lack of structure and offer of this summer and some refused to participate in the last day piñata activity considered too childish. They went nonetheless because the centre is still important and the most accessible resource to them.

School is useless

Another place where care should happen is in school. In the words of the kids, however, this is not the case. The education moment where care is present for these kids is predominantly the one of homework at the centre.

The MIUR has issued over the years a number of documents containing the guidelines for the integration in schools of students of immigrant origin (Linee Guida per l'Accoglienza e l'Integrazione degli Alunni Stranieri 2006 and 2014) and schools often offer linguistic and cultural integration activities embedded in the regular school time.

During two focus groups anecdotes regarding school included racist teachers who targeted non-Italians and gave them lower grades even when they showed high competence in a specific task, lack of interest for non-Italian cultures and traditions and no attention to the students' needs. Another theme was the one of the uselessness of school both in terms of learning and in terms of preparation for "life".

Perhaps the most striking feature that emerged from their recounts was a strong power imbalance and discretionary of rules application that resulted in an atmosphere of unjustified oppression. This is aggravated by the fact that teachers did not seem to follow the same rules that they imposed on students in this regard an interviewee mentions that one of her classmates has been sent to the headteachers' office because he was wearing jeans torn on the knees while some teachers wear low neckline blouses and short skirts and nobody says anything.

I investigated further this aspect during the one-to-one non-structured interviews and connected it to the centre space, where there are rules as well. Their answer was that rules there were different, less restrictive, more balanced and fairer especially because everyone followed them, staff included. They recognized the importance of rules and the fact that they are needed in a community, but they resisted the practice of imposing rules while at the same time behaving as if you were above them.

School is old-fashioned and one main problem is represented by teachers of older age. One girl has been extremely vocal about it and attributed to this the lack of engagement and the disappointment about her school experience. Other echoed her discontent adding that what they enter the class, demand absolute silence, speak for two hours in a row without stopping and then tell you what to study so "in the end you only remember to study from page x to page y." (focus group 19th July 2021). Though I do not believe that age alone is a reason for low student-teacher engagement, the kids voice in facts the lack of a dialogue between teachers and students that is possibly exacerbated by the aging of school staff.

Interrupted dialogue

School should be a place of care and a place where relations are cultivated, however, in this youth's words, this is not the case. Teachers represent street level bureaucrats, and they provide "high-demand and poorly resourced 'helping profession' services" (Lipsky 2010 in Dobson 2015, p. 692) and the type of educational work they do is different from the one of educators. The pressure to implement the curriculum is strong and the teacher-student ratio is so high at times that classes are difficult to manage. In the last years schools have become increasingly burdened with formal procedures and protocols to follow, with high variability between schools, and they have also introduced precautionary ones that, for example, do not allow the sharing of food in class, like a birthday cake. Students have been deprived of a convivial occasion that eased the role boundaries between them and teachers.

This is just one empirical example, but it gives a hint on the different restrictions to basic care practices that can lead teachers often to overlook, if not to completely ignore, the care aspect inextricably connected with education.

In the interviews school is present and the kids say that one of the things that dislike about it is that “In school you cannot do anything, here instead there is a break, you can use the phone, you can have fun, be with friends, dance, listen to music [...] in school you cannot even sit the way you like, one leg on the other [means crossed]” (Laura 14-years-old girl, 23rd July 202) or “In school you are basically stuck, you cannot do almost anything, six hours sitting in one place” (Eugenio 15-year-old boy 30th July 2021) and they usually either complete the sentence with a move where they straighten up on the chair, adjust their back and bum and legs (which means basically for girls to cross them and for boys not to straddle). Another point is that you cannot sit on tables in school, while at the centre, you can.

As a clarification, even if they present a dichotomy in terms of this is not allowed in school, but it is allowed here, this is not exactly the case. Sitting on tables or slouching is by no means encouraged at the centre, especially during the homework moment. The same goes for wearing vulgar clothes (the staff has put an acceptable length limit to girl’s hot pants). The real difference lies in the fact that during the relax moment they can sit wherever in whatever pose, including lying on the sofa.

As far as movement is concerned, in Italian schools PE is relegated to two hours a week and most schools do not have a proper gym so the activities are very limited. Students who attend after-school centres add to the six hours of school at least other two hours sitting at a desk to do their homework. No wonder that movement and constriction become a relevant issue. However, there is more than this; in school movement restriction is only in part connected to discipline or safety issues (i.e. running in the corridors is forbidden because students could actually slip, fall and get hurt), while is more connected to the imposition of an idea of what it is appropriate or decent. I am aware that this is undoubtedly part of the educational mission of the school, but this type of students perceives all of them as impositions because it refers to values that they either do not share or that they simply do not recognize and that have never been explained to them.

Workers inside the centre are also street level bureaucrats who have to face everyday reality with its complexities in facts they “‘make’ policy in their day-to-day interactions and responses to the users of services, as opposed to it being something developed in ‘elite offices’” (Lipsky 2010: xiii in Dobson 2015, p. 693), but they show a level of reciprocity with the kids and base their authority not on imposition but on shared and understood rules.

Lives on the table

Distance is another key issue in the unwritten relationship with youth at the centre. Staff and students are divided by age and function inside the centre, in facts volunteer staff is usually hired when at least in their 20s in order to lower the “peer” feeling with some of the kids. Teenagers can volunteer during summer camps for elementary school children.

When hired, everyone has to sign an agreement where is stated that they will not share personal contacts with the youth, they will not meet them outside of the centre and they will not invite them to their place or go to their places too. No private contacts should take place between staff and kids.

Youth bring their most private matters to the table nonetheless, while you do homework with them and boundaries melt in a second when this happens and there is not much that one can do to avoid it. An example is what happened this summer. I am doing literature

homework with a 17 years old boy. The topic is the book by Primo Levi “Se questo è un uomo” where the author describes his experience as a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. The specific piece is about the deadly experience of winter in the camp and even if outside the temperature is above thirty, one can feel the sting of cold through Levi’s words. The boy is not really engaged in the reading and we toil together through the lines slowly making sense of the narration. I see him scratching an arm repeatedly and so I ask distractedly what is going on, maybe a mosquito bit him (they can be terrible in that region in summer). He says that he has been itching all over since they came back from the countryside and while he explains this, he rolls up his t-shirt and completely shows his belly and torso in the attempt to show the rash. I focus on looking for the rash, while a thought strikes me about how this is not exactly professional. But it is done, it happened. I suggest him not to scratch, maybe to take a fresh shower when at home and to put an over-the-counter cream on the rash and if it does not go away, to go and see the GP. This is my way to regain some sort of accountability and move from the sister-like position where I have been put to a more professional educator one. After this we go on reading the piece and finish the exercise.

This vignette presents how boundaries between the education function and the care one melt regularly during work. There is no way to prevent this from happening and, in the case that I researched it is highly recommended that this happen because it is the feature that glues the relationship with the place and between staff and kids and sometimes is the moment where that tacit dialogue is created and consolidated. The kids look for “off the book” care, they are the ones who break the rule, because they need to and staff follows.

Conclusion and afterthought

This RP work findings show the importance of unscripted practices in the social and care work. The data and analysis presented support the argument that the most of the activities related to the social and care work inside the centre I researched are the result of an ethic of care that staff apply as the basic rationale for their practice, which is in fact a practice of care. The two, ethic and practice, being intertwined in this specific case.

Care is also a dialogic practice and a flow that moves between those who need it and those who supply it without following prescribed practices. This, however, does not mean that the recipients of the care practice have a passive role, on the contrary they shape and sharpen the practice with intention choosing when to take advantage of it and when to retrieve from it. The kids in the centre use that space, which itself makes care possible, exercising every moment their will to comply or to resist. They tacitly negotiate boundaries in an environment that allows for boundaries to be built for protection and to be abated in order to initiate a dialogue. The flexibility of care, its possibility to be put on hold and to be taken up again is what, ultimately, makes that space a space of care. Such a setting allows also for conflicts to arise in a healthy way because they are growth opportunities.

This closing chapter contains also an afterthought sparked by the last conversation I had with one of the centre managers while I was double checking some data. They accidentally told me that this year they had decided to be very strict with working hours and to finish when they had to instead of stretching the time table to the limits. This surprised me. I know that they have constantly worked more hours and that in those hours they were able to offer many of the activities that made the centre so alive; I also know that listening, being there, being ready to welcome someone and her/his needs requires time and pushes other parts of the work (like the more clerical ones) beyond the limits of office hours. This is core to the activity of the place. I wonder how effective would the practice of care be if this flexibility changed, if all the rules were followed. I think that the centre would change and so would the relationship with the kids.

Annex

List of anonymized participants

Alias	Age	Gender	Nationality ethnic affiliation
Rosa	18	F	Italy
Margherita	18	F	Morocco/Italy
Alessandro	18	M	India
Giovanna	18	F	Egypt
Linda	18	F	Cameroon
Riccardo	17	M	Peru
Lucia	17	F	Tunisia
Stefano	16	M	Cuba/Italy
Eugenio	16	M	Morocco/Italy
Maria	16	F	Tunisia
Chiara	16	F	Dominican Republic
Martina	16	F	Dominican Republic
Carlo	15	M	Italy
Alberto	15	M	Egypt
Edoardo	15	M	Egypt
Laura	15	F	Sinti community
Giorgia	15	F	Egypt
Paolo	14	M	Italy
Monica	14	F	Bangladesh
Anna	13	F	Tunisia

Note: one participant is not mentioned because of their illegal status

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