



**‘ON MONDAY AFTERNOONS WE GO
TO DISCOVER THE WORLD!’: UNDERSTANDING A
TRADITIONAL ITALIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL’S ADAPTATION
TO A STUDENT-DRIVEN APPROACH TO LEARNINGⁱ**

Alessandro Bortolotti¹,

Simon Beames²ⁱⁱ

¹Department of Quality of Life Studies,
Alma Mater Studiorum - The University of Bologna,
Bologna, Italy

orcid.org/0000-0001-5112-2399

²Department of Teacher Education and Outdoor Studies,
Norwegian School of Sport Sciences,
Oslo, Norway

orcid.org/0000-0003-1513-9745

Abstract:

Across the globe, increasing attention is being paid to curricular learning outside the classroom. While there is no Italian national outdoor learning policy, there is a growing wave of lecturers, teachers, schools, environmental education centres, who are developing this field. This paper examines one rural primary school’s attempts to incorporate learning outside the classroom into their rather conventional teaching practices. Michael Fullan’s seven premises of ‘change knowledge’ are employed to lend a deeper interrogation of the findings. Since the boundaries of inquiry were so clear, in terms of context, space-time, and people, a case study design was used. Data generation featured two principal methods and took place over a six-year period. First, there were open-ended interviews with each of the two principal educators; two focus group interviews with the entire staff team; and large focus groups with senior pupils. Field notes from participant observation and informal conversations were also used. The findings highlighted the importance of alliances between teachers, parents, and the wider community; the need for pupils to have the power to shape what is being learned; and the value of having pupil groups with different ages and abilities. The teachers stressed how crucial it was for pupils to learn how to critically refine the questions they were asking about their ‘places’. Further analysis of the data showed that Fullan’s premises of

ⁱ IL LUNEDÌ POMERIGGIO ANDIAMO A SCOPRIRE IL MONDO: MODIFICAZIONI NELL’APPROCCIO SCOLASTICO TRADIZIONALE A FAVORE DI PERCORSI D’APPRENDIMENTO GUIDATI DAGLI ALUNNI IN UNA SCUOLA PRIMARIA ITALIANA

ⁱⁱ Correspondence: email alessandro.bortolotti@unibo.it, simon.beames@nih.no

motivation and commitment, learning in context, capacity building, and persistence and flexibility were especially present.

Keywords: outdoor learning, educational change, pedagogy, school transformation

Abstract:

A livello globale, si registra un crescente interesse nello sviluppare il curriculum scolastico all'aperto. In Italia, pur non essendoci un diretto interesse da parte di organizzazioni centrali, si assiste comunque ad un'ondata di docenti, insegnanti, scuole, centri di educazione ambientale, che stanno viepiù sviluppando questo settore. Il presente lavoro esamina gli sforzi di una scuola elementare rurale, al fine d'inserire l'apprendimento all'aperto nelle proprie pratiche didattiche, generalmente piuttosto convenzionali. Le sette premesse di Michael Fullan per "cambiare la conoscenza" sono state utilizzate per riflettere a fondo sui risultati ottenuti. Poiché i confini dell'indagine qui sviluppata erano molto chiari in termini di contesto spazio-temporale e personale, è stato adottato l'approccio dello "studio di caso". I dati sono stati raccolti nell'arco di sei anni, attraverso due metodi principali. In primo luogo, si sono utilizzate interviste approfondite con ciascuno dei due insegnanti principali della scuola; due incontri di focus group con l'intero corpo insegnante; e focus group allargati a tutti gli alunni. Inoltre, sono state raccolte numerose note di campo provenienti sia dall'osservazione dei partecipanti, sia da conversazioni informali. In generale, i risultati hanno evidenziato l'importanza dell'alleanza tra insegnanti, genitori e con la comunità locale; la necessità che gli alunni abbiano la possibilità di essere coinvolti nella definizione dei contenuti d'apprendimento; il valore dei gruppi d'alunni con età e capacità diverse. Gli insegnanti hanno sottolineato quanto sia cruciale che gli alunni imparino ad affinare criticamente le domande che si ponevano sui loro "luoghi". Un'ulteriore analisi dei dati ha mostrato che le premesse di Fullan su motivazione, impegno, apprendimento nel contesto, sviluppo delle capacità, continuità e flessibilità, siano particolarmente presenti.

Parole-chiave: apprendimento all'aria aperta, cambiamento educativo, pedagogia, trasformazione scolastica

1. Introduction

Across the globe, increasing attention is being paid to curricular learning outside the classroom. This shift is taking place at policy levels (e.g. Education Scotland, 2010), grassroots levels (e.g. Italian network of *Scuole all'Aperto*, Bortolotti & Bosello, 2020), and through empirical research (e.g. Bentsen & Jensen, 2012, in Denmark). In a way not dissimilar to Denmark's *udeskole* movement, Italy has begun its own grassroots movement in learning outside the classroom. While there is no national outdoor learning policy – and no national governing body -- there is a growing wave of university

lecturers, teachers, schools, environmental education centres, local government, and freelance outdoor educators who are developing this field.

Funding bodies in Italy appear to have little appetite to support outdoor learning research, so virtually all research conducted on this movement is done without any external financing. This paper charts and interrogates one rural primary school's attempts to incorporate learning outside the classroom in their rather conventional teaching practices.

Drawing on an established educational approach from one national context (e.g. Scotland) and attempting to incorporate it into another (in this case, Northern Italy) is, at best, a challenging enterprise. The difficulties and justifiable critiques of adapting an educational approach from one socio-cultural context notwithstanding, understanding the pitfalls and successes of this process became hugely important to share with partners in Italy. As this paper developed, we saw how the lessons learned could be of interest to the broader international community of teachers and researchers who use the outdoors as an extension of their classroom.

The project under discussion came about through author A (from Italy) having explored different approaches to outdoor learning (OL) in several European countries. When author A delivered an in-service teacher training programme in Italy, a teacher from one rural school was particularly interested in giving outdoor learning a try. It is this journey of introducing outdoor learning into a primary school and it then becoming an accepted part of the school culture that we attempt to understand more deeply through the act of writing this paper. We are especially interested in more deeply understanding the processes by which an established Scottish approach to integrated indoor/outdoor teaching and learning was adapted – to a greater and lesser extent -- by an Italian primary school.

There are different socio-cultural traditions regarding learning outdoors. European examples of these different perspectives, include *friluftsliv* (Scandinavia, see Gurholt & Haukeland, 2020), *erlebnispedagogik* (Germany, see Becker, 2015), and *turistika* (Czech Republic, see Martin, Turcová & Neuman). These traditions are deeply embedded in culture, landscape, ecology, and language, and as such do not necessarily travel well from one country to another. Waite et al. (2016), in her discussion of OL and *friluftsliv* approaches, warns against apples and pears comparisons, as does Lugg (2004), who raised concerns about uncritically importing British notions of outdoor education into Australian practice.

In Italy, the concept of curricular outdoor learning is inherently problematic -- not least because it is not part of Italian school culture and, at the beginning of this project, was entirely absent from national educational policy literature. These limitations notwithstanding, outdoor learning is now a growing field of practice, study and research in several regions around the country. Indeed, at the University of Bologna, there are two Academic Study Centres whose principal focus is teaching and learning outdoors. These Centres, along with headquarters of the national outdoor learning primary school network (called *Scuole all'aperto*), have seen Bologna become something of a national hub

for what Bortolotti (2015) has labelled *Educazione Attiva all'Aria Aperta*, which can be loosely translated as 'outdoor experiential education'.

Italian outdoor learning is rooted in what could be labelled an 'experiential tradition' that is strongly connected to Dewey's (1938) legacy, and the progressive education movement more generally. It is important to note that *educazione attiva* has not been uncritically 'cut and pasted' from another country's established practices; while North Americans may refer to 'experiential education' and the French to 'education nouvelle', 'educazione attiva' is patently Italian and thus firmly embedded within a cultural landscape that has been at the centre of political, engineering, economical, and artistic movements over millennia (Bortolotti, 2019). Italian culture has also been shaped by ideas and goods that have come from abroad and, in turn, produced new social practices and enterprises (Palumbo, 2019).

2. The school, the case, the approach

The rural primary school at the centre of this case is located in Marano, which is a town of 300 inhabitants that is about an hour's drive outside of Bologna. Marano is a town of lower socio-economic status. The school is close to the village centre and features a courtyard; green spaces, forests and hills all around, a river; but also Farms, a Police Fire Station, and so on. The school is effectively the centre of the community and frequently opens its doors to townspeople for workshops, meetings, recitals and parties.

While there was no history of formal outdoor learning at the school, there was a relatively strong tradition of outdoor play with natural elements, such as making mud kitchens. Teachers would visit sites such as courtyards, gardens, fields, rivers and so on, but these outings were rather place-ambivalent – like an indoor lesson taught outdoors (see Mannion et al., 2013). What was clear, however, was that the school's two principal teachers believed in learning that involves pupils developing strong relationships with the 'real world', through their interaction in it (see Dewey, 1938; Beames & Brown, 2016). These two teachers met the first author in 2010, when he was delivering a CPD session on place-based outdoor learning. From that moment, a collaborative journey began and has lasted ever since. The first author, who is a researcher at the University of Bologna, gave the teachers the idea of trying to incorporate an established Scottish approach to integrating indoor and outdoor learning, called *Outdoor Journeys*.

Developed at the University of Edinburgh in 2008, Outdoor Journeys (OJs) is a pedagogical approach that enables pupils to learn about the people and place in which they live. The approach is based around planning and undertaking local journeys, where pupils generate and answer questions about the socio-cultural and ecological 'story' of the land. Outdoor Journeys is theoretically underpinned by three areas. First, a critique of (then) current practice highlighted how too many outdoor education programmes were characterised by highly prescriptive, one-size-fits-all sessions that ignored place (Beames, 2006). Second, a study reporting teachers' perceived obstacles to taking their students outdoor shone a light on concerns about the high cost of transportation,

overwhelming bureaucracy and paperwork, and disruption to the timetable (Ross, Higgins, and Nicol, 2007). Finally, Scotland's newly arrived Curriculum for Excellence championed curricular principles such as breadth, challenge and enjoyment, progression, depth, personalisation and choice, coherence, relevance (CfE, 2004).

The easy to 'adopt and adapt', three phase structure of OJs (questioning, researching, sharing) has, over the last 12 years, been part of in-service teacher training programmes in countries such as Finland, Australia, Ireland, Singapore – as well as Scotland and Italy, of course. Outdoor Journeys has been the subject of university dissertations, magazine articles, education guidance documents, and two notable peer-reviewed papers (Beames & Ross, 2010 & Christie, Beames & Higgins, 2015). The information in this paragraph is presented not as an attempt to position OJs as some pinnacle of enlightenment: the purpose of rehearsing the above success indicators is to demonstrate that the Marano teachers were drawing on a teaching approach that they were reasonably certain would work, given its track record.

Returning to the description of the Marano case, *L'Outdoor*, as the project is called, involves all (currently about 50) Marano School pupils, from first to fifth grade (6 to 11 year old children), and takes place every Monday afternoon. The timing means that the school day ends later (at 4pm) and requires pupils to stay at school for lunch -- both of which are seen as culturally desirable as, for one more day a week, families are partially liberated from normal childcare responsibilities.

At the beginning of the project, only two teachers were actively using OJs. In the following year, however, buoyed by the successes of the two classes, OJs was adopted by the entire primary school, thus effectively creating an OJs 'laboratory' that endured for the five years of this study, and which continues to this day. In the second year, an all-school OJs workshop took place and this proved to be a key step forward in the project's development.

It is important to note that the Marano educators adapted OJs to work for them in ways that suited their own situation (e.g. high pupil to staff ratios and large, multi-year and varying ability classes). It is this two-step integration of Outdoor Journeys that will be explored in this paper: first, the adoption of the OJs approach, and second, the molding and shaping of OJs to suit local pedagogical and socio-cultural contexts. Indeed, the Marano teachers seemed remarkably attuned to Lugg's (2004) identified pitfall of 'having roast beef for Christmas dinner' (in Australia) and sought to adopt the more universal elements of Outdoor Journeys approach, while leaving plenty of room to adapt the approach to the specificities of their pupil population, school ethos, national curriculum, and local landscape, ecology, and culture.

3. Theoretical framework

While we did not begin the OJs Marano project, nor writing this paper, with the intention of employing a theoretical framework, we recognised that our understanding of the wholesale shift in teaching and learning that took place at the Marano school could

benefit from drawing on some kind of organisational change theory. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the field of organisational change within the business world represents an ocean of literature, of which much does not seem especially relevant to educators.

There is, however, a sizeable literature on educational culture change, and the Marano case is ripe for examination through the lenses of Elmore's (2004) and Fullan's (2006) work, in particular. Most of this literature seems to focus more on change across a school district, rather than within a school. A good example of this is by Thorburn and Allison (2013), who employed Fullan's concepts to more deeply interrogate the reasons why Scottish educational reform relating to outdoor learning has been so challenging to realise.

The Marano case differs from this example, of course, as it represents educational change from the ground-up, rather than reflecting common top-down approaches in the form of standards-based reform initiatives; professional learning communities; and qualifications' frameworks (Fullan, 2006, p. 4). Our survey of suitable theoretical frameworks brought us back to Fullan's work, and his seven premises of 'change knowledge'. These are a focus on motivation; capacity building, with a focus on results; learning in context; changing context; a bias for reflective action; tri-level engagement; and persistence and flexibility in staying the course (p. 8).

Here we briefly introduce the seven premises, which will be revisited later in the Discussion section. First, individuals must be motivated to put in the effort that is required to reach the agreed aims. Fullan (2006) notes that the other six premises all feed this first one about motivation and engagement. The second premise of capacity building refers to helping teachers develop knowledge and competencies, while ensuring they have the resources to support this growth. Third is learning in context, which is about educators actually learning through their work practices, rather than at some decontextualized workshop. The fourth premise is changing context and has to do with exchanging ideas with others outside of the institution and identifying with "*larger parts of the system*" (p. 10). Fifth, a bias for reflective action, draws on Dewey's notion that we do not learn by doing: "*we learn by thinking about what we are doing*" (p. 10, emphasis original). Sixth, we have tri-level engagement, which involves the school and community, district, and state (or province, etc...) being connected to each other. Fullan's final premise is persistence and flexibility in staying the course. Since educational change is so "*complex to manage and must be cultivated over time*" (p. 11), Fullan notes that resilience and 'a strong resolve' is required to effect enduring reforms.

This above framework is not presented as a 'perfect fit' for the Marano case, but many of its concepts align quite well. As such, Fullan's framework will be used to further interpret the paper's findings. We now turn to the methods used to more deeply understand the adoption and adaptation of an established integrated indoor and outdoor learning approach into the context of a rural Italian primary school.

4. Methodology

From the seeds of the project to where we are now (the work continues), a constructivist paradigm has always provided a firm base for our philosophical assumptions. The means of collecting data, as well as the OJs approach itself, are grounded in 'local and specific co-constructed realities'; the researchers and the research participants regard themselves as co-creators of the study's findings; and the methodology is hermeneutical, in that it permits deep interpretation of a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011, p. 100). The researchers, teachers and pupils were almost partners, in terms of their collaboration, creation, decision-making, and meaning-making. Indeed, this project was not about researchers coming into to interview people they had never met about the effectiveness of some off-the-shelf intervention; it was literally a co-constructed project in practically every way.

Addressing the aims of this inquiry demanded more than a recounting of events; it required a methodological approach that would enable us to accurately and sensitively capture how a small, rural school gradually changed its approach to teaching and learning over several years. Following Merriam (2009), we wanted to comprehend how the Marano teachers and students were 'making sense' of their new outdoor learning worlds, and we wanted to understand the large and obvious features, as well as the subtle, but often unforeseen nuances associated with an educational intervention being implemented across an entire school. Our context comprised interpreting a story that is now 10 years old, and rich in events, actions, reflections and outcomes. An interpretative paradigm thus gave us license to choose a less restricting research design (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

A case study design was deemed most appropriate, since its boundaries were very clear, in terms of context, space-time, and people (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). Case Studies provide examples of real people in real contexts, while introducing theoretical issues and providing analytic generalisations (Robson, 2002). The broad nature of our case made it lend itself to using a 'bricoleur' approach, that permitted us to employ whatever materials, strategies, and methods needed to piece together a representation of a complex situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For example, our approach featured methods that could be described as naturalistic and ethnographic, and this resonated with LeCompte and Preissle's (1993) state that an ethnographer is a kind of "*methodological omnivore*" (p. 232). We were embedded within a collaborative process, as opposed to being external evaluators who arrived post-hoc to ask people 'how it was for them'.

The Marano school and its context is described in Section 2 above, so we can move directly to describing data generation, which took place over six consecutive years within the 10 year relationship between the school and researchers. Two principal methods of data collection were used. First, there were three kinds of interviews: open-ended interviews with each of the two principal educators; two focus group interviews with the entire staff team; and an end of year large focus group with senior pupils (aged from 8 to

10ⁱⁱⁱ). The second data collection method was field notes that came from at least three days a year of on-site participant observation and informal conversation. Further conversations over the phone and email also took place with teachers outside of the planned data collection periods. These 'unofficial' data could not, of course, be ignored, and were incorporated into field notes.

Notes from all three kinds of interviews (with lead teachers, staff, and students) were written into a notebook, either during or directly after the meetings. Observations and notes from informal conversations were captured in the same notebook. This way, notes from all four kinds of data were kept in the same format and in the same place. It is important to state that not all data sources shared the same status. The formal interviews with the two lead teachers elicited the five themes that are presented in Findings section. The focus group interviews with staff and senior pupils, and the fieldnotes, were regarded as more secondary sources of data that served to add context and provide data triangulation to the dominant data source.

A standard approach to thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Greig, Taylor, and MacKay's (2007) four stage approach to inductive analysis was followed: total immersion in the data, headlining, quality control check, and coding. This iterative process revealed key themes, the dominance of which was judged on the degree to which it captured "*something important in relation to the overall research question*" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

Three principal methods of ensuring the trustworthiness of our findings were employed. Following Creswell and Miller (2000), "*we a) used multiple perspectives and sources of data, in order to triangulate as much as was possible; b) did member checks of the key themes with the two principal teachers; and c) employed peer-debriefing, where the second author acted as critical friend and devil's advocate to the first author's analysis. This involved asking the first author Maxwell's (2005) pointed question: 'How might you be wrong?'*" (p. 105).

Ethics is based on trust, care and transparency through all stages of the research. Indeed, this research is *not about but with and for the community* involved. As such, the teachers, parents, and pupils had the right to participate as much or as little as they wanted throughout the entire process. Participant consent was established at the start and re-affirmed periodically (Humberstone & Riddick, 2019). In terms of secure data management, the identities of all participants were protected, and the data is safely guarded in an encrypted digital storage location (Poulet, 2009). Our research practices were informed by, and aligned with, those of the British Education Research Association (2011).

5. Findings

The inquiry's principal aim was to more deeply understand the ways in which an outdoor learning initiative was adapted by a school with little formalised curricular story in

ⁱⁱⁱ Primary schools in Italy have five grades. Pupils range from six to 11 years old.

respect to learning outside the classroom. The title of this paper was taken from the words of a six year old pupil who claimed to know what was 'outdoor learning': he said it was 'when on Monday afternoon, we get to discover the world!'. Five dominant themes emerged from our inductive analysis:

- a. The journeys have become increasingly ambitious;
- b. Pupils generating questions about their surroundings has been incorporated into the school's approach to teaching and learning;
- c. Alliances between parents, the community, and the school are hugely important;
- d. Pupils' suggestions greatly contributed to the project's improvement;
- e. The inclusive, cross-age and cross-ability ethos is a key feature.

Each of these themes will be explained in turn. A Discussion section then interprets these findings with germane literature.

a. The journeys have become increasingly ambitious

During the life of the project, Marano's pupils visited near and far places – always as a way of addressing their own curiosities. Crucially, trips to the Verona Arena or the Porretta Thermae, for example, did not come out of nowhere; on the contrary, they can be seen as a 'harvest' of sustained period of growing, where the school's outdoor journeys grew in length and ambition. Initially, teachers limited pupils' journeys to the schools courtyard and immediate surroundings. Later, once questions and answers about the 'near milieu' had been exhausted, pupils went further -- to the town's church, local river, fire station, and so on, in order to explore what was considered interesting. This resonates with Beames, Higgins, and Nicol's (2012) concentric circles model, where students gradually extend the scope of their outdoor exploration, as their knowledge of their places deepens.

Pupils examined geographic, historic, scientific and even mathematic aspects of their school ground and surrounding areas. At one certain point, however, pupils turned their attention to a very precise place: the prominent hill standing in front of the school: Montovolo. Pupils asked if it was possible to see their school from Montovolo Hill top. The teachers drew on the power of the young people's curiosity and enthusiastically responded, 'Why don't we go there and see?'. The entire school body then journeyed to Montovolo Hill by public bus and then by foot. The site is a place full of natural, historical, and architectural interest, and thus rich in cross-curricular learning opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, the journey enabled pupils to verify for themselves if it was indeed possible to see their school from the hill. Taking seriously pupils' questions about their 'world' has been a vital step towards creating a special atmosphere of trust and a sense of community – and a step that demonstrated the power of an educational journey beyond the confines of the school's walls.

b. Pupils generating questions about their surroundings has been incorporated into the school's overall approach to teaching and learning

According to the teachers, at the very core of OJs' approach lies the questioning phase. Teachers explained how their 'questioning phase management' improved over time and they became more skilled at helping pupils increase the precision of their questions.

The teachers encouraged pupils to think differently about what they were interested in learning about and to 'play with ideas'. While sharp questions are easier to research, becoming a good 'question asker' can also be regarded as an important life skill (Marmocchi, Dall'Aglio & Zannini, 2004).

The teachers explained how it was essential to not only to capture pupils' curiosity, but to welcome and support it as well. They found the OJs method to be powerful not by chance, but due to the way it facilitates teaching and learning activities that encourage curiosity, supports pupils' personally relevant learning paths, and then leads to building alliances between themselves and pupils; the traditional classroom hierarchy became flatter (Bortolotti & Bosello, 2020). In this regard, the teachers worked hard to ensure that each pupil felt that their question was valuable. If the children asked to go to and explore a certain place, the teachers would endeavour to make this happen -- even they knew that it might be a dead-end or a 'waste of time'. Following Beames and Brown's (2016) feature of pupil agency, the students thus had a modicum of power to influence what they were learning in a way that would serve them over a lifetime, rather than learning through an approach that featured knowledge transmission from 'teacher as master' to 'pupil as empty vessel' (see Freire, 1971).

Ultimately, however, it was 'place' that did the work. It was the 'storied space' (see Tuan, 1977) of the sites that were visited – a river, church, fire police station – that made it easy for pupils to be engaged. The teachers didn't feel that they needed to motivate students to learn; they simply helped students travel to new sites and form excellent questions about the nature of those sites.

In a novel pedagogical extension of the OJs approach, the teachers developed their own method of connecting the sometimes disparate topics that the pupils had chosen to learn about. This involved leading the pupils through an in-depth examination of their own questions. First, they listed all of the questions on the blackboard, then facilitated a discussion that sought to find relationships between the questions. Inevitably, this process led to 'families of questions' emerging. The pupils thus engaged in a sort of meta-analytical review, where they categorized ideas and distinguished between main and minor questions. Quite naturally, this led to discussions about how best to find the answers to these questions.

We researchers were particularly fascinated by the teachers' discussions about the OJs approach was causing them to revise their indoor teaching practices. They recounted how they were encouraging much more questioning during their more traditional classroom-based lessons.

c. Alliances between parents, the community, and the school are hugely important

The third of five findings themes is the importance of alliances between teachers who are working in teams and between the school and parents. The teachers reported how delivering OJs together 'forced' them to constantly exchange information, plan, evaluate, and consider possibilities. When compared to their previous, more conventional approach to teaching, they perceived their team-teaching to be more united and organized, and thus better equipped to ask for some form of support from within the school or from those outside of the school.

Parental involvement, for instance, was usually triggered by the students' need to acquire information on their 'place', which is very difficult to find in conventional sources such as books, journals, and websites. Therefore, the OJs' project soon involved the whole town, where 'community others' became co-educators (see Beames et al., 2012). Parents came in to share their intimate, yet largely undocumented, knowledge about places within the town. Crucially, knowledge was not being presented in a generic fashion, but rather as specific answers to pupils' questions that could not be found anywhere else but through some kind of oral history. Dewey's (1938) 'continuity of learning' was thus on display, as parents and townspeople facilitated pupils' acquisition of knowledge over time, through direct experience.

d. Pupils' suggestions greatly contributed to the project's improvement

The fourth findings theme features pupils' hunger for 'real' experiences, as well as their power to determine how working groups were created. The teachers reported how they found it difficult to predict what the pupils would be most interested in learning about. They were constantly amazed by pupils' curiosity about what they were observing. When studying the local river, for example, the pupils were not interested in gaining 'classic' knowledge about river's source, water flow, river mouth, and so on. The children were instead fascinated by the water reservoir and the hydroelectric power unit that they were observing, and wanted to learn more about those topics. Perhaps going against the strictures of their own teacher training, the teachers abandoned the official syllabus and followed the pupils' desires to learn about the river in personally relevant ways. In doing so, both the teachers and pupils became more skilled at recognizing aspects of mathematics, geography, history, science, art and language in every location they visited. As explained in the previous section, both pupils and teachers learned how categorize questions and create focus groups which would investigate specific topics more deeply.

Our interviews with pupils revealed how passionate they were about these direct, hands-on experiences in local places. They explained how OJs was a way of learning that stood in stark contrast to typical classroom education. Through adopting a deliberately contrary and provocative line of questioning, we argued that seeing images or video on a screen was not so different from physically journeying to a real place. Remarkably, the students shook their heads, as if us foolish adults didn't see how limited virtual trips were, nor did we understand the importance of physically exploring places in detail. One girl energetically described how seeing a video of a volcano was inadequate, and that

only by standing on the crater's rim would it be actually possible to appreciate its sheer grandeur, hear its noises, smell the vapours, touch its elements, and experience her own emotional response to this multi-sensory experience. This 10 year-old captured the essence of experiential education and outdoor learning better than we could. Sensory experiences, combined with in-class academic inquiry, can be a powerful educational combination (see Auer, 2008).

Another feature in this theme of pupils suggesting ideas to teachers is how older and younger pupils worked together. The fourth and fifth grade pupils (the 'old ones') explained how hard and tiring it was to work with their younger classmates. However, they felt a certain duty, it seems, to introduce OJs to their younger schoolmates, as this had been an important part in their own educational experiences and one that went some way to increasing a broader sense of community. Remarkably, having OJs groups with a range of pupil ages was suggested by the pupils and not the teachers. When it came time to make groups based on topics, the older pupils challenged the teachers' assumption that these groups would be made with classmates of the same age. To the adults' surprise, these nine and 10 year olds stated, 'We'll take care of our little ones'.

This declaration was naturally welcomed by the teachers, and has had a profound and enduring impact on the learning culture at Marano School. These mixed ability groups permitted new level of teamwork to take place, where – under the supervision of the teachers – pupils could more independently seek solutions, make decisions, and support each other. This group structure points to learning outcomes that are beyond curricular ones that were originally sought-after. Through one final sharing session that was open to the entire town (which has become an annual ritual), the pupils explained how these shared experiences had a powerful impact on the social bonds they felt between each other.

e. The inclusive, cross-age and cross-ability ethos is a key feature

The final findings theme was that OJs led to a more inclusive approach to schooling. An example of this is how the local fire station played a surprisingly central role in 'Marco's' educational awakening. The teachers had always found it difficult to engage Marco in all aspects of schooling; they had admittedly given-up hope for him and had very low expectations for him – or so it was until the day he unexpectedly asked to visit the fire station.

As with the journey to Montovolo journey, the teachers knew they had to make this happen. The teachers explained that, after this visit, Marco effectively started a new life in school, where he participated to a much larger degree than he ever had. They went to state that they could not account for why Marco had suddenly made this 180 degree turn.

It may be that this very personal Outdoor Journey that Marco took, served as a triggering device that opened his eyes to how the world is full of things to explore. From then on, Marco was able to maintain his new identity. He remained active and engaged

throughout the rest of his schooling in Marano, and teachers referred to his case as a 'prodigious rebirth'.

Marco's tale is one of countless stories that demonstrate how OJs has profoundly impacted Marano schooling. Over time, the teachers have prioritized their inclusive approach to working with hard to reach young people. The importance of providing opportunities for pupils to investigate topics that have huge interest to them cannot be overstated. Marano school has since become known as very inclusive and supportive school for everybody.

6. Discussion with theoretical framework

While OJs has been examined empirically in the past (see Beames & Ross, 2010; and Christie, Beames, and Higgins, 2015), the present study permits a novel interrogation of the approach being applied: instead of looking at OJs over a period of a few weeks, here OJs has been examined over the course of six years. Further, and perhaps somewhat unusually, OJs was adopted by the entire school. OJs started as an experiment and led, quite unexpectedly to wholesale shift in the way the school approached teaching and learning, and the pupil's role within this.

Fullan's (2006) Theory of Change affords us the analytical tools to consider OJs at Marano school with much greater precision than we otherwise would. To begin with, Fullan notes that *motivation and commitment* fuel every other ToC element. Outdoor Journeys captured the imagination of a whole community. The teachers were highly invested in making OJs work at their school, and the pupils and parents bought-into it as well.

The second premise, *capacity building*, refers to teachers' competences and their ability to develop further. Between the two lead teachers at Marano, they had a range of complementary skills and attributes to establish a rich learning community. One teacher is particularly energetic and dynamic, where as the other is a calming presence with outstanding management skills. The competences around delivering OJs that they developed then attracted community members and the other pedagogues who wanted to be part of the project.

Learning in context involved which refers to educators reflecting on, and learning from, their teaching practices. The teachers' adoption and adaptation of Outdoor Journeys become a very real enterprise. As noted, elements of a work-based action research initiative can be seen in the Marano case. Of course, it was not only the teachers who were learning in context, but the children as well. It was they who were curious about the landscapes that were familiar to them, yet largely unknown. The children were curious about seeing their places through different lenses: geographical, historical, scientific, economic, socio-cultural (see Meinig, 1979). Place was given a privileged position and thus became the starting point for learning (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Implementing a highly contextualized, place-responsive approach to teaching and

learning provided the platform from which pupils might flourish (Sobel, 2004; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

The fifth premise of *changing context* has to do with ideas and practices being exchanged with others who are outside the institution. This enables schools like Marano to be part of a larger educational network, which it can both learn from and contribute to. Institutionally, the Marano teachers worked closely with an outdoor learning expert from the University of Bologna. Further, the school was part of a cluster of schools who had formed the Italian Outdoor Schools Network. Finally, it could be argued that the town of Marano supported the school by providing a rich outdoor classroom – quite possibly the first of its kind in Italy.

Fullan (2006) notes, referencing Dewey, that we learn by thinking about what we are doing. This is his fifth premise of reflection action. As noted earlier, there are elements of action research that are inherent part of the Marano OJs project. Research was not built-in to the project design from the start. Rather, the project started as an initiative that was supported by an outdoor learning academic who worked closely with the lead teachers at the school. Countless discussions were had before and after the pupils' outings over the life of the project – all of which featured this element of reflection on practice (see Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985).

Tri-level engagement is the sixth premise offered by Fullan (2006). This premise highlights the importance of the school's efforts to transform itself being connected to the local community, region, and state. Marano school's connection to the community and local government do not need rehearsing, but it is important to note how Marano is now a 'beacon' school of the *Rete Scuole all'Aperto*, which is the aforementioned Italian OL Schools Network which has been officially recognized by the Italian Ministry of Education. Indeed, the two teachers with the highly developed expertise in OJs (and who are known as 'Marano's ticket') are considered leading practitioners of outdoor place-responsive teaching in Italy, and regularly deliver continuing professional development courses across the country. Not by chance, Marano school has also been part of an EU funded Erasmus+ project, *Go Out and Learn*, which was created to support schools as they develop innovative ways to teach curricula through the outdoors in their home countries of Italy, Norway, England and Belgium.

Fullan's (2006) final premise is *persistence and flexibility* in staying the course. Since educational change is so 'complex to manage and must be cultivated over time' (p. 11), Fullan notes that resilience and 'a strong resolve' is required to effect enduring reforms. In the Marano case, persistence is evidenced by the story itself, which is now 10 years old and counting. Flexibility in adopting the OJs approach was evident as well, as the teachers recognized that the rigid constraints of a prescribed curriculum was at odds with their educational philosophy. In the first year especially, flexibility was a necessary part of teaching and learning in a way that was novel to all parties.

7. Conclusions, implications for practice, suggestions for further research

This study has sought to more precisely capture how the processes by which a specific approach to outdoor learning was adopted by a primary school in rural Italy. The investigation is a worthwhile contribution to knowledge because it examines the way a pedagogical approach can transform an entire school's approach to teaching and learning.

Notable themes that arose from observations and interviews with both teachers and pupils highlighted the importance of alliances between teachers, parents, and the wider community; the need for pupils to have the power to shape not only what is being learned, but the circumstances and structures that mediate how it is being learned, and the value of having pupil groups that include different ages and abilities. The teachers stressed how crucial the questioning phase is crucial; learning to refine a question through dialogue with others became a valued skill.

Fullan's (2006) seven premises in his Theory of Change resonate strongly with the transformation that Marano School underwent. A straight-forward interrogation of the data revealed all of Fullan's premises, with particularly strong links to motivation and commitment, learning in context, capacity building, and persistence and flexibility.

Outdoor Journeys is a place-responsive, cross-curricular, student-driven approach to teaching and learning. It is now part of Marano School's story. Outdoor Journeys is not perfect and is not a 'fix all'. Indeed, further research on OJs needs to move away from trying to prove that it works, but towards finding the answers to such questions as,

- In what ways were certain learners disadvantaged by this approach?
- How can all teachers – not just the highly motivated and committed – employ the OJs approach?
- How can schools and teachers with little history of teaching and learning outdoors take meaningful 'first steps' on their own paths to incorporating the outdoors into their pedagogies.

Crucially, what has emerged from this educational enterprise is an Italian brand of outdoor learning that has borrowed what it wants from an established methodology and made it its own. This is not a case of an off-the-shelf product being uncritically employed in another culture (see Lugg, 2004). What has emerged is 'open space education', Italian style: *Educazione Attiva all' Aria Aperta*.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

About the Authors

As a researcher at the University of Bologna since 2007, **Alessandro Bortolotti** conducts research within the fields of Special Education, Outdoor Learning and Physical Education. His investigations regard both formal and non-formal educational settings, particularly their socio-cultural values, in order to understand relevant issues for holistic

development and inclusive approaches. Alessandro has been involved in Erasmus+ projects, both in Outdoor Learning (GOaL: Go Out and Learn) and Traditional Motor Games (BRIDGE). He is Programme Director for the Wellness and Sport Management masters degree.

Simon Beames is Professor of Outdoor Studies at the Norwegian School of Sports Science. While at the University of Edinburgh from 2005 to 2019, Simon created Outdoor Journeys with colleagues at the Moray House School of Education and Sport. Simon is co-author of the books *Learning Outside the Classroom*, *Adventurous Learning*, and *Adventure & Society*.

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- [1] Blake wrote the very famous verse: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man [sic] as it is, Infinite".
- [2] Playing in the *open air* has but this one danger in it, that I know... (§ 10, p. 14 – cursive in the original). <http://www.bartleby.com/37/1/1.html> retrieved the 2018/03/27
- [3] <https://centri.unibo.it/cefeo/it>
<http://www.scienzequalitavita.unibo.it/it/ricerca/centri-di-ricerca/centro-di-ricerca-e-formazione-outdoor-education>
- [4] <https://scuoleallaperto.wordpress.com/>
- [5] The Outdoor Marano experience was presented as 'Bolognese Outdoor Journeys' at the 7th International Outdoor Education Research Conference at Cape Breton University, Canada, 4-8th July 2016, and at the 18th conference of the European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning (EOE), Ireland, Tralee, 25th-27th September, 2019.
- [6] For further information: <https://gooutandlearn.weebly.com/>
- [7] The expression is 'daughter' of an Italian definite article (*Lo*, shortened in *L'*) and an English term (*Outdoor*).

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