IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

MASTER THESIS

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SPACES IN CAIRO: THE (RE)MAKING OF SPACE AND REAL LIFE

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THESIS SUPERVISOR
ASST. PROF. DR. NURSEM KESKİN AKSAY

ISTANBUL, 2022

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by

AFNAN ABDALLA

A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology

THESIS SUPERVISOR

ASST. PROF. DR. NURSEM KESKİN AKSAY

ISTANBUL, 2022

APPROVAL PAGE

This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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This is to confirm that this thesis complies with all the standards set by the School of Graduate Studies of Ibn Haldun University.

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I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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ÖZ

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SPACE IN CAIRO: THE (RE)MAKING OF SPACE AND REAL LIFE

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Tez Danışmanı: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Nursem Keskin Aksay
Ağustos 2022, 108 sayfa

Bu tez Kahire'deki alternatif öğrenme alanlarını analiz etmektedir. Bu alanlar, ana akım geleneksel eğitim sisteminden uzak, alternatif eğitim biçimleri olarak kabul edilir. Bu çalışmanın temel iki amacı, bu alternatif öğrenme alanlarının mekan oluşturma deneyimlerinin yanı sıra bu mekanların eğitim alanı içinde ve ötesinde sunduğu alternatifleri keşfetmektir. Bu çalışma, mekan oluşturma ve alternatif soruyu tematik bir şekilde tartışacaktır. Bunlardan ilki, öğrenmeyle olan ilişkisi içinde mekanı ön plana çıkardığım ve kavramsallaştırdığım "Uzaya Doğru", ikincisi ise mekândaki maddeselliğe ve ilişkilere baktığım "Mekan İçinde" ve sonuncusu ise "Uzayın Ötesinde". Kahire'deki alternatif öğrenme alanlarının öğrenme alanlarından daha fazlası olduğu konusundaki ana argümanımı oluşturuyorum ve anlamları, öğrenme ve yaşam yollarını yeniden tasavvur eden ve buna göre onlarla etkileşime giren alternatif bir gerçek yaşam vizyonu üretiyorum. Diğer argümanlar, bu mekanların evin bir uzantısı olarak sosyal olarak inşa edildiğini ve kolektif duyguların önemli rolünün mekan yapımında olduğunu içerir. Bu tür sosyal ilişkilerin dayanıklılığını bu alanlarda alternatif eğitimin İslami olarak gerçekleştirilmesine bağladığım alternatif topluluk olarak adlandırdığım sosyal ilişkilerin yeniden çerçevelenmesi. Bu çalışmada "alternatif okul" ve "serbest öğrenme alanı" olarak adlandırdığım iki alternatif öğrenme alanına yer verdim. Sahip olduğum ana veri toplama tekniği, alternatif okul ve ücretsiz öğrenme alanından kurucular, yöneticiler, öğretmenler, kolaylaştırıcılar ve

veliler ile çevrimiçi derinlemesine görüşmeler ve analizimi çalışmanın yapıldığı zaman çerçevesine odaklamak, 2021-22. Mekânı birinci elden değil, uzaktan deneyimleyeceğim için, bunu başka bir mekânsal boyut ve tartışma olarak ele alıyorum ve bu doğrultuda çalışma muhatapların söylemsel betimlemelerine odaklanıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Alternatif Eğitim, Alternatif Öğrenme Mekanları, Mekan yapımı, Gerçek hayat.

ABSTRACT

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SPACE IN CAIRO:
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August 2022, 108 Pages

This thesis analyzes alternative learning spaces in Cairo. These spaces are considered modes of alternative education, away from the mainstream traditional schooling system. The two key aims of this study are to explore the space-making experiences of the people engaged in these alternative learning spaces as well as the *alternative* that these spaces represent within and beyond the educational realm. This study discusses the space-making and the *alternative* question in a thematic manner, with three themes underpinning my thesis. The first theme is "Towards the Space," where I foreground and conceptualize space and its relationship to learning. The second is "Within the Space" where I look at the materiality and relationships of the space, and the final theme is "Beyond the Space" where I build up my main argument that alternative learning spaces in Cairo are more than mere learning spaces. Instead, I argue, they produce an alternative vision of real life that reimagines meanings and different ways of learning and life and accordingly engages with them. A related argument I make is that these spaces are socially constructed as an *extension of home.* At the heart of this is the role of collective emotions that is significant in space-making. I also reframe the social relations into what I call an alternative community, where I attribute the endurance of such social relations to the Islamic actualization of alternative education found in these spaces. I include in this study two alternative learning spaces, which I refer to as the "alternative school" and the "free-learning space". The main data collection technique I have utilized is online in-depth interviews

with the founders, managers, teachers, facilitators as well as parents from the alternative school and the free learning space. I focus my analysis on the time frame during which my study was conducted, 2021-22. As I experienced space *at a distance*, not firsthand, I engage with it as another spatial dimension. Accordingly, the study focuses on the discursive descriptions of the interlocutors.

Keywords: Alternative education, alternative learning spaces, space-making, real life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is no way I can express my gratitude to all those who have helped move this thesis forward. The least I can do is acknowledge their support, time and effort. I am grateful to my advisor Prof. Nursem Keskin Aksay who I have learnt a lot from during my years in Ibn Haldun University, for her time, patience and guidance. I have been in the company of great academics; Profs. Alev Erkilet and Ramazan Aras have taught me a lot in the last few years. I want to especially thank Prof. Heba Raouf Ezzat and Prof. Eda Yücesoy for their rich and valuable contributions to this study.

I feel very lucky to have spent these years in Ibn Haldun University with some of the most inspiring people I have meet: Mariam Agha, Betül Tuzlu, Halima Bensaid, Neveen Fathy Aboeldahab, Malek Zuaiter, Karam AlHafian, Amina Akeyshi, Rümeysa Ertuğrul, Nur Efşen and Dima Ashqar. The courses we have attended together and discussions we have had, very much shaped this thesis.

In Egypt, I am extremely grateful to the founders, managers, and family-representatives of the alternative learning spaces I worked with. They have been cooperative and supportive to the greatest extent. I also wholeheartedly thank the loving and supportive friends I have been surrounded with, especially Israa Ahmed, Mariam Negm, Laila Kamal, Arwa Altaweel, Hadeer Elkhadragy, Dana Alsibaie and Najlaa Ashour, for they made this year much more bearable. Special thanks to my sister-in-law, Habiba Hesham, who assisted me in many ways on critical points in this study, and who was kind enough to spend so much time and effort doing so. I look forward to working together with her in the very near future.

No one has sacrificed more to see this thesis to completion than my dear family, my father and my mother, and my warmest gratitude is reserved for them, as well as for my brother Alhusain who shared this thesis journey with me from literally the other side of the world. My brother, Alhasan, regardless of the geographical distance between us, had a way of being always present. My sister Manar has been my mentor throughout my life, who I thank for being there for my daughter and me. Last but not least, gratitude is due to my husband Mohamad Hesham who supported me from the very first day I applied for the master's program to the day I am submitting my thesis.

This mission would have been impossible without him by my side. I dedicate this work to my sweetest Feride, my daughter, who inspired this topic and who is the reason I was determined to complete this thesis.

My final thanks are in praising Allah, the Protecting Associate, for His guidance and kindness. Any good in my work is by His will alone, and any mistakes are mine alone.

Afnan Ahmed Mohamed Abdalla
ISTANBUL, 2022

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One of my main objectives in academia and enlightened during my work on alternative learning spaces in Cairo, was to research and theorize about learning spaces and their empowerment. These are spaces that speak to and acknowledge the economic, political and cultural realities and needs of their societies. They are also learning spaces that particularly challenge colonial and neo-liberal ways of interpreting the world. After the 2011 revolution and 2013 military intervention in Egypt, there have been numerous initiatives and new spaces that are politically distanced from the state and can be seen as alternatives to that state-censored education and state-controlled learning spaces. Some of these were oriented towards offering non-formal forms of education, meaning that they were mainly community-based initiatives that operate outside the formal educational institutions. The scholarly work on education in Egypt after 2011 focuses mainly on the changes that happened in the mainstream and typical forms of education. Some have analyzed changes that happened within informal student activities taking place in formal educational institutions, especially universities (Ramzy 2019), while others highlighted the shift in citizenship education after the revolution in formal and non-formal educational institutions (Atta 2021; Waddell 2013; Dorio, Abdou, and Moheyeldine 2019), the field is yet very limited on the alternatives that surfaced after 2011.

Led by my observations starting from 2015 till 2022, I was able to recognize different forms of these initiatives in Cairo. The first group of spaces are those oriented towards religious education, whose idea is to teach Islamic education with different curricula and pedagogies than used by Al-Azhar University. Their aim is to be also much more accessible to the public. After running for some years, however, these had to be closed because of being targeted politically. At times, their founders were arrested.

Other alternatives include a form of post-compulsory education that teach a liberal arts education that in comparison to public and private universities follow non-mainstream pedagogies. They are also more accessible to the public in terms of fees. Most of those enrolled in these spaces are university students who are dissatisfied with their education and would like to continue somewhere else. These spaces may not face the same political targeting because of their being more secular, however they are still operating with other challenges especially of funding.

Other alternatives are those for younger learners in the age of compulsory schooling. These include Montessori nurseries that can be found in New Cairo and are usually expensive, thus accessible largely to upper-middle and upper social classes while being few in number. There are also other spaces like Alwan wa Awtar, which offers artistic, cultural and educational programs for young learners in places where children neither have access to quality education nor art activities, like the El Masaken area, the Ezbet El-Nasr settlement and the rural village of Kafr Hamza. In this category too, there are, on the one hand, small-scale non-formal schools who follow the national curriculum only with slightly different teaching pedagogies than of mainstream schools. On the other hand the spaces like Mesahat and Genius Kids Community and other spaces in New Cairo or Maadi. The latter do not follow the national curriculum and combine alternative education philosophies and pedagogies, sometimes adding their own. Their fees are on the higher side, similar to private or even international schools so families enrolling their children there are upper-middle class. While I presented part of the large spectrum of alternatives in Egypt post 2011 revolution, the form of alternatives this study engages with are the small-scale non-formal schools. They are following alternative education philosophies and pedagogies and are thus both ideologically and pedagogically distanced from the mainstream.

In 2015-16, after being introduced to the critical and radical theories of alternative education, I started working on my mass communication bachelor's degree's graduation project on homeschooling in Egypt. I had started talking to and interviewing homeschooling families in Cairo and it felt only logical at that time to engage with homeschooling using a comparative approach with respect to the traditional schooling system. Upon approaching alternative learning spaces in Cairo for my master's thesis, this time around, I began to question this comparative approach.

Normally with the legal stigma attached to it, there are no public dialogues about alternative education in Egypt, only within families and communities of alternative education. With not many changes taking place within educational policies, from 2015 till 2021 the dynamics and discourses grew remarkably, at least within the communities of alternative education. From my observation, in 2015-16 efforts towards alternative education in Egypt were mainly family led, in the form of homeschooling and unschooling with the latter being a term devised by John Holt (1976). One could still sometimes see unannounced collective efforts from homeschooling communities towards creating common online resources, very small facilities and parent-led meetings and activities for homeschooled children and families. One of the public initiatives is the "flexible education" community, mainly as a Facebook group and online blog dedicated to creating a supportive platform for homeschooling families for exchanging ideas and experiences both online and offline for example in the form of workshops, playgroups, and activities for children in public gardens. Alternative learning spaces were unprecedented in this geography until around 2016-17. With this fairly new addition and growth in the alternative education context in Egypt, this study attempts to overcome the comparative binary of the alternative/traditional, to engage in depth with the specificities of these novel alternative learning spaces in Cairo. In this introductory chapter I will be discussing alternative education as a concept, its main philosophies, and renowned theorists who correspond to the aim of this study. This account of alternative education in this chapter is intended to act as a preface and conceptualization of the main ideas of alternative education that relate to this study. While I briefly revisit some of these ideas in the subsequent chapters, the rest of the chapters aim to look at space-making in alternative learning spaces in Cairo. Another aim in this study is presenting the ways in which alternative learning spaces in Cairo are much more than a mode of alternative education.

1.1. Understanding Alternative Education

The critical writings, alternative educational models and their consequent social and collective movements have coexisted with the traditional schooling system from the get-go (Sliwka 2008). Sliwka puts together a historical account of these diverse critical waves, whether initiated by individuals or collectives in the Western context. I map

key examples, starting from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings of Émile, to Bronson Alcott's Temple School of Boston, and from Swedish writer Ellen Key's renown book *The Century of the Child* (1909), to the country boarding schools ("Landerziehungsheime") in Germany (Sliwka 2008). Then there are the globally famous approaches of the Italian educator Maria Montessori (of Montessori schools), and the Austrian Rudolf Steiner (Woldorf schools). Other names include, Célestin Freinet, John Dewey and Francis Parker, all who had influential philosophical and pedagogical contributions to the educational alternatives and its diversity. The previous historical account of these critical efforts, even though influential to this day, were marginal in their time. It was not until the 1970s that "the educational status quo began to be categorically challenged" (Tyson 2019, 28) and this period witnessed a widespread social movement in this direction (Sliwka 2008; Apple 2013).

Starting from the 1970s, greatly influential writers like John Holt, Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich added to the critical literature of mainstream schooling and proposed ideas and pedagogies towards alternative education. While Holt's work departed from the autonomy of the individual in his learning endeavors, Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 1968 theorized in parallel at both the individual and collective level (Freire 1968; Kraftl 2013). Freire called out the oppressed to lead in the quest to reclaim their full humanity by ending the dehumanizing power of the oppressors. Holt, Freire and Illich's prominent works had a central idea, advocating for pulling away from traditional schooling systems that promote "one-size-fits-all", hierarchical, lecturing style of teaching (Freire 1968; Illich 1970; Holt 1976). Illich, years after publishing his renowned *Deschooling Society* (1971), argued that in his book his approach in questioning the current dominant schooling systems as means was not enough, rather we should question education itself as an end. The solution, in his opinion, is not devising other educational institutions or satisfying more of the "educational needs" that he claims are unreal, the solution is in the attitudes of people towards tools (Illich 2008, iii-v). John Holt devised the term "unschooling" and ascribed criteria to what he believes to be true learning, such as "learner-directed, respectful, non-institutional, and ultimately trusting" (Tyson 2019). These ideas are especially clear in Holt's book *Instead of Education* (1976).

While self-directed learning is central in Holt's work as he called against formal instruction by arguing that that children are capable of learning intrinsically through play, self-directed learning and intrinsic motivation also becomes one of the principal ideas of alternative education and is related to other psychological and educational theories like Self-Determination and Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Attachment Theory and Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Riley 2020, 21-32). In line with this and against teacher-centered learning, Freire is also critical of "banking education" in traditional schools that gives agency to teachers making them subjects and deprives it from the students transforming them into objects and passive recipients (Freire 1968). In chapter III, I specifically look at the relationship of the teacher to students in alternative learning spaces included in this study. I also contrast both learner-directed and teacher-directed conceptions of education with that of Khosrow Noaparast's conception of "Asymmetrical Inter-action" (2016, 339-353), as Noaparast's conception of the fits very well the teacher-student relationship in the alternative learning spaces in Cairo.

Another principal idea in alternative education is learning by doing (Holt 1976), that children can learn better by practicing and through their everyday life experiences. Both Freire and Holt theorizing offers a significant perspective to "learning as embedded in everyday life", and views learning with great potentiality, as an active process and multi-sited in its sources (Kraftl 2013). Peter Gray looks at children's ability of learning by themselves as only possible because of the social environment that children live in (Gray 2016, 50). Gina Riley, within the framework of learning through life, emphasizes even more the importance of cultural transmission and the intergenerational socialization of unschooled children for acquiring knowledge and building essential knowledge connections (Riley 2020, 32-33). This idea is particularly important for this study as I look at the kinds of movements and interactions that children have, that alternative learning spaces in Cairo allows and facilitates, with everyday life. That is, I am looking at the movements and interactions of children in public spaces, with people in different contexts inside and outside the direct community of alternative learning spaces. These ideas are discussed throughout the chapters, building up towards chapter IV where I argue how through these movements and interactions these spaces are productive of an alternative vision of real life.

1.2. Modes and Approaches of Alternative Education

In this research, alternative education refers to those founded on philosophies that engage with life and learning differently than of traditional schooling systems. Alternative education as a concept refers to the philosophies and approaches devised in the last century, from critical and radical standpoints towards modern mass educational theories and practices, as discussed above. I will be using the literature on alternative education as a departure point, and build up on them with attention to the specificities of the Egyptian context.

First, the literature distinguishes the many modes and approaches of alternative education from mainstream education with a list of commonalities, some of which will be included here. Before listing the commonalities, this study acknowledges the diversity of alternative education modes and approaches and that such characteristics could be found in these different modes and approaches with varying saturations. Thus, the intention of the following listing is to further identify alternative education using clear common trends and not draw a rigid, imaginary system to fit them in. First, educational alternatives tend to overcome the division of knowledge into isolated subjects, and when it comes to traditional subjects like math, science, reading and writing they are usually integrated into the whole learning journey (Martin 2002; Sliwka 2008). Other areas of interest, whether it is religious or environmental studies, apprenticeship in certain skills or any area that triggers the interest of the learner is then encouraged and pursued (Martin 2002). Sliwka adds the flexible curricula that are also designed in a way to relate to everyday life (2008). Coming from the critical standpoint to traditional education previously discussed, alternative education intentionally avoids a reductionist approach that produces workers and citizens, purposefully to avoid fixed molds for children, they adopt rather deep-rooted philosophies that nurture and develop all dimensions of the child's learning (Martin 2002). Martin also adds that alternative education is usually found in small-scale schools (2002). Families who decide on pulling their children out of mainstream education have diverse reasons. They could be divided into two main categories. The first group are the "ideologues", who move away from mainstream education usually to seek more religiously-oriented education. The second group are the "pedagogues",

who are those critical of the effectiveness and potentiality of schools for their children, regardless of the secular curriculums (Tyson 2019).

This study looks at the diverse approaches and applications of alternative education in the realm of possibilities (Lees and Noddings 2016, 2), rather than attempting to achieve an imagined "better" version. This understanding highlights the significance of every application and approach independently. In taking this position, one can also look at the alternative learning spaces in Cairo included in this study as one of many other possibilities, novel and worth studying on account of firstly being pioneers in their geography and secondly with their Islamic identity (as I will discuss throughout the chapters).

There are thus two aims for this study, rooted in this understanding of alternative learning spaces in Cairo as significant possibilities worth researching. The first aim is to move towards space conceptually and empirically, and to unravel the space-making processes of alternative learning spaces in Cairo with the social, spatial, and temporal processes that are involved. This spatial lens again contributes to the potency of these spaces on a theoretical and practical level, as I explain further in chapter II. My primary research question is thus how are space-making processes experienced in relation to alternative learning spaces in Cairo? The second aim is looking at the alternatives that these alternative learning spaces may contribute beyond the already discussed alternative education philosophies and approaches. And thus, my secondary research question is, what is *alternative* about alternative learning spaces in Egypt?

1.3. Motives Behind Alternative Education in Egypt

> Egypt's education is a closed system, detached from contemporary realities and isolated from the common cultural heritage of mankind, without which no educational system can hope to produce individuals capable of enriching their nations. But where and when did this tragedy start, and who is responsible? To answer this, we must go back to the time when Mohammad Ali made education available to all Egyptians (Heggy 2003, 154).

Starting with Heggy's quote, I want to present the problems that the formal education system in Egypt is suffering from. Starting from Mohammad Ali, who is considered the founder of modern Egypt, Tarek Heggy traces the educational scene up to present-day Egypt. Its historical dynamics resulted in it being a "closed system" and its

multilayered “tragedy” manifested in the incapability of individuals graduating from this very educational system (Heggy 2003, 154; Loveluck 2012).

During Mohammad Ali’s rule and modernization project, Egypt witnessed what is described by some as a significant expansion of its educational system along with growing concerns of quality, pedagogy and relevance (N. Megahed et al. 2012, 43). In the last few decades there have been also the problems of overcrowded classrooms, lack of schools in many areas and lack of supplies and qualified teachers (Osama, Tawfik, and Khalil 2014). Along with these problems, there is also the question of the place of Islamic education in this educational system and the fear that students' education is divorced from their Islamic identity and culture. According to Bradley Cook, Egypt has its Islamic culture and heritage, its colonial experience, and its modernization quest led by Mohammed Ali. Looking at these aspects together gives more insight on the parallel routes of secular and religious education as "two differing educational systems" found in Egypt (Cook 2010, 341). According to him, this is a cultural dualism resulting from an educational dualism, which manifests one of Egypt’s main educational problems (Cook 2010, 341). Another prominent debate arising from the Egyptian educational context is discussed by Cook in what is debated as a quest to escape a dichotomized secular/Islamic education. Which lies in the attempt to secure the attainment of the knowledge and skill set needed to keep up with the market without compromising an Islamic culture and identity. What Cook would describe as a quest for “modernization without Westernization, and Islamization without extremism” (Cook 2010, 344).

With this dualism of secular and religious education, and the pervasive problems of the lack of quality and relevance, and that of poor pedagogies, families started looking for alternatives for their children outside the formal education system. As I have presented part of the spectrum of alternatives in post-revolution Cairo, many families specifically chose alternative education. Some parents partially integrated alternative education inspired activities and techniques while still having their children attend traditional schools. Other parents pulled their children completely out of the schooling system. Even though schooling is compulsory in Egypt, parents are also aware that there is minimal supervision over the attendance of students in schools and find ways to keep their children enrolled in a school without actually attending (N. Ahmed 2019,

208). While it is important to recognize that families engaging in alternative education in Egypt have the motive for seeking quality education, many still see this as a second priority. From my observations in the field, the majority of the parents I interviewed, if not all, have religious motives and, as previously mentioned, they can be seen as 'ideologues', who seek more religiously oriented education for their children (Tyson 2019). This is not only related to the specific case of Egypt, it is also seen in the US where many families that homeschool are from the conservative Christian groups and have conservative religious commitments (Apple 2013, 241).

I have argued throughout the thesisthat alternative learning spaces in Cairo practice an Islamic actualization of alternative education, one that I argue here fits Cook's quest to escape the secular/Islamic dualism mentioned above (Cook 2010).Through fieldwork, the need for what I call an Islamic actualization of alternative education is voiced clearly by parents. Most parents interviewed described wanting to preserve conservative Islamic values of their children as the main motive to enroll them in alternative learning spaces in Cairo. This motive and need have a very crucial spatial aspect. In chapter II, I argued that this need is not a mere need of practicing any form of alternative education, but one that becomes an *extension of home*; its values, affects and learning experiences. In chapter IV, I also argued that parents felt safe and assured with the Islamic vision of the spaces, mainly because they and their children are part of a larger collective that adhered to this Islamic vision.

1.4. Experiencing Space at a Distance: My Methodology

My research on alternative education before this thesis project started in 2015 during my undergraduate studies in mass communication. For my graduation project, my group and I produced and directed a documentary on homeschooling in Egypt, through which I got in contact with some homeschooling families and was introduced to this community in Cairo. During this period there were very few, if any, larger collective efforts in this community. The only one visible to public was a Facebook group and online blog "flexible education"1. It was not until 2019 that I encountered alternative

[1] A blog and Facebook page well-known especially in the circles of homeschooling families and families engaged in alternative education in Egypt.

learning spaces. These spaces are considered pioneers in this location, and because of the dire need I witnessed of the many homeschooling families to be part of collective space for their children, it became clear that the spatial aspect would be central in my thesis. While my plan was to travel to Egypt by the time of my fieldwork and physically visit the spaces and have participant observation and face-to-face in-depth interviews, things didn't go as planned. Thus, I have mainly depended on online in-depth interviews.

After reviewing almost ten alternative learning spaces in Cairo and contacting most of them, and visiting a few and arranging online meetings with their founders, I had set the following criteria to decide and choose from these spaces:

- The space should be located in Cairo or its suburbs.
- The space does not adopt the Egyptian national curriculum.
- The space identifies themselves and/or are perceived as alternatives to mainstream education.
- The space is not funded by mainstream education budgets and depends on fees or grants besides voluntary efforts.
- The space is actively working for at least one year.

The research field of this study is based on two of the alternative learning spaces in Egypt that fulfill the previous criteria but are still different on many levels. I do not use the real names of the place, I rather refer to the first place as “alternative school” and the second place as “free learning space”. Both names are pseudonyms that were carefully chosen to best describe them as I will further clarify in chapter II, in the “Background to the Case Studies”. I will also be using pseudonyms to preserve the privacy of my interlocutors and any names of people or places mentioned in this study unless they are renown figures and public spaces like in chapter IV. Both the alternative school and the free learning space are located in different suburbs of Cairo city. While the alternative school is larger in scale and includes a little over thirty families and seventy children and includes children from three and a half till fifteen years old, the free learning space on the other hand includes almost fifteen families and over thirty children ranging from three and a half till eleven years old. The alternative school was a full-time school, and the children spend around 8 hours daily at the school on the weekdays, on the other hand the free learning space was part-time,

and attendance was flexible and varied from one family to the other, children on average would spend six hours 2-3 days a week. As far as the academic curriculum goes, both spaces did not follow a readymade curriculum, the alternative school completely covered the academics with their designed curriculum and was still under update and documentation. The free learning space was strictly aiming to cover the academics, nevertheless they included and complemented this aspect, when fitting, within their monthly themes.

These interviews were conducted as online interviews through a video call on a multimedia application. As seen in Table 1.1 (see Appendix), I have conducted a total of eighteen interviews, eight of which were from the free learning space and ten from the alternative school. The interlocutors include parents, both fathers and mothers, to children enrolled in these spaces. They also include teachers, where I refer to those from the free learning space as facilitators, and those from the alternative school as teachers, as an extension to the description used by each space. I also interviewed the founder and co-founder from the free learning space, and on the other side interviewed three managers from the alternative school. I specifically chose these three categories of parents, teachers/facilitators and managers/founders, in an effort to combine the diverse perspectives about space-making experiences of alternative learning space. In alignment with the main aim of this study to explore the space-making of alternative learning spaces, the study was intended to explore each space in-depth. Bearing in mind the limited time frame of this study, only two alternative learning spaces could be included for in-depth analysis. In the analysis, I mainly focus on the time frame of 2021-22 in which the interviews were conducted and finalized. The two spaces were chosen to represent different versions of alternative learning spaces to uncover and explore diverse spatial patterns that may appear in such alternative learning spaces.

While the study illustrates parts of the educational approaches and pedagogies practiced by the alternative school and the free learning space, the aim is not to evaluate the education at these spaces; rather the focus is on analyzing the space-making experiences.As the interviews are conducted with people engaged in alternative learning spaces in Cairo whether parents, teachers/facilitators and managers/founders, the quotations used in the chapters are generally biased to these spaces and alternative education based on the natural bias of the interlocutors.

Nevertheless, any contradictions or ambiguities encountered in the quotations used within the study are presented as they are and discussed according to the themes and in the context of the research questions. These contradictions or ambiguities convey two important meanings emphasized by the managers and founders in different contexts. Firstly, that the spaces are constantly growing especially in their pedagogies and curriculums, and they do not assume maturity in their application of alternative education or their own educational visions. Secondly, the people engaged in these spaces are also diverse to a certain extent, especially the teachers and facilitators in both spaces are not particularly experienced in these kinds of alternative learning spaces.

On another note, it is not the concern of this research to set a boundary or affirm a dichotomy between mainstream traditional education and alternative education. Peter Kraftl (2013) demonstrates the connections/disconnections between mainstream traditional schools and alternative learning spaces rather than accepting a simplistic dichotomy between the two. Inspired from this approach I intend to engage with alternative learning spaces in Cairo, without reducing or coercively fitting the findings into this dichotomy. While it is possible that comparisons could be made from my interlocutors during the interviews, my efforts are to move away from such margins and give more attention to the space-making experiences and meaning-making processes in these alternative learning spaces. This is also directed by my assumption that the literature attending to the micro level of what is taking place in alternative learning spaces is very limited, especially in relation to space-making. On the contrary, much of the literature adopts a "holistic" approach (Hammersley 2006) in locating the *alternative* to the *mainstream* (Ferguson and Seddon 2007), or the *local* to the *global* or the macro context (AbdelQawi and Imam 2021). Martyn Hammersley talked about the problem faced by ethnographers in deciding on which macro context to deal with in their analysis. According to him there would be contesting perspectives of what should be taken as the larger context. For ethnographers, locating their specific field of study to a macro context became confusing because of the various possibilities of contexts and the parallel stories that can come out therein (Hammersley 2006, 6-8). While there is a respective history of anthropology and micro-ethnographies in education (Mills 2012), there are also critical views towards carrying such microanalyses and their narrow engagement with history, power relations and social

structures (Sharp 1981; Burawoy et al. 2000). In this study I lean towards engaging with the micro level of analysis throughout the chapters led by the field work, especially clear with the analysis of the everyday practices and interpersonal relations found in alternative learning spaces in Cairo.

It deserves to be mentioned that I am aware that carrying out this ethnography comes with the risk of romanticization, specially with my insider/outsider positionality. Having studied the communities practicing alternative education in Cairo from 2015, working with them closely, making personal relationships and building a network over the years, I am aware of the many challenges facing them in a country that does not recognize alternative education. With my effort to highlight these challenges of these communities along with my personal long-term immersion in the field, maintaining a critical standpoint to their ideologues and agency could be challenging. Social researchers acknowledge that the nature of ethnography comes with this risk of romanticization, especially when the communities under study are marginalized or oppressed and the researcher feels obliged to let their voices be heard or change their reality. While this insider/outsider position of the researcher is at essence a main methodological approach of ethnography, it could also question the validity of the research. According to Hammersley, the ethnographer is at risk of systematic bias if he/she finds himself either serving political interests of an establishment or playing the role of an organic intellectual towards the marginalized and oppressed (Hammersley 2006, 11). On the other hand, researchers carrying out critical ethnographies are seen to embrace their positionality, sometimes even as far as sharing the linguistic repertoire of their informants in their research (Palmer and Caldas 2015, 7). Working on this study opened up my eyes to the magnitude of the challenge. I want to convey as much as possible the reality of the communities of alternative learning spaces in Cairo, their beliefs and practices. At many times I extend their linguistic repertoire in my writing, however I found it hard to do all of this without either being accused of or actually being guilty of romanticization.

Another spatial dimension would be experiencing these spaces at a distance and conducting the field work online, which evokes another spatial dimension and discussion. While the alternative learning spaces are based in Cairo, during the limited time frame of this study I was not able to leave Istanbul to be in Cairo. Thus, rather

than having multiple firsthand visits and observations of the places, I compensated by acquiring still footage as well as having one guided virtual tour by one of the teachers through an online video call for the alternative school. While also acquiring still footage from the free learning space, it was harder to obtain videos whether prerecorded or live streamed. This issue had been repeated in the interview context as well, having a visual interaction was a general challenge in my communication with the alternative learning spaces in Cairo. Even though the interviews were agreed to be both video and audio, not all the interlocutors were comfortable about having a video call, thus a few of them ended up as only audio calls. From working up close with this topic for many years now, this could also be understood in the context of the uneasiness that families and spaces practicing alternative education face in Egypt, and again because of the legal stigma attached to alternative education. They would thus always prefer anonymity. However, the usual challenge that researchers face in online recruiting interlocutors for online interviews (O'Connor and Madge 2017, 427), was luckily dodged in the field work for this study. People involved in alternative learning spaces in Cairo while being skeptical in the beginning of our communication, they were very welcoming and enthusiastic towards the arrangements of the online interviews. Along with them wanting to preserve their identities and privacy they expressed in many contexts their need for more research that paves for public awareness and dialogues about alternative education in Egypt. In anyways the absence of visual interaction during the interviews has its undeniable drawbacks. Compared with the traditional face-to-face interviewing, chances of having misunderstandings of the questions or vague responses are higher due to the "lack of extralinguistic cues normally available in offline interactions" (Hewson 2017, 63). However, Henrietta O'Connor and Clare Madge explain how this very lack of extralinguistic cues could also mean that there was less visual input to misread, which could be seen as an advantage for online interviewing (O'Connor and Madge 2017, 427).

Having said that, these online data collecting methods means that the study is missing my firsthand spatial experience and observations of the spaces and was led more by the perceptions of my interlocutors. Making the use out of this situation I shifted my focus to see what comes out of unpacking their affective and discursive explanations of their experiences of the space. Some were very enthusiastic to verbally take me on an informative tour in the material space, others very keen that they convey the

emotional atmosphere of the space instead. Facilitators in the free learning space were especially emotional and affective in their descriptions of their relations to the space and to its founder. Many family-related analogies were evoked to describe the community of the two alternative learning spaces as well as the learners' feelings towards the teachers and vice versa. Space thus is reconstructed through their affective explanations, their interpretation of what matters in space, and how children actually learn through space.

1.5. On Some Terms and Terminologies

Bearing in mind that the names I exclusively use to refer to the two spaces included as case studies in this study are "alternative school" and "free learning space", I refer to these two spaces collectively or other settings where alternative education takes place as "alternative learning spaces" (Kraftl 2013). "Alternative education" is introduced and defined in this chapter and is accordingly used in the study. While I will be explaining the reasons for using "school" in "alternative school", I will only be using "school" by itself in the quotations if and as used by the interviewees and will be clarified in the context what they mean. Therefore, to avoid any confusion I will be using only "mainstream traditional schools" and/or "traditional schools" to refer to state schools or private schools not practicing alternative education. I also refer to architectural and geographic aspects of the space mainly as "material space" and "physical space" throughout the study. However, in chapter III, I will be using both "material space" and "physical space" to refer to different aspects that I will clarify there.

I also introduce a few terminologies that I give elaborate explanations for in their respective sections and chapters. *Real life* refers to the specific meanings and ways of learning and life practiced by alternative learning spaces in Cairo based on their own conceptualization, that are different from those pertained in Cairo. The *good life* is the attitude of the learner towards life, being the flexible and rapid adaptation to changes, along with a positive attitude towards unexpected changes as "a chance to learn". Both terminologies of real life and good life are essentially an extension of the linguistic repertoire used by the interviewees gathered from the field work. I conceptualize both terminologies according to my analysis of their different usages, meanings and

contexts. *Mu'allim-murabbi*[2] is the teacher/facilitator in alternative learning spaces in Cairo also as an extension of the word as used by interviewees. I devised a *family-like* concept to describe the nature of the interpersonal relations and emotions involved, especially of the Mu'allim-Murabbi to the students in alternative learning spaces in Cairo. While using family-like I do not mean to bluntly relate it to the student's nuclear family, I rather use family-like to explain how certain emotions and relations are reproduced in alternative learning spaces in Cairo in ways that connect and disconnect with that of a real family. The alternative community is what I conceptualize based on the field work to be the community of the learners with their families along with the staff and founders. The alternative community forms a collective with its specific collective emotions, and that engages in formal and informal ways, both inside and outside the material and educational space of alternative learning spaces in Cairo.

1.6. Chapters and the Structure of This Thesis

The study is organized thematically, these themes are organized into three main chapters, "Towards the Space", "Within the Space", and "Beyond the Space". The naming of the chapters is not intended to only imply a physical movement, from towards to within to beyond the space, rather as gradual steps along with the themes. That is to say the chapters and their sections are organized in a manner to address first the themes that in my analysis have a directive effect and build on to the subsequent themes in a ripple like effect. The themes will lead forward the discussion and analysis about my case studies.

Chapter II: "Towards the Space" starts with setting a conceptual framework for the study, in an attempt to particularly foreground and emphasize the usually neglected aspect of space. The conceptual and theoretical discussion also aims to build a framework of the relation between space and learning. I then move towards space empirically to give background to alternative education in Egypt where I look at the homeschooling communities in Cairo as necessarily intertwined with the alternative learning spaces. I also present and analyze the perception of my interlocutors of these

[2] Mu'allim-murabbi is one of the titles given to the teachers in the alternative school, I extend their use of mu'allim-murabbi to refer to this specific teacher model found in the alternative learning spaces in Cairo.

alternative learning spaces as an extension of home. Finally, I present the methodology of the thesis where I set the criteria by which I choose the spaces under study. I also discuss the juxtaposition of having to experience space at a distance in a study that foregrounds the question of space and space-making.

Chapter III: "Within the Space" is mainly divided into two parts. The first half of the chapter I engage with the primary material space of both alternative learning spaces, and look into and trace back the *daily* and *ordinary* routines that makes the space. So the daily learning experiences, as actualized through the spatio-temporal order of the space are presented and analyzed to unravel an underlying order that not only produces affective atmospheres but also accommodates for and produces mess. The second part of chapter III is focused on the educational relationship of teacher and student through the model of the mu'allim-murabbi. The Islamic understanding of *ta'lim* and *tarbiyah*[3] is discussed and reflected on this educational relationship as actualized in the alternative learning spaces in Cairo. I look at the relationship of the mu'allim-murabbi to students, in the framework of the quest of tarbiyah as a reconfiguration of the educational relationship. Even beyond the educational relationship, *family-like* relations and intimate atmospheres build up between the students, the mu'allim-murabbi, and within the circles of tarbiyah.

Chapter IV: "Beyond the Space", is where I move beyond the primary material spaces and the alternative educational approaches and look at the movements, meanings, the alternative communities, and collective emotions that extend beyond the space. I trace back the movements of the alternative learning spaces especially in how it approaches and remaps the city of Cairo and its everyday spaces. While the relation of learning to everyday life and real life as described by the interlocutors is recurring throughout the chapters, I gradually build an argument that the spaces under study and through their Islamic actualization of alternative education are productive of an alternative vision of real life, the notion of good life as well as reframe the social relations into what I call the alternative community. The alternative community is reframed social relations that I analyze from the understanding of neo-tribalism and "little communities" (Maffesoli 2016) but more than that, I also argue that the Islamic actualization of alternative

[3] two folds of education as defined with the Qur'anic concepts of ta'lim and tarbiyah that I further discuss in chapter III.

education is the force with which such social relations are constructed and with which they can endure (Bennabi 2002). The Collective emotions related to the alternative community are also discussed with the understanding that collective emotions have directive potential to actions beyond.

CHAPTER II

TOWARDS THE SPACE

In the preliminary stage of this study and while gathering and reading about alternative education, I noticed the repetitiveness and dullness of most papers and articles. The 1970s was the starting point that the educational status quo was challenged with counter ideas and movements (Tyson 2019). While this period witnessed a widespread social movement in this direction (Sliwka 2008; Apple 2013), in my opinion the work and literature produced, whether in education or sociology of education, did not keep up. Since then studies critical of mainstream education mostly start with revisiting the critical theories of state-schooling and a historical account on schools as a state apparatus for the distribution and preservation of hegemonic cultural and economic values (Apple 2013). They mostly then present different pedagogies and schools of thought within alternative education. This is by no means to disregard the importance of such work, rather to acknowledge that the vividness of alternative education and its practical applications calls for more than mere documentation, for more innovative approaches and theories that are inward looking, outward looking and forward looking (Kraftl 2013). The most significant work I had found was that of cultural and human geographers on the spatialities of alternative education as I will elaborate later.

While I started with setting a conceptual framework for the main concepts of the study and literature review, the second part of this chapter is contextualization of the case studies and an introduction to the community of the alternative learning spaces especially in its relation to homeschooling. Then through both the field work and analysis of interview quotations I further situate space, to explore the need of these spaces from the perspective of their communities.

2.1. The Space in Alternative Education

This study engages with a duality between social and spatial imperatives, like (embodied space, affect, materiality, movement) which in itself has been recently an introduced alternative approach within sociology of education. On one hand, indeed most of the research in sociology of education is saturated with 'the school' as the mainstream educational institution, alternative learning spaces are already not as much present in the literature. And on the other hand, within the field the focus is towards questioning education as constitutive of meaning-making processes, and social processes within educational institutions that enable social order and social control, but then also there the "learning location has been largely unquestioned" (Ferguson and Seddon 2007, 119). So this chapter aims at moving towards space both conceptually and empirically.

Through revisiting the literature of learning spaces I intend to unravel how space is debated as a contested, sometimes vague, concept, and how space is seen in relation to learning in a meaningful way to push the discussion of learning spaces forward. Based on both the literature and field work I inevitably engage with certain aspects and I conceptualize space for alternative learning spaces in Cairo. However, my aim here will not be to manifest a concrete definition of space, rather the main intention is to foreground space in its relation to learning. This is also an attempt to escape direct simplistic conceptions of space on one hand and on the other hand through the process of unwinding the multilayered complexities of space in relation to learning, to unlock the potency in these very definitions. While it is argued that spaces may not be in themselves liberatory on a metaphorical level (Lees and Noddings 2016, 307), spaces are not also meaningless containers on a physical level. While it is certainly not a binary opposition between the physical and metaphorical, my main argument in this chapter is that moving towards space contributes to the theoretical and practical potency of alternative learning spaces. I start with the concepts of space, learning, learning space and intentionally discuss them interchangeably and simultaneously with the relevant literature in order to situate (conceptually) and relate space and learning in learning spaces.

2.1.1. A Conceptual Framework

Space was initially approached as neutral, objective and mappable (Ferguson and Seddon 2007). Jos Boys point out the gap found between studies on learning space in the 1990s from an architectural perspective and that from an educational one. On one hand space was understood as material space and deemed in a mechanical deterministic approach while on the other hand learning was theorized in a livelier manner as an "interactive process" (Boys 2011). In all cases, space was left in the background in studies on learning spaces and when evoked was then limited by a material definition thus consequently limited in imagination, potency and in practice. As early as the 1970s, these assumptions began to be challenged, and a shift towards space took place within human sciences, whether sociology or human geography and architectural theory. Mirroring and building on Henri Lefebvre's argument that space is intertwined with social reality (Lefebvre 1974), studies on learning spaces took a turn (Ferguson and Seddon 2007; Kraftl 2013, Boys 2011). The social processes became as important as learning in studying learning spaces. Thus, this shift allowed for engagement with space as more than just the absolute static container of human activity, more than being “easily represent-able” (Kraftl 2013, 48). Rooted in non-representational theory, space is moved from being passively acquiring meaning, to viewing the practicing through space as what gives meaning. In other words, we could think about space as meaningful because of what the users of the space bring to the space, along with the spatial context itself.

Before conceptualizing space in alternative learning space in Cairo, and in light of the theories of space discussed, it is important to point again that it is not the intention of this study to look at space in isolation, the intention is to specifically understand the space-making processes experienced in alternative learning spaces in Cairo. And in an attempt to do so I am acknowledging the relationship of space to learning and underpinning the main features of this relationship not only in alternative learning spaces in Cairo, but also in public spaces in Cairo as I will discuss through the following paragraphs.

Firstly, space in alternative learning spaces in Cairo is socially constructed, this understanding invites the social aspects of the place, whether it is the social relations

and interpersonal interactions, the emotions, or daily practices by humans of the spaces (Low 2017, 68). These social aspects do not only contribute to the spatial discussion, but they are also at the heart of experiencing and practicing space and learning. These interactions construct meanings of space that give in depth understanding of alternative learning spaces in Cairo. This becomes clear in Chapter IV as I also look at the wider communities of alternative learning spaces in Cairo, what I call the alternative community. Alternative learning spaces in Cairo intentionally use their communities as part of their learning approaches. This can be seen as learners' engagement with this wider community in organized social visits that are part of the field trip curriculum (chapter IV) and learners' interactions with circles of tarbiyah (chapter III and chapter IV). In chapter III I also analyze the relationship of the learners to their teachers in alternative learning spaces in Cairo as a reconfigured educational relationship that along the quest of tarbiyah constructs the meaning of the space.

Emotions also contribute to the social construction of alternative learning spaces in Cairo. Emotions were continuously evoked in the interviews, they appeared as interpersonal expressed emotions especially in the teacher-student relationship, and as well interviewees evoked emotions to describe the alternative community (the communities of these spaces) mainly as familial affect growing towards and within this community, as discussed in chapter III. The alternative community here can also reflect Barbara Rosenwein's "emotional communities" (2006), as the alternative community relates to each other and to the outside world through sets of emotions that shape their worldview and direct their actions. Within the framework of this study, I will be mainly focusing on collective emotions and affects rather than individual feelings. Building on Sara Ahmed's theorization of emotions and affect, I conceptualize emotions as something that circulates between individuals and collectives rather than residing within bodies and objects, and that accumulates over time in the form of affective value. Which means the more emotions circulate, the more affective they become (Ahmed 2004). Thus, these relationships, the alternative community and collective emotions are an essential part of the space-making processes experienced in alternative learning spaces in Cairo.

At the same time this understanding of the space as a social construct does not dismiss the tangible aspects of the space. The material aspects, the ways they are represented

and interpreted can also contribute to the social construction of the space and the meaning people attach to the space. I thus argue that the free learning space in Cairo is socially constructed as an extension of home and analyzes the social as well as the physical aspects of the space that contribute to this meaning. This discussion is again resumed in chapter III where the order of the material space and the affective atmospheres related to it also contribute to the sense of the space as an extension of home.

Secondly, I look at the material space in alternative learning spaces in Cairo as closely related with their learning approaches, affected by it, and affecting it, at the same time not to suggest a direct correspondence between material space and its learning activities. Jos Boys conceptualizes the relationship of material space and learning as only "partially related" in the sense that a change in one should not imply a corresponding change in the other, if any change at all (Boys 2011, 51). Boys in his work on post-compulsory education he approaches learning spaces by first dividing them into levels in an attempt to recognize its multilayered nature and the different levels at which learning spaces operate. This work specifically contributes to the understanding of learning spaces in relation to architecture and space design through the "conceptually rigorous conceptual framework" he attempts (Boys 2011, 63). From this standpoint that material space and learning is only partially related, I focus in chapter III on the ways in which the material and temporal order of alternative learning spaces in Cairo encourages a specific learning experience. I specify there two parts of the geography, 'material space' and 'physical space', the former being things involved in learning as well as physical divisions of the space, while the latter being the learners' locations and visibility from other users of the space (Barnett 2011, 168). This is again moving away from the mechanical conceptualization of the material environment as a container that withholds human action, consisting of a set of tools and objects and rather analyzing the underlying temporal and material order of the space and the relationship of the learner to this order. Both the ordering and practicing of the space is productive of specific learning experiences and affective atmospheres. This becomes one of the space-making equations I propose for these alternative learning spaces in Cairo.

Thirdly, this study also deals with spaces beyond the main physical space of alternative learning spaces. I specifically look at the field trips as an intentional and major part of alternative learning spaces' curricula to expose and engage learners to real life as I argue in chapter IV. And in mentioning spaces beyond the main physical space of alternative learning spaces I specifically refer to public spaces in Cairo. In doing so I do not conceptualize or analyze public spaces of Cairo in isolation. It is to again look at space in relation to learning, this time public space in Cairo in its relation to the learning experiences of field trips as designed by alternative learning spaces in Cairo. In chapter IV I still do engage with theorizations of Cairo as "a city of contrasts and contradiction" (Abu-Lughod 1971, 182), how public spaces are not necessarily "public" (Nespor 2000, 28), specifically in Cairo where spaces are more and more "walled off" (Abaza 2006, 196) and the ways in which Cairenes reappropriate public spaces after being pushed away (Abaza 2006; Singerman and Amar 2006). However, in this study I focus on highlighting the experiences of young learners in reappropriating public spaces of Cairo, which could contribute to the literature in engaging with the experience of childhood in public spaces of Cairo. In this framework I also conceptualize public spaces in Cairo as embodied spaces. I look at the city of Cairo as Calvino describes the city of Zaira, "The city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand" (Calvino 1979, 13 in Thrift 2000, 222). Building on this understanding I look at public spaces in Cairo as embodied spaces that integrate the bodily movements and agency of the human body, along with space and culture (Low 2017, 94). My analysis is based on the discussions I have with the interlocutors on the organized field trips, their perception of learners' experiences in public spaces, the lists of pathways and destinations, and the kinds of exposure and engagement targeted by alternative learning spaces in Cairo. With this I argue in chapter IV that for alternative learning spaces in Cairo the field trips are the manifestation of the intentionality to expose and engage young learners with real life beyond the learning space. This intentionality along with the movements and pathways created by field trips, and the agency of young learners, fits Setha Low's conception of "trajectories" (Low 2017, 103-118). Low conceptualizes trajectories as possessive of "agency, power and direction" needed for transforming embodied spaces (Low 2017, 107). This study thus conceptualizes and engages with public spaces as embodied spaces in the framework of its relation to field trips as trajectories.

Next is the non-representational theory that greatly affected studies on learning spaces, and that gives a shared understanding that life is experienced and so is space, experienced in ways that exceed direct representations (Kraftl 2013, 47). While this study is leaning towards conceptualizing space as a social construct rather than conceptualizing space in a non-representational manner, I am also inspired by what Nigel Thrift calls ``nonrepresentationalist' "style of thinking" (Thrift 2000, 216). I think of space-making processes of alternative learning spaces in Cairo not as uncovering a specific route to inevitable ends, which subliminally suggests looking at an endpoint in time, possibly futuristic. I rather think of it as the partial relation and interaction of space and learning, with the social reality inevitably integral, and based on this relation and interaction space-making becomes a continuous performance of "unactualized possibilities" (Thrift 2000, 217). While I conceptualize space-making as continuous performance, this *nonrepresentationalist* style of thinking about space and learning also enables me to arrange and rearrange what could be already known or could even be seen 'ordinary' about alternative learning spaces in Cairo.

> The most extraordinary things are also the most everyday; the strangest things are often the most trivial ... Once separated from its context ... once presented in all its triviality i.e. in all that makes it trivial, suffocating, oppressive, the trivial becomes extraordinary, and the habitual becomes 'mythical' (Lefebvre 1991, 13).

The process of arranging and rearranging the ordinary or these "everyday" things is mainly of materiality, relationships, movements and embodiments, and affect.

Lastly is relating alternative learning spaces in Cairo to autonomous spaces. Some studies on learning spaces and alternative learning spaces relate space with concepts of autonomy. Max A. Hope and Catherine Montgomery in their chapter in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Alternative Education* (2016) carry out multi-sited studies on learning spaces the researchers were keener on situating and identifying space through the impressions of the users of the space. They use the term firm framing, to relate clear boundaries of space to freedom and autonomy. Their analysis is informed and led by the students' impressions and experiences of freedom in relation to their educational space. Through the words used by students to describe these experiences they frame the space into architecture, philosophy, and pedagogy. Without dismissing the importance of learners' perceptions of autonomy and freedom

related to space, I suggest that this study on alternative learning space in Cairo does more than that. In continuity of the previously mentioned *nonrepresentationalist* style of thinking, I trace back and analyze autonomous practices at the level of the ordinary and everyday life in alternative learning spaces in Cairo.

Some studies that adopt an outward looking stance towards learning spaces and alternative spaces as conceptualize them as autonomous spaces constitutive of power and potentiality to escape and even challenge neoliberal versions of life (Kraftl 2013; Thiem 2009). Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton in their work on what they call "autonomous geographies" discuss the general understanding of autonomous spaces as spaces that give broader possibilities outside the state and capitalist modes of being (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). While Pickerill and Chatterton do not specifically focus on learning spaces, their work resonates with that of Peter Kraftl and Claudia Thiem and with this study on alternative learning space in Cairo in highlighting alternative everyday life practices (Kraftl 2013; Thiem 2009; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). This study also reconceptualized everyday life as real life in an extension to the expression used by the interlocutors during the interviews. Real life in this sense is the daily practices and manifestations found in the material space, learning approaches, human interactions, movements and meanings that relate alternative learning spaces to life from the perspectives of the interlocutors. These practices and manifestations range from using natural materials and pertaining to a simplistic environment (chapter III) to exposing and engaging the learners in real life situations and places (chapter IV). Building on these practices and manifestations of real life I argue throughout the chapters that alternative learning spaces are thus productive of alternative visions of real life that extends beyond their physical and educational space. Alternative versions of real life that do not conform to capitalist and neoliberal visions of life, they are capable of constructing alternative meanings and ways of learning and life. From these alternative meanings and ways of life in chapter IV I engage with alternative communities as reframed social relations. I engage there with Michel Maffesoli's conception of "neo tribalism" to understand how such alternative communities are formed (Maffesoli 2016). But more than that, what it takes to reconstruct and endure such social relations where I put my argument forward that the Islamic actualization of Alternative Education is the great force behind the reconstruction and endurance of these alternative communities (Bennabi 2002).

The literature on space in education is also greatly directed towards the physical space on one hand and mainstream traditional schools on the other. “The space remains seriously under-theorized and under-researched” (Boys 2011, 64), but even more in the context of alternative education. Other studies on learning spaces and alternative learning spaces that engage with the spatial and social processes are insightful in their diverse approaches, especially multi-sited studies that work on multiple learning spaces and sites as I added the most significant and relevant above (Kraftl 2013; Ferguson and Seddon 2007; Hope and Montgomery 2006). Studies on learning spaces and alternative learning spaces might both be “over-structured and diagrammatically vague” (Boys 2011, 64). This vagueness, sometimes ambiguity, messiness and complexity found in these studies that focus on space affirm my assumption, as well as that of researchers working on learning spaces, that this research area is yet to be explored.

To conclude, through the previous theorization and conceptualization of space and learning spaces, I attempted to do two things. First to outline the relationship of space and learning in alternative learning spaces in Cairo. And second, to conceptualize alternative learning spaces in Cairo beyond the framework of alternative education, as spaces that are productive of alternative visions of *real life*. My conceptual framework is based on social construction theories. I look at space in alternative learning spaces in Cairo as not confined in the material space, but space is also a social construct, where the practicing through space is productive of meaning. Thus, this study analyzes social aspects mainly interpersonal interactions, social relations in the community, and collective emotions as well as material aspects, daily practices and routines and bodily movements. On the other hand, I conceptualize the relationship of the material space to the learning activities as a partial relationship where space and learning cannot be boxed as direct reflections of each other. The ordering and practicing of the material space can thus produce specific learning experiences and affective atmospheres. Within the same framework of the relationship space to learning, but beyond alternative learning spaces, I engage with public spaces. I conceptualize public spaces in Cairo as embodied spaces that combine human movement and agency with space and culture (Low 2017) in the framework of its relation to field trips as the learning approaches designed to expose and engage learners to the city. Lastly is the *nonrepresentationalist* style of thinking of space and learning, as I am looking at the

ordinary and the everyday taking place in these spaces to withhold important meanings to the space-making experiences in alternative learning spaces in Cairo. In doing so I am also conceptualizing real life as the everyday practices and manifestations that are distinctive to these spaces, that could be connected and disconnected to the pertaining ways of life in Cairo.

2.1.2. Reapproaching Space: Research Questions

There are very few sociological studies on alternative education that engage with space, along with a few produced by human geographers working on 'children's geographies', alternative learning spaces indeed have novel, yet untouched, dimensions. This study thus re-approaches alternative education by putting to the fore the usually neglected dimensions of space.

The main research question is how are space-making processes experienced in relation to alternative learning spaces in Cairo? Based on my conceptual framework of space, I then use space-making as a lens through which I examine alternative learning spaces in Cairo. I focus on the social and spatial experiences as perceived and lived by parents and the staff whether teachers/facilitators or managers in my two case studies. In order to foreground the question of space in a manner that enriches the discussion about alternative learning spaces, as I mentioned earlier I first move further away from the simplistic definition of space, and look into the relationship of space to learning as to have a dynamic, multilayered and non-representational nature. Space-making subsequently is an ongoing process thereby requiring more than mere documentation of one aspect or one point in time, nor is a historical or comparative account of the space adequate. To attempt an answer to my research question I look into space in-depth at the time frame of this study, to map the social and spatial patterns and themes. I also look into learning as a socio-spatial practice and analyze learning activities, routines, relationships, emotions and movements as experienced through space.

While these conceptions of space discussed earlier invites "intangibility" (Quinn 2003, 450), we should not neglect the tangible physical reality found within space. As the study recognizes the multilayered nature of these alternative learning spaces, it also recognizes and engages with both the tangible and intangible aspects of these layers of

space as inseparable. I engage with the material space by itself as well as the material aspect of the socio-spatial practices.

This study also aims to locate the alternative about these spaces. The sub-question for this research is What is 'alternative' about alternative learning spaces in Cairo?
Adapting on Kraftl's question of the alternative (2013), I aim to focus on the specificities of these two spaces, firstly as pioneers in their geography and secondly with their practiced alternative pedagogies. However, the question is not exclusive to the educational alternative, I focus even more on how these alternative learning spaces relate to real life. In the Beyond the Space chapter, I will be looking at the alternative version of real life from this perspective, how learning takes place spatially and collectively beyond the primary material and educational space, and how this could answer the question of the alternative.

2.2. The Space Matters (I)

Through this section I aim to introduce the two spaces included in this study, and in doing so I also conceptualize and contextualize homeschooling as an educational alternative and the homeschooling community that is inevitably intertwined with these alternative learning spaces as I will clarify. Through the analysis of the interviews, I look into the main reasons that constitute a need for space from the point of view of families engaged in these spaces. I will accordingly engage with the space as an extension of home. The Space Matters (I) would be also a preface to The Space Matters (II) where I discuss and engage with the reality that these spaces also move out to other physical and virtual spaces. Where the discussion of the need for space is furthered to reconstruct a more comprehensive meaning of learning spaces from the understanding and practice of the notion of *good life*.

2.2.1. Background to the Case Studies

In this study I focus on two alternative learning spaces in Cairo, the first I refer to as *alternative school* and the second as *free learning space*. In the framework of alternative education, the term *school* may raise confusion. Many educational alternatives do not use "school" to refer to themselves, this may come from the feeling

that *school* usually implies the traditional type of school, one divided into traditional types of classrooms packed with desks all facing the teacher (Martin 2002, 3). According to Robin Ann Martin, to resolve such confusion one could deal with *school* as a place where people gather to intentionally learn, regardless what, how or why they learn (Martin 2002, 3). The alternative school included in this study explicitly describes themselves as a school and I extend their usage of the word, while the usage of alternative resonates here with their alternative curricula, pedagogies, learning and spatial practices in general, as will be discussed throughout the subsequent chapters. On the other hand, the free learning space refuses to be described or categorized as a school or nursery, they use *space* and *free space* to refer to themselves.

> We always have to tell people we are not a kindergarten, because people have this idea of wanting to always place you in a category, people like categorizing. The human mind tends to categorizations, so what are you? You are either a kindergarten or a school. No, we are neither, we are something in between. We are something new. (Hasan, father of four children, founder, free learning space)
>
> I honestly refuse both labels, I refuse the label of a kindergarten and I refuse the label of a school. (Mariam, mother of four children, and founder, free learning space)

Mariam and Hasan, a married couple, and parents to their four boys and founder and co-founder of the free learning space, were clear to refrain from the categorization usually forced on them by outsiders. I therefore intentionally use *alternative school* and *free learning space* first to best describe the type of learning spaces that these alternative learning spaces are, as well emphasize the type of alternative education modes these spaces represent. This is by no means an act of categorizing the two spaces to fit into a concrete category. Many other alternative learning spaces in other geographies, including the alternative school and free learning spaces in Cairo as will be clear throughout the study, tend towards less rigidity, some of these spaces may combine more than one alternative educational philosophy along with their own values and visions. Still, somewhat similar *alternative schools* and *free learning spaces* can be found in Cairo, with which my case studies may or may not share pedagogical and spatial similarities, thus using these names are also useful for the purpose of future

research made on similar alternative learning spaces. I will also be using pseudonyms to preserve the privacy of these spaces which will be the case as well with my interlocutors and any names of people or places mentioned in this study, unless they are renown public spaces like in chapter IV.

When dealing with alternative education we usually find homeschooling as a recurring concept. Homeschooling can be seen as one type of the many approaches and modes of alternative education, and the most famous. Sometimes it is confusing that homeschooling could be understood as merely adopting traditional school curriculums, only transferred to the home setting (Tyson 2019). We have two main aspects to tackle to further understand homeschooling and in turn position homeschooling in Egypt. The first is the setting assumed to contain the homeschooling activities and the second is the curriculum followed. Peter Kraftl starts by using this simplistic definition for homeschooling as "educating one's children at home" but then to argue that "home" is just "one (often less significant) context" (Kraftl 2012, 3) in which learning takes place and the complexity would lie in the other rich and diverse spatial dimensions of homeschooling. As an umbrella term, beyond the argument of space, homeschooling is agreed to be education that extends beyond mainstream schooling and is usually led by the parents and can include other adults in the role of educators whether relatives or private tutors. Also homeschooling could be rather flexible to adopt one or more educational philosophies like Montessori, Waldorf or others (Martin 2002; Tyson 2019). Adding to this, in the Egyptian context homeschooling could follow a formal accredited curriculum (including the Egyptian state curriculum) or other combinations of non-accredited curricula (AbdelQawi and Imam 2021).

While the alternative school and the free learning space in Cairo are different alternative education modes than homeschooling, looking at homeschooling in Egypt contributes furthers our understanding of alternative learning spaces in Cairo. In the premises of this study and even beyond the field work, most of the families I encountered, who are enrolled in alternative learning spaces in Cairo are currently or have been previously identifying themselves as homeschooling families. This includes families who sent their children to traditional schools then pulled them out, and families who were homeschooling from the very beginning. As schooling is

compulsory in Egypt (AbdelQawi and Imam 2021), homeschooling became the first natural solution for families seeking alternative education, as it was the only easily accessible and realistically applicable alternative considering it is mainly a familial endeavor.

Ali, who is a father of two children in the alternative school, explains how the options available for them as a family in Cairo, at the time when they were looking for alternative education for their children, was limited. While using the word "risky" to describe deciding between alternatives that are somewhat new or "strange", his uncertainty was not related to sending his children to mainstream traditional schools or not, that for him was settled. Out of the eight families I interviewed, from which three were interviewed as teachers, managers of founders, and happen to have their children enrolled in the alternative learning space, a total of five were homeschooling families at some point, but later chose to move to alternative learning spaces. Thus, most of the families engaged in the free learning space and the alternative school are families who were at some point engaged in homeschooling. This is important to note because it paves the way to the discussion in the next section. So while I explained in the Introduction that families choosing alternative education over mainstream traditional education can be categorized into "ideologues", and "pedagogues" (Tyson 2019), I argue here that there is also a spatial aspect contributing to families in Cairo specifically choosing alternative learning spaces as modes of alternative education over homeschooling. Even though families were already practicing alternative education as homeschooling families, I argue that they chose being involved in alternative learning spaces over strictly homeschooling because of a spatial need they had. I describe this as a need for space that is an extension of home.

2.2.2. The Space as an Extension of Home

While the previous section The Space in Alternative Education aims to foreground space in the study of alternative learning spaces, this section gives a practical perspective on why space matters as informed by the perceptions of the users of the space and their families. I specifically focus on that of families in the free learning space. Throughout the interviews with the parents, there was a recurring discussion about their need for a space beyond and as an extension of home. Space was associated

in their speech to physical and social space as will be elaborated next. What is expressed by parents as a need for space consequently highlights some key spatial functions found beyond the home, that contribute to the space-making question. What is meant here by spatial functions is not for the sake of listing, rather locating these functions will pave the way for "partial maps" (Boys 2011, 61) through the socio-spatial practices to emphasize what is most valued and prioritized in these alternative learning spaces.

As I clarified, many families who have their children enrolled in the alternative learning spaces in my study were or still are homeschooling families. While it is generally understood that homeschooling is a family endeavor, nevertheless the families I interviewed expressed their need that children's learning and interactions be extended to other spaces with other children and adults away and beyond the home setting. I intentionally focus here on the free learning space. The free learning space is part-time, to a homeschooling community which in a way means that the families are supposedly less dependent on the space than that of the alternative school. Focusing here on the free learning space gives a clearer and more solid perspective on the essence of this *need* for alternative learning spaces.

To start with the social aspects, Sara who is a mother of two children in the free learning space and a homeschooling mother, specifies the importance of social interaction. Sara sees the "many experiences" gained from being "outside home" cannot be compensated at home no matter how much you enrich the process with diversity in subjects or books. One aspect of these "many experiences" that she describes includes the social aspect and the ability of the children to interact and engage with others outside the premises of their homes. Mariam, who is the founder of the free learning space and a mother of four children further situates the social aspect that Sara discussed, she explains that in the context of homeschooling, even with maintaining frequent outings with other children, her child found difficulty making friends. Irregularity and continuous shift in places and people was immanent to homeschooling as experienced by Mariam and her family. This continuous change not only made it difficult to maintain friendships but also did not give a chance for "deep learning experiences". She gives an example of the children having to rediscover the sand pit at every new place they visit, while if they would regularly play at one sand

pit, naturally through playing in this now familiar place they will be able to be creative. This combined need for "time", stability and a sense of a growing familiarity with the human and non-human agents of the space is clear in almost all the interviews.

> I believe that a great part of learning is in a collective form. The idea is that we are neither in a place where we are too many, that we are unnoticed and lost within this group like what happens in schools, nor that we are at home so we are centered around ourselves and are unable to interact and have no social relations and so on. However, when it is a reasonable number that is considerate of the nature of the child and gives him the space he needs to choose and he could be directed in a mindful way and at the same time the child is learning within a group. In my opinion this is by far more effective and realistic because he will eventually have to walk through life along with others and not solo. So no matter what it is he takes at home, whether academic or values, it is not practiced and only acquired as theory. Even the mere experience of being with other people and children allow him to practice, to discover what he believes in and what he does not. (Arwa, Mother of two children, free learning space)

Arwa's discussion is particularly productive in giving a wider overview of the issue. According to her, learning as a collective activity is significant not only for its social aspect, but in that it gives children a chance to put to practice what they acquired on a theoretical level through their interaction with other users of the space. Arwa draws a relation between learning as a collective activity and the space as ground for the children to experiment and practice in preparation for their "life". This "practice" as part of learning is central in alternative education philosophies as discussed in the Introduction, while its actualization in alternative learning spaces in Cairo is discussed in the next two chapters. Learning and doing cannot be divorced from one another and for Arwa this needed a space, and could be fulfilled through the collective that the free learning space offered. The collective that Arwa refers to is also achieved through the wider community, what I call the alternative community, of these spaces and not only of a collective of young learners as will be discussed in depth in the last section of chapter IV: Beyond the Space.

The second series of discussions related to the need for space as perceived by the parents was related to the time and physical distance spent away from their children. Hasan who is the co-founder of the free learning space, explains this from both perspectives as parent and co-founder.

> As a homeschooling father, I feel the need to be distanced from the child for a short while. No matter how educated and patient the parent is, I will reach a point where I am constantly in pressure and need to have a break. The idea of having children go to courses is a headache for the parents still, the details of having to get him to the course and then going back to take after a short while and so on. No, I wanted to provide a place that the parents can leave their children for up to six hours and rest. Even if no one speaks of this issue or it went unnoticed, it is very important. (Hasan, father of four children, and co-founder, free learning space)

The need for time away from the children as discussed here has two perspectives. The first being the exhaustion of full time homeschooling for the parent, and second is having a suitable alternative to "take over", as another parent described, even if for "six hours every few days".

On the other hand, as formulated by Arwa, mother of two children, the need for the child "being away" from the parents is also important for the child himself. According to her the child needs to regularly be in a place without his mother and her direct guidance. Even if the mother is only there to watch without any interference, the child still needs to be "away from her". She points out two benefits to this. The first is that this distance away allows the child to act in his personality, thus different aspects of excellence and/or weakness in the child would show, which then gives space for better directing and guidance. The second point is it gives him the ease and familiarity needed to engage and connect with more depth.

> Our free learning space complements the homeschooling process. Homeschooling is great but with disadvantages, those that Hasan just explained, so we will avoid these points so that they have a successful homeschooling experience. So I am not taking over the homeschooling

> process, because you find some institutes that say we will homeschool your child (laughs), this is nonsense. As I was saying we intend (pauses) or this is an attempt (the free learning space) to help homeschooling actually succeed. (Mariam, mother of 4 children, and founder, the free learning space)

In the case of the free learning space, it was clear from Mariam, the founder, and the parents I interviewed that the space is mainly complementary to their homeschooling endeavor. The qualities of the free learning space as described by parents were mainly related to analogies of home and family. One parent described feeling safe that her children were in a space that is very much like their home especially in its Islamic values. More than one parent was describing that having their children building strong relationships with the facilitators was important to them. It was described more than once how this relationship was a parental one in its emotions and depth. Thus in different ways the need of space was put as a need for an extension of home, extension of not only learning experiences as Mariam described, but the values and affects of home.

> I look at this space (free learning space) as a lived space, and in my opinion children grow up in homes and their living experience in their homes is what nurtures traits and behaviors in them. So as I consider this space (free learning space) as a lived space, small and familial, and the children consider them as their homes, my children for example do consider it as an extension to their homes, and I would like this extension to be like my home honestly. (Sara, mother of two children, free learning space)

Sara expresses here this very idea, that she opts that the space as a "lived space" is an "extension" that is "like" her home. She also later talks about how the facilitators become role models to the students, embodying the Islamic values and practices through the act of prayer, clothing conservative attire, and the "character" each of them has. I am discussing the space as an extension of home in the sense that it conveys and nurtures the Islamic values, familial emotions, and the learning experiences practiced at home. These aspects along with other aspects related to the space as an extension of home will be again revisited in the next two chapters.

Throughout this section I presented how alternative learning spaces are perceived by the parents as a stable, collective, and distanced learning experience for their children. The notion of exposure to and engaging with "life" and learning through "practice" was also briefly mentioned and will be elaborated more in the next chapters as the alternative vision of real life. One one hand the free learning space is intended as an extension of home by their founders, to complement the learning experiences of the homeschooling families. On the other hand, free learning space is also socially constructed as so, I have discussed that the need of space, as expressed by parents, is not a mere need of any space, but a needed extension of home, its values and affects.

2.3. Conclusion

The key aim of this chapter was moving towards the space both conceptually and empirically. Space in learning spaces was for long interpreted by geographers and social scientists as a transparent vessel only as meaningful as the learning activities it contained until a shift repositioned and reconceptualized space. Without seeking any rigid definitions of space and building on the limited literature on spatialities of alternative education, I first look at the relation of space to learning. In doing so I conceptualize this relation to be a partial relation, intertwined with social reality and which is non-representational. Space-making as an ongoing process accordingly informs the socio-spatial analysis in this study. The alternative school and the free learning spaces are both considered pioneer alternative learning spaces in Cairo. Since homeschooling was the only feasible educational alternative in Egypt, this homeschooling community and their experiences help map the key functions of these alternative learning spaces, and accentuates their need for space. I thus highlight how space matters for its community in offering a stable, collective and distanced extension of home.

CHAPTER III

WITHIN THE SPACE

I look at space based on the understanding of space as a social construct. The social relations and interactions, emotions and daily practices of the humans of these alternative learning spaces, all make the space and give it meaning (Setha Low 1996). In the first part of this chapter I purposefully look into and trace back the daily ordinary practices within the material space through interviewees' discursive descriptions. Through this I will analyze the order of the material space and how it relates to mess. I then move to the educational relationship of teacher and student and how it is reconfigured in these alternative learning spaces. The Islamic understanding of the teacher, the student and their educational relationship is engaged to illuminate how along with the model of the Mu'allim-Murabbi, it can contribute to the alternative this research is also questioning. The space-making of the alternative learning space, as the main quest of this research and chapter, is approached and understood as an ongoing process. Thus, I will argue how these social, spatial and temporal interactions and affects produce recursive construction and reconstruction of the space.

3.1. An Order that Accommodates for Mess; Negotiating Material Space, Physical Space and Time

In this section I analyze routines, heavily implicating on spatial and temporal aspects of everyday practices as inspired from Jos Boys approach. These specific routines build up the "educational repertoire" (Boys 2011) of each alternative learning space in this study. Through these routines and everyday practices, a specific 'ordinary' manifests itself. My intention is neither mere documentation of these routines nor dealing with them as "functional patterns of space" (Boys 2011). I look at the routines as a surface to deeper "underlying mechanisms" (Boys 2011) that make up the space. I also recognize these spatial and temporal management mechanisms; "impact upon

the construction of meaning within education and impact directly upon the dynamic of learning" (Montgomery 2008).

In order to analyze these underlying mechanisms, I was keen throughout the interviews to acquire in detail what was perceived by the interviewees as an *ordinary* part of the space and their day. Exploring through these habitually *ordinary* parts is challenging in that people tend to take them for granted, so they might not even mention them or redirect the conversation to other directions. Notably when I asked more about the material space during the interviews I received comments that described the place as "simple" or "not much", in a way that might seem at the first instant as dismissal to the importance of the material setting. However, this usage of words mainly mirror the impressions of outsider eyes looking at the place, so words like "simple", "small", "not much" come as a preface by the interviewees to their later discursive description of the material space. Nevertheless there is still in fact a shared understanding between parents and staff that this place is by design and intention "simple". With this shared understanding it was also generally agreed, specifically in the alternative school, that the place still needed further developments. On one hand one to two parents were talking about how future developments were rather dependent on the availability of better resources and the absence of other bureaucratic constraints. On the other hand, staff were keen in the interviews to unravel the pedagogical reasons behind the material reality of the space and explain how any future development will be directed towards increasing the richness of the environment without compromising this simplicity, as I will present through their quotations in this section. Having this said and aligned with my methodology as mentioned in Chapter II Towards the Space, I do not look at the material reality of the space to compare it to previous or hoped-for future versions of the space, I rather look in depth at the present moment to analyze the underlying mechanisms that construct space in an ongoing process.

In order to achieve this, along with the temporal aspect, I will be focusing on two aspects of the material reality of the space. Borrowing from Barnett's taxonomy of learning spaces, I will be dealing in this section with the "material space" and "physical space" (Barnett 2011, 168). While both are part of the geography of the space, both point out different aspects of the learning space. That is to say material space refers to materiality and technologies involved in one's learning experience, as well as material

structures that could include open or enclosed places whether indoors or outdoors like rooms, halls, or even a tree house, tent, and sensory corners as from my case studies. On the other hand, the learner's physical space would give us insight on his learning locations and his physical proximity to, and visibility of, other learners and teachers. In Barnett's understanding, the educationalist then becomes the designer when it comes to physical space while both the educationalist, as the client, and the architect become the designers of the material space (Barnett 2011). Both material and physical space are greatly intertwined, so the discussions in this section might deal with both aspects at the same time. I recognize this material and physical division as it helps further illuminate diverse aspects of the space without being strictly separate. I also argue how simultaneously "specific learning atmospheres" are created. As mentioned in Chapter II Towards the Space, I conceptualize affect and collective emotions to have cumulative nature, that affect circulate between rather than within bodies and objects (Ahmed 2004). I argue throughout this section that the underlying order of the space produces affects and atmospheres, altogether the underlying order along with affects, welcome and accommodate for mess.

3.1.1. Overview of the Material Space: The Visible and Invisible Qualities

First as an overview of the material space, throughout the interviews educators from both spaces acknowledged the essentiality that the space first covers the basic needs for learners, for example comfortability of the seatings, the ordering of the furniture to allow easy movement and that there are no distractions to nurture better focus during the activities, this is what I call the invisible quality of the material space. Invisibility resonates here with the fact that the presence of these material aspects in a way to fulfill certain criteria might neither be noticeable nor are they directly deployed in the learning process, but their absence on the other hand would "jeopardize" the learning experience as one of the facilitators in the free learning space explain.

The implication of comfortability, easy movement and no distractions is relative to each space and its alternative perception of learning and childhood. For instance comfortability does not depend on having chairs and tables or soft furniture, in fact most alternative education models dispense the traditional classroom arrangement with the teacher desk upfront opposing the students (Sliwka 2008, 100). The seatings are

arranged in a way to center the learner and encourage individual and shared learning, in the alternative school and free learning space the classrooms have either U-shaped seatings, or rounded tables with chairs or cushions around them. In the alternative school most of the activities and slots are taken outside the classroom so sitting with the teacher on the sand in the sand pit or on the floor in the serenity room for example, are common arrangements during the day. Comfortability in this sense is the manner in which the child is not confined to a desk or chair and has more space and various positions in which to feel comfortable while learning. Another part of the invisible qualities is related to the totality of the material space and how it is seen related to certain needs of learners that are not strictly educational but aid in successful learning. Some of these needs are discussed by Mariam below:

> If we were to look at the final result, and look at the hoped-for outcome of these children growing into righteous humans with good virtue and its relation with physical place? You know they say, what are human beings but a number of needs piled up together (laughs). So If we were to say these very needs were met at a young age, whether it is a need to belong, a need for kindness, a need for firmness, a need to learn so and so, in this or that specific time, you follow? So a need to learn, a need to explore, all these needs when met in the right way and time, this human being grows up without issues. We hear alot about the idea of "your inner child" and that one looks back into what his or her issues as a child to be able to live your life to the full. So that's the idea, imagine the child's needs put to a side under the allegation that there are some educational targets needed to be accomplished, well this child will not grow up to be this balanced human being we aim for at all. So yes, the idea that fulfilling these needs including the need to learn, to explore, has a direct effect and corresponds to mental wellbeing. On the other hand, having a righteous human with good virtue, good for himself as well for others and being responsible are all more related to the content. (Mariam, founder, free learning space)

When asked about the material space Mariam was talking about wanting the place to nurture "righteous humans with good virtue". According to Mariam, the role of material space in fulfilling the need to learn, to explore and to belong, becomes the

foundation for a successful learning experience. While Mariam does not specifically specify certain material qualities, she subliminally is talking about learners' total experience through the material space that would nurture and satisfy those needs. So, while on the one hand the "content" of learning is more related to "the hoped-for outcome" manifested in the learner becoming a responsible righteous human with good virtue for himself as well for others, on the other hand fulfilling the needs to learn, explore and belong are essential for nurturing mentally healthy learners, as Mariam further explained. Her quote is also very important in how it conveys the complexity of the space, where pedagogies are intertwined with materiality and affect, which will be further discussed in this section. In this sense I argue that these invisible qualities manifested in satisfying a number of needs, while seen to "correspond to mental wellbeing" are not directly part of the day-to-day learning process. Thus the invisible qualities, while hard to identify or relate to the direct learning process, are however part of the underlying order of the space.

> The principle of Reggio Emilia, that the environment is the third teacher, was one of our main aims when designing the place, that the place would teach the children and respect their needs. Learning can happen anytime and anywhere, and every child's comprehension of the learning input and meanings is different. And that's what I had in mind while designing the place, that if I could create a place where every corner teaches the child something or aids him in learning something, that would be it. (Mariam, founder, free learning space)

As mentioned in different occasions in the past two chapters that these alternative learning spaces under study do not strictly follow one renowned alternative philosophy like that of Maria Montessori's or Reggio Emilia's nor are they considered Steiner schools with a well-structured curriculum, still they would combine between some of these pedagogies and ideas along with their vision and Islamic education. The agency of the material space where every corner teaches something to the child, described by Mariam as "the third teacher" as adopted from Reggio Emilia, is what I call the visible quality of the material space. Visibility resonates here with the fact that children are

directly interacting with these qualities, whether it is the embodied culture in *tabliya*[4], bedouin rugs, and other furniture and tools in the free learning space, or in the exposure of a rich diverse environment through "sensory corners" in the alternative school. The visible qualities are by design and intention directly part of the learning experience. Nevertheless the previously mentioned invisible qualities are also intentionally interweaved with the visible qualities of the material space as explained next.

> It was Mariam's idea and I admired it from the get go, and that she was determined about this. The idea is to overcome this ashamement of our culture, whether Arabic or Egyptian. So we would sit around the tabliya (low wooden rounded tables) like we used to do in our countrysides and even not long ago in the family house we would sit around the tabliya there were no tables. So while designing the place it was essential that we go back to our roots whether Arabic or Egyptian, against the wave of westernization. Even the idea of having posters of Mickey Mouse or Disney characters were completely out of question. (Hasan. co-founder, free learning space)

> As Hasan was saying, it is related to the idea that I am proud of the Egyptian and Arabic culture and countryside life particularly, it's also because I lived there for a while. I see how by living in the countryside you gain many skills, skills that children now are missing, so we are trying to, rather than borrowing from other intruder cultures, mimic my own. For example, the tabliya (low wooden rounded tables), most of the furniture we use is wooden, people might think we are going for the cheap option, on the contrary wood is more expensive than plastic, and its would be easier to have everything plastic, toys, tables and chairs. However, my choice of wood is firstly to mimic nature, secondly, it is stimulative for the senses for children, thirdly, the idea that the tabliya (low wooden rounded tables) is related to the Egyptian culture, and another point that is enables easier movement for the children in the place. Imagine a small space like ours, pilled with chairs and tables, the movement would be very challenging for the children, so the tabliya is perfect. Also the cushion (as seatings) around the tabliya, they sit, get up, we put the cushion in

[4] İt is a low, wooden and rounded table usually where the family sit down for shared meals, and was used to be a regular piece of furniture found in Egyptian households.

> one pile and that's it. Even without cushions if there was carpet it would be sufficient. So that is as far as furnishing the place, as for the toys we have outside, when I wanted to choose the utensils for the mud kitchen, I thought about the material that would be most durable for the kids to play with, and it was aluminum, and it was perfect and also related to our Arabic culture. So I brought pots, spoons, aluminum tisht (tub/container), and even those did not survive the children (laughs). (Mariam, founder, free learning space)

Mariam and Hasan, founder and co-founder to the free learning space explain how having no posters of Mickey Mouse or Disney characters, having cushions around the tabliya as a seating area, and as well using aluminum kitchen utensils in the sand pit, are all part of the visible qualities to serve in rooting the learners in their Arabic-Egyptian culture. Still these also serve the criteria of the invisible qualities, of no distraction, the comfort and easy movement as they explain. Sitting on the carpet or cushions around the tabliya becomes part of the daily and ordinary, children become accustomed to seeing and using aluminum utensils in their pretend-play in the mud kitchen like in Fig. 1. While this material culture, that is the tabliya, bedouin rugs, or aluminum utensils might or might not still be part of the family house as Hasan explains, having this material culture become part of the daily and ordinary in the alternative learning spaces produce affects of familiarity and intimacy within the community of the space. These affects extend beyond the objects themselves or the individual usage of these objects and relates to the collective (Ahmed 2004), they accumulate over time to create an "affective atmosphere" (Setha Low 2017, 182) . In the previous chapter Towards the Space, I argued that the space is socially constructed as an extension of home. That the free learning space as intended to be complementary to the homeschooling family endeavor and as perceived as a lived space, becomes an extension to the learning process, values and affects of home. Thus we could say that having the material culture incorporated as part of the daily and ordinary in alternative learning spaces becomes effective in a familial atmosphere, contributing again to the alternative learning spaces as an extension of home.

While the previous description and quotes are mainly from the free learning space, the alternative school is not very different. Both settings are similar in their intentionality to preserve a simplistic modest look to the place as Amena describes in the next quote:

> It is somehow very simplistic and basic, so the descriptions might give the impression that the place is huge and great, but in reality we are lenient towards simplicity and that the children interact with nature and life as it is without too many complications, furniture or color. The visuals are important in the place and the visually calming colors are dominating as much as possible, beige, white, gray and wooden, and during the free-time the children play a lot with stones, collecting them, tree leaves and so on, creating things with them. (Amal, manager, alternative school)

It is worth noting how on different accounts interviewees relate the space, in this context the material space, with "life as it is", as Amal describes, and with real life as will be discussed in the next chapter Beyond the Space. While the material space in

Illustration 3.1. Young Learners Playing with Aluminum Utensils in the Free Learning Space

the free learning space was clearer to nurture an affective atmosphere towards space as an extension of home, the material space in the alternative school on the other hand is constructed and reconstructed to invite an alternative vision of real life. I argue here that through the material space the alternative learning spaces redefine "life as it is" to construct an alternative vision of real life, which in this context is relating to simplicity and being closer to nature. In the context of the material space this can be manifested through, not limited by, the availability of selected materials and objects and the lack of others therein. Amal here talks about the lack of furniture in exchange for moving and interacting freely with the natural elements in the space, creating a calm ambient

with color selection, these are the few examples mentioned here by Amal. What is important to conclude here is that through the visible and invisible qualities discussed, the material space is carefully ordered to convey the simplicity that was repeatedly emphasized as part of their alternative vision of real life. Interactions, movement, circulation of human and nonhuman agents, exposure to diverse environments, practice, *taking time*, observing *at a distance* and more, are examples of the actions that behold mess, which are the actions that are accommodated by the material space of these alternative learning spaces as will be discussed through this section. This order created to accommodate for mess is also seen across other learning spaces as means for nurturing "non-linear, creative forms of learning" (Kraftl 2013, 19).

3.1.2. Learner Relation to Material Space in Light of Notion of 'Ni'ma': Growing a Sense of Responsibility and Belonging

In line with many alternative educational philosophies both alternative learning spaces provide natural materials, in their primary state, like water, sand, clay, paper and wood, and provide a spectrum of objects and tools that can be incorporated together to build something larger, rather than toys or objects that fulfill a function by themselves. In the alternative school, Aya, who is one of the teachers, explained how they would put random items in the sand pit or the playground, like different pieces of wood, for the children to create things out of them. Adding to this, interviewees from the free learning space also stressed the intentioned scarcity in the materials and objects provided to children. One mother specifically described how this scarcity directly affected the child's relationship to, as well as perception of, material objects in general.

> [T]he place stresses that the child should treat objects with respect, not because it is expensive or just because we must preserve it, rather that we deal with objects as ni'ma (blessings). Therefore, we tune our behaviors not to have israf (improvidence) nor do we waste materials, we rather think about how to recycle, and have rahma (mercy) towards it even if it is a thing. So this is one of the things that matter to me in the place, and that could be provided in a simple place with simple inexpensive tools that are naturally abundant. I do not want the child to have 500 pens to deal with. If so he will have no appreciation

> towards the things, I need him to have limited materials for him to be able to think about the best ways he can utilize them and recycle them and even how to acquire them. Excessive abundance is a problem in my opinion, it gives many indirect messages to the child, but then we blame the child and take him accountable for this. This is what I had in mind about the place. (Arwa, mother of two children, free learning space)

With the simplicity of the material and tools on one hand and its scarcity on the other, they are nevertheless fairly accessible to the children to use individually and collectively with the condition that they are dealt with as 'ni'ma'[5] and without "israf"[6] as Arwa described. This comes subsequent to the kind of agency recognized for students in these spaces. The human agency from the perspective of Islamic education and alternative education will be further discussed in the second section in this chapter. Children on a daily basis and on many registries are engaged as active subjects. I argue here that this intentioned scarcity and accessibility of the materials and objects used, whether it is specific tools and materials for the activities or random pieces of wood or tires put for creative play, help them grow affects of responsibility towards the materials and the space. Thus, and in the words of Arwa and in continuation of her previous quote, and also in the words of Amr:

> I can say that this is my assumption of the place, the more the place is in this way it will allow for.. Let me choose my words here.. The more it will allow for an empathetic understanding between the child and the teacher, to come up with agreements upon which to engage with the material space. There will not be orders or rules from one side forcing a quiet yes from the other, in an attempt to escape being labeled naughty or wanting to be patted on the back, no. The spaces with this kind of spirit allows for better chances of the teacher engaging the child in the process, to think about the best possible way to deal with the things, preserve them, and what would be the consequences for intentional harm or damage. The idea is that the child becomes aware that he is genuinely part of the space, not that he is just placed there to only receive, no you (the

[5] The Quranic word for blessing or gift from Allah.
[6] The Quranic word for improvidence.

child) are interacting, speaking up, and expressing yourself. (Arwa, mother of two children, free learning space

His feelings that this is home really matters, their responsibility towards the space and their contributions to it. We make sure from time to time to make something or fix something in the place in front of them. Once before they made a cleaning campaign for the place and took money for that, they feel now that this is their place, everyone has his stuff hanged in some corner, they belong to the place. (Amr, facilitator, free learning space)

First through watching this action of preserving and developing the place by the teachers/facilitators and secondly, followed with the actual contribution and practicing of the students through for example “a cleaning campaign”. This practice, as we can see in Fig. 2, strengthens these affects of responsibility and belonging towards the space. The students as “part of the space” become embodied agents who negotiate with their teachers, based on “an empathetic understanding”, the suitable engagement with the materials and place. We can thus say that along this accessibility to scarce materials, as part of the actualized agency of the students, grows the individual and collective emotions of responsibility and belonging.

Illustration 3.2. A Girl Cleaning the 'Tabliya' in the Free Learning Space

3.1.3. Exposure, Practice and Living through the Space: Notions of *Taking Time* and *at a Distance*

Both alternative learning spaces are divided into an indoor area consisting of a few classrooms and a kitchen and an outdoor open area that is ordered differently in each space. Both alternative learning spaces have a sand pit in the outdoors area, the alternative school has four out of five sensory corners outdoors, the tree house, archery aisle and two separate playgrounds as the main outdoor areas. The free learning space besides the sand pit has a climbing wall, the tent, a seating area for mothers as main outdoor areas. Some areas are designed in a way and occupied with materials and tools to withhold a specific activity, especially the sensory corners in the alternative school. So, the "animal care" corner, carpentry corner, sewing corner, cooking corner and farming corner are physical areas in the space, each equipped with the needed tools and materials. The designated areas are mainly visually and physically open to the rest of the space. While the children have specific slots within the week for the sensory corners, depending on their age group, these corners are also part of other classes and slots.

> So other than this continuous development of the place, we now have the sensory corners, for example the farming corner, the animal care corner, the children are exposed to these corners at many times even beyond their allocated slots. So they would go watch the animals and their movements, this richness in the surrounding environment I think is very beneficial in their knowledge accumulation even if it was not specifically intended in this very exact way. For example my son, irrespective of his farming slot, would daily observe the plants that the other younger section planted from the day the seeds were planted until they grew and were harvested. So he becomes an observer to the process even if he was not directly targeted to experience it first hand, this is the unintentioned knowledge acquired as a benefit of the richness of their environment. (Amena, mother of three children, alternative school)

While the sensory corners took up most of the discussions on the material space in the alternative school and the teachers, parents and managers I interviewed described the sensory corners discursively and vividly, Amena here touches upon an aspect

important in the context of space-making. The different ways in which the students engage with the sensory corners redefines the space and adds again to the potency and richness of the material space itself. One example from Amena's quote is the way her son becomes an "observer" *at a distance* from other children interacting with the animals or planting and harvesting at the farming corner. I use the notion of *at a distance* to refer here to this exposure and observation that she describes as beneficial yet different from first hand practicing because of it being far spatially and/or temporally from the initial act of feeding the animals, planting and harvesting. This kind of exposure is also possible because most, if not all, the place including the sensory corners is easy to reach visually and physically. Moving from exposure *at a distance*, the next discussion will deal with the first hand practice.

> The synergy between the platforms emphasizes the meaning of learning in life, being normal and natural, so when he (the child) starts to learn rules of any science he feels that learning is natural and purposeful, and that he actually needs to learn, that the arabic language is connected with carpentry, for example the tools used in carpentry, this is hammer, that is a saw, and that the meaning of this morphological word or this morphological weight really express a particular meaning in carpentry and so on. For example, arithmetic operation in mathematics, is not taught as it is, I (the child) use it in my project in carpentry, and if I will be learning addition and subtraction I will be learning it because I need to calculate the number of the rabbits after it gave birth this month, and I am calculating these numbers to see what I will need while caring for them, whether tools or the amount of food I used to bring will increase by how much and so on. So he is practicing life and along his way he needs skills and certain knowledge and I thus acquire them. So as I was saying, the richness of the place is a fundamental part of my activities in Mathematics and Arabic language. (Hussein, teacher, alternative school)

Another type of engagement with the sensory corners which is also greatly intertwined with pedagogy, is what Hussein describes as synergy of educational platforms. In the context of the alternative school, platforms refer to the main activities depending on the age group, while Quran, reading, sewing, carpentry, product design, sports and field trips are examples of the platforms for middle-aged learners, on the other hand,

Quran, animal care corner, farming corner, arts, sports and field trips are examples for the platforms for the younger ages. Reflecting on Hussein's description, the material space including the sensory corners becomes part of the student's "practicing life". So they could be taking the mathematics class together with the parkour captain or at the carpentry corner seen in fig. 3 below, to calculate angels or take measurements as Hussein describes.

So as classes are designed to intersect at many points, through the act of practice, also different parts of the material space become interwoven with each other and with the different platforms. This results in many possibilities of intersectionality and on many levels. One part we have the intended richness of the material space to mimic and mirror life, and the other part is related to learning, "learning in life, being normal and natural" as well as "purposeful". While I translated it as purposeful from the originally used Arabic word in his quote, Hussein is discussing here how ideally, when learning anything, the learner is able to know and envision the purpose of acquiring this knowledge and feel the urge that "he actually needs to learn". I argue that this purposefulness of learning as discussed, and through practice, gains tangibility in the material space. the relation of space and learning. Here specifically how learning is experienced in the material space through practice. Students can look at the material space, as immediate means and attainable end to their learning through the act of practicing. The material space in this sense is continuously being reconstructed through practice and is reconstructive of learning and its purposefulness.

Illustration 3.3. The Carpentry Corner, the Alternative School

On the sidelines of sensory corners and the richness of the environment of the alternative school, a mother and father of two children, had the following conversation:

> Another thing the children at school deal with any dead creatures with extreme spontaneity, like they would say see I found the bird dead while holding the bird with its wings in his hands and even buries it and the whole deal. They interact with nature around them with extreme spontaneity, we are the ones who have many and intense psychological barriers. (Salma, mother of two children, alternative school)
>
> That is because of the richness of the environment they are interacting within, and they would interact with everything within the material space of the school. And because the place has plants and animals, it is normal to find all of these things, and he looks at them differently than we do. We could be looking at the plants casually, on the other hand he is exposed to these plants every day and observes it everyday, so he would notice any changes to it. He might find parts of the leaf of this plant eaten, and starters asking why it was eaten, and finds the worm that did so, and might follow this worm until it becomes a butterfly. Where can this be found, what does that look like, and all these changes happening ignite the curiosity of children, so they completely live through the environment. (Ali, father of two children, alternative school)

While Salma and Ali describe and analyze some of the scenes they witnessed at the alternative school, I am interested here in the notion of *taking time*. While in the conversation more than one aspect was mentioned, one aspect of *taking time* matters here when discussing the spatio-temporal order of the space that is the time given to children to "live through the environment". In having enough time daily to interact, observe and reflect on this built ecosystem of plants, animals and insects as discussed in the above conversation. But also time to follow up with the changes that happen over relatively longer periods of time. This allows them to become both attentive to even the smallest changes happening around them in this environment as well accustomed to dealing with nature "with extreme spontaneity". Also this is related to the effect of continuous and unconstrained exposure and interaction, as Salma explains.

3.1.4. Learning Locations and Proximities

The learning locations as well as learners' visibility and proximity from others in the learning space is what Barnett refers to as physical space (2011). As in the previous part, I will be inviting temporality and discuss locations and proximities of learning and how time is given meaning in the physical space. As I am looking within the space, I will be specifically focusing here on the physical space of the younger learners in both alternative learning spaces. In the words of Mariam, the founder of the free learning space, "Learning can happen anytime and anywhere". This spatio-temporal understanding of learning is a shared philosophy of alternative education (Holt 1976; Hern 2008). I analyze the actualization of this understanding through the physical space, drawing mainly on the descriptions of Aya, a teacher in the alternative school, responsible for the younger ages between 3.5 to 6.5 years.

> I genuinely feel that the physical place reflects the learning experience and vice versa, the learning experience reflects how the physical place is experienced and how it looks. So if we would say in the regular schools you find classrooms, that is the physical place, classrooms and playground, and the playground for him (the child) is the break, and the break is not for learning, so we learn in the classroom and we go out to play in the playground in our break which is no time for learning but for having fun or something like that. However, in our school this is not really the case, the classroom is one of the many places where we learn, so the animal care corner is a place to learn, and they actually have one to two classes per week to go to the sand pit, the sand pit itself is a place to learn, the tree house is a place to learn, the class, the library, the serenity room, the exercising area, all are places to learn. When we have a class or a slot, we leave it to the children to choose the place, the last place they would choose is the classroom, they always have fun outdoors and we also do not really push them to take their activities in the classroom, unless the activity itself needs a table or needs an enclosed place, it then that we would choose the classroom. So as I was saying, the learning experience is lived throughout the whole place. (Aya, teacher, alternative school)

Aya's quotation again reflects the spatio-temporal understanding of learning in the alternative school. She stresses how learning is not centralized in classrooms nor is there time allocated to take a "break" from learning as in mainstream traditional schools. Every area, room and corner within the material space becomes a "place to learn", and learning is even part of free-time as she explains in the next quote. Throughout the interviews the teachers discussed how they design and prepare activities within the school curriculum, so while there are certain slots and activities set for each day, there is nevertheless a reasonable amount of flexibility in allowing the children to choose where to take the activity. There is thus high circulation of learners and materials within the space throughout the day. Each group of students would have time slots and activities with a teacher that could take place anywhere within the material space as long as it does not require a quiet place or intense focus, in which case a classroom is more suitable. The enclosed rooms themselves have glass walls and doors, so even while children are having an activity in an enclosed room they have visual accessibility beyond the room. Making and remaking of space into one interwoven fabric through the daily acts of choosing, moving and learning within the entire available place, unbounded and beyond any specific attributions to particular areas, rooms or corners. In this sense "the learning experience is lived throughout the whole place".

On the other hand, learning in the alternative learning space is lived throughout the day, when previously referring to the "break" in mainstream traditional schools as somehow perceived free of learning, Aya was also keen to disconnect this from the case of the alternative school.

The free-time or free-play as used interchangeably between interviewees mean the same thing, a period of time that the learner can move and interact freely within the space. Free-time is considered in both learning spaces critical for the teachers and facilitators to observe how the children play and interact and reflect back through tarbiyah or if the students are engaged with something that can be later prepared into a group activity. As implied by its name, free-time is not as structured or directed like the activities and classes, still the teachers like Aya explains would provide the children with what would enrich their interactions and play, these could be things that could be recycled or tools like a wax gun or any empty container. On the other hand,

in the free learning space it does not suffice to provide them with objects, the facilitators might play with the children with the intention to further direct and enrich their free-time. In any case and in both settings, learning is seen as immanent in any part of the day including the free-time.

These spatio-temporal rhythms of the place are again manifested in a specific recurring phenomena with the young newcomers. In both settings parents and teachers referred to the indulgence of the young children throughout the material space, the younger newcomers especially, in the sand pit and the animal care corner. With no pressure that they join activities, they are free to walk around, where they find some areas in particular that feel welcoming and would spend most of their time there. From what the parents and teachers describe, the sand pit and animal care corner both "help" the newcomers feel included and engaged. They can as well observe from a safe distance the activities, teachers and other children. In this sense the physical space ensures that newcomers can take time, and feel engaged *at a distance*. The notion of *taking time* and experiencing the space *at a distance* as discussed earlier, were understood in the context of the accessibility and exposure of the children to a rich environment. Here *taking time* and *at a distance* are more related to the spatial and temporal aspect of getting acquainted with the space gradually. It is the acknowledgment that newcomers need to experience the space gradually in their own time without being pressured into participating.

> I might go into the class, or have it in the tree house or sit in the sand pit. Sometimes we do take the activity inside the sand pit, If I find the little children too engaged in the sand pit, I wouldn't want to interrupt them to tell them let's leave the sand pit to go have our activity, because then it will turn into a quarrel and I would lose three quarters of our activity time, so I would quietly gather the materials and lets have the activity in the sand pit, and you'll hear yays and we eventually do take the activity in the sand pit. (Aya, teacher, alternative school)

This aspect of the notion of *taking time* here resonates with that discussed by Kraftl as being "somehow more relaxed about when, how, and where learning happens" (Kraftl 2013, 130), it also aligns with the pedagogical aspect of *taking time* notion related to

how teachers allow children through *taking time* to lead the learning process and even disrupt the preset activities in pursuit of something that got their attention to follow their curiosity. Here, Aya explains that continuing in the same place without interruptions gives them more time playing and still would also win more time for the activity in the sense that time should not be wasted in "quarrels". And so, not wanting to "interrupt them" gives more meaning to *taking time*, in that the teacher actualizes the need of the learner in wanting to take his time even if it is playing in the sand pit.

3.2. Mu'allim-Murabbi; Reconfiguring the Teacher-Student Relationship

In continuation of the within the space analysis of alternative learning space, this section focuses on the teacher-student relationship which I call in this chapter the mu'allim-murabbi-student relationship. While the reference to *within* in this "Within the Space" chapter is not only physical, I also move with the teacher-student relationship *beyond*. The first movement *beyond*, will be beyond the physical premises of the alternative learning spaces. While I am starting my analysis with the teacher-student relationship inside the physical space, I move outside the physical premises to give glimpses of how the mu'allim-murabbi-student relationship sometimes operates in different places and aspects of the students' lives. This is an implication of the interrelationality and spread of the quest of tarbiyah that is an essential defining aspect of the mu'allim-murabbi-student relationship. This section thus also discusses how through tarbiyah and the Islamic understanding of education, the teacher-student relationship is reconfigured. The mu'allim-murabbi as the teacher model in the alternative school is the ideal type (in the Weberian sense) that I will analyze. The second move *beyond* is how the interpersonal relationships in the framework of tarbiyah move beyond being only educational relationships to what I call family-like relationships. The third movement *beyond*, will be looking at the mu'allim-murabbi as a reconfigured educational relationship that could potentially be exported to other educational contexts beyond the Islamic and alternative education context. This is only significant for this study in that it contributes to the secondary research's question of the alternative that these spaces contribute. This Islamic actualization of alternative education, seen in this section through the incorporation of tarbiyah as part of the learning endeavor and in the mu'allim-murabbi-student relationship, becomes one of the main alternatives that alternative learning spaces in Cairo contribute.

3.2.1. The Quest of Tarbiyah

Both the alternative school and free learning space adopt an Islamic understanding of education. I will thus be dealing with the two folds of education as defined with the Qur'anic concepts of ta'lim and tarbiyah, and as used in the interviews from both alternative learning spaces. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1994, 123) explains ta'lim to be the act of instructing and transmitting knowledge by a teacher, while tarbiyah is concerned with the whole being, the training of the personality and soul of the student. According to Nasr the teacher from an Islamic perspective "was not only a mu'allim, a 'transmitter of knowledge', but also a murabbi, a 'trainer of souls and personalities'". Ibn Khalun in his theory of education deals with both science education and behavioral education as integral parts and intertwined in the learning process.

> The best method of instruction is to begin with (calculation), because it is concerned with lucid knowledge and systematic proofs. As a rule, it produces an enlightened intellect that is trained along correct lines. It has been said that whoever applies himself to the study of calculation early in his life will as a rule be truthful, because calculation has a sound basis and requires self-discipline. (Soundness and self-discipline) will, thus, become character qualities of such a person. He will get accustomed to truthfulness and adhere to it methodically. (Ibn Khaldun 1958, 632)

There is a shared understanding in both alternative learning spaces, about learning as part of human 'fitra' (human nature), learning as a natural process inevitable for the human being. Rooted in alternative education philosophies, learning is perceived as part of living, that should not be divorced from real or practical life. John Holt depicts learning as doing, in the sense that there is only one process, not two, that is learning through the act of doing (Holt 1976, 13).

> Learning in my opinion is very vast, it is 'fitry' (part of the human fitra; human nature) and natural. What we as teachers and educators have to do is utilize life in a way for these children to be able to learn in the right way. (Amal, manager, alternative school)

Marwa, who is a manager in the alternative school, yet also a mother and previously a teacher in one of the traditional mainstream schools, has insightful input about the meaning of learning and the learning environment. She explains how experiencing

both extremes of a very structured traditional school system and on the other side too much agency to the learner in Montessori, she acknowledges the importance of standing somewhere in between.

> After experimenting I got to acknowledge that Islamic Sharia has it all. We have the 'fitra', the holy book that withholds the laws and rules and so on, the messenger who is the Murrabi. The element of the Murrabi is extremely important, it is not just about agency and structure, the Murabbi might be perceived as part of the environment (learning environment) but the Murabbi as a person is in himself is one of the critical pillars. And you also have the person himself (the learner) his will and what he would choose to do, so it is a mix of everything. When I am thinking of the learning environment, I am thinking of all of these elements together, that I am nurturing a learner with will and agency, at the same time I need a righteous environment, at the same time the Murabbi is very important, I should also have the rules but to what extent of flexibility, because if I transform the rules into a fixed catalog then it becomes too tight and I have canceled the personalization part of it. So in the end it all needs to be balanced out. (Marwa, manager, alternative school)

Marwa interprets here the learning process as needing to withhold human agency on one hand and clear structure on the other, in a somewhat balanced equation. The agency as she explains is the will and choice of the learner in his learning journey. The structure she refers to on the other hand is related to the laws of the Islamic Sharia and the Quran. Along with other elements, the Murabbi as a person, even beyond his profession, his personality and character is of significant importance in this learning equation, and is not merely in the background of the learning environment.

> So you (the teacher) need to continuously think whether you are on the right track for the child and on all the levels, so it is definitely not an easy task. The teachers need to also look at the child beyond the idea that I am responsible for his tarbiyah therein of his behaviors only. It is not exclusive to the behavioral aspect, rather the responsibility of his skills, knowledge, his grammar even. So this is what is meant by the 'Murabbi', that is foreseeing growth in everything, on all the types of tarbiyah. From the efforts (efforts of the alternative school)

> in the directions of tarbiyah types, there are 8 types, cognitive skills, faith and worship, social skills, that is his relationship with the community, older and younger children, all as types of tarbiyah to make it easier not to focus on one side and neglect the others. (Hussein, teacher, alternative school)

Tarbiyah on the other hand as described by Hussein is neither "an easy task", nor is "exclusive to the behavioral aspect". It can be interpreted as a holistic quest of "growth" for the child in all his aspects of life, as listed in the eight tarbiyah types Hussein refers to. Having this said, the mu'allim-murabbi in the alternative school is usually a teacher responsible for tarbiyah of one group of students, between 5-10 students (usually one complete learning group). On the other hand, the free learning space refers to their teachers as facilitators. However, the facilitators in the free learning space, their roles and relationships with the children and the community of the space, cannot really be represented by that of facilitators in other alternative education models. While there are many similarities between the mu'allim-murabbi in the alternative school and the facilitators in the free learning space, rather than discussing these similarities I will be using the teacher model of the mu'allim-murabbi as an ideal type. Looking at mu'allim-murabbi as an ideal type is an attempt to focus on the shared Islamic understanding of the teacher-student relationship as actualized in these alternative learning spaces. The ideal type is a concept developed by Max Weber to be used as an analytic tool. This will be a shallow engagement of this concept however (Max Weber 1949). I am attempting to draw on the distinctive characteristics of the mu'allim-murabbi as depicted and interpreted from the interviews.

In the alternative school, there are two types of teachers, the mu'allim and the mu'allim-murabbi. While a student might have more than one mu'allim according to his age group and the different classes he is taking, every student has only one mu'allim-murabbi. While every mu'allim should be, in the Islamic understanding, a murabbi, still the mu'allim-murabbi in the context of the alternative school has an assigned responsibility to follow up with the tarbiyah of his students on an individual level with the students, their parents, other teachers and preparing tarbiyah reports and so on. That is to say, the learners interact with the teacher of the farming corner, and that of the animal care, who are particularly responsible for these sensory corners and

its related activities, but are nevertheless contributors to the process of tarbiyah of every learner they engage with even if they are no their assigned mu'allim-murabbi.

> So while all teachers are engaged in one way or another in tarbiyah of students because they naturally interact with them, the mu'allim-murabbi is responsible for a specific group of students and would engage individually with students on issues that matter to them and prepare reports and communicate with parents of these specific students, and this role becomes a part of his professional role in the school. (Aya, teacher, alternative school)

Aya in her description refers to two levels of tarbiyah interactions, the first is the natural day to day interactions between students and their teachers whether a mu'allim or a mu'allim-murabbi. According to Aya, tarbiyah is immanent and imminent in these everyday interactions with the teachers. Immanent in that within the interaction with the personalities and characters of teachers, comes tarbiyah, and imminent that it ought to naturally happen as the teachers are intentionally focusing with the students, directing them, engaging with them in meaningful ways. While on the other hand, the second level is that of the efforts of the mu'allim-murabbi, leading this quest of tarbiyah of the student, through his rigorous communication with all parties and circles involved as will be discussed later on, preparing records, having individual session with the student and so on.

3.2.2. Human Agency, Inter-action and Family-like Relations

Throughout this section I am utilizing Khosrow Bagheri Noaparast's (2016, 339-353) conception of the teacher-student educational relationship to conceptualize the mu'allim-murabbi as an ideal type. Neoparast's conception is particularly important here because he offers more than a description of the teacher-student relationship in the context of Islamic education. His work is significant in that it offers a reconfiguration of this relationship in any educational context including that of alternative education. I will simultaneously analyze interview quotations to further illuminate how the mu'allim-murabbi-student relationship is actualized, as I also reflect on Noaparast's conception. My main aim will be to map the distinctive characteristics of this reconfigured teacher-student relationship, this therein

contributes to my question of the alternative these alternative learning spaces contribute.

Noaparast's (2016) is talking about how it is clear in the Quran that all mankind poses agency regardless of racial or sexual differences or that of belief or age. While part of this agency can be practiced and actualized for children of all ages, I am mainly focusing on the age of seven years old as seen as the starting age of logical reasoning. The alternative school is practicing this age recognition through the division of children around this understanding of the age of seven, "before the age of rationality" and "after the ages of rationality", are the main division of the alternative school and accordingly the aims and curriculums designed for each. The criterion of age here is worth mentioning as the relationship we are dealing with is an intergenerational relationship and learners are children ranging from 3.5 to 15 year old.

> The first section is separate from the second section, basically around the idea of rationality. When the child turns seven years old I am supposed to, as many Muslim scholars consider him rational, so I teach him how to pray. Beside praying, there is an agreement even in diverse societies that starting from this age you can start giving the child duties and so on. So the major difference between the first section and second section and what determines everything later on, is that I will start to give you duties and ask about them, it is no more as relaxed as before (while younger), the academic part included. (Marwa, manager, alternative school)

Having this age distinction clarified, Islam deals with humans as agents and therein their actions become attributed to them as consequential to having this agency. Noaparast accordingly depicts three foundations for human actions that act as prerequisite conditions for human action to take place. The three foundations are cognition, inclination and will. This also means that humans face responsibility for their deeds as a natural consequence of their choices. Their choices and actions are constitutive of who they are and who they become "students, as well as teachers, are agents who have different types of actions and constitute their identities by means of these actions" (Noaparast 2016, 346). Along with this recognized agency of both the

teacher and the student and its consequences of an interactive relationship (as will be discussed), comes the growing intimacy between them.

> I deal with you humanely and intimately at the same time, this brings up certain challenges because sometimes the child might translate this intimacy that we are equals and this might give space for transgression and so more challenges appear. No, there is a difference in the position of the teacher. (Arwa, mother of two children, free learning space)

Noaparast in his vision of the teacher-student relationship imagine an "Inter-active respect" (Noaparast 2016, 348) that would balance that the teacher and student both have, and mutually recognize, this agency yet the teacher has a secondary authority as will be discussed later in this section. The "position of the teacher" as Arwa describes it will resonate with the secondary authority in Noaparast conception. What I intend to discuss here is that because and with this mutual recognition of agency, which is feelings of shared "humanity" in Arwa's words, comes feelings of intimacy. I argue that this intimacy can so much be related to the affective atmospheres of alternative learning spaces, as discussed in the first part of this chapter as well as in chapter II. First, the space as a needed extension of home in the case of the free learning space; needed as an extension to the values and affects of home. Secondly, through the daily practices and routines, the material culture, comfortability, simplicity, the space is productive of familial affects and is recursively reconstructed as an extension of home. However, even more than this, as I am arguing here, this mutual recognition of agency and "humanity" as well as the depth of the mu'allim-murabbi to student relationship because of having tarbiyah at its heart, allows for such intimacy.

Kraftl in his book uses "family-like" relations within his analysis of interpersonal relationships in alternative learning spaces in the UK, to describe one of the types of relations in these spaces (Kraftl 2013, 177-208). As I will borrow this family-like understanding of relations generally in the alternative school and especially between learners and teachers there, I will also be keen to present how the nature of the mu'allim-murabbi to student relationship can be productive of feelings of intimacy, but also how along with the quest of tarbiyah these emotions are propagated to include the entire space and community.

> I feel that my relationship with them (her students) is comfortable even more than my relationship with my children. My children, at home because they spend a lot of time with me and the mother's role includes directing them, so maybe there are sensitivities and problems more than with the children at the school. I am not sure why this is the situation, maybe because with my children being their mother I feel I have to be more firm, and that they would accept this firmness from me, while the children at the school, I don't know, I feel I am more kind with them. Anyways, I am just trying to describe to you our relationship (her relationship with her students). (Aya, teacher, mother of two children, alternative school)

I start here with a quotation that goes even beyond my argument of family-like relations. Aya feels confused about how her relationship with her students became more comfortable than with her own children. She contrasts her relationship with the students as a teacher with her relationship with her children as a mother. According to her, being a mother of her children might imply a certain firm directive role that her role as a teacher may not imply. Aya also refers to spending "a lot of time" with her children as opposed to her students. While this quantitatively could be true, I would like to contrast this with what Arwa, a mother in the free learning space, explains of teachers and students in the free learning space spending a good deal of time together in different contexts that would allow for attachment and affections still not too much time that they feel saturated. This balance of spending a lot of time still not too much, balances emotions of attachment and relationships of students to teachers according to her. From my analysis of what other teachers and parents describe, the same could be said about the alternative school. My intention here is to point out how clear and strong these *family-like* emotions are, especially with the specificity of the relationship and role of the mu'allim-murabbi with the students. These emotions are also as strong when described by the parents about the relationship of their children to teachers.

> My daughter now can share certain things with her 'Murabbi-yah', she started in her teenage hood, so she would tell her things she would never share with me, not in a million years. She would tell her 'Murabbi-yah' what she would feel shy to tell me even if we share a trust bond, I am her mother still. So really

> their relationship with the 'Murabbi' is amazing. (Amena, mother of three children, alternative school)

While Amena's daughter is willing to share with her female teacher, her mu'allim-murabbi, what she might not share with her mother because of a particular bond that she has with her. The same goes for Amena's younger daughter having a bond with her mu'allim-murabbi, that Amena feels is like a mother-daughter bond. The younger daughter wants to share details of her day with her "Murabbi-yah", by sending her photos through her mother's phone or calling her to tell her stories from her day, she becomes relentless like a child longing for her mother as Amena describes. While this intimacy with the younger ages, other than the feelings of attachment, still does not express in clear intentional actions, Amena distinguishes this relationship of the older students to their mu'allim-murabbi as more mature and productive of the trust that allows for intentional actions like sharing secrets.

Amena, as well as other parents interviewed from both the alternative school and the free learning space, was happy to say the least with this kind of relationship the children had with their teachers. Some expressed how the nature of this relationship of their children and themselves with the teachers were the utmost valuable thing from their experience in their respective alternative learning space. It is still important to highlight that the effects of the family on the student's learning and education is not always celebrated or at least seen to involve emotional tension (Chin 2000). It is especially related to role strain and emotional burnout when the teacher plays the role of the parent and vice versa (Lois 2006).

While the quotes I am using here could be misunderstood that these spaces are having both the educational space and the home greatly, if not completely, swollen by each other. What I am arguing here is that alternative learning spaces in Cairo are neither removing the boundaries between home and school, nor recreating family relations in the educational space. Rather that these spaces are recreating emotions that can be better described as familial emotions more than anything else. Kraftl approaches this by contrasting the relations in such spaces to both family relations and friendships (Kraftl 2013, 177-208). Here on the other hand, I am looking at how the nature of the relationship of the mu'allim-murabbi to students becomes more similar to that of the

student to his parents than to the student to a typical teacher in mainstream traditional schools. That is to say, while acknowledging that this reproduction of family-like emotions could potentially be problematic to some extent, I am interested here in unpacking how such emotions have existed in the first place and how they endure.

As clear from Aya's quote mentioned earlier, the relationship of the mu'allim-murabbi to student does not become a replication of that of the student to his parents, however, it is clear in the interviews how it is always compared to parent-child rather than teacher-student relationship (the teacher in traditional schooling system). I argue here that mu'allim-murabbi to student becomes family-like because this relationship is greatly directed by the quest of tarbiyah. Where the teacher who is here the mu'allim-murabbi works together with the student on the student's growth in different aspects of life. In alignment with Noaparast's work (2016) I also argue that tarbiyah results in an asymmetrical rather than symmetrical relationship. I will be again discussing later in this section how and why this relationship is seen as asymmetrical from the perspective that teachers have secondary authority in their transmission of the cultural heritage to students. As I have conceptualized emotions and affects as Sara Ahmed does, to be circulating between people and objects rather than residing within them (Ahmed 2004), I am thus in this sense arguing that the recreation of family-like relations is a recreation of certain emotions and affective atmospheres rather than the actual recreation of teachers to fulfill the role of surrogate fathers and mothers. The emotions involved as I have explained in the previous quotes are, specifically, intimacy and trust. Intimacy is relevant here not only because these spaces are of a smaller scale with a limited number of students (Martin 2002, Kraftl 2013, 178), but more importantly, because of tarbiyah being at the heart of this relationship. According to teachers interviewed from the alternative school, with the quest of tarbiyah and the recurring individual tarbiyah sessions between the mu'allim-murabbi and his students, there are continuous intimate and personal talks and spaces that are provoked and shared between the two.

> Another aspect that I am not sure is relevant here, is that even the teachers who leave, are still part of the school community, we are keen that they volunteer from time to time, that they are there in events and visit the children. (Marwa, manager, alternative school)

Another aspect of this intimacy is that it propagates not only to include the rest of the community of the space, as will be discussed next, but also to include teachers who have left the alternative learning space. Reflecting on Sara Ahmed's theorization of affective economies is insightful in understanding how such intimate atmospheres are capable of extending to include people beyond the direct physical space and beyond regular day-to-day encounters. So while acknowledging that the communities of these spaces were intentionally keeping close relations with teachers and families who left, there is another aspect to the issue. I also acknowledge here the ability of emotions themselves to "do things" (Ahmed 2004, 119). What matters is that as an extension of the familial emotions of intimacy and trust, family-like relations endure even after members of the community leave, like the teachers Marwa talks about. I argue that this endurance, that to some extent defies the distance and irregularity of teachers that left, can be attributed to emotions and their cohesive nature.

3.2.3. The Circles of Tarbiyah

> As a 'Murabbi' I would think about the student and his needs, through interacting with him, understand the problems he is facing and have individual sessions with him, talk together about issues he wants to solve or aspects he needs to improve, and how to do so. Another aspect of the interaction is my continuous communication with his parents. Our communication is rigorous and continuous since I am responsible for the student and his tarbiyah. We talk about aspects in the school and even out of school, as if we (the 'Murabbi' and the parents) are joined together in the quest for the tarbiyah of this child, in the wide and comprehensive meaning of tarbiyah, because I would also interact with him outside the premises of the school, we might go out together or attend social gatherings. The deeper the relationship, the more it becomes a joined effort of the community. (Mahmoud, teacher, alternative school)

> The role of communicating with the parents, I would give them the update if the students and expect from them to communicate any new input, for example the child showed these kinds of behaviors this week, something came up like we moved into a new house, and I would share how he is doing at school, and the action plan. (Aya, teacher, alternative school)

To further understand the depth and extension of *family-like* relations and familial emotions, I present here the ways in which the quest of tarbiyah involves many circles from the community of the alternative learning space. As previously explained, tarbiyah is the process of an overall growth of the student in different aspects of his life, including social skills, cognitive skills, faith and worship, as well as physical and behavioral aspects. The first circle of the circles of tarbiyah from what Mahmoud describes can be understood as the mu'allim-murabbi and his student. Through the individual sessions and interacting within and beyond the space premises, the student is engaged and involved as an active agent, accountable and responsible as previously discussed in light of his agency. The student then becomes subject and object in the quest of his own tarbiyah. The second circle then is the mu'allim-murabbi and the student's parents, and this is through a two-way channel of communication, where the mu'allim-murabbi is taking a lead on this joined "quest". In this sense and through his concern for the student both inside and outside the physical and social premises of the space, the mu'allim-murabbi becomes deeply engaged with and aware of the updates of the family of the student. In a way he becomes like family to them, a "partner" to the parents of the student like Amena describes in the next quote, and parent to the student like described in the previous section.

> I am not sure if this is a reality or my impression, I imagine that if we were in a school (mainstream traditional school) and my son assaulted another child, hit him for example, the issue would be resolved between me and the other mother. The majority of it would be in our hands even if we reached out to a teacher from the school, since it happened there, and we would sort what I will do and what she would do about it. Here (the alternative school), the issue is mainly in the hands of the 'Murabbi' even if this encounter wan not in school, for example hy son met the boy in the sports club and they fought, I would naturally send and inform my son's 'Murabbi' that so and so happened. This is not to say that I am walking away from the problem, I mean to say that they are our partners all the time. (Amena, mother of three children, alternative school)

The comparison made here between mainstream traditional schools and the alternative school is added here in no means to approve or falsify it, rather to point out the

significant involvement of the mu'allim-murabbi on different levels with the student and his parents, foreseen as a "partner" in tarbiyah. What matters here is not the extent of involvement of the parents, and not by any means their exclusion, but the inclusion of the mu'allim-murabbi in what seemed to be taken for granted as a 'parents only' issue as described by Amena.

The third circle is that of the mu'allim-murabbi and other teachers in the space as they are joined in what is called tarbiyah discussions. As mentioned before, even subject teachers or Mu'allim contribute to students' tarbiyah one way or another, through the day-to-day interactions with the students during different classes and activities. In tarbiyah discussion, while each mu'allim-murabbi is still in charge to gather any input or feedback about the student he is responsible for, it is a collective responsibility of all teachers to discuss aspects of tarbiyah of each student. The tarbiyah discussions especially take place for each section separately. The teachers of one section join with the section manager, as well as subject teachers like the animal care teacher or the sewing teacher, to have these discussions about the students of the same section.

> The parents have another role in the context of participating in the tarbiyah of the children, not only their children but we consider them parents to all other children at school. We dedicate time weekly for a parent to volunteer, and would like parents each in his/her area of expertise that goes with the skills or knowledge we seek for the children to learn to engage with the children. We prepare a sheet and timetable to accommodate which week each parent will volunteer and what he would like to teach the children or what his areas of interests are. This is explicitly to enrich and expose the children to more teachers and more of the larger community. (Hussein, teacher, alternative school)

As we move along this quest of tarbiyah we are building levels of interrelationality, fueled by the desire to nurture the student in all the needed aspects of his life. The fourth circle are all the parents as contributors in the tarbiyah of all students in the alternative school. Parents become here "parents to all other children" as Hussein who is a teacher in the alternative school explains. Parents, as an entity, are part of the children's week by hosting one parent to take the place of a teacher for one slot,

interchangeably between different parents to include most if not all parents of all children throughout the year. Hussein relates this voluntary work of the parents that enriches and exposes the students to more teachers and more of the larger community of the space. In relating all parents to all other children through the quest of tarbiyah the family-like relations and familial emotions propagate to include the entire community of the space. Parents here are people who do not particularly interact with the children on a daily basis, thus again the familial emotions propagate to include members of this community irrespective of their distance and irregularity.

3.2.4. Mu'allim-Murabbi as "Asymmetrical Inter-action": Beyond Teacher-centered or Learner-centered Conceptions of Education

> We try to explain the idea, why we are in this current situation (moving out to another physical place) and that we are trying to manage and accommodate according to the situation at hand. These meanings are brought up, and other meanings, that for example we are doing our best but still things are not working out, so what should we do? We should have sabr (patience) for example. And when they feel exhausted from this situation we talk and comprehensively engage with the meanings of patience and the value of transparency, that as a grown up you (the student) should understand the situation and the challenges we go through and that we are not intentionally doing this to annoy you. At this age (students between the ages of 10 to 15 years old) they understand almost 70% of what's going around them. In general and for many reasons even if you are not transparent with them they would understand what's going on, so it is better that I would intentionally engage them in the matter, and so I do. (Mahmoud, teacher, alternative school)

Mahmoud in the previous quote is keen that the students (here referring to older students) are somehow engaged in *real life* situations as they happen, and to "intentionally engage them", discuss with them and reflect on the matter.

Building on this Islamic understanding of human agency and human action, Noaparast concluded that the student-teacher educational relationship is an "inter-action" (Noaparast 2016, 346). This inter-action is thus possible with a shared respect and

consideration of the agency, understood as cognition, inclination and will of both the teacher and the student. This inter-action would ensure that the teacher does not neglect the agency of the student and consequently should not demand or impose change, rather the teacher is expected to provide rich possibilities for the student to act better.

> ..inter-action of teacher and student can pave the ground for forming "good habits" as well as deconstructing "bad habits." Enabling students' actions, rather than shaping or molding them, is the view coherent with human agency (Noaparast 2016, 346).

Noaparast suggests that to move towards this educational relationship is also to consequently move away from both learner-centered and teacher-centered conceptions of education (Noaparast 2016, 347). Teacher-centered education is what Paulo Freire referred to as the teacher-student contradictions, where the teacher becomes the active subject and students are passive receiving objects in the instruction process (Freire 1970). Learner-centered or student-centered concepts of education are well known in alternative education. Teachers in different alternative education models would have different names and roles; direct instruction of a curriculum is not part of it (Sliwka 2008, 102). Another important aspect is the knowledge acquired and what Noaparast describes as cultural heritage possessed by the teacher.

> Cultural heritage is important in Islam but not merely because of its being a traditional phenomenon but as something that is rational and reasonable or as the accumulation of reasons (Noaparast 2016, 350).

This then introduces the element of authority in the educational relationship. The authority is on one hand, the primary authority of the cultural heritage, and on the other hand the secondary authority of the teacher as the carrier of this knowledge and heritage. This authority introduces the asymmetrical part of the relationship. Noaparast explains how authority here should not be confused by authoritarianism (Noaparast 2016, 350). When there is mutual respect and recognition of the agency of the teacher and student, the secondary authority of the teacher becomes a helping hand to the student rather than the teacher becoming a coercive subject and the student a passive object.

To conclude, Noaparast's conception of the Islam-inspired teacher-student educational relationship, is based on the understanding of the agency of both the teacher and the

student, as well as the emphasis of the authority of the cultural heritage and secondary authority therein given to the teacher. This understanding manifests in a reconfiguration of the educational relationship as "asymmetrical interaction". I have argued through this section that this very understanding of the teacher-student relationship is to a great extent actualized in the alternative school. It is actualized through tarbiyah as a holistic quest for growth, that was manifested through the mu'allim-murabbi as an ideal type.

3.3. Conclusion

I have argued throughout this section that the underlying spatial and temporal order of the space along with its affective atmospheres accommodate mess and are even sometimes productive of mess. The notion of extension of home is revisited through the affects produced with the daily incorporation of Arabic and Egyptian material culture. In the daily encounter and use of some of the furniture and tools such as the tabliya, Bedouin rugs and aluminum utensils the space is reconstructed as an extension of home. As an overview of the material space of both alternative learning spaces, the visible and invisible qualities and their intersections are all evident of intentioned simplicity. On the one hand, in the free learning space this simplicity is again related to space being an extension of home. On the other hand, in the alternative school this simplicity greatly conveys an alternative vision of real life as perceived by the community of the space. I also discussed the nature of the materials used, along with its scarcity and accessibility, and argued how this is productive of individual and collective emotions of responsibility and belonging.

The spatio-temporal dynamics of the learning experiences and daily routines within the material and physical space unravel the messiness I had referred to at the beginning. Within and around the sensory corners in the alternative school, learning is actualized through exposure, practice and living. The notion of *taking time,* discussed at different points in the section, explains how to a certain extent learning in the alternative learning spaces is led by the learner's need to follow his curiosity at his own pace. The notion of *at a distance* shows that learning could also be exhibited through a temporal and spatial distance through exposure and observation. On the other hand, the act of practice in the alternative school constructs the space and creates areas of

intersectionality within the different areas and as well with the different platforms and activities, and in turn the immediacy and accessibility of the space is reconstructive of learning and its purposefulness. Also building on this, the daily acts of movements and circulation of learners and materials within the space reconstructs space and its different areas, rooms and corners as to be inclusive rather than exclusive to specific attributes or activities. A final and important phenomenon is the use of space by young newcomers, which would be usually centralized at the animal care corner and the sand pit while observing everything else from a far. The notions of *taking time* and the notion of *at a distance* are discussed here from the aspect of how young learners approach the space and how the underlying order of the space in return enables them to do so.

In the second part of the chapter, I engaged with the mu'allim-murabbi to students relationship as reconfigured educational relationship, the quest of tarbiyah and their related affective atmospheres as significant in the making and remaking of alternative learning spaces in Cairo. Through engaging with Noaparast's (2016, 339-353) Islamic conception of the teacher-student relationship, I argued that the mu'allim-murabbi model represents a reconfiguration to the educational relationship that even goes beyond the educational space and becomes family-like. This speaks to the second aim of the study in putting forward an alternative in this reconfiguration of teacher-student relationship that alternative learning spaces in Cairo construct. I have also presented the nature of the quest of tarbiyah in these spaces, its depth in covering many aspects of students' lives within and beyond the primary physical, social and educational space, as well its ability to connect and involve many circles of the community mainly led by mu'allim-murabbi. Collective emotions and affects have a significant role in space-making, I have argued how through the quest of tarbiyah the relations between teachers and students as well as other parents are family-like relations that endure and propagate to include even those who are no longer part of the space.

CHAPTER IV

BEYOND THE SPACE

Alternative learning spaces in Cairo are not just one of the many modes of alternative education, it contributes to and challenges the meanings and ways of learning and life pertained in Cairo. In an outward looking manner, I aim to convey in this chapter these very meanings and ways that extend beyond the primary material and educational space of these alternative learning spaces. These spaces are thus able to reappropriate public spaces in Cairo, redefine learning spaces through the notion of the good life, and reframe social relations into an alternative community. Through these three main discussions I argue that alternative learning spaces in Cairo are productive of alternative visions of real life.

Kraftl in his analysis of alternative learning spaces in the UK engages with "alternative versions and visions of life-itself" that these spaces contribute (Kraftl 2013, 210). Along with the scattered traces of this envisionment of life-itself laid out in the chapters of his book, in the last chapter he focuses specifically on love, nature and food to crystalize his argument of how alternative learning spaces "envisage and perform forms of life that endure" (Kraftl 2013, 211). While acknowledging Kraftl's courage in his outward looking argument that through these alternative visions of life-itself, alternative learning spaces are capable of interacting with yet reaching out "beyond the spaces of contemporary neoliberal governance" (Kraftl 2013, 212), however this discussion extends beyond the framework of this study. At the same time, I extend my analysis to look beyond the primary material and educational setting of alternative learning spaces, and look at the movements, meanings, collective relationships and emotions that relate these spaces to real life.

4.1. Mapping the Movement Beyond the Space: Alternative Vision of *Real Life*

> [T]he 'patterning' of education across our lives and the landscape of space where learning can occur, across employment, professional organizations, museums, galleries, cafes, homes, etc. I call this the space of teaching and learning processes because it engages very directly with our broadest conceptual assumptions about - and contestations over- what learning is, and therefore how and where it 'should' take place (Boys 2009, 19).

While Boys is specifically referring to learning in the context of post-compulsory education, one can say the same for alternative learning spaces in Cairo. Naturally, and departing from their philosophies of alternative education, the alternative learning spaces' "patterning" of learning across the lives of children, their families and across spaces, engage with the conceptions of learning and its whereabouts. More than that, through this 'patterning', meanings attributed to childhood and life are renegotiated.

Amal, one of the managers at the alternative school explains, learning in the alternative school is greatly interwoven in real life and the experiences the children gain from their interactions and encounters during the field trips and the activities designed for them. The "sources for learning", as she describes, are diverse and mobile to include spaces beyond the primary material setting of the alternative school. The weekly field trips include pre chosen destinations mainly in the city of Cairo or its suburbs, as well as social visits and activities within the alternative community, the latter will be discussed by the end of this chapter. Both are integral parts of the curriculum and are considered, as Amal explains, "sources for learning". I argue through this part of this chapter that the intentional movements beyond the primary material space, are productive of alternative vision of real life, naturally entangled with that of learning and childhood.

4.1.1. "Cities within the City": Remapping and Re-appropriating Cairo

To be able to engage with the rigorous movements and diverse spatial experiences and understand how this is productive of alternative visions of real life, I will use the lens of "embodied space". The conceptual framework of embodied space as elaborated by Setha Low, integrates the body, as the center for bodily movements and of agency, along with space and culture (Low 2017, 94). In this section I will focus more on the weekly field trips conducted by the alternative school. By looking at weekly field trips

as intentioned movement beyond the primary material space, to and within other spaces, this again brings us further away from the understand of space as a container, as discussed in chapter II, and rather engages with spaces as "intersecting pathways" as described by Vishvajit Pandya in his article published 1990 (as cited in Setha Low 2017, 103). While the field trips, as will be discussed, have diverse and widespread destinations, the pathways created by these field trips connect and create what Low describes as "a unified whole" (Low 2017, 103). Reimaging then space as performed through field trips, as pathways that create alternative maps.

Both alternative learning spaces included in this study are based in Cairo. Cairo as described by Janet L. Abu-Lughod is "a city of contrasts and contradiction" (Abu-Lughod 1971, 182) and this section aims to present the ways in which alternative learning spaces find their ways through these contrasts and contradictions. I intend to focus specifically on intentional movements beyond the material premises of these alternative learning spaces. While one of the managers expresses how the curriculum of the field trips is under continuous modification towards more in depth interaction with the city especially for the older sections, still she believes that the field trips at the moment serves its purpose to expose children to the different aspects of Cairo and the different landscapes around the city.

Abu-Lughod uses "cities within the city" (Abu-Lughod 183) to describe the contrasts of diverse "social worlds" that exist within Cairo; individual and collective bodies inside Cairo create their own versions of the city. I borrow the same description of "cities within the city" that I see can in a way also capture how the alternative learning spaces reappropriated their own city within the city of Cairo through the field trips. As I engage with their movement and pathways one could wonder how much is included from Cairo in these field trips? How much is left out? Alternative learning spaces remap Cairo through moving and experiencing certain spaces within the city along which the alternative vision of real life is spatially actualized.

To engage with the spatial experience of alternative education along with that of childhood as naturally interweaved together, this makes up one layer, and to engage with these spatial experiences within the metropolis of Cairo is another. This can be easily regarded as a novel geographical and sociological research area yet to be

explored. The book by Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics Culture and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East* (2006), engages with Cairo and the contests over its public spaces and resources. For the framework of this research, the book offers a rich account especially through its ethnographies on the diverse social and urban realities of Cairo. In different chapters the authors present the "tactics" (De Certeau 1988) of Cairenes in reappropriating and sometimes even taking over public spaces that were no longer welcoming to them (Singerman and Amar 2006). With new forms of privatization, and the renewal and reopening of some public spaces for tourists as well as invention of new spaces "walled off" to certain social classes (Abaza 2006, 196), the authors present the struggle and contests over spaces in Cairo. Examples of this reappropriation of public spaces include the al-Rifa'i and Sultan Hasan Square, shopping malls in Nasr city and the Giza zoo (Singerman and Amar 2006).

In the same manner and on a smaller scale one can look at the diverse pathways and public spaces covered by the field trips of alternative learning spaces and imagine how they, especially in the company of children, can find their way through. To list a few examples of the wide spectrum of pathways and destinations, the field trips for the younger sections in the alternative school include different private and commercial farms, natural protectorate such of Wadi Degla protectorate in Tura, orphanages, open markets of fruits vegetables and fish, parks like Alazhar park, the annual Cairo book fair, art, military and history museums like the Egyptian Textile Museum in El-Gamaleya and the Egyptian Air Force Museum in El-Nozha, the pyramids, children's arcades, neighborhood stores like dairy shops, groceries, hypermarkets and textile factories. The older sections in the alternative school may also have the same previously mentioned field trips in more depth, along with other pathways and spaces like steel factories. They also use public transportation such as public buses or the metro to visit elderly homes or visit slums such as Ezbet el-Haggana.

4.1.2. Field Trips: Walking through and Moving around Public Spaces

Jan Nespor stresses the important role of mainstream traditional schools in building and regulating relations of young people to the outside world, specifically that through the school field trips and bus rides young people are positioned in the performance of

public spaces (Nespor 2000, 28). Schools accordingly help "fill the vacuum" (Nespor 2000, 28) between the reality of public spaces being limited in the kinds of interactions they enable and to still give introductory opportunities for young people to engage in public settings. While Nespor's ethnography was based on a mainstream traditional school in a city in Virginia, United States, one can still say the same for alternative learning spaces in Cairo. Further, in the latter case I argue that it is rather intentionally an integral part of their curriculum and in a more rigorous manner.

> If I could summarize all of this into one comprehensive meaning before going into details, is that all our efforts are towards having the closest version of real life we are living. I am not saying that this is for the child to become ready to eventually get *out* to life, I do not want him to get out to it by the end, I want him to live *through it* from the very beginning. So I do not want to create a glass cage for him (the learner) to leave when he is ready, I want him *in* life from the get go. (Marwa, manager, alternative school)

Going back to one of the recurring phrases in the interviews from the alternative school in particular, there was a subliminal agreement envisioning learning as exposure to, and engagement with, real life. Marwa is talking here about manifesting "the closest version of real life". One cannot ignore the verbal usage of *in, through* and *out* as Marwa relates their physical position to their actual engagement with life. Using "glass cage" here, is not dismissal of the material space, as she further explains in the rest of the interview, still a great part of learning is actualized through the physical movement of young learners beyond the material space. As being *in* life rather than later getting *out* to life. Also her analogue of "glass cage" greatly resembles the logic of the field trips, learners become active performers of the space rather than watching passively from a distance, as will be presented in the next few examples.

From what Marwa and other managers and teachers said, one could reimagine a great part of learning in the alternative school as a network of experiences actualized into pathways throughout the city of Cairo and its suburbs, sometimes even further to other parts of the country. Simultaneous to this spatial mapping of learning, an alternative vision of real life is produced. This vision is again naturally interweaved with an alternative vision of childhood. These alternative learning spaces have their

pedagogies and visions for the ‘when’ and ‘how’ learners engage in “doing” (John Holt 1976), at different extents at different ages.

The combination of this intentionality to engage in real life, with the agency of learners, along the movements and pathways created by the field trips, make up a triad that can be best captured by “trajectories” (Low 2017, 103-118). Trajectories is a term that Setha Low contributes to the conception of embodied space, trajectories “transforms the spatiotemporal unit into a construct with agency, power and direction” (Low 2017, 107). Looking at the trajectories of weekly field trips within the city of Cairo, I present a few examples and analyze how public spaces as embodied spaces are reappropriated and how in turn this engagement actualizes the alternative vision of real life.

> When we visited the dairy shop, while the normal experience of people going to a dairy shop is just buying dairy products, we were also going to buy milk but what happened was different. The shop owner explained to the children the processes until milk is ready for us to buy. He gave them bites of different cheeses to taste and they drank milk, and gave them gifts when they were leaving. I felt this was a different experience than anyone [just] coming to buy. He even brought an inflated cow in the entrance of the shop for the children, we were surprised by it and it was the first thing we started with. The shop owner was delighted and expressed how happy he was that children are learning this way. (Aya, teacher alternative school)

> As for the open market of Obour, people there were not bothered as much as they were surprised, they are not used to seeing children walking there. We would go into the fish market, the floor is wet and muddy and the place stinks with the smell of fish, some of the children cannot tolerate the smell (laughs). Still it is one of our aims in the trips, the meaning of living the good life despite the circumstances, and this meaning greatly influences the children, some who were at first disgusted, now they are not as much. People still sometimes comment, like why did you bring them, don’t bring them again, it's harsh on them, they would feel bad for the kids. We eventually find our way through it

> and I feel these are the most influential, they deal with people and walk in everyday life and so on. (Aya, teacher alternative school)

With the two different experiences that Aya describes in these places of "everyday life", the children go through unexpected sights and are exposed to aesthetic diversities. They experience the spaces through the smell of the fish, the taste of cheese and milk, watching passersby and hearing the language of the marketplace. It is a sensorial experience. The varying reactions of people in the two places is evident of the nature of public spaces in Cairo, while the places are 'public' still it is not very public in practice (Nespor 2000, 28), it was unexpected that a group of children are seen strolling there, engaging with the goods and people. While welcomed by the owner of the dairy shop, their presence in the open marketplace was questioned. In a way the children's presence and performance in these public spaces pushed the boundaries of these spaces further, further than what Aya described as the "normal experience" of other users of the space. Through their experimentation, their "tactics" (de Certeau 1988) expressed by Aya as "find our way through it" and the joint adult and children engagement, this altogether not only reproduces these spaces but also positions the learners and their "participatory possibilities" (Nespor 2000, 36).

> The book fair, how do you think the book fair would be beneficial for the kids? what other than the kids' area there? But even the kids' area was too crowded and we didn't spend time there. We passed by it and they were already bored from the same toys that they have there, it is not what we want to do. We strolled through the hall rooms with books and stories and we were keen that we explain the buying and selling process to the kids, and that they depend on themselves in choosing what to buy. The budget as well, we agreed with the mothers to give them money they would only shop with. For example, (one child) liked a toy, a book and one more item, and the 100 pounds he had was not enough for all, so I asked him what will we do now? you will have to let go of one item, what do you want the least? We spent a good half an hour in this conversation in front of the cashier, who was already furious, but we had to and this was my intention. (Habiba, facilitator, free learning space)

The annual Book Fair is one of the important field trip destinations for both alternative learning spaces. Unlike the local shop and market in the previous example, the book fair has a dedicated "kids' area", the space in a way dictates a particular engagement of children with the place, specified in a physical corner in one of the halls. With the acknowledgment of this "kids' corner" the field trips still aim for a wider and more active interaction for the children with the different booths, as part of a larger crowd and through the experience of calculating money, choosing and buying, and interacting with sellers. One can easily argue that this performance of the space is quite different than that intended within the "kids' area". It could also be safe to claim the intolerance found in public spaces in Cairo towards children, even in these spaces that physically 'give space' to children. There is a limited physical and social engagement that is deemed somehow proper and suitable for children in the book fair as can be true of other public spaces, one that misses a "democratic performance" of the space (Nespor 2000, 39). Nespor talks about how public spaces are not necessarily public in the sense that all men, women and children of different ethnicities and social classes can feel welcomed or are able to perform at public spaces at their free will (Nespor 2000, 27). In the case of Cairo, the "cosmopolitan" (Singerman and Amar 2006), with the emergence of more exclusive spaces, whether gated communities, shopping malls, or renewed historical sites for tourists, public spaces in Cairo are now more than ever places of struggle and contests for Cairenes (Singerman and Amar 2006).

Mahmoud, who is a teacher for the older section in the alternative school, highlights the experience of using public transportation now that the students in his section are old enough. Taking the bus or the metro to one of the places they are visiting is not merely their means of transportations, the pathway itself matters and is a public space that Mahmoud wants his students to experience. Amr on the other hand, a facilitator in the free learning space explains how he seizes any opportunity to walk to a place together with the children. Walking on the street is a chance for the children to practice "the rules of the streets" as he describes. Discussing the local shops, open markets, public transportations and the streets as pathways and destinations in the field trips is especially important. While these spaces are already part of everyday life and can be easily overlooked, the field trips and the movement beyond the alternative learning spaces not only reappropriates these public spaces but puts them on their alternative

version of the map of Cairo, and gives them meaning within their alternative educational experience.

While there are many trajectories worth looking at I will present one last example of field trips. Marwa, a manager in the alternative school explains that not all places they visit would be tuned with the alternative school's views, when possible they would rather move around it, but not entirely cancel out these places. She gives the example of Sultan Hassan Mosque, one of the important mosques that lived on from Islamic Cairo and speaks of the early Mamluk architecture, located in Salah al-Din Square. The main issue that Marwa describes is having the mausoleum of Sultan Hassan along with many others right inside the mosque. So in refusal to pray in a mosque with mausoleums, at the time of prayer the teachers along with the children pray right in front of the mosque, this delivers a "message", she says. She quoted part of Prophet Muhammed's hadith, peace be upon him: "The earth has been made for me (and for my followers) a place for praying and a thing to perform Tayammum". Not only do they physically move around the place and its determined spatial experience, the use of this Hadith in particular is in fact spatially reinventing earth as a place for performing prayer. What matters here is the inclusion of what they considered partly problematic spaces in the field trips, with a preset intention to perform the space in a specific manner to deliver this very "message".

4.2. The Space Matters (II): Moving Out to Other Spaces Virtually and Physically

In The Space Matters (I) in chapter II Towards the Space, the need expressed by homeschooling families as a need for space, as well as the affects that come along with the space were discussed. The discussion in chapter II was to establish an understanding of the homeschooling communities of these spaces, yet at the same time understand the *why* behind the emergence of these spaces. In an empirical move towards space I focused on what these alternative learning spaces offered the homeschooling families in Cairo as a *stable*, *collective*, and *distanced* learning experience. The focus in chapter II was on the free learning space, as it is a part-time, less academic option compared to the alternative school. The focus on the free learning space was intended to emphasize even more how these spaces do not merely represent a different mode of alternative education besides homeschooling, but can present a

much needed extension of home even for homeschooling families. In this section, I intend to re-question this "need of space" also based on empirical analysis, giving more insights from the alternative school. The alternative school happened to have gone through continuous movement beyond the physical and fairly long, but temporary, periods of transitioning out of their primary material space, because of difficulties related to officially registering a place practicing alternative education in Egypt. These periods of transitions to other physical and virtual spaces *beyond*, are insightful for revisiting the need for space. The aim here is not to merely prove or dismiss the importance of parts or aspects of space, rather to engage deeper with these transitions beyond space, and explore the ways in which they contribute to the comprehensive meaning of learning spaces through the practiced notion of good life.

4.2.1. Renegotiating Space through the Notion of *Good Life*

In the alternative school, the temporary transition to different physical spaces is not considered an ideal situation neither by the staff or parents. There is a shared understanding that the primary material space is better stable as specifically designed for the alternative education needs. With the forced transitions however, teachers in particular, saw them as chances for emphasizing with the learners the meanings of living a good life. A good life in this specific context is related to their Islamic understanding of an individual being ready and capable to face the unknown that future-life beholds along with the adversities that comes with it, yet through these adversities still manage to live a good life.

> So I was saying this was not how the place looked before, we as a community have changed a lot, but this is a huge advantage really in this school, that is the flexibility. We are not limited with the place, really the place is but one thing I utilize to complement the learning process and tarbiyah process we're having, otherwise it is not really useful. I utilize what's in the place according to what I really need. I would see many teachers adapt themselves with high flexibility if anything happens or that we had to completely change our place or having this or that place unavailable, they would adapt and use different places whether inside or outside the premises of the school, and would adapt the content they are giving, so this is a huge advantage. The teachers consider any

> thing that happens inside or outside the school a chance for learning. (Salma, mother of two children, alternative school)

Salma was initially interviewed as a parent, still her quote here is more insightful coming from her experience and encounters as a teacher in the alternative school. Salma would describe their relationship to the physical space as "not limited with the place", and potentially considering the place "not really useful", these descriptions withhold two important meanings in this context. The first meaning is related to adapting rapidly and with flexibility to unexpected changes. What Salma is discussing here is inclusive, not exclusive, to the physical transitions in question. So whether it's small changes on a daily basis, like lack in resources or spaces for the activities which would necessitate rapid action, or bigger changes like having to temporarily relocate to an entirely different place. I argue that while at the first instance it could give this impression, what Salma is referring to is not dismissal of the need or importance of the physical space. Rather while having specific criteria for the physical space the teachers can still, temporarily, do without them if the circumstance necessitates so. The second meaning is related to how these changes are considered as "a chance to learn". Even beyond this encouraged attitude of utilizing all situations, unfortunate situations included, as chances to learn, there is more to the notion of good life. What is more is this openness specifically on the levels of sources and locations of learning was also previously discussed in the field trips curriculum. This openness to engaging with real life as it happens as part of the dynamic nature of alternative education and its indulgence with life and doing (Holt 1976). Encouraging flexibility and rapid adaptation to changes, along with nurturing a positive attitude towards unexpected changes as learning opportunities draws the main features of good life.

4.2.2. Extensions of the Learning Space

As continuation to the discussion on field trips as "patterning" (Boys 2009, 19) of learning beyond the primary material and educational spaces, these transitions are also contributing to the meaning and potency given to learning sources and learning spaces as diverse and mobile. Other than transitioning out to physical spaces there is transitioning out to virtual online space whether during the COVID-19 Lock down of many institutions in Egypt between 2020-21 or moving to virtual spaces rather than

physical ones as part of the forced temporary transitions previously discussed. In either case we are engaging with both the virtual space and the home setting as extension of the learning space. From what the interviewees describe of these experiences, this again goes back to the flexibility of alternative education in its learning sites and sources but more it goes back to the notion of good life. One example is conducting field trips through video, the teacher on the street and children in their homes, strolling together "virtually" through the decorated streets and neighborhoods of Cairo in Ramadan. Another example mentioned by Mohamed, father of three children in the alternative school, was the two-way rigorous and sometimes exhausting communications back and forth between managers/teachers with parents to organize and distribute tools and materials for this or that activity that the children would have at their homes. Home, as an extension to the learning space, engaged the parents even more than normal in the day-to-day learning activities of their children.

4.3. The Alternative Community

The types of relationships included in studies on learning spaces and alternative learning spaces include the educational relationships of teacher-student (Noaparast 2016), family relationships especially in homeschooling families, or family-like relationships, friendships, intergenerational relationships or intragenerational relationships of students (Kraftl 2013). I argue that the alternative learning spaces in Cairo are capable of reframing social organization of learning. The social organization of the community of both alternative learning spaces I discuss here are different from that of any learning spaces found in the literature. Both the alternative school and the free learning space have a fairly intimate community, mainly made up of families of the young learners, the teachers, founders and managers and other workers in the space. This community is perceived as an essential part of the space and is actively engaged in the alternative education approaches yet also becomes a mobilized body by itself, an alternative community that moves *beyond* the space.

To approach and understand the nature of this alternative community, I look at the contexts of their interactions beyond the primary material space and educational activities. Different modes of alternative education intentionally use the wider community as an "extension to the classroom" (Sliwka 2008, 101), I focus here on

how alternative learning spaces in Cairo are able to do so not only through social visits and activities as part of the field trips but also how this alternative community is part of the alternative vision of real life. I simultaneously engage with understandings of reconstructed social relations as forms of neo-tribalism (Maffesoli 2016) but more than that, what it takes to reconstruct and endure such social relations (Bennabi 2002). The collective emotions are important because they allow us to consider this alternative community as a form of shadowed "emotional community" (Rosenwein 2006). From the understanding of emotional communities, the alternative community creates a togetherness and otherness that I will discuss. The collective emotions here play a great part in pushing towards specific actions.

4.3.1. Thinking and Doing of Real Life

As first discussed in the second part of chapter III Within the Space, we can see the interrelationality of this alternative community, with different yet considerable extents everyone within the alternative community interacts together. This intentional and rigorous interaction can be seen in the circles of tarbiyah for instance. While the quest of tarbiyah is not limited to, rather led by these circles of tarbiyah, everyone within the alternative community to a certain extent is acquainted together. Even beyond the circles of tarbiyah still other formal and informal interactions are also intended as part of the social gatherings and bonding beyond the primary material space and educational activities. These interactions and contexts include the monthly organized parents meeting, the fathers gathering with elder children in football matches, some families organizing together swimming classes for children after school, having a collective iftar in Ramadan or simply traveling together in the vacation to the 'masyaf'. One of the main and clear functions and intentions of such interactions and interrelationality is the exposure of children to a rich diversity of people, of "eligible Murabbi-yeen" as Marwa explains. Marwa is also speaking of the nature of these relations in this alternative community and the extent of its endurance.

> I can add to this the teachers who leave, we want them to visit every now and then, interact with the children, this is the role of the Murabbi and it holds another meaning that exposing the child to this richness. Another meaning here

> is more about the value of loyalty, togetherness and affection, these I think are very important. (Marwa, manager, alternative school)

This again was discussed in chapter III Within the Space, the relationships with previous members of the alternative community. In this case propagating emotions of intimacy to include teachers who are no longer formally affiliated with the space, and holding on to family-like relationships with the mu'allim-murabbi in particular regardless of the distanced reality of him/her no longer being a regular in the space. These enduring emotions and values of "loyalty, togetherness and affection" for any member of the alternative community is insightful in this context.

> One of our principles is that values are not to be taught theoretically, so if I were to teach the child about generosity, I would not give him a lesson about generosity, we reject this, the "character building" classes are not allowed as part of our curriculum. I would rather expose him to situations where he would practice generosity, even if I would make up such situations, like I was telling you they might go visit someone to learn how to ask for permission when entering someone's home. So our community as a whole, whether parents, teachers, this is life. What is life other than people whether relatives or friends, people you used to know then you got cut off, so now what should your relation with them be like? Someone visiting us for the first time for some reason, what are we supposed to do when we have visitors? So all of these are chances for kids to prosper. (Marwa, manager, alternative school)

Again, as part of experiencing real life, the alternative community is utilized for teaching values as part of the alternative education approaches. In contrast to theoretical dictation of values in "character building" classes, the alternative community becomes the space for practical performance of values. This can be through making use of the organic social events that come up within the alternative community, or even sometimes making up real life situations. Visiting their sick friend or teacher at home, attending a teacher's wedding, giving condolences to a teacher or friend for losing someone or congratulating a family with a gift for their newborn, all are examples given throughout the interviews for such social events. These social interactions do not happen haphazardly, these are organized by the teachers depending

on the need, as in correspondence to educational themes, or timely social events or contexts of individuals and families within the alternative community. These social events as part of the exposure and engagement with real life, and part of the quest of tarbiyah, are intentionally given considerable space in the curriculum of field trips.

4.3.2. The "Social Cement": An Islamic Actualization of Alternative Education

> To add to what we were discussing in the relationships of parents, the school actually provides a wider setting beyond being a school, a setting that enables for long-lasting relationships not attached to the school's material space, rather more attached to our collective organization around this specific vision or direction. So this is one of the very important meanings that you are providing an environment, I would not say identical rather as I repeatedly said that there is collaborative efforts between the parents and the school, a synergic and complementary relationship. This even goes beyond this, within this same framework and vision, what the children are seeing at the school is similar and close to what they see at their homes, and the same at their friends' homes, this way the child is not exposed to shocking contrasts in ideas or how things are in the places he goes to. The field trips and the other external interactions cannot be included in this, and he (the child) would still face this (contrast) in these contexts, while this is to an extent intentionally applied in our community. So the child would consume his values and ideas from within this community, which make it in a way a safe place and environment for the child. (Ali, father of two children, alternative school)

As Ali explains, this "wider setting" that the school provides is productive of a collective, an alternative community, that becomes functional in many ways within and beyond the alternative educational setting. To look at this alternative community within the wider society, Michel Maffesoli proposed that with post modernity the "little communities" (Maffesoli 2016, 746) and their collective emotion are dominating the scene, this he calls the "neo tribalism" of post modernity (Maffesoli 2016). His main argument revolves around the reconstruction of the identity into a series of porous identifications (Maffesoli 2016, 741). One can thus look at the society as a "social mosaic" made of entangled little communities that have their specific

"tribal" customs and rituals (Maffesoli 2016, 746). Beyond monolithic categorizations of individuals into set and singular identities as exclusive modes of existence, and towards reimagining the society as different, entangled tribes and communities, Maffesoli's use of "social mosaic" is quite expressive here.

> While a mosaic respects the diversity of the elements of which it is made up, it brings them together in an organic unity greater than the sum of its parts. (Maffesoli 2016, 746)

The shared "territory" and "tastes" are essential characteristics in Meffesoli's analysis of neo-trialism, and become the "social cement" that brings individuals together and holds these communities to endure (Maffesoli 2016, 743). Based on my analysis of the interviews it is clear that it takes more than Maffesoli's analysis to approach the alternative communities of alternative learning spaces in Cairo, their deep interrelationality, togetherness and as reconstructed social relations that endure. Malik Bennabi's work can be of more relevance in this aspect and as continuation of Maffesoli's neo-tribalism. What matters in Bennabi's theory of civilization here is the potency he attributes to the realm of ideas. He specifies religious ideas or ideas equivalent in power, in reconstructing and reorganizing social relations along with their cultural heritage, in alignment with the idea's framework of action (Bennabi 2002, 39-40). The dynamics of the idea, when authentic and effective, will necessarily and consequently reconstruct the realm of people as well as that of materials. In his analysis Bennabi refers to the moment of civilizational take-off for the Muslim civilization as the moment of revelation. A religious idea as powerful as the message of Islam was capable of reconstructing the society and its material reality to adhere to the new ideas of Islam, moving more into the "age-of-the-idea" (Bennabi 2002). I argue that the clarity of the vision of these alternative learning spaces, in their Islamic actualization of alternative education, becomes the "social cement" (Maffesoli 2016, 743) and "force of cohesion" (Bennabi 2003, 57) with which this alternative community was founded and by which it endures.

What Ali explains in the previous quote as "our collective organization around this specific vision or direction" is somewhat expressed by all the parents in both the alternative school and free learning space. This Islamic actualization of alternative education is the larger umbrella under which both alternative learning spaces operate, both their Islamic vision and framework along with their alternative education

approaches are declared and explicit in their visions and practices. Examples of this can be seen throughout the chapters, and one of the very clear examples is the reconfiguration of the teacher-student relationship. Moving beyond teacher-centered and learner-centered understandings of the educational relationship and towards the 'Mu'allim Murabbi' to student relationship that acknowledges agency, authority and cultural heritage in what could be perceived as an Islamic democratic realization of the educational relationship. A second example is the vitality of the quest of tarbiyah in these spaces. A final example is during the field trips as part of their alternative education approach, to engage with real life, still move around some practices or spaces, in adherence to their Islamic value system, as in the example of praying outside rather than inside the Sultan Hasan Mosque.

4.3.3. Collective Emotions of the Alternative Community: Feeling Safe, Family-Like Belonging and Solidarity

> I feel this with the four (students), I feel this with the four and their parents and on a personal level I also feel that the community is larger than being the four, it is a whole community that includes parents of children I might not particularly engage with. (Mahmoud, teacher, alternative school)

Mahmoud is talking here about his feelings of belonging to this alternative community, even beyond his four students and their family. While Maffesoli does not deeply engage with collective emotions related to neo-tribalism, he acknowledges their importance as both cause and effect for the tribal formation and its social bonds (Maffesoli 2016, 742). What I intend to emphasize here and as Mahmoud expresses, is not the feelings by themselves rather their features as collective emotions, how they propagate to include distanced 'others' within this collective. I also look at collective emotions as capable of doing, (Sara Ahmed 2004) and in the case of these alternative communities how they are capable of doing more. Sara Ahmed in her theorization of affective economies, argues that emotions are neither private nor exclusive to individuals or objects. Emotions circulate between individuals and groups, in a manner that is capable of binding them together to create the effect of collective (Ahmed 2004, 119). I first look at this very ability of emotions to create the sense of a collective in

the alternative communities, and in this context of alternative learning spaces in Cairo, trace back the initial source of these binding emotions.

As I have previously argued, the Islamic actualization of alternative education is the directive idea around which social relations are reorganized and with which alternative communities gain momentum. I now further argue that this directive idea becomes the effective source for these binding emotions, or at least attractive of such emotions. Sara's next quote will help to expand this in a more comprehensive manner.

> I will tell you, feeling safe for me is not the soft toys or the soft floors or the knives that are kept away from their (the children) reach. Feeling safe is number one religiously, I have religion as a number one priority and I don't like vagueness and I appreciate a place with a clear identity. So this for me was the priority when searching for a place, if it has a clear identity, as a basic and main part of the place, or not. (Sara, mother of two children, free learning space)

Sara, who has been a homeschooling mother even before joining the free learning space, mainly attributed her reasons for choosing the space to its clear Islamic identity. As simple as she puts it, Sara's priority of a clear religious identity of a place made her feel safe. She gives a few more reasons that contribute to her feeling safe, including certain criteria in the choice of facilitators and relating the monthly themes to Quranic, hadith based teachings, which still was related to this clear religious identity. In this sense she enrolled her children in the free learning space, feeling safe enough that the space practiced an Islamic actualization of alternative education. Feeling safe, assured and content was also discussed by other parents in both the free learning space and alternative school, especially attributed to the Islamic manifestations and practices in the space. Emotions of safety were not only evoked in the context of parents initially choosing the space for their children. Aya who is both a teacher and mother of two boys in the alternative school explains how feeling safe for herself and her children and content about the Islamic vision of the alternative school overcomes her anxiety and fear of many other considerations related to being "different" in a country that does not recognize alternative education.

> You don’t feel alone, there are others and I feel it is reassuring that most, if not all, the people on the founding and managing team have their children in the school, it is reassuring to me as a teacher. I would have not thought of working if it had not been for this school. I had always heard many things about the work community from my friends, the way people treat each other, the negatives one could find, in this school however, I don’t really see any of these negatives. There might be times of too much workload and similar things, but the community and the teachers feel as one family, all brothers and sisters. (Aya, teacher, alternative school)

Aya highlights this togetherness built around sharing the whole experience of both working and having one's children in the same place This along with the shared social events, family road trips, grouping children to send them to sports classes, mothers’ and fathers’ organized outings and much more—all happening beyond the material and educational space of the alternative school. This again brings up Maffesoli’s emphasis of sharing “territory” and “common tastes” to be productive of tribal feelings of belonging (Maffesoli 2016, 742). The family related analogies were brought up repeatedly throughout the previous chapters, again Aya is speaking here of family-like relations, of brotherhood and the trust and assurance that comes with it. Sara, a mother of two children in the free learning space, expresses her deep emotional connection that the space creates, initially because these families came to know each other because of their children, this somehow propagates familial feelings. Moreover, I argue with the theory of affective economies that such emotions propagate as a result of its accumulation over time, so the more they circulate the more affective they would be (Ahmed 2004). This accumulation of affective value (Ahmed 2004) or an affective atmosphere (Kraftl 2013) of familial intimacy and belonging can still be considered both cause and effect of these tribal bonds (Maffesoli 2016).

4.3.4. Surpassing Affection, Surpassing Actions

> There is social solidarity, one that we see on all occasions, good or bad, social solidarity that could be in the forms of psychological or financial support. (Ali, father of two children, alternative school)

The relations and interactions between individuals of the alternative community, as discussed previously, go beyond the material space and educational framework of the alternative learning spaces in Cairo. The "social solidarity" Ali is talking about is the main focus here. I am referring to this social solidarity as "surpassing" affections and "surpassing" actions of solidarity, not only because they extend to include personal aspects of the people in these spaces. Also because they are surpassing from the individual to the collective space. To elaborate on the latter point, the kinds of emotions I am discussing here might be looked at as emotions of individuals that are felt and accordingly expressed in the interviews. However, I argue that these are emotions that individuals "thought they ought to feel" (Rosenwein 2006, 196) only because of being part of this particular collective, i.e., the alternative community. As I presented how their Islamic actualization of alternative education is the "social cement" and "force of cohesion", it is in the same sense that this shared value system almost dictates certain collective emotions and continuously gives it the power needed to be translated into actions. That is to say, as Rosenwein talks about an imagined obligation within the emotional communities towards having certain feelings and performing certain actions, I argue here that there is a calling stemming from their value system that makes the alternative community feel obliged to answer to in the form of feelings and actions.

From the interviews it is noticeable that parents, teachers, managers, and founders alike tend to use pluralistic "us" when speaking of any efforts that the spaces are making. Accordingly, it is "us" who are working on developing a curriculum for the future generations, as described by different people in the interviews. Regardless of "us", there is always usage of other expressions and ways in which the interviewees expressed how everyone in this alternative community were in agreement. In some instances, parents and teachers were keen to clarify that their unmet expectations and problems with the respective spaces are a work in progress. This sense of togetherness, along with trust and assurance that I previously discussed seemed enough for parents and teachers in the face of their dissatisfactions. In the same line, it was also noticeable how everyone interviewed expressed their togetherness in light of being part of this alternative community versus the otherness of everyone who is not. There is a continuous and collective movement towards maintaining these spaces shadowed, making it hard to penetrate or join them. In the alternative school families must

personally recommend each other for any new student to join the space. The secrecy and privacy are also understandable with the legal risks related to practicing alternative education in Egypt.

While there are many examples to show the social solidarity, I will be discussing two that can be indicative of the spectrum of the extensive efforts and extended spaces of this social solidarity. The first example is from the alternative school. Salma who is a mother of two children, describes the community as "symbiotic" and regardless of if someone might have to leave the space for whatever reason they have pledged to each other with continuous communication and support. She speaks of particular examples, one of which when one of the mothers gave birth to a premature baby and was admitted to the NICU (neonatal extensive care unit) the entire community was keen to provide needed support. The second is mentioned by Sara, a mother of two children in the free learning space, during one of the waves of COVID-19 and the lockdowns that followed. According to her, families proposed that they would contribute to the rent of the place so that the space would not have to completely shut down. Even though the place itself would remain closed and neither parents or their children will be able to utilize it, Sara describes how the alternative community of the space were keen to go beyond the expected in efforts to preserve the space. Whether being involved in personal events of individuals and families from the alternative community or collectively supporting the founders of the alternative learning space itself as in the second example, surpassing emotions and actions are a distinct characteristic of these alternative communities.

4.4. Conclusion

In the same manner that Nezar AlSayyad in his Afterword of the Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics Culture and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East (2006), asks the one question expressive of the book's message: "Whose Cairo?" One can add to this and ask another question, "Whose version of real life?"

This chapter is a physical and metaphorical movement beyond the primary material and educational space to convey the liveliness and novelty of these alternative learning spaces. This movement beyond unravels how far alternative learning spaces extend to

reconstruct the meaning of life, learning and learning spaces. The first part of the chapter aims to analyze how movement beyond the primary material and educational space is essential for alternative learning spaces in Cairo and their alternative learning experience. I approach the field trips of the alternative learning spaces, as trajectories that re-appropriate public spaces through their alternative vision of real life. First is the remapping of their alternative pathways and pre chosen destinations, to expose children to life in the city, their city within the city (Abu-Lughod 183). Secondly the teachers and learners are not limited by the pre-determination of public spaces and its intolerance to children or its sometimes dictated childhood experience. All these pathways and destinations are not in themselves novel, these spaces are but a world beyond the traditional educational realm, whether everyday spaces, occupational, social, historical places or museums and exhibitions. Having this in mind, this reappropriation of these already-existing-spaces has two aspects to it, first is the way in which the spaces are experienced differently, and the second is the educational meanings given to them. The alternative vision of real life becomes a set of pathways and places, ways of performance that situates the young learner in the midst of life, and tactics to literally and metaphorically walk through, move around and be in real life.

Secondly, the physical and virtual transitions beyond the primary material space contribute to the notion of good life as understood as the flexible and rapid adaptation to changes, along with encouraging a positive attitude towards unexpected changes as "a chance to learn". Finally, the alternative community as a form of neo tribalism and as reframed social relations. Islamic actualization of alternative education becomes the directive idea and "social cement" around which these alternative communities were founded and by which they endure. Simultaneously the collective emotions of feeling safe, family-like belonging and solidarity related to these communities have the potential to extend as surpassing affects and actions.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Alternative learning spaces in Cairo, as modes of alternative education (explained in chapter I), are new learning spaces that were established only within the last 10 years. My first aim in this study was to put to the fore the question of space and space-making in studying these alternative learning spaces in Cairo. The second aim was to look at these spaces as more than straightforward modes of alternative education, and look for the *alternatives* they may contribute firstly because of their reality being pioneers in their location and secondly out of their Islamic actualization of alternative education. While space-making was the leading question in this study, the question of the *alternatives* that alternative learning spaces in Cairo contribute was tackled during the analysis and findings. I was also keen on accentuating them in the conclusion sections of each chapter as well in this concluding chapter.

In gradual steps and throughout the chapters, I have carried out a spatial, temporal and social analysis of alternative learning spaces in Cairo, which I present in a thematic manner in three main chapters: “Towards the Space”, “Within the Space” and “Beyond the Space”. While in the Introduction, I gave an overview of the chapters and their main arguments, I will engage here with the principal findings and relations that this study draws and contributes. Thus, this will not be a mere summary, rather I will be engaging with the arguments and simultaneously penetrating the chapters to evoke the importance of these arguments to the literature.

As I build this study significantly on the empirical data I gather from two specific alternative learning spaces in Cairo, the conclusions made in this study can be insightfully used to resonate with different alternative learning spaces both in Egypt and elsewhere. Nonetheless, my insights are specific and cannot be directly generalized. Having said that, the key distinctive factor in both the alternative school

and the free learning space included in this study was their Islamic actualization of alternative education.

5.1. Islamic Actualization of Alternative Education

The application of an Islamic educational vision of alternative learning spaces in Cairo, along with that they were essentially applications of alternative education, is constructive of what I called an Islamic actualization of alternative education. Some notions are explicit manifestations of this idea like the notion of N'ima discussed in the context of the relation of learners to the material space in chapter III. Also, we can see this in the quest for tarbiyah as an integral part of education that has direct implications on the relationship of the learner, his teachers and to others within the alternative community. Also related to this is the mu'allim-murabbi to student relationships as a reconfiguration of the educational relationship within the framework of Islamic conception of education. More importantly this Islamic actualization of alternative education can also be seen in the reframed social relations of the alternative community as well as constructing and performing the alternative vision of real life. The depth at which I engaged with the Islamic actualization of alternative education follows in the next discussion.

5.2. Extension of Home

In the second part of chapter II, departing from what families perceive as the need of space, I engaged with the alternative learning spaces in Egypt as fulfilling a dire need for a stable, collective, and distanced learning experience for their children. I presented how this need of space was also essentially a need for an extension of home, its values and affects and especially an extension of home as complementary and extending to the homeschooling's learning endeavor in the case of the free learning space. On the one hand alternative learning spaces were intended as extensions of home by their founders, on the other hand they were also socially constructed as so. I argued that this social construction of the space as an extension of home is an ongoing process that is also influenced by the physical environment. Thus, in Chapter III, I looked at the ordering of the space, including the materials and objects used such as the tabliya, bedouin rugs, or aluminum utensils. These appearances and objects relate to Arabic

and Egyptian material culture and its familial atmosphere. Having them incorporated in the material space they become part of the daily and ordinary, with which familial emotions accumulate over time and contribute to the space as an extension of home. More than that is the quest of tarbiyah and the circles of tarbiyah, especially and primarily the relation of the 'Mu'allim-Murabbi' to students, that I argued are more than educational relations, what I call family-like relations. The need of the space as perceived by families, along with familial emotions related to the material culture and finally the family-like relations of teachers and other members of the alternative community recursively reproduce the alternative learning spaces in Cairo as an extension of home.

5.3. Between the Extension of Home and Being in Life

On the one hand, throughout the chapters I presented how the material space, relationships and affects are recursively reproducing alternative learning spaces as extensions of home. On the other hand, one of the main themes and ideas of alternative learning spaces in Cairo was exposing learners from the get-go to real life. While both notions might give an impression of contradiction, I have argued that they are complementary to each other in the framework of Islamic actualization of alternative education of these alternative learning spaces in Cairo. That is to say the spaces being an extension of home does not mean preserving learners from engaging with life, nor is the exposure to real life undirected or unguided. One can visualize this as the alternative learning spaces building a vehicle for the learners as they move and with which they move through real life. This vehicle is rather a framework, a solid set framework made up of specific meanings, affects and relationships that reflects the Islamic vision of the spaces and in extension the values of the families of the learners. Still this vehicle is porous to allow, to an extent, engagement of both sides. One side is the learners affected by their engagement with real life, and the other is what Peter Kraftl claimed that such alternative learning spaces engage and even challenges neo-liberal forms of life (Kraftl 2013).

5.4. Alternative Vision of Real Life

One of the principal ideas in alternative education is learning as embedded in everyday life, and as intertwined with doing (Holt 1976). I presented how the application of this idea in the alternative learning spaces in Cairo was not only through constructing what they perceive as the closest version of real life within the setting of the spaces but is moving outside the physical premises of the spaces to engage first hand with life. And with this exposure and engagement of learners with life, alternative learning spaces in Cairo built particular meanings and ways of what learning and life is really about. Thus, these spaces construct what I called an alternative vision of real life, that is implemented in many ways within and beyond the space. Firstly, it is implemented within the spatial order as I presented in chapter III. This includes the abundance in selected materials in the material space, especially natural materials like stones, pieces of wood, sand, clay, water, paper, or tools that learners could recycle and use to build, along with other objects like wax guns and empty containers. And the scarcity of other materials, especially toys or objects that fulfill a function by themselves. Also, the lack of furniture, to ease the movement of learners within the space, creating calming undistracting atmospheres with selected certain colors that mimic nature alongside dispensing the usage of cartoon characters' posters. In these ways the material space was thus carefully ordered to convey simplicity, which was emphasized to mimic what these spaces perceived of real life. Also, in the second part of chapter III, within the quest of tarbiyah, the mu'allim-murabbi, especially with the older learners, intentionally engage them in real life situations as they happen, as part of recognizing their agency and cognition. I also presented how the mu'allim-murabbi is himself/herself included and engaged with the learners' families and life updates, and the encounters that may happen outside the physical and social premises of the alternative learning space.

Secondly, as for the engagement with real life outside the physical and educational premises, I presented in chapter IV, how through field trips, the notion of good life, and the alternative community, the alternative learning spaces constructed an alternative vision of real life. As a significant and integral part of the curriculum, the field trips target to expose the learners to different spaces within the city of Cairo and the different landscapes around it. Firstly, by targeting visiting different kinds of public

spaces, everyday life spaces like local shops, open spaces like parks and protectorates, museums, factories, and even slums and public transportations are part of the destinations, they are creating an alternative map to the city. Looking at public spaces in Cairo as embodied spaces, I approached field trips as trajectories capable of reappropriating public spaces. With a set of examples, I presented how the alternative vision of real life becomes a set of pathways and destinations, ways of performance that engages the young learner in the midst of life, that results in 'tactics' for the learner to literally and metaphorically walk through, move around and be in real life. Another implementation of the alternative vision of real life is through practicing the notion of good life in the physical and virtual transitions the alternative school went through. The physical transition being a temporary transition out of the primary material space to another place, and the virtual transitions being to an online platform. Learners and teachers during these periods were encouraged to practice flexibility and have a positive attitude towards such unexpected changes even considering them as learning opportunities under the notion of living a good life. Living a good life as related to the Islamic understanding is this readiness, rapid adaptability and 'positive' mind set to the changes that comes with real life. The final aspect of alternative vision of real life, beyond the extent of the primary material and educational space is the alternative community. The alternative learning spaces included in this study provide a wider setting, a collective that is part of, yet more than, the educational space. This alternative community is utilized in the practical teaching and performance of values. Social interactions within this community are performed as an integral part of learning. Examples include, students visiting a sick friend or teacher at home, attending together a wedding of a teacher, giving condolences or congratulating a family. These social events are seen as exposure and engagement with real life, and part of the quest of tarbiyah, and are given space in the curriculum of field trips. These social events also happen naturally and informally as a result of the interrelationality and familial atmosphere that grew between members of this alternative community.

5.5. Alternative Community

The alternative community was present in most of the discussions throughout the chapters, I engaged with this collective as a significant identifying part of the space not only as a type of interpersonal relations. In chapter IV, I argued that the alternative

community is the manifestation of how alternative learning spaces are capable of reframing social organization of learning. Reflecting on Michel Maffesoli's conception of neo-tribalism (2016), I looked at the alternative community from the larger understanding of societies in post modernity as clusters of 'little communities' gathered around shared "territory" and "tastes". I also draw on Malik Bennabi's work to argue that the idea of the Islamic actualization of alternative education represents the "force of cohesion" (Bennabi 2003, 57) with which this alternative community was formed and by which it endures. With this idea giving momentum to the alternative community, I also presented how the collective emotions particularly of assurance, family-like belonging and solidarity can still be considered both cause and effect of these tribal bonds (Maffesoli 2016). Along with the "Beyond the Space" theme of chapter IV, I also explained how the surpassing emotions and actions are a distinct characteristic of these alternative communities. The alternative community, as reframed social relations of learning that go beyond, contributed significantly again to the *alternative* question of this study.

The field of research for this study consisted of two alternative learning spaces in Cairo, the first being the alternative school and the second being the free learning space. With carrying out an ethnographic study, along with my insider/outsider positionality there is first the risk of idealizing and romanticizing the analysis. The field work was mainly conducted through online interviews with parents, teachers, managers, and founders from both spaces. This had set the challenge of having to experience the space at a distance, along with the challenges faced because of conducting the interviews online rather than the traditional real time interviews. The challenges were mainly the difficulty of visual interactions, and the interlocutor's natural tendency to anonymity, as well as the lack of my firsthand observations of the space. To make the best out of this situation, I thus focused on unpacking the discursive descriptions and the expressed perceptions of space-making by the interlocutors which contributed greatly to the findings. Another limitation of this study is that the young learners were not interviewed due to the limited time of the study and the ethical dilemmas concerned; thus, the study is also missing their descriptions and experiences. Also due to the time limitations and to be able to have enough interviews as well as in-depth account and analysis of each space, I included only two alternative learning spaces in this study. This field of research on alternative education in Egypt is limited

and especially lacking the sociological lens, and so future research on other alternative learning spaces as well as other modes of alternative education in Egypt would enrich the field.

With the existing challenge of navigating through the limited literature on spaces of alternative education, this study contributes to the field with its conceptualization of space in relation to learning in the framework of alternative learning spaces in Cairo. This study not only foregrounds space, against the usual negligence of space from sociology of education, but it also combines and relates different social, spatial and temporal aspects in its analysis of these spaces. The study also contributes to the growing literature on the alternatives within the educational framework in post-2011 revolution Egypt. Through contextualizing alternative learning spaces in Cairo, the study gives an account of the spectrum of other alternatives. It also contributes to the literature as it relates the ordinary everyday practices of alternative learning spaces to larger meanings of learning and life. As I have argued that through the ordinary everyday practices of alternative learning spaces in Cairo, these spaces are capable of reproducing alternative versions of real life.

Even though I engaged with the alternative vision of real life as capable of reimagining meanings of life and learning in the framework of this study, it can be further researched in the future especially on the level of affecting the current capitalist, neo-liberal interpretations of life in Egypt. Alternative learning spaces in Cairo could also be reconceptualized in relation to autonomous spaces and their contribution to reimaging and reconceptualizing learning spaces as spaces of autonomy as in the understanding of Pickerill and Chatterton of autonomous spaces being "workable alternatives outside the state" yet beyond the dichotomy of "global-bad, local-good" (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, 739-743).

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS

	Name	Role	Space	Date of interview
1	Habiba	Facilitator	Free learning space	04/04/2022
2	Amal	Manager	Alternative school	10/03/2022
3	Salma	Mother	Alternative school	26/03/2022
4	Ali	Father	Alternative school	26/03/2022
5	Zeinab	Mother	Alternative school	29/03/2022
6	Mohamed	Father	Alternative school	29/03/2022
7	Amena	Mother	Alternative school	27/04/2022
8	Sara	Mother	Free learning space	14/04/2022
9	Marwa	Manager	Alternative school	16/05/2022
10	Arwa	Mother	Free learning space	05/04/2022
11	Amr	Facilitator	Free learning space	31/03/2022
12	Mahmoud	Teacher	Alternative school	29/03/2022
13	Betul	Facilitator	Free learning space	29/03/2022
14	Enas	Facilitator	Free learning space	28/03/2022
15	Hussein	Manager	Alternative school	17/05/2022
16	Aya	Teacher	Alternative school	26/03/2022
17	Mariam	Founder	Free learning space	21/03/2022
18	Hasan	Co-founder	Free learning space	21/03/2022

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