Beyond the Boundaries of Traditional and Alternative Education

School Choice and the Geographies of Experimentation in the Italian School System

By

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Dedication

To Adelio, Orlando and all the children of tomorrow

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Abbreviations

AAPT	Associazione Amici del Parco Trotter (Friends' Association of Trotter Park)
ANT	Actor Network Theory
ASL	Azienda sanitaria locale (Local health authority)
CA	Catchment areas of residence
CERI	Centre for Educational Research and Innovation
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CV	Curriculum vitae
EDU-LARP	Educational live action role-playing
EFCF	European Federation of City Farms
EU	European Union
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points
IBBY	International Board on Books for Young People
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ILE	Innovative Learning Environments
INDIRE	Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa (National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research)
INPS	Istituto nazionale della previdenza sociale (National Social Insurance Agency).
INVALSI	Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione (Italian National institute for the evaluation of the education and training system)
ISEE	Indicatore della Situazione Economica Equivalente (Equivalent Financial Situation Index)
ISTAT	Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Italian National Statistics Institute)
KET	Key English Test

LODLNB	L'Ora di Lezione Non Basta (Lesson Hour Is Not Enough)
MIUR	Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Iniversità e della Ricerca (Ministry of Education, University and Research)
MoMo	Mondo Montessori (Montessori World)
NoLo	North of Loreto
NSSC	New Social Studies of Childhood
OAE	Outdoor Adventure Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OL	Outdoor Learning
ONB	Opera Nazionale Balilla
PAD-LAB	Pedagogy architecture design laboratory
PAS	Science and environments park
PC	Personal computer
PE	Physical education
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
POF	Piano dell'offerta formativa (training offer plan)
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USA	United States of America
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

Publications

A part of the research results of this study has been presented at several international conferences; feedback and questions were welcomed. Further discussions were carried out in meetings with research groups and shared work. As a result:

- A brief overview of Chapter 2.2 appeared in Ceresa G. (2018). Children's Geographies: un settore sempre più importante della geografia umana. Ambiente Società Territorio – Geografia nelle Scuole. 4, 34–40.

- Aspects of Chapter 2 appeared in Kraftl, P., Holloway, S., Johnson, V., Andrews, W., Beech, S., White, C., & Ceresa, G. (2022). Geographies of education: A journal. Area, 54(1), 15–23. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12698

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

This book originates from my doctoral research, completed at the University of Birmingham, and builds upon the reflections, fieldwork and theoretical frameworks developed throughout that period. While its core arguments and empirical materials stem from the PhD thesis, the present work has been re-elaborated with the aim of offering a broader and more accessible perspective on the transformation of learning environments in contemporary education. This study was written at a decisive time in the debate over the transformation of learning environments in the Western world in which academia is participating in an ever more interdisciplinary perspective, in open dialogue with policymakers and authorities which deal with educational policies (Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; OECD, 2008, 2013, 2015). There is a creative debate due to the complementarity and interaction between various studies and research disciplines which range from education, architecture, the geographies of education and political and social sciences. On an institutional level, over the past decade, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has focused on the relationship between educational architecture and learning processes, highlighting the importance of putting teaching practices at the centre of the analysis and planning of the school environments. Similarly, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) collected the work of tens of academics (Kraftl, McKenzie & Gulson, 2022; Scott, 2015) in order to examine the role of different types of learning spaces and observe how they can be actively modelled, perceived and concep-

tualised through the processes which take place within and around them. In the Italian landscape – the context for this study – the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research developed the manifesto '1+4 learning spaces for schools of the new millennium' (INDIRE, 2016) which highlights that current training requirements need polyfunctional, flexible and modular spaces. This is a topic which has been widely discussed in academic literature (Barrett et al., 2015, 2019) and analysed by large-scale quantitative studies which have undertaken the evaluation of the impact on student and teacher performance (Higgins et al., 2005; Keep, 2002; Lackney & Jacobs, 2002).

For obvious reasons, this study does not aim to be all-encompassing of everything that has been written or is being said on the topic of the expansion and transformation of learning spaces; however, it aims to create a grounded, situated and rich critical analysis of the Italian landscape of alternative and experimental spaces and practices within mainstream education, offered by an intersection of three areas of scholarship: children's geographies, school choice, and the geographies of education and alternative education. It is an approach which has been identified among the infinite list of possibilities offered by this creative field of investigation and selected in order to share the experience of the parents, teachers and children who collaborate and live each day within this world of change. Transformations of learning spaces have also had an impact on alternative education – which in Italy is situated differently from many other countries and often operates in close contact with the mainstream school system – creating experimentation spaces within public schools. Some examples of this are the synergy between the Opera Nazionale Montessori / Fondazione Montessori Italia and public schools or urban farms cited in the case studies of this work.

Indeed, an innovative aspect of this research is the fact that it extends its lens to the circuits of choice which guide parents towards alternative education. In the light of burgeoning scholarly interest in alternative education spaces (Kraftl, 2013; Lees et al., 2016; Woods & Woods, 2009), which revolve around criticism of mainstream school, alternative education is accumulating a renewed popularity, especially in terms of numbers. For example, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the number of pupils in Italy who were educated by parents has tripled over the course of three years. Ministry of Public Education data, issued by the main Italian economics newspaper, Il Sole 24 Ore, show that in fact, 5,126 homeschoolers between 2018–2019 have now become 15,361 from 2020–2021, after an interval of 6,212 pupils in 2019–2020. Despite this growth, in Italy alternative education is a phenomenon of limited dimensions if compared to that of other countries: for example, England with 5% of the student population engaging in alternative education and the USA where the figure is greater than 10%.

To date, in academic literature, there is no standard definition for alternative education, the term 'fragmented landscape' is more often used (Sliwka, 2008, p. 1), and this encompasses anyone operating outside of the mainstream school system. At the same time, the expression is often used to describe programmes dedicated to vulnerable children who are not able to attend traditional schools (Aron, 2006). Given these premises, education is not to be understood as a 'monolithic entity but varies in its form between and within countries and contains differences and alternative perspectives' (Woods & Woods, 2009, p. 3), in such a way that it is often difficult to have official lists validated by academia. In the case of Italy, at the time of writing this study, there were no peer-reviewed texts which conduct a census of alternative education; among the attempts to describe the phenomenon, a mother belonging to the Italian network EDUpar (Bosoni, 2018) created a map which aims to identify forms of alternative education in Italy (see Research Context, Chapter 3). For example, among the most popular

options, especially in the North of Italy, the global networks based on specific educational philosophies stand out. These are the Montessori or Steiner networks, which today coexist with some new forms of non-traditional education (for example, forest schools, farm schools, democratic/human scale schools). It may be the case that these experiences are integrated or mixed: it is not unusual to find homeschoolers who use Montessori materials, or forest schools inspired by Steiner concepts. In particular, the forms of parental education are school experiences which operate outside of the school system and are not subject to the Italian Ministry of Public Education's control of quality standards. Only families who desire to do so can take exams as external candidates to gain access to the subsequent grade but doing this every year is not mandatory. Besides this, as previously mentioned, in Italy there are many experimentation networks in the public school system like Montessori, Outdoor School and No Backpack; these were established thanks to the law on autonomy (Article 5 Italian Presidential Decree no. 275/99), and their conduct is continuously monitored and supervised by the universities and training entities with which they are affiliated.

These experimentations often offer an alternative to the traditional curricula but, as shall be demonstrated later, as these schools are public schools, they can rarely represent forms of alternative education. A similar discussion was held regarding the American magnet schools (Lees et al., 2016), where the term '*magnet*' refers to public schools, characterised by specialised curricula, which attract students from outside the normal confines defined by authorities. In Italy, mainstream experimentation is understood as spaces in constant change which also adhere to networks formed by multiple institutes and sanctioned practices. However, despite similarities, they are not all equal, as they belong to pre-existing traditional schools. In this sense, each institute carries a different story which models the experimentation itself. They represent the leading strategy in teaching inno-

vation in Italian public primary schools. Even though in a few years they may already have taken on new forms, it is worth investigating which processes make up these approaches, because they offer an important point of observation on the transformation of the learning environments which characterise the Western world.

Given the backdrop mentioned here, which shall be looked at in greater depth in the third chapter on research context, the need to listen to those who choose the forms of non-traditional education has been emphasised: it is an emerging phenomenon which cannot be ignored. Therefore, I decided to begin the analysis with the circuits of choice which move students within, and outside of, the mainstream system. Over the last forty years, a vast and eclectic literature concerning school choice has been in constant growth and evolution (Jeynes, 2014) and today covers many sectors of public and private schools in all their forms (Osborne, Russo & Cattaro, 2012). The most recent data available, related to enrolment in the academic year of 2020–2021 in the United States, demonstrate that the pandemic caused a significant change in the attendance of students with regard to public, private and domestic learning options (Butcher & Burke, 2021). It is well known that Coronavirus restrictions have impacted on the daily life of schools (Gil-Baez et al., 2021; Robertson, Thomas & Bailey, 2022; Victorino et al., 2022) all over the world. This has led to schools rethinking teaching, amplifying spaces and recovering less used spaces, imagining new elements of furnishing and planning more activities outdoors and outside of the school wall. At the same time, however, it is possible to observe how the pandemic was an accelerator in the diffusion of the network of experimentation within the public school system which has grown and seen an increase in numbers of adhering institutions over recent years. Of these learning spaces in constant evolution, Italian academic literature is still scarce, and, for this reason, I decided to dedicate a substantial part of the field research to these school experiences (see Chapters 6 and 7), making them a point of

special observation to investigate the boundaries between alternative and traditional education.

Introducing the Geography of Education in Experimentation

On one hand, this study revolves around the choices of parents, on the other, it provides insight into the emerging realities within the mainstream system through the voices of the students and adults who live their daily life in experimental and alternative spaces. Through the voices of the teachers, facilitators and head teachers, a dialogue was opened surrounding the processes which make these educational spaces different from the mainstream, with particular focus on material aspects, practices and spacings (Horton & Kraftl, 2006). Pupil participants were asked to discuss their schools and share their opinions and class-life experiences through writing a lapbook. Promoting, therefore, an idea of children as '*social*' (Prout, 2002, p. 67) and '*knowing*' actors (Holt, 2011, p. 2), the study contributes to the field of studies of children's geographies, a prolific and expanding branch of human geography. Through the many and often non-linear paths it has travelled over the course of time: from the work of pioneers of the '60s, to contemporary academic studies, passing through some of its landmark moments, such as feminist geography, the relationship with the New Sociology of Childhood and recent studies of non-representational geographies (see Chapter 2 for a literature review). In this fascinating journey, schools have been at the centre of the discipline right from the beginning, both in terms of its normative and material aspects, as well as its centrality to the internal and external network of relations that characterise any specific territory. Many of the studies of children's geographies tend to think of the schools as environments of socialisation, defined as spaces *'through which differences between children are reinscribed'* (Holloway & Valentine, 2000,

p. 11). This is because the possibility of attending one school over another can significantly change the daily life, vision and future of the child. A similar vein was taken up by the sister sub-discipline of the geography of education, a field of research that rose rapidly during the first decade of the twenty-first century and explored the complex social and spatial processes that inform school spaces from various angles (see also Chapter 2 for the literature review). In particular, the aim of this analysis is to respond to the call of some of the geographies (Nguyen, Cohen & Huff, 2017), which have highlighted the importance of investigating the transformations of educational landscapes following the neoliberal restructuring.

The case of experimentation in Italian public school is important and (compared with most other countries) unusual and instructive because it increases, although in a limited way, the possibility of choice and allows families who cannot afford a private school, to attend school outside the traditional model. Another noteworthy aspect is that these schools have been learning spaces in transformation from the start as most of them were originally founded as traditional state schools. The study opens a dialogue with the most recent contributions that pay particular attention to formal school spaces (Holloway, 2000), alternative school spaces (Kraftl, 2013) and informal school spaces (Dunkley & Smith, 2019; Hickman Dunne, 2019; Morris, 2019), bringing them together into the chorus of those who criticise the gulf between formal and informal education (Holloway & Kirby, 2020; Mills & Waite, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019) as a means of analysing the use of alternative approaches in the mainstream school system. The study provides insight into the complex establishment of these hybrid forms at the boundaries between the mainstream and alternative systems, typical of the Italian landscape, adding a valuable perspective to the understanding of these spaces of experimentation within the neoliberal context.

Research Focus

To critically analyse the geographies of alternative and experimental education in Italian mainstream schools, as indicated above, the research design was planned surrounding two key arguments (see Figure 1).
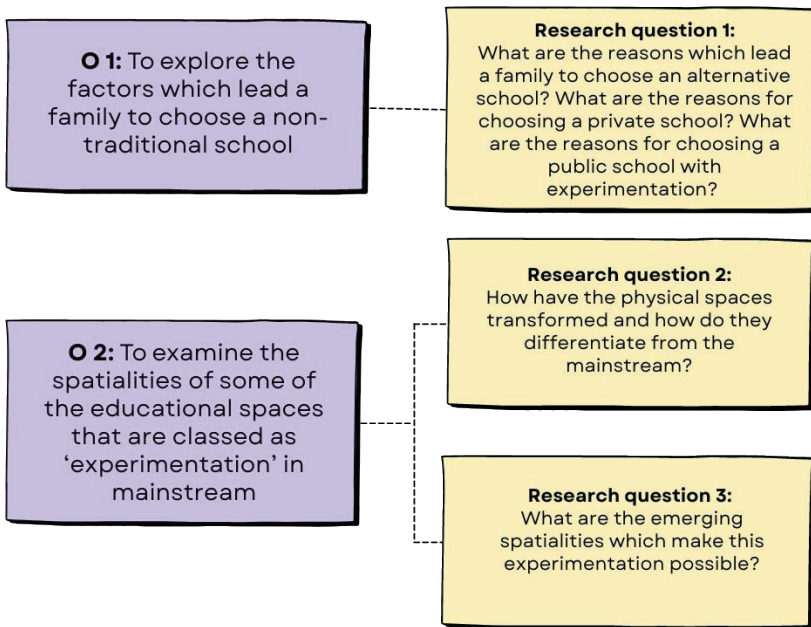

Figure 1 *Study Objectives.*

Source: Author.

Firstly, it starts with analysis of needs and the context which emerges in the decisions of the parents who face the choice of a non-traditional primary school for their children.

Explicitly, the first objective of the study is:

> To explore the factors which lead a family to choose a non-traditional school.

This first research objective was pursued through the programme, 'The School Of My Dreams' (for a detailed description see Chapter 4) which was carried out over the months of April and May 2020. The programme comprised an in-depth interview composed of open questions for parents who chose alternative learning sites, private schools or state schools with alternative experimentation for their children (n=40). Participants were adults sampled from different socio-economic groups, coming from different regions throughout the North, South and Centre of the Italian Peninsula, recruited through members of the Facebook group 'Tutta un'altra scuola', or coming from the schools with experimentation under investigation. On an operational level, this first objective was broken up into a threefold research question:

> What are the reasons which lead a family to choose an alternative school? What are the reasons for choosing a private school? What are the reasons for choosing a public school with experimentation?

After being analysed and compared, the reasons were extracted and subsequently organised into wider topics which outline the circuits of choice leading the parents to choose a non-traditional school.

Subsequently, the focus shifted to a more defined sample in order to investigate some of the social and spatial processes which characterise three of the major school networks with experimentation in Italy: Outdoor Public School, No Backpack School and Montessori Public School.

The second objective of the study can be outlined as follows:

> To examine the spatialities of the educational spaces that are classed as 'experimentation' in mainstream schools.

By analysing the ways in which experimentation in the mainstream system is established within the unique Italian context, the study aims to offer a new perspective on the ways in which traditional and alternative educational spaces are evolving within the neoliberal reorganisation. All three case study schools were originally established as traditional schools. Research questions 2 and 3 have therefore taken into account the transformative characteristic of these spaces. Research question 2 is brought about by this premise:

> How have the physical spaces transformed and how do they differentiate from the mainstream?

The study identifies the features of the physical spaces of the schools with experimentation and how they are reorganised or adapted during teaching time in order to give life to more fluid and flexible learning settings. In doing this, the study confronts a key gap in the literature, understanding the characteristics of the school spaces where the children and teaching staff operate and live their daily lives, and it maps how these environments mediate their experiences. The need for the third research question arises from here:

Research question 3

> What are the emerging spatialities which make experimentation possible?

The aim of the research question 3 is to identify some of the social and spatial processes which characterise the three schools under investigation and make them spaces for experimentation. The analysis includes all that takes place within, and outside of the school walls, through relationships with stakeholders and the community.

The second research objective was pursued through two different methodological programmes, carried out in the spring of 2021, which used different tools:

1. 'All About Your School', a programme for children from the ages of 6 to 10 which proposed the production of a lapbook through which the children expressed their own school experiences (n=75). All the children were briefed by the postgraduate researcher through a remote meeting, and they subsequently received an outline to inspire them, which they worked on in class with their teachers, in collaboration with the postgraduate researcher. The participants of this programme were children belonging to the three schools with experimentation located in three different Italian regions (Piedmont, Lombardy and Tuscany).

2. 'What's Education For', interviews with key adults who work as teachers and school directors in schools with these alternative experimentations (n=28). The participants were adults involved in the experimentation network to which each of the three schools under investigation in the previous programme adhere, and adults belonging to the children's schools themselves. (For a detailed description, refer to Chapter 4 on methods).

In closing, this study examines the motives leading families to choosing a non-traditional primary school, within or beyond the Italian school system. Subsequently, it examines the three case study schools with experimentation within the Italian school system in greater depth, attempting to describe and discuss, through the voices of the children and teachers, the social and spatial processes which make up these approaches and how they try to disconnect from the mainstream. By doing this, it positions experimentation schools within the geography of education, offering a new perspective on the relationship between formal and informal education within the public school system.

Terminology Used in the Book

Considering the inherent complexity in defining the varied landscape of alternative education and the spaces under transformation within mainstream school, this study uses some terms to differentiate the various typologies. It refers to 'alternative learning sites' as the settings outside of the mainstream system where alternative education takes place. 'Non-traditional' is instead referred to as a general and vast container of all the forms of education with an innovative curriculum and can belong to alternative education, the private school system, equivalent to experimentation within the public school system. The term 'experimentation' is used as a broad umbrella under which the networks of schools operating within the public school system are grouped. These schools are referred to in the case studies, in the 'All About Your School' and 'What's Education For' programmes. These network contracts have different durations and varying numbers of participating schools, as well as a regulated relationship with the Ministry of Public Education according to their own methods. Therefore the term 'experimentation' groups together experiences of different methods and dimensions but with the common denominator of operating within the Italian public school system. The schools with experimentation featured in the case studies have been translated as 'No Backpack' School ('Senza Zaino' in Italian), Outdoor School ('Scuola all'aperto' in Italian), Montessori School. Regarding this last expression, although in Italy there are many private schools inspired by the Montessori method, for convention and ease, 'Montessori Experimentation' or 'Montessori Public School' refers to those within the public school system. Instead, when discussed in the context of private schools, which require payment of a fee to attend, 'Montessori School' is used. More generally, to refer to the private schools operating within the Italian school system using the same curriculum as the public system, the term 'equivalent' (which corresponds to the Italian term 'paritario') is used.

Book Structure

After this first introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents the conceptual frameworks which guide the study of the geographies of experimentation through the exploration of the boundaries of traditional and alternative education. It begins with an analysis of the history of children's geographies which illustrates the range of different scholarship to which this study offers a contribution. It then explores the development of the sister sub-discipline of the geographies of education and positions the study within the more recent geographies of alternative and informal education. After this, it tackles the theories and critiques of education, highlighting where its analyses intersect and expand upon these theories. Focus is then shifted to the topic of school choice, observing it from the perspective of the geographies of education and the offerings of recent urban studies. Subsequently following this is the discussion of some noteworthy points in the interdisciplinary research on educational spaces under transformation, with particular reference to flexible learning spaces and outdoor education.

Chapter 3 offers a look into the research context in which the research operates. To begin, landmark moments in the history of Italian schooling are highlighted, as well as the normative framework that gave way to the development of experimentation within the mainstream system. This is followed by an exploration of the background of experimentation networks and an introduction to the specific schools under investigation. After this comes a presentation of the current configuration of alternative education in Italy which outlines the scale and reach of the phenomenon.

Chapter 4 illustrates the methodological approach and the modification of the research design due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The recruitment processes are also discussed and analysed within the three research programmes which compose the multi-method

approach: 'The School Of My Dreams', 'What's Education For', 'All About Your School'. The chapter ends with the ethical considerations and challenges encountered during the fieldwork experience at the schools, with particular reference to the difficult circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Chapter 5 marks the beginning of the empirical research and is the first of three. Here, the study takes on the first research objective, attempting to outline the factors which lead parents to choose a non-traditional school for their children. It analyses the fine link between place of residence and school, the possibility to choose private equivalent schools and the main themes that emerge from the parent-interviews with those who opted for non-traditional education. Finally, focus is placed on the relationship between parental lifestyle and alternative education, shedding light on some of the ways in which this choice impacts on their lives.

In Chapter 6, the focus is on the second research objective. Here, the transformative nature of the school spaces changing from the traditional curriculum to experimentation is investigated. Subsequently, the main physical characteristics aiding the creation of flexible learning settings are illustrated. The practice of appropriating space is defined in collective and individual terms, as well as through some of the affordances that emerge from the furnishings and school materials. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the nature of flexible space and development of outdoor education which emerges in the case studies.

Chapter 7 concludes the analysis, also addressing the second research objective, and some of the spatialities which characterise the spaces with experimentation are identified. The study offers a reflection of the role of creativity and imagination, autonomy, heterogeneous learning and uncertainty. Next this chapter examines the relationship between informal education and its double-function: on one hand, it

acts as a complement to the training offer, supporting the privatisation of certain processes of the public school; on the other, it operates as a network of social support, increasing the solidarity and connections of the social fabric with the educational community. The final part analyses the relationship with alternative spaces and some of the ways in which the curriculum of schools is shaped through them.

The final chapter provides conclusions: recalling the principal research objectives, Chapter 8 illustrates its key contributions in terms of the key areas of scholarship outlined in this introduction. Finally, this book closes with an exploration of possible future fields of research, in the Italian context, and on a wider scale, in the development of the growing geographies of experimentation in the mainstream school system.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

School is the cornerstone of the spatial experience of children. Contemporary research on education is a huge field, in constant evolution thanks to the opening of a lively interdisciplinary dialogue between different academic disciplines: from the various facets of pedagogic studies, to human sciences, from school policies to economic sciences. This study, written by someone who is not an education scholar, positions itself at the intersection of three areas of scholarship which deal with theoretical issues according to a geographical and social perspective: children's geographies, geography of education and, more specifically, geographies of alternative education. This chapter therefore focuses on the conceptual frameworks on education spaces that are classed as 'experimentation in the mainstream' and, at the same time, on alternative schooling and school choice within the Italian context. The hope is that this study can provide academics from different backgrounds with a new perspective on the ways in which traditional and alternative learning spaces are evolving, shaped by geographical thinking on learning environments and the spatial practices through which students engage with knowledge.

Among the various approaches proposed by the geographers of education which shall be presented in this chapter (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Hanson Thiem, 2009; Holloway & Jöns, 2012), I chose to include the perspective of children's geographies in order to observe the school as a key place in the spatial experience and social protagonism of the students. Therefore, in this first subchapter, ample space

is given to this field of studies in the literature review as it inspired and guided the research design. The discipline is presented through the history of the sub-discipline along the many, and often non-linear paths, it has travelled over the course of time. This section concludes with a discussion of the lines of children's geographies which are of major interest to this study.

The book shall demonstrate how schools with experimentation are also influenced by the communities surrounding the schools; and how these communities, through their activities, often contribute to the creation of the social processes which make these spaces alternative and innovative from a teaching point of view. Reflecting on this, I have positioned the study within the recent geographies of informal education and alternative education, illustrating the conceptual frameworks most relevant to this discussion while also opening a dialogue with the radical geographies of education. In parallel, I highlighted three lines of research which intersect in the analysis: the theories and critiques of education; an introduction to school choice, on an international level; and, in the Italian context, interdisciplinary research on transforming educational spaces, with a particular focus on the flexible class and outdoor education. In particular, Gibson's theory of affordances is reconsidered and expanded in order to study the experimentation spaces. The chapter concludes with a macro-level summary of the study's positioning and the complex landscape in which it operates.

Introducing Children's Geographies

Children's geographies is a sub-discipline of human geography that seeks to understand the recursive and co-producing relationship between space and childhood. Its goal is to bring light to the articulated system of subjective and collective relationships that children establish with the places of their everyday lives, and the ways in which

they themselves produce space. In this research area, children, teenagers, and young people under twenty-five are conceived as '*dynamic and social actors*' (Horton & Kraftl, 2006, p. 67), inasmuch as they are creators, '*colonizers of small spaces*' (Ward, 1978, p. 76) and mediators of the social significance of those places (Christensen & Allison, 2008). As shall be demonstrated in the methodological chapter (see Chapter 4), the field research design found roots in this assumption: giving the children, as competent subjects, the possibility to discuss their own school.

Sarah Holloway (2014) observes that the sub-discipline does not have a single origin, nor does it follow a linear development. In fact, its path has taken it down various roads, with some crucial deviations that include studies of children's games, identity, spatial cognition, mapping abilities and feminist studies of the family. In a work from 2018, the American geographer Stuart C. Aitken identifies three distinct phases of development: an initial 'impression', born in American geography and influenced by developmental psychology and the environment (from the '70s to the '90s); a concept developed through British and Scandinavian geography, conditioned by factors such as the development of critical feminist and Marxist approaches, as well as the new global initiatives on children's rights (from the '90s to the '00s); and finally a challenge with global aspirations of what we think we know about children's geographies. Without losing sight of the central topic of the spatial experience of children, this last phase (from the '00s to today) – the most copious in terms of literature produced – took it upon itself to move into new interdisciplinary directions and angles, occasionally giving birth to veritable new sub-disciplines, such as, for example, geographies of education and geographies of alternative education, the pillars of this research.

Recent examples of empirical research in the various areas of Children's geographies can be found in the two main academic journals

that register the changes and developments of the sub-discipline. 'Children, Youth and Environments', founded in Colorado in 1984, publishes studies of an interdisciplinary nature that concern the relationship between children and physical environments in various countries around the world; 'Children's Geographies', founded in England in 2003 by Hugh Matthews, brings together contributions that investigate children's places and spatial experiences from a geographical as well as interdisciplinary point of view. Since there is no single manual of children's geographies that covers the entire history of the ascent of the sub-discipline, one must refer to the work of various authors (among the most recent works are Freeman, 2020; Holt et al., 2020; Skelton & Aitken, 2019).

In Italy, the literature on geography demonstrates a lack of contributions dealing with the specific area of research. Nevertheless, noteworthy is Stefano Malatesta's volume 'Geografie dei bambini (Children's geographies)' (2015), which acts as an invitation and introduction to children's geographies. Through a selection of monographed texts, it offers a set of tools for a first contact with the sub-discipline and its immense theoretical framework. Before him, Cristiano Giorda decided to dedicate a chapter of the book, 'Il mio spazio nel mondo (My Space in the World)' (2014, pp. 43–46) to the geographies of children, proposing different points of contact between epistemological topics of the sub-discipline and the major topics of the geography of education, on the contrary known and studied by the Italian academic world. Among these, attention is given to the social and political protagonism of children using the body, orientation in space, the importance of material components of places and various ways of representing the space on the children's behalf. While in educational studies, there are many empirical studies involving children (Mortari, 2009), in the case of the rising Italian children's geographies it is a theoretical literature which is becoming more prevalent. Therefore,