



## Practicing a values-oriented education in geography. Main results from a national photo-contest run by the Italian Association of Geography Teachers

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### Abstract

In 2015 the Italian Association for Geography Teachers (AIIG), in collaboration with other relevant national partners, launched the initiative “Fotografi di Classe” (FdC), a photo-contest open to the participation of classes of every school grade, from primary to high school. The main goal of the contest is to stimulate geography education through creativity and active engagement, by asking pupils to critically reflect on the significance of their local space and on the values they ascribe to it, beyond the most immediate aesthetic dimension. Building on the results of the fourth edition of the contest, inspired by the topic “Il Paese che vorrei. Scatti e immagini dal futuro dell’Italia” (The Country I would like to live in. Pics and images from the future of Italy), the aim of this paper is twofold: first, to discuss the role of this and similar initiatives in enabling a values-oriented education in geography; secondly, to map the typologies of spatialised values expressed by the participants, in order to assess to what extent students are empowered to think critically and spatially.

**Keywords:** Geography Education, Landscape Values, Photo-Contest, Values Education

### 1. Introduction

In 2015 the Italian Association for Geography Teachers (AIIG), in collaboration with other relevant national partners, launched the initiative “Fotografi di Classe” (FdC), a photo-contest open to the participation of classes of every

school grade, from primary to high school<sup>1</sup>. In the first four editions, the initiative saw the par-

<sup>1</sup> The photo-contest is co-organized by the AIIG ([www.aiig.it](http://www.aiig.it)) with: De Agostini Scuola; Fondazione Italia Patria della Bellezza; A.N.D.I.S. (Associazione Nazionale Dirigenti Scolastici); WWF Italia (from 2020). More information on the contest, past editions and on the pictures awarded with prizes are available on the website of the contest: [www.fotografidiclasse.it](http://www.fotografidiclasse.it).

icipation of an increasing number of classes from all the Italian regions, with a total number of 200 pictures being presented in 2019. Such a wide archive of pictures provides a privileged observation point on how pupils perceive and represent their reality, what the most relevant topics and issues are that they report through the pictures, and which values and meanings they ascribe to the landscapes and places they live in. Indeed, the main goal of the contest is to stimulate geography education through creativity and active engagement, by asking pupils to critically reflect on the significance of their local space and on the values they attribute to it, beyond the most immediate “visual” dimension. In this regard, photography is a strong vehicle of geographic information, as it enables students to represent the world, space, and societies and puts to work some specific geographic categories such as space, environment, territory or landscape. At the same time, being open to multiple interpretations according to the different cultural filters from which they are observed, photos stimulate engagement, discussion, and common reflection.

Building on the results of the fourth edition of the contest inspired by the topic “Il Paese che vorrei. Scatti e immagini dal futuro dell’Italia” (The Country I would like to live in. Pics and images from the future of Italy), the aim of this paper is twofold: firstly, to discuss the role of this and similar initiatives in enabling a values-oriented education in geography; secondly, to map the typologies of spatialised values expressed by the participants, in order to assess to what extent students are empowered to think critically and spatially.

From the methodological perspective, the analysis of pictures is based on the classification of landscape values being depicted in the takes and the subsequent interpretation of the contents of each picture. Even if the analysis does not aim at being at all representative as regards the whole population of Italian students, the results show how the students who joined the initiative were put in the condition to elaborate their own opinions, thoughts, and arguments, and thus to practice what has been defined as critical spatial thinking.

The paper is organized as follows: after the

introduction, the second paragraph collocates the initiative in the wider international debate on active learning, critical spatial thinking and values-oriented education in geography, with a specific focus on the role of photography in engaging students in morally oriented activities. The third paragraph then provides the reader with some background information on the photo-contest, its objectives, organization, and recent history, with a focus on the 2019 edition; in the fourth paragraph, the main results of the image classification are presented and discussed. The analysis demonstrates that students who took part in the FdC initiative were able to produce complex and articulated representations of landscapes, based on associations between multiple values-systems. Indeed, three main pieces of evidence can be isolated from the values attribution analysis: i) landscape is more than a background; ii) landscape enables critical thinking; iii) landscape is a message. Finally, the conclusions stress the importance of a values-oriented initiative for geography and image education.

## 2. The place of values in geography education

From a pedagogical perspective, the main aim of FdC is to promote critical spatial thinking through students’ active engagement. Indeed, as a large body of literature demonstrates, critical thinking and active learning are strictly interconnected: to engage students in experiential learning means to prepare them to think critically and spatially and, as a consequence, to empower them to be active citizens (Pike, 2011; Schlemper et al., 2018). In fact, critical spatial thinking stems from the ability to connect our local environment and everyday spaces to larger regional, national and global issues (Catling, 2003), in order to form our own opinions and values and to share and confront them with those of others (Arnould and Biaggi, 2004). Through direct experience, students are engaged in studying local issues as active participants (Mohan, 1995), so that they can better understand the origins of and links between social, environmental and political issues and to wonder how they can contribute to elaborating solutions (Philippot and Bouissou, 2007). In other words, promoting a

critical approach means to foster a global view starting from the local scale and everyday experiences.

This set of principles is at the base of several relatively recent lines of research in the field of geography education and beyond, sharing the idea of using place as a platform for learning and personalising education. To mention but a few, this is the case of place-based (or place-conscious) education approaches first proposed by Gregory Smith and David Gruenewald (Smith, 2002; Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald and Smith, 2008), which the aim of connecting the school environment to the community in which it is situated through five main courses of action: investigating local cultures; studying local natural environments; identifying and addressing community issues; bridging school education and local employment; fostering local public participation. A distinctive feature of place-based education is thus a radical view of the political value of recovering the significance of place in the global age, where education “is explicitly linked in policy and practice to the narrative of economic globalisation” and “public education has become the business of training children and youth to enter the global marketplace as consumers and workers” (Gruenewald and Smith, 2008, p. XIV). In this regard, place-based education offers an alternative set of values centred on place awareness and place consciousness as a premise to community well-being.

Being less formalized than the above perspective, a second approach is represented by community engagement practices in geography education (Bednarz et al., 2008; Yarwood, 2005; Rose, 2018; Robinson and Hawthorne, 2018). As explained by Bednarz et al. (2008), the essence of community engagement is to integrate education through direct and practical involvement with a community close to the school environment, providing the opportunity for either (i) service-based, (ii) research-based or (iii) work-based field experiences. Regardless of the type, however, these approaches share the idea that “a stronger engagement with the community can improve student knowledge of civic and social issues and increase student awareness of ethical and moral issues, giving students a greater respect for the local” (Yarwood, 2006, p. 357).

Finally, to mention the Italian context, quite similar principles found a formalization through the concept of “educazione al territorio” (territorial education) (Giorda and Puttilli, 2011; Dematteis and Giorda, on this Journal, 2013; Giorda and Puttilli, 2019). At the basis of territorial education lies the idea that different types of education (such as citizenship, cultural diversity, sustainability, and so on) find their spatial contextualization in the local territory. Geographical contextualization makes it possible to consider these perspectives not as separate branches but as integrated aspects of the geography educational process, that should be shaped according to the context in which it is carried out, as well as to its issues, challenges, values, and possibilities.

In the perspective of this paper, we think it is relevant to stress the fact that all these approaches make reference to what may be defined as “moral education” (or morally careful education) in geography (Hall, 1987; Lambert, 1999; Lindstone, 2003; Merenne-Schoumaker, 2016). It is worth clarifying that by moral education we do not mean to inculcate students with moral principles and values; on the contrary, it means putting them in the condition to elaborate their own opinions, thoughts, and arguments (Huckle, 1983). We agree with Lambert (1999, p. 7) when he writes that “morally careful geography lessons cannot tell students what to think and value [...]; but in using values education strategies they can help students understand how to think through problems”. Still with Lambert (p. 6): moral education requires both teachers and students “to accept and engage in the dialectic between universal truths (such as the capacity of human beings to harm the natural environment) and more relative versions of the truths (involving, for example, different perspectives from situated, local contexts) simultaneously”. In this line of reasoning, promoting experiential learning through fieldwork activities, inviting students to share their opinions on social and environmental issues regarding their everyday spaces and beyond, and making pupils express the values they ascribe to local landscapes may be considered as “values education strategies”, all being founded on critical spatial thinking.

Evidently, putting values at the centre of geography education has strong methodological

implications as well. As a consequence, a rich bibliography exists reporting on values-oriented practices, approaches, tools, and so on. For example, relevant studies highlight the role of the participatory, community, and citizen mapping as a tool to collect students' spatial narratives, experiences, and perceptions (Schlemper et al., 2018) and to enhance civic engagement (Söderström, 2000; Boll-Bosse and Hankins, 2018). Being more consistent with topic of this paper, other studies focus on the role played by photography (and, more precisely, photo voice) in geography education and beyond (Sidaway, 2002; Bigante and Rossetto, 2011; Warne et al., 2013; Delgado, 2015; Latz, 2017; Wass et al., 2019). Photography has been extensively used in formal and informal educational contexts to foster participation and to further the understanding of various social issues (Schell et al., 2009; Cattedra et al., 2018); to investigate local identity and place attachment (Ruggeri, 2014); to nurture self-reflection and support the construction of meanings (Wee et al., 2013); and, above all, to promote critical consciousness (Carlson, 2006; Gallastegui Vega and Rojas Rubio, 2016). As a further confirmation, it is worth mentioning that in this same journal an edited section is dedicated to "the language of images" and to images as a tool for education in geography.

At the end of this theoretical itinerary, we can stress the linkages once again between photography and values-education, as visual methodologies can give strong insight into "wider cultural perception, categories, and metaphors, and provide us with views of how things are or should be" (Harrison, 2002, p. 857).

### 3. "Fotografi di Classe" as a values-oriented initiative

Several photo-contests are run every year in the geography field by different organizations and institutions worldwide. While a comprehensive review of these initiatives falls beyond the aims of this paper, it is worth mentioning just a few cases in order to stress to extent to which FdC stands as a different proposal, or better integrates several different components of other

competitions<sup>2</sup>. A first example is the "Physical geography photo competition", run annually by the Physical Geography Special Interest Group of the Geographical Association<sup>3</sup> and currently at its sixth edition. The competition is open to school children in years 7–13 and. As the title says, the aim of the contest is to stimulate students' understanding of geography by capturing peculiar physical aspects of landscapes at different scales. As the main topic of the 2019 edition (i.e. "wonderful physical geography") well indicates, the contest is strongly characterized by an aesthetic approach, according to which landscapes are firstly depicted for their visual impact and enchanting power.

A second example is the Canadian Geographic's annual photo competition, run by The Royal Canadian Geographical Society<sup>4</sup>. The competition has a long history, as it reached its 34<sup>th</sup> edition in 2019. In this case, schools are not the specific target of the contest, and is open to every Canadian resident. Consequently, the initiative has no specific educational goal, as it aims at collecting different images of the country according to five main permanent entries: flora and fauna; urban Canada; iconic landscapes; active outdoors; wild weather. Since the contest is open to the general public, it gives rise to almost professional-like pictures. In this case too the aesthetic and iconic dimensions of landscapes are mainly stressed.

A third and more recent case is the Landscape Award Competition promoted by the Landscape Speciality Group of the Association of American Geographers (at its third edition in 2020). Being mainly targeted at academic participants, the contest is based on a wide and open definition of landscape, as it aims at collecting pictures able to capture the "essence" of landscapes, whether human, physical, or virtual<sup>5</sup>. As is revealed by the short captions attached to

<sup>2</sup> Contests that are targeted mainly at professional photographers are not considered here. This is the case of the annual "National Geographic Photo Contest" (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/contests/>).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.geography.org.uk/2019-physical-geography-photo-competition#categories>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://annual19.canadiangeographic.ca/home>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/aaglandscape/photo-and-map-award-competition-1>.

former awarded pictures, landscape is ascribed with meanings and values that are mostly symbolic and go far beyond the sole aesthetic dimension.

Finally, a fourth case is the GeoNight photo contest promoted by the Association of Geographical Societies in Europe (EUGEO)<sup>6</sup>. The first edition of the contest was launched in 2019 on the occasion of the annual Night of Geography under the topic: “fieldwork at night”. Being integrated within the social networks, the contest was targeted at the general public and less formalized than the previous examples. The main aim was that of spreading the knowledge of the European Night of Geography among the public.

The above mentioned cases are effective in showing to what extent a unique format (that is, a photo contest) may be differentiated in terms of goals, participants, and approaches. If compared to these examples, FdC incorporates some of the features of the other competitions, while at the same time developing its own specific proposal. In this paragraph we argue that FdC may represent a good example of a values-oriented initiative in geography education. Indeed, it is in line with the above mentioned features of place-based approaches centred on the place of values in education for two main groups of reasons.

First, we have already mentioned that FdC is open to the participation at all school levels. A further distinctive feature of the initiative is that participation is voluntary and collective: in accordance with the contest regulations, each class joining the competition is requested to present a single photograph, integrated with a descriptive sheet reporting the picture’s title, its geographical location and a short explanation behind its choice. In this way, class collaboration and cooperation between students and teachers is stimulated and facilitated, and the competing picture normally results from a group project. Nevertheless, even in the case the chosen picture is taken by a single student, it must be presented as a group-project. Therefore, it needs to be shared, discussed and approved by the whole class.

In the process, the role played by the teacher

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.eugeo.eu/nuitgeo-geonight/2-non-categorizzato/96-geonight-2019-photo-contest.html>.

is anything but fixed: he/she may opt either for a supportive role, delegating pupils as regards the photography takes, or for a more engaged role, guiding and actively participating in the elaboration and realization of the photographic project. In this perspective, photography can also become the support or pretext for a subsequent wider geographical analysis, based on interviews, outdoor activities or a field survey. In fact, in both cases class involvement must be incorporated into a dedicated teaching project, with direct links to the geography curriculum as well as to other curricula. The articulation of the teaching project plays a central role in the FdC initiative, since it has to be included in the photo-sheet and it is considered among the evaluation criteria. Indeed, when the deadline for presenting the pictures closes, these are evaluated by a technical jury, made up of both professional photographers and geography teachers, according to four main criteria: i) relevance to the annual topic; ii) originality; iii) quality of the teaching project; iv) technical distinctiveness of image. Taking part in the contest thus requires active personal engagement and participation, collective work, and creativity.

A second group of reasons for considering FdC a values-oriented initiative regards its aims from a pedagogical perspective in geography and beyond. One of the merits of FdC is to stimulate students to give words and meaning to the pictures they take. FdC’s main objective is to foster students’ local knowledge and the appreciation of landscapes beyond the sole visual and aesthetic dimension. This means getting students to elaborate on the sense, values, and significance they ascribe to landscape and to question how they view the world around them and their place in it.

This elaboration over meanings and values may occur at three distinct although complementary times: before the shooting, when preliminary ideas are collected and personal creativity is stimulated; at the moment of shooting, when, in order to depict a scene, photography requires a special mix of improvisation and technique in the choice of positioning, light, camera angle, and so on; after the shooting, when rationality and reflection prevail and, under the guidance of the teacher, students must select the competing picture from among all the photos that have been taken.

In every edition, this all-embracing goal is specified in a more precise topic to be addressed, explored and represented through the pictures. The annual topic is then introduced to students through a “teaching kit”, prepared by the contest’s organizing committee. In addition to the rules and deadlines of the contest, the teaching kit also provides short essays aimed at informing and stimulating in-class discussion and at inspiring pupils and teachers on the topic.

The first four editions of the contest focused on the following topics: landscapes of beauty and sustainability (2016); spaces of social inclusion (2017); places of encounter and dialogue (2018); the Country I would like to live in (2019). Compared with the previous three editions, the fourth one chose a topic significantly more neutral and cross-cutting, with the aim to give students more freedom and autonomy in thinking about the values and the message to share through their pictures. Consequently, the contents of the teaching kit were targeted to stress the role of geography in reflecting on the future of spaces and places.

In this regard, it may be useful to quote a passage from the 2019 photo-contest teaching-kit:

[...] the practice of observing, imagining, and thinking to places, as well as that of describing, representing, immortalizing them through images means to transform them into an aspiration; it means, for example, capturing what has value in a place and what we would like to preserve as such for future generations; or, on the contrary, it means to take back what we don't like, that rejects us and scares us, in order to denounce it and propose different and better solutions. What is certain is that the gaze of geography is never neutral: taking a picture of a landscape - be it in a literal sense or metaphorically - it is an act that requires us to take position, assume a responsibility, be open to the possible. The topic of “Fotografi di Classe” for 2019 focuses on the ability to project ourselves into the future of places and to imagine the Country we would like to see for tomorrow through the geographies of today. Spaces, territories and landscapes are vehicles of meanings and values, sometimes evident, sometimes hidden, which form the basis for reasoning in terms of the future.

As this passage well illustrates, at the centre of the 2019 edition lies the idea that the ability to critically reflect on everyday spaces, and to question our system of values and meanings ascribed to places and landscapes, plays a central role in developing the sense of belonging in the community and of active citizenship. To quote again the teaching-kit: “designing the ‘Country I would like to live in’, even if only through photographic images, is to all effects a citizenship action, in the sense of building a sense of belonging to a common and shared territory, the construction of which we cannot and must not escape from”.

#### **4. Assessing landscape values from the 2019 edition**

As already mentioned in the introduction, 200 classes from all the Italian regions (Figure 1) participated in the 2019 edition of FdC.

Pictures are distributed among school levels as follows: 31 pictures from primary schools; 109 from middle schools; and 60 from high schools. Evidently, the overall number of pictures and their distribution among school levels hinders any kind of representativeness of the sample. Nevertheless, at the same time they offer a privileged observation point for valuing the efficacy of values-oriented education strategies in geography and how students perceive and evaluate their everyday space and landscapes.

In order to assess how and which values have been mobilized and elaborated by students through their pictures, we made reference to previous works on the analysis and assessment of landscape values, that is, the values which are attributed to landscapes by people.

Indeed, in the last years several studies on the quantification, classification, and mapping of landscape values have seen the light in Europe and beyond, being united by the idea that “landscape represents the most general and publicly accessible source for understanding a culture’s past and future [...]; acting both as a bearer and shaper of the values which a society projects onto it” (Butler, 2016, p. 240).

As a consequence, landscape found its place in significant educational initiatives and reflec-

tions (Castiglioni, 2011; Cisani and Castiglioni, 2019).

Different models of landscape values classification have been proposed. In our analysis, we found inspiration from the models suggested by Butler (2016, p. 244) and Garcia-Martin et al. (2017, p. 2137; 2018, p. 13), that we partially re-elaborated. The final output of this re-elaboration brings us to consider seven main types of landscape values for photo codification: economic, natural significance, aesthetic, recreational, historical/cultural, intrinsic, social (Table 1).

It is worth clarifying that, while the values reported in Table 1 are all expressed in positive terms, they may also appear in negative ones (such as, polluted landscapes ascribed with negative values in terms of environmental values; abandoned cultural sites as proof of their negative management, and so on). The classification of image contents was inductively based: each picture was analysed and then classified according to the criteria listed in the third column of Table 1. We did not put any limit to the number of values to be assigned to each picture. Values attribution were based mainly on the visual content; the title and the motivations reported on the photo descriptive sheet were taken into consideration as well as their confirmation. Nevertheless, the fact undoubtedly remains that image codification is a highly subjective activity, strongly reliant on personal tastes and opinions. The final output of image classification is reported in Figure 2.

The results show that the least represented values are the economic and recreational ones, while the environmental, aesthetic, historical/cultural and social ones are the most represented, with a prevalence of the social typology. No significant differences in values distribution per typology are registered either as regards school level or regional distribution (not represented in the image). Middle schools show a higher proportion of pictures reporting “social” values, followed by “historical/cultural”, while high schools present a higher proportion of “natural” values. As regards primary schools, distribution is more equal for the first four typologies. As is shown below in more detail, it is meaningful to note that only a few pictures were assigned with a unique values type. This demonstrates that

students who took part in FdC initiative were capable of producing complex and articulated representations of landscapes, based on associations between multiple values-systems. Indeed, from an interpretative point of view, we can isolate the following main three pieces of evidence from the values attribution analysis.

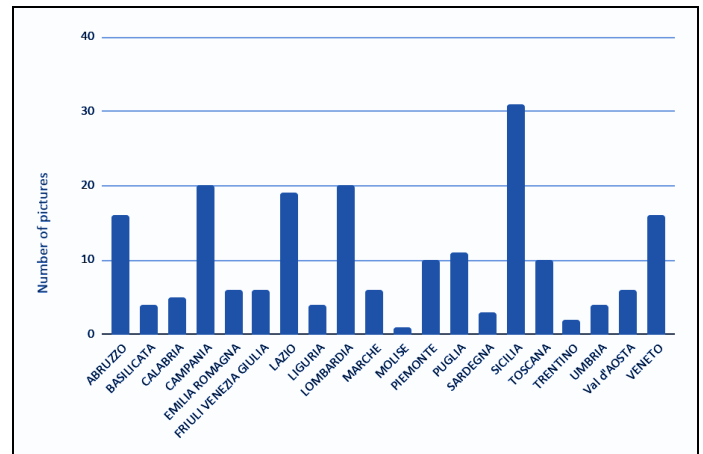


Figure 1. Regional distribution of pictures presented in the 2019 edition.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

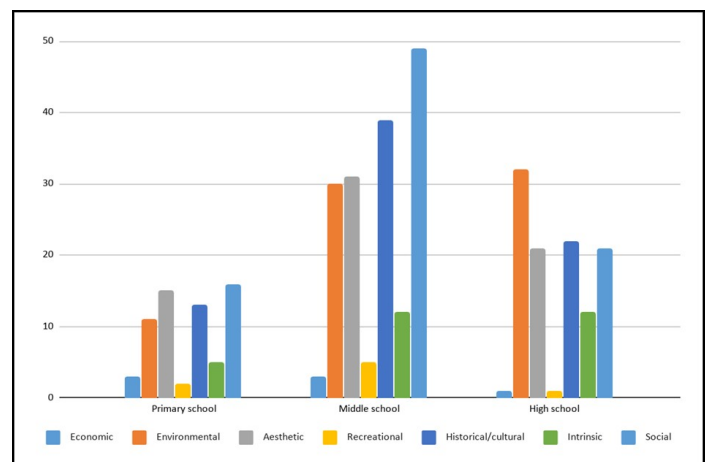


Figure 2. Landscape values attribution to pictures presented to FdC (2019 edition).

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Abbreviation	Type of value	Elements being depicted in the image
Economic	Appreciation of local products and local economic activities	Local products, production sites and/or economic activities
Environmental	Appreciation of nature, biodiversity, wildlife and the ecosystems services connected to them	Natural elements and physical components of the landscape
Aesthetic	Appreciation of the beauty of landscape and/or of its landmark(s)	Pictorial-like scenery and/or vast landscape views
Recreational	Appreciation of outdoor recreation activities, such as sports, walking, hiking, games, and so on.	People in recreational outdoor activities
Historic/Cultural	Appreciation of cultural heritage, monuments, and sites as expression of local identity and local culture	Historical sites, monuments, intangible cultural practices.
Intrinsic	Appreciation of spiritual, inspirational, emotional and affective dimensions related to landscape	Inspirational elements, symbolic artefacts, colour shades, signs.
Social	Appreciation of being together with other people and social relations as a means for social well-being, democracy, and justice	People being in-place, social practices, bodies.

Table 1. Landscape values classification. Source: Butler (2016); Garcia Martin et al. (2017); Garcia Martín, Plieninger and Bieling (2018); re-elaborated and adapted by the Authors.

#### 4.1 Landscape is more than a background

The first piece of evidence regards the role of aesthetic values in the perception of landscape. One of the main photo-contest objectives is in fact to induce students to overcome the basic aesthetic conception of landscape, in place of a more articulated one. The pictures reveal that this target has been met. While the aesthetic dimension continues to be important in order to appreciate a landscape, scenic values rarely go alone. Quite often, they are joined by other values that charge the picture with more sophisticated meanings. This is the case of “Hugs to life” (Figure 3), presented by a primary school class from Lecco, on the eastern branch of the Como Lake in Northern Italy. Leaving the majestic natural scenario of the lake in the background, groups of students hug some trees in the foreground. Thus, while the aesthetic dimension still plays a role in contextualizing and giving visual impact to the image, it is the collective act of protecting and celebrating life that gives a greater importance, in its assemblage of social and environmental values.



Figure 3. “Hugs to life”. Source: Scuola primaria “A. Diaz”, San Giovanni (Lecco), class 4B.

Even in more static pictures where no human presence is visible and scenic values are more evident, in the title as well as in the photo description sheet, though, other hidden messages and meanings are present, and can be either social or environmental. For instance, a “beautiful” natural landscape is rarely depicted only because of its beauty, but it reminds us of the need to protect it and defend the environmental values it



shields. More and more frequently nevertheless pictures avoid static depictions of landscapes and represent human actions and symbolic practices.

This is the case of “A tree, a hope” (Figure 4), where the plantation of a young tree close to an older one - leaving the municipality of Segni (Lazio) in the background - is the opportunity to express the importance of taking care of others and a hope in a brighter future. As the photo sheet makes clear:

Segni is rich in green areas due to the presence of chestnut woods and because it stands on a plateau with thick vegetation. We would like to preserve it with the care and protection of the environment by infusing respect for what surrounds us. It is a mutual exchange between us and the trees, we take care of each other, and the benefits are for everyone. This is the Italy we would like to live in: respecting and taking care of nature, but also of traditions, of elderly people and of the values they pass on to us.



Figure 4. “One tree, a hope”. Source: picture sent by the IIS Via Gramsci, Valmontone-Segni (class IIID).

#### 4.2 Landscape enables critical thinking

In the framework of the FdC initiative, photography turned out to be an effective tool to enable critical spatial thinking in geography education. In fact, following the principles of values education, pictures are used by students in order to critically reflect on their everyday spaces, and create connections between local and global issues.

On the one hand, this is the case of numerous photos focused on environmental issues such as

waste and recycling: photographing litter scattered in the street or in the countryside, as well as people in the act of collecting it, becomes a way to recall the importance of correct waste management in order to defend the environment on a global scale. In this sort of pictures landscapes are given symbolic values that go far beyond the local. On the other hand, students use photography to report on some abandoned spaces, buildings and sites in their own community and to imagine and propose creative solutions for recuperating them for the future. Thus, they put into practice community engagement through geography.

Presented by a class from Perugia, Figure 5 shows a degraded space in the school courtyard which has been regenerated and transformed into a place for students’ engagement, active learning, and participation. In this small school corner, students learn to cultivate plants in the school garden, are involved in artistic initiatives, and take part in group discussions and activities. In the picture, environmental and social values go hand in hand with the recuperation of the school space as a common heritage to be shared by all students. As the photo sheet states:

In our small community, we felt the need to make the school garden a space for participation of everyone, with his own talents. In the future, we would love to go on cultivating vegetables, thoughts, social relations and, more importantly, our school as a resource for all the community.



Figure 5. The garden democracy. Source: Secondary school “Bernardino Di Betto”, Perugia, class IB.

The same focus on the recuperation of important sites and buildings for the community is at the centre of Figure 6, presented by a school from a small town close to Turin. Here, an abandoned villa in the regional natural park of “La Mandria” is recreated through the screen of a smartphone and transformed into a space for public entertainment and enjoyment. Some colourful and extravagant acrobats make it alive again, highlighting the role of sociality for the recuperation and revitalization of cultural heritage.

In the above mentioned pictures and in many others, students use their imagination to project themselves into the future of their everyday landscapes and to highlight to what extent arts, nature and participation are non-negotiable values to give abandoned spaces back to local communities.

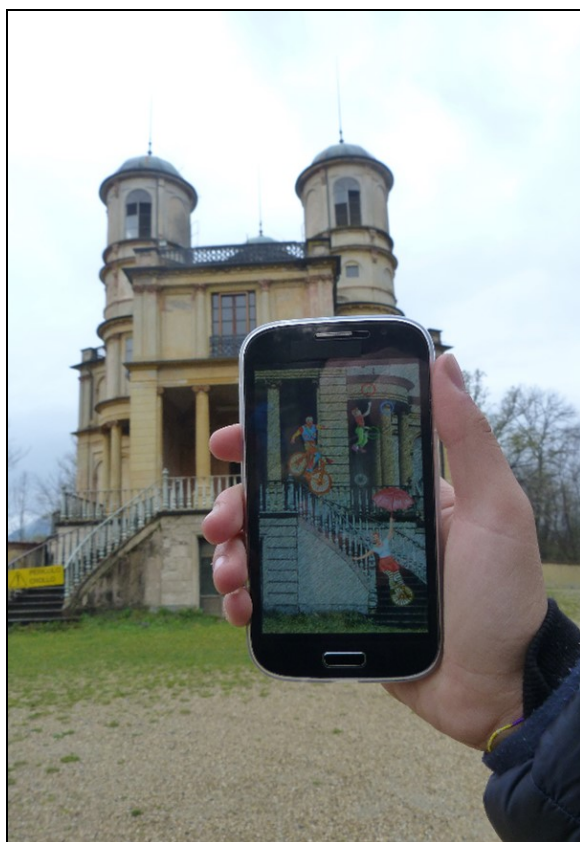


Figure 6. Bizarre spectacles. Source: Secondary school “Don Milani”, Druento (Turin), class IIG.

### 4.3 Landscape is a message

A third and final piece of evidence regards the use of landscape as a way to launch moral messages, or that is, to give views of how things should be (Harrison, 2002). In this particular typology of pictures, landscapes are ascribed with highly symbolic values, and bear a message for the whole community.

Although being contextualized, photographs acquire a general value that goes far beyond the local dimension. Such a value can change according to whoever observes the image and the meaning that they perceive in it. These landscape pictures normally bear a message of hope. Depending on the privileged value typology being depicted, photos express a hope for a better environment, peace, equality, justice and so on. More generally, they are used by students to express their hope for a better future.

Two examples of this typology of pictures regard walls being broken down or already down.

In Figure 7, a group of students raises some small plants towards the top of a wall. The picture finds its origins in a local story: the wall in fact belongs to a local factory that used to employ lots of people in the community. Having been abandoned, nowadays all that remains is a cluster of concrete and iron separated by the high wall. Through their act, children demand that the area be regenerated and given back to the community as a green area.



Figure 7. The wall between today and tomorrow. Source: Primary school “Paolo Volponi”, Urbino, class IV.

Besides this “locally embedded” interpretation, however, the picture is open to many other possible meanings, depending on the observer. It may symbolize any other wall (tangible or intangible) in our society, as well as the small plants rising to the sky can represent any type of effort aimed at overcoming them.

This is the explicit meaning of Figure 8. Here, two lines of students, on the opposite side of the wall, break it down with rudimentary work tools, captured by a drone in the sky. Differently from the previous image, here the meaning is a pure metaphor of a hope in a more just future from the social point of view. Quoting the photo sheet:

In Italy social barriers exist which isolate humans from others. We are the future and we want to break down the wall of racism, selfishness, homophobia, prejudice. We want to make sure that there are no more walls that divide us, because there are no races or differences between us. Our wall symbolizes the social barrier and indifference that we want to break down, as a way to make Italy of the future better than it is today.

## 5. Conclusions

This work followed the principles at the basis of several more or less recent lines of research in the field of geography education and beyond, sharing the idea of using place as a platform for learning and personalising education. More specifically, the paper took its moves from the 2019 edition of *Fotografi di Classe* photo-contest, with two main objectives: i) to discuss the role of FdC and similar initiatives in enabling a values-oriented education in geography; ii) to map the typologies of spatialized values expressed by participants, in order to assess to what extent students are empowered to think critically and spatially.

The paper moved from the idea that photography can be a useful tool to capture the elements of the landscape. However, due to its aesthetic and evocative power, photography is also an art that reflects the subjectivity of the artist and a technique that conveys a particular vision of the world (Gataloup, 2018). A photographic competition is therefore an excellent means to

put all these different elements at work and to stimulate a values-oriented teaching and education in geography, especially if it focuses on highly topical subjects as in the case of the 2019 edition of FdC.



Figure 8. Breaking the walls. Source: Middle school “Berrettini-Pancrazi”, Cortona, class IIb.

The results show that through direct experience students can better understand the connections and links between social, environmental and political issues on the local scale and beyond, and to wonder how they can contribute to elaborating solutions. In other words, they confirm that putting values at the centre of geography education, when combined with active and experiential learning, may enable critical spatial thinking.

Along this same line of thought, photography proved to be a useful tool to engage students in the field and to stimulate creativity and moral education. When asked to depict local landscapes and everyday situations with the aim of envisaging the country they would have liked to live in, students demonstrated that they were able to go beyond the mere visual and aesthetic dimension and to refer to other typologies of values, such as environmental, historical/cultural, intrinsic and social. Indeed, complex and articulated representations of landscapes have been provided, proving that landscape is an important bearer of social meanings and metaphors, which the students were able to manage and use as a message.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates how economic values ascribed to landscapes remain underrepresented in pictures, in place of

more symbolic and metaphorical representations. This is a result that may be used in order to give input to future initiatives aimed at focusing on the relevant role landscapes play in economic terms.

Finally, it should also be mentioned that similar initiatives also play a role in promoting image education at school. Indeed, the FdC photo-contest allows students to approach photography as a subject of knowledge and investigative technique. Students are challenged to go on the field, illustrate and support an idea and to learn basic photography techniques. Consequently, students who participate in the contest have an active role towards photography, while most students are normally the passive receivers of the overwhelming mess of images in our contemporary society. This active role can be further developed by teachers, for instance by making students question the logic behind the images contained in school manuals and their presumed representativeness of places, practices, and landscapes. Far from being neutral, the use of photography in school textbooks has a great influence on the ways in which students observe the contemporary world (Arnould and Biaggi, 2004).

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