



## Landscape in classroom: a survey of the educational paths in Italian secondary school textbooks

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Received: June 2022 – Accepted: October 2022

### Abstract

The purpose of this contribution is to explore how the subject of landscape is proposed and treated in Italian middle and high school, also in view of the normative documents concerning the teaching of geography and the reflections that geographical knowledge has had on the concept of landscape. With this aim in mind a reasoned selection of geography textbooks has been analysed, including both orders of school, and covering the time span from 1990 to the present.

The analysis is conducted on two levels. Firstly, a semantic analysis is carried out to detect the presence of the word landscape in texts in order to understand the meanings assigned to it. Secondly, the data collected are read through some interpretative criteria derived from the geographical literature on landscape. The obtained results allow us to outline the prevailing trends followed by schools when proposing and building educational activities on landscape, as well as on education on and through landscape, providing useful information to understand critical issues and suggest the most appropriate actions.

**Keywords:** Landscape, Landscape Education, Geography, Italian Secondary School, Geography Textbooks

### 1. Introduction

The present contribution aims to explore how the subject of landscape is proposed and treated in Italian secondary middle and high school. Our interest originates from the awareness that the concept of landscape is central in geographical reflection, and, particularly in geographical education, both formal and informal (Castiglioni and Cisani, 2022; Sgard, 2021).

Knowledge of the essential features of the

guideline documents for educational programmes in Italian schools, in relation to the topic of landscape, is an indispensable prerequisite for better contextualising the research questions and the consequent analysis. So we examined the document *Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione* (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2012) and found a significant presence of the word "landscape". Some of the meanings proposed by the normative

text are particularly interesting. Indeed, they go beyond the traditional concept of landscape as a set of physical and anthropic elements which are characteristic of specific territorial areas "(mountains, hills, plains, volcanos, etc.)" (p. 57), and refer to it as a "container of all material and immaterial memories, even in their future projection" (p. 56). This dynamic approach also emphasizes the need to protect it as a patrimonial depository of natural and cultural values. In the framework of the *Indicazioni nazionali riguardanti gli obiettivi specifici di apprendimento concernenti le attività e gli insegnamenti compresi nei piani degli studi previsti per i percorsi liceali* (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2010), the word landscape is mentioned only once, without any in-depth analysis; nevertheless, it is attested that landscape is one of the most important themes to propose when building teaching and learning activities. Finally, the *Linee guida per il passaggio al nuovo ordinamento degli istituti tecnici* (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2010) also require, as part of the geographical knowledge to be acquired, the "formation, evolution and perception of natural and anthropic landscapes" (p. 55), focusing on some particularly stimulating processes, which underline the complex and multidimensional value of landscape.

Taking into account these observations, it is interesting to explore if the importance of landscape is present in geography textbooks, how this concept is treated, and which didactic values are transmitted through it. To reach this aim, we focus on two aspects: the first one is strictly semantic and aims at discovering and understanding the meanings supposedly assigned to the term landscape. Therefore, we explore the most common uses of the word, identifying which categories of meaning prevail in order to understand which messages, consciously or unconsciously, can be transmitted to young readers through this concept. The second aspect aims to base the analysis of the texts on some interpretative criteria drawn from geographical literature on the subject of landscape. In our opinion this step is particularly important to better understand how the learning processes on landscape are structured through landscape and for landscape.

## 2. Tools and methods

We chose to analyse textbooks in order to evaluate the degree of attention given to the concept of landscape in the context of secondary education in Italy, and to assess the ways in which this topic has been developed. Our choice derives from the consideration of the yet significant value attributed by teachers to the rather constant and systematic use of classic textbooks. We are aware that there are teachers who use the textbook as just one of several tools for teaching geography, and who are therefore able to complement it, and partially replace it, with other alternative or supplementary instruments. However, it is very unusual for a teacher not to propose to students the study of the textbook, or parts of it. For this reason, we decided to base the research on the qualitative analysis of some textbooks, chosen according to a twofold criterion: on the one hand time periods; school grade and address on the other<sup>1</sup>.

Texts covering approximately the last thirty years have been selected and divided into three groups. The first group dates back to the end of the last century. The second group belongs to the first decade of the 21st century, being contemporary to or immediately following the regulatory interventions carried out at the turn of the millennium. Finally, the textbooks of the third group were published in most recent years, after the reform measures of 2010 (lyceum), 2012 (first cycle school) and 2013 (technical and professional/vocational education).

For the high school we chose the geography

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to underline that our sample is not representative at a numerical level of all the geography textbooks for secondary schools published in the last thirty years. In fact, the choice is not proportioned to the total number of national adoptions of each textbook in relation to the period of its availability on the publishing market. Otherwise, the volumes were selected with the express purpose of guaranteeing even a minimum coverage of both the two school levels and the high school addresses, covering a period of about thirty years. Ultimately, we decided not to apply any criteria of statistical representativeness. For these reasons, we did not deem it appropriate to carry out a detailed comparison between different time periods and school addresses; this would have entailed the risk of making generalisations.

textbooks according to the type of school (vocational, technical and lyceum) and to the different addresses offered by the technical and vocational schools.

Our sample includes twelve school textbooks: five for the middle school and eight for the high school, for a total of twenty-eight volumes (Table 1). The analysis of the textbooks was carried out in about five months.

To carry out a reading as precise and effective as possible, a matrix was developed with the aim of summarising all the information functional to the research objectives. On the one hand, we focused on the relevance or irrelevance assigned to the landscape topic, even only pointing out the presence or absence of the term.

On the other hand, we paid attention to the actual location of the term and to the importance assigned to it, aiming at understanding how it was used and how much it was explored.

The matrix allowed us to assess if the concept of landscape informs an entire chapter and/or if it is included in the paragraph or even chapter titles. In addition, the researcher's attention was directed to the image captions and glossaries if present. The completed matrices constituted the base for addressing and giving substance to our analysis and to the ensuing discussion of the results.

Middle school	Corbellini G., <i>Il marcopolo. Strumenti geografici per l'educazione ambientale</i> , Bologna, Marietti, 1990.
	Corbellini G., <i>Il marcopolo. Europa</i> , Bologna, Marietti, 1990.
	Dinucci M., Dinucci F. and Pellegrini C., <i>Geocommunity</i> , voll. 1-2-3, Bologna, Zanichelli, 2014.
	Iarrera F. and Pilotti G., <i>Libro visuale. Esplora il mondo</i> , voll. 1-2-3, Bologna, Zanichelli, 2014.
	Tondelli C., <i>GeoAgenda</i> , voll. 1-2-3, Bologna, Zanichelli, 2020.
High school	Bianchi S., Köhler R., Vigolini C. and Ferrari L., <i>Sfide globali</i> , voll. 1-2, Novara, De Agostini, 2020.
	Carpanelli F., <i>La geografia in 30 lezioni. I problemi del mondo globalizzato</i> , Bologna, Zanichelli, 2020.
	Corradi G., Morazzoni M. and Pisani B., <i>Geotour</i> , voll. 1-2-3, Milan, Markes, 2008.
	Di Napoli M. and Valagussa P., <i>Prospettive geografiche</i> , Milan, Cristian Lucisano Editore, 2011.
	Giorda C., <i>Pianeta A</i> , voll. 1-2, Turin, Loescher, 2021.
	Formica C., <i>Genti e paesi del mondo</i> , voll. 1-2, Naples, Fratelli Ferraro Editori, 1999.
	Iarrera F. and Pilotti G., <i>I paesaggi del turismo</i> , voll. 1-2-3, Bologna, Zanichelli, 2017.
	LA.RI.GE., <i>Dimensione mondo. Geografia economica</i> , Milan, Markes, 1995.

Table 1. Examined textbooks. Source: rafting by the authors.

### 3. Interpretative keys for the analysis of the texts

To analyse the texts, we identified three interpretative criteria, which guided us to better define the landscape approaches we came across in our research. We called them: “landscape appearance”, “landscape dimensions” and “human-landscape relations”.

The first interpretative key focuses on landscape characteristics and on its tangible elements. At one extremity, it includes “outstanding landscapes”, as the European Landscape Convention (ELC) calls them (Council of Europe, 2000). At the other, it refers to everyday and also degraded landscapes, which often characterize our daily life. Such extremities recall those of Castiglioni et al. (2010): these authors – proposing the concept of “democratic landscape” – focused on a “landscape of emergencies” (landscape is something extraordinary, which “emerges” for its natural or cultural value) and a “total landscape” (landscape is everywhere, as a social product created by the interactions between a population and its place of life). Extraordinary landscapes par excellence are first of all the increasingly rare “natural landscapes”, where nature is “uncontaminated”, and no traces of human actions exist (Meinig, 1979). These landscapes are called by Frémont “sublime” (2008) and comprise seas, shores, mountains, deserts, rivers, and forests. Humans are not completely excluded from these landscapes: nevertheless, if they are present, they behave like tourists and admired visitors, who look for beauty and emotions. Not surprisingly, the French geographer underlines that all sublime landscapes are “threatened”: “polluted shores” as well as “rubbish abandoned in the Himalayas” (Ibidem, p. 123) suggest that this threat is represented by human actions and that their impact on nature is always negative. Extraordinary landscapes also include those characterized by historical and cultural values, which show a unique and unrepeatable relation between humans and their environment. For example, the “cultural landscapes” included in the UNESCO list (the Dolomites Mountains, as well as the Chinese rice terraces) are considered “word heritage” because “they express a long

and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment”<sup>2</sup>. Such landscapes represent a legacy received by the past and therefore need to be protected and preserved, according to an approach that is well-established also by Italian legislation (Castiglioni and Cisani, 2022). At the opposite side of this interpretative key there are the so-called “ordinary landscapes”, which are experienced every day as part of our daily routine (Riley, 1992). Frémont calls them “everyday banality landscapes” (2008), citing for example the suburbs of the European and large North American cities that do not possess any valuable and unique characteristics which appear similar across the globe. As such, these are often “unaware landscapes”, i.e. they are lived and transformed by their inhabitants without being recognized as “landscape” (Castiglioni, 2015).

The second interpretative key concerns the two dimensions of landscape, material and immaterial. On one hand, landscape is considered only as a set of physical elements, connected by cause-effect relations, and produced by different processes (ecological, economic, social, historical, etc.). This rationalistic, or “objectivistic” (Vallega, 2000) perspective includes for example Biasutti’s and Sestini’s classic works, which aimed at defining different types of landscapes according to their physical characteristics, but also the approach of landscape ecology<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, landscape is made up not only by physical elements, but also by immaterial meaning and values attributed to it through its perception. The ELC – defining landscape as “an area, as perceived by people” (art. 1) – adheres to several geographical studies which underline this point: landscape is “the thing and the image of the thing” (Farinelli, 1992, p. 12), it is something both material and symbolic (Cosgrove, 1998), it is “both the phenomenon itself and our perception of it” (Wylie, 2007, p. 7). As Turri affirms, it is precisely this immaterial component that distinguishes landscape from

<sup>2</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/>.

<sup>3</sup> In this field of study landscapes are considered as mosaics of biophysical and socioeconomic components that fit into models and interact at different scales (Wu, 2008).

other geographical concepts, e. g. territory: according to this author, territory is “space organized by man”, while landscape is “the subjective projection of territory” (2003, p. 23).

The third interpretative criterion concerns the relationship between a landscape and the population who live in it, between the two opposites of “observed landscape” and “lived landscape”. The first one is rooted in the “aesthetic contemplation” of landscape, which represents a cornerstone of the geographical thought on landscape since the beginning. In fact, as Papotti reminds us (2008), the sense of landscape in modern Western culture arises from the presence of an observer: landscapes are contemplated and known through all the senses and this experience becomes communication, narration, image; in this regard, contemplation is the prelude to representation. Also in Turri’s well-known metaphor, which considers landscape as a theatre, man is a spectator; however, he is at the same time an actor who transforms the landscape in which he lives. Indeed, the act of looking, and learning to look, is considered a necessary requisite for learning to act on landscape with a greater awareness (1998). This point of view leads towards the opposite extremity of this interpretative key, i.e. towards an idea of landscape as the life context of the people who inhabit and actively transform it. Landscape is a “lived space” (Frémont, 2008) and, from a conceptual point of view, is strictly linked to the notion of “place”<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, it is interesting to recall the dichotomy between “observation” and “inhabitation”, used by Wylie: indeed, this author underlines that

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Saar and Palang write: “[...] there are opinions that landscape as a concept is mostly about the visual and therefore studying places gives better access to how people act in landscapes. Cresswell (1996, p 11) even announced that ‘we do not live in landscapes – we look at them’ – a statement we definitely disagree with. Still, Spirm (1998), see also Olwig (2002), argued that the term land denotes both the place and the people living in it, and scape or schaffen means ‘to form’, and Olwig (2008) has shown the origin of the term landscape being close to the Greek word choros, and thereby landscape itself should be understood as a land or place shaped by somebody. Thereby place and landscape are interlinked” (2009, p. 5).

landscape can be considered something that geographers observe as “detached experts”, to explain it empirically, or instead as a relational product, whose meanings originate from the interactions with the population who live in it (2007). This last point of view includes several different approaches – from the humanistic geography of the 1970s to the more recent non-representational geography – which affirm that inhabitation, as well as daily practices and experiences, are fundamental factors in building both landscape and the relationships between landscape and population. Taken to the extreme, this view denies the separation between the perceiving subject and the perceived landscape, as the former is part of the latter and vice versa.

#### 4. The analysis of the textbooks

The examination of the textbooks was carried out at two levels: the first one focuses on semantic and “quantitative” aspects, concerning the location of the concept (in titles, texts of paragraphs, glossary, etc.), its visibility and the degree of in-depth analysis; the second level brings back the examined texts to the theoretical approaches that inform our interpretative keys.

A first relevant observation concerns the fact that the term landscape is not widely used in textbooks. Except for two volumes, chapters/sections specifically dedicated to this concept are absent. In other cases, the term appears in the titles of chapters or paragraphs but is rarely treated in-depth inside the texts. The notion of landscape does not seem to have its own conceptual specificity and is often used somewhat as a synonym for others, such as “territory”, “environment”, “region”; in particular, the concepts of “landscape” and “natural environment” often coincide (Bianchi et. al., 2020).

The tendency of classifying landscapes according to “types” is also widespread: e.g., “the alpine landscape”, “the plain landscape”, etc. (see Corradi et al., 2008). Moreover, a largely simplifying approach is adopted, which associates some natural, climatic, and anthropic characteristics to a specific area, as if there existed a single typical landscape of a country or region, represented by symbol-images. Some

examples are: “The typical landscape of northern Finland: a farm facing a lake” – caption of figure 5, Corbellini, 1990a, p. 262; “Beach of the Maldives Islands: typical exotic landscape longed by tourists”, caption of figure 3, Di Napoli and Valagussa, 2011, p. 177).

Another point concerns the little attention paid to the temporal factor in the approach to landscape: among the texts we analysed, only two consider landscape evolution and changes over time, stimulating reflections on this topic and proposing didactic activities based on the comparison between images of the same landscape at different time periods. In all the other cases, landscape is neither considered a topic for exercises, nor a reality in transformation. Indeed, it tends to be presented as something static, never changing over time, just like an invariable postcard of a place.

#### 4.1 Landscape appearance: elements and characteristics

Analysing the collected data through the first interpretative key – which focuses on landscape appearance, between the two extremities of extraordinary landscapes and ordinary/degraded ones – we noticed that most textbooks associate the term “landscape” mainly to settings which are considered “natural”. Moreover, there is a tendency to attribute to nature an almost unique role in transforming landscape. For example, Corbellini claims, with reference to the landscapes of Northern Europe: “to understand the current forms of the Nordic landscape, we must go back to the last glaciation, when a gigantic ice cap covered the ‘Baltic shield’” (1990a, p. 84). The term landscape is also frequently used with reference to territories modified by man through agriculture (“reclamation landscape”, “landscape of open fields”, “landscape of closed fields”, “polyculture landscapes”)<sup>5</sup>. “Rural” or “agricultural” landscapes are significantly considered worthy of protection, as are other landscapes which are deemed relevant for their

<sup>5</sup> In the text by Formica (1999), the term landscape is used only to refer to rural settings dedicated to agricultural activities.

“uniqueness” and “beauty”. These are precisely the “sublime” landscapes (Frémont, 2008), as for example the Alpine ones which UNESCO declared “World Heritage Site” (Giorda, 2021).

The term landscape is less often adopted with reference to “ordinary” contexts, which do not present valuable natural/cultural elements: e.g., Corradi, Morazzoni and Pisani underline that “two linear conurbations, which are parallel to the beach and separated by the Po delta, create a monotonous and repetitive landscape, which have almost deleted the characteristics of the original towns” (2008, p. 78). However, it is interesting to note that the same textbook proposes an uncritical juxtaposition between the past “beautiful landscape” and the subsequent transformations (nowadays [the Campania coastal plain] is densely urbanized and its huge and disordered growth has disrupted the natural landscape” – *ibidem*, p. 76). The association between the term landscape and industrial, commercial or touristic activities is rather rare (Iarrera and Pilotti, 2014; LA.RI.GE., 1995).

#### 4.2 Landscape dimensions: material and immaterial components

Concerning the second interpretative key, the analysed texts mainly focus on the materiality of landscape, presenting it as a set of physical elements, both natural and human (Tondelli, 2020). For example, Iarrera and Pilotti propose this didactic activity: “recognize in the drawing the following elements of contemporary landscapes: “factory, shopping centre, highways, TV antennas, power lines” (2014, p. 36).

There are instead only two textbooks which underline the immaterial dimension of landscape and its importance. Thus, Di Napoli and Valagussa state: “landscape is the physiognomy which is conferred on a territory by the action of natural and/or human agents. However, it is not just the panorama, i.e. what can be seen, but also what we are able to understand through our sensory perceptions (sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell), our knowledge and our reflections on the place under consideration. Even emotions and affective ties contribute to forming a specific landscape: their importance should not be underestimated by those who carry out a

geographical study” (2011, p. 19). Giorda similarly claims that landscape has three components: the natural environment, the ways in which man transforms it, and the “gaze of the observer” (2021, p. 35). According to this author, the perceptive component of landscape is fundamental, as “people’s emotions must be taken into account” (Ibidem)<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4.3 The relationship with landscape: man-observer and man-inhabitant

From the analysis of most texts, it emerges that landscape is a reality in some respects detached from man, who observes it “from outside”. This idea is particularly evident in the didactic activities and operative proposals concerning landscape and its changes: indeed, the use of photographs prevails, both current and historical ones, adopting a comparative perspective that seems not to consider the static nature of pictures (Carpanelli, 2020; Corradi et al., 2008). The use of photography is certainly to be promoted, as a precious iconic tool that reproduces reality, and can partially replace it. However, employing only this source involves the risk of reducing landscape to a series of images that exclude the observer. Not surprisingly, Giorda – who pays particular attention to the immaterial dimension of landscape, as we have already seen – proposes landscape reading activities through a plurality of sources, including photos, but also literary texts and interviews (2021). This approach leads to the consideration that the relationship between a landscape and its population goes far beyond a simple passive observation: as in Turri’s metaphor, man is not only a spectator,

but also an actor (1998); inhabitants are part of their landscape, active protagonists who live and transform it. In this regard, Dinucci and al. introduce the discussion about the European territory reporting the tale of an imaginary student who is climbing towards the crater of Mount Etna. Immersed in the landscape, he describes its progressive changes and expresses his impressions: “Landscape starts to change. The soil is dark, it looks like dry mud. My sister says that is solidified lava. We arrive to the hut. Normal cars cannot proceed... we arrive to the crater. What a smell! [...]. Now it’s time to go back. Damn! We are all full of soot, even in the hair! A very interesting experience!” (2013).

### 5. Discussion and conclusions

The concept of landscape and the didactic approach to landscape constitute two dimensions of geographic reflection, and in particular of geographic education, which do not seem to directly involve the authors of geography textbooks in Italian secondary school. Although geographers’ theoretical discussions on the meanings of landscape are rich and stimulating – and there are significant educational proposals, also in Italy – the impression is that too little of these reflections is transferred in school textbooks. This supposed discrepancy may have its effects on teaching practices.

First of all, we note that it may be difficult for learners to grasp the actual meaning of the term “landscape” and its specificity compared to other geographical concepts, used almost as synonyms. Secondly, we highlight the limits of using the term according to an aesthetic approach that tends to contrast the “beautiful” natural landscapes with the human ones. Moreover, teachers who rely solely on textbooks have limited opportunities to use landscape as an educational tool to promote geographical knowledge and, above all, territorial citizenship. A final aspect concerns the fact that in most cases landscape is treated as a subject of study rather than as an everyday reality. For this reason, it can be difficult for pupils to connect their living experience with the landscape that surrounds them and with their transformations of it. To this regard, it is essential to underline that only two of the examined textbooks – one for

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, in their textbook Iarrera and Pilotti state that “the image of a place is subjective and is influenced by the degree of education and by the social and economic conditions of an individual” (2017, p. 2). Concerning the affective components, the authors also underline that feelings and emotions give an essential contribution to the construction of the place image. However, it should be noted that, according to this approach, the immaterial dimension is functional to the elaboration of touristic images, rather than being constitutive of the place. Furthermore, there isn’t any explicit reference to landscape.

middle school (Tondelli, 2020) and one for high school (Giorda, 2021) – make explicit reference to the European Landscape Convention. However, it should be noted that probably the dissemination of this important document, which has influenced geographical scientific thought, has also affected school publications. In fact, the manuals preceding and following the ELC present a different approach to landscape and its value: regardless of grade and school address, only after 2000 is it possible to read pages which at least partly also consider the immaterial nature of landscape and attribute a role to the subjective and experiential approach. A fundamental part of landscape education, which is based on the confrontation and integration of different gazes, the ability to observe carefully and listen to each other, is thus substantially neglected (De Vecchis, 2011). So, we can affirm that most textbooks promote education on landscape and increase knowledges about landscapes; however, they do not exploit the full potentialities of education through landscape, which allows to foster personal growth and the development of cognitive, but also social and affective skills (Castiglioni, 2011). Moreover, an approach to landscape as an educational tool, and not only as a teaching object, would also increase students' awareness of the actions affecting the landscape itself.

In view of these observations, it is inescapable to hope for the promotion of active educational activities, which also enhance the immaterial dimension of landscape, encouraging the expression and recognition of emotions and feelings. In this sense, the use of “immersive” practices is essential. For example, excursions and didactic activities dedicated to reading and analysing landscape through direct observation can encourage the student's involvement in a multi-sensory and experiential knowledge of their everyday landscape, giving concrete substance to the statements of normative texts. In our view this is a fundamental step in the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are necessary to a heightened awareness and complex relationship with any landscape. However, what remains open to debate is the issue concerning how to use the textbook for conveying the sense of landscape as a “lived space”, also rich of fundamental immaterial

components that refer to the personal geographies of each of us. An open challenge, especially for professional geographers.

For example, excursions and didactic activities dedicated to reading and analysing landscape through direct observation can encourage the student's involvement in a multi-sensory and experiential knowledge of their everyday landscape, giving concrete substance to the statements of normative texts (De Vecchis et al., 2020).

### Acknowledgements

The paper was devised together by the authors, who wrote paragraphs 1, 4 and 5 together; A. De Nardi wrote paragraph 3, A. Guaran wrote paragraph 2.

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