

# **Reasons for the research on *The construction of the sense of espace vécu in European children's literature in the second half of the 20th century (1945-2010). An international historical and comparative survey on picturebooks: goals, method, tools, and preliminary results***

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## **Abstract**

This article seeks to present the goals, methods, tools and preliminary results of the research project *The construction of the sense of espace vécu in the European Children's literature in the second half of the 20th century (1945-2010). An international historical and comparative survey on picturebooks*. The research focused on an international historical-comparative investigation into how domestic spaces and the *espace vécu* has evolved in children's literature since 1945. The project is supported by a research network that includes several scholars of children's literature from a variety of European countries. From the methodological point of view, this study seeks to examine how a combination of historical and comparative methods can be applied to research in the field of children's literature. Two research tools have been used: a *Word Picturebook Datasheet* and an *Excel Data Matrix* comprising four different tables. The project generated some interesting and thought-provoking comparative results in addition to raising some issues with regard to the tools used to collect the data.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/10037>



**Keywords:** comparative method; history of education; picturebooks; *espace vécu*; European children's literature

## 1. Reasons for our research project on European children's picturebooks

The research project entitled *The construction of the sense of espace vécu in European children's literature in the second half of the 20th century (1945-2010)*. An international historical and comparative survey on picturebooks was developed by the University of Padua (Italy), directed and coordinated by the historians of pedagogy Marnie Campagnaro (a specialist in children's literature) and Carla Callegari (who specializes in comparative education). The project lasted two years and was completed at the end of 2018.

The research focused on an international historical-comparative investigation on how domestic spaces and the *espace vécu* has evolved in European children's literature since 1945. The strong propensity to give this project an international dimension was supported by a research network that included several scholars of children's literature from different European countries. The team developing the scientific project, working at Padua University's Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology (FISPPA), established a collaboration with: Ana Margarida Ramos (Department of Languages and Cultures, University of Aveiro, Portugal); Nina Goga (Department of Language, Literature, Mathematics and Interpreting, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway); Smilijana Narančić Kovač (Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Croatia); Bettina Kümmerling-Meubauer (German Department, University of Tübingen, Germany); and the group's geographer, Christophe Meunier (Centre de Formation de Tours Fondettes, Université d'Orléans, France). The group of researchers thus covered numerous geographical areas of Europe, with Northern Europe represented by Norway, Central Europe by Germany, Eastern Europe by Croatia, and Western and Southern Europe by Portugal, France and Italy.

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The main aim of the project was to analyze children's picturebooks that contained representations of domestic environments from 1945 to the present day (i.e. over a period of approximately 65 years), and to validate the application of the classic comparative method to the sector of children's literature. The research consequently concerned a specific field that took shape over the course of the 20th century as a particular facet of the "history" of education: children's literature can be seen as one of many "histories", alongside those of childhood, the family, women, the publishing world, educational customs, and academic materiality, for instance, which all emerged as a result of an epistemological and methodological revisiting of the history of pedagogy that began in the 1960s (Callegari, 2012; Viñao Frago, 2016).

One of the goals of our research project was to investigate how representations of the *espace vécu* changed over time in children's books by generating data in a format that could be compared between the various European countries. We looked at how children in the stories interacted with their domestic environment, bearing in mind that literature reinterprets the historical-cultural reality in which it is produced (Ascenzi & Sani, 2016, 2017), and sometimes even hypothesizes possible alternatives. Books reflect the societies that generate them, their history and their geographical and experiential spaces, and all the various nuances of family and personal feelings.

The picturebooks from which our data were obtained also give an account of how domestic spaces contribute to forming children's sense of identity, and their family and social relations. They show that the way in which the stories' protagonists interacted with their interior spaces – including the furniture, domestic objects, household appliances, books and toys – can shed light on how life changed for children over time. The books convey the idea of childhood that emerged over the latter half of the 20th century in various parts of Europe.

Our comparison between children's literature produced in Italy and other European countries was also an attempt to see, by taking a multidisciplinary approach, how historical and comparative research methods can intersect on both a theoretical and a practical level to give rise to valid pedagogical studies. The innovative nature of our project is apparent from our fruitful fusion of the history of pedagogy and education

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with a comparative research method to analyze children's literature and humanistic geography on a European scale.

The goal of comparative studies – not subordinate to other sectors of pedagogical research, but often the object of lively debate – is to contribute to the analysis of the concept of education and its practical applications. This goal can be interpreted and encoded in various ways, but – without claiming to being exhaustive, or suggesting an excessively simple solution – we could say that comparative studies should be able to offer a specific point of view on the fundamental issue of pedagogy, or on its object of investigation, i.e. education.

On these grounds, and going along with the discipline's traditional approach, we can analyze the social scenario, and academic settings in particular. But we can also focus on subjectivities, seeking to explain the experience of individuals (considered in the community to which they belong), and to demonstrate how they experience their schooling in relation to their family and social dynamics.

This approach enables subjectivities to occupy their rightful place in pedagogical research, restoring them to center stage. The education of human beings with a view to enabling them to achieve their full potential should never be considered complete; it is always underway, and amenable to improvement and advancement.

But subjectivities occupy a place in time and space. The complex concept of *espace vécu* – a term coined by the French geographer Armand Frémont in 1976, further developed in 1990, and adopted by other humanist geographers too (Tuan 1978a, 1978b; Pocock, 1981) – refers to a relationship between what “exists” and what “is perceived”. Over and above the objective, geometrical architectural space, there is a concrete personal space modeled by our own experience, an interior landscape characterized also by a perceptive, symbolic, human dimension that includes invisible and unexplored spaces. As children grow up and develop, this space (and, for the purposes of our research project, the domestic space in particular) has a fundamental part to play: it not only contributes to children's construction of a sense of belonging, but also significantly influences the formation of their sense of identity.

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The ambitious goal of our research method was not only to emphasize several hitherto unexplored aspects of children’s *espace vécu* as an indispensable element of their educational pathway (Iori, 1996, 2006), but also to include these aspects in a cognitive platform and prompt a discussion capable of offering a novel scientific contribution on the need to improve the design of contemporary domestic spaces for children, in the light of comparatively-validated indications coming from various European countries. As sources for our historical-comparative analysis, we considered particular works of children literature, i.e. picturebooks, which represent the domestic spaces experienced by children from the 1950s to the present day. The following table shows the temporal progression we adopted and the number of books considered.

|           |                                     |                                     |                                     |                                     |                                     |                                     |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1945-1950 | 1 <sup>st</sup> Decade<br>1951-1960 | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Decade<br>1961-1970 | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Decade<br>1971-1980 | 4 <sup>th</sup> Decade<br>1981-1990 | 5 <sup>th</sup> Decade<br>1991-2000 | 6 <sup>th</sup> Decade<br>2001-2010 |
| n. 3      | n. 6                                | n. 6                                | n. 6                                | n. 6                                | n. 6                                | n. 6                                |

The picturebooks were selected on the basis of two essential criteria, proposed by the team in Padua organizing the research, and approved by the other scholars involved. The first concerns the cultural setting of origin or long-term residence of the author or illustrator, which had to be the same as the country the book was to “represent”. The second concerns the book’s aesthetic-literary quality, judged on the grounds of parameters such as: a picturebook’s acknowledged historical, aesthetic and educational value; books that won prizes or were included in honors lists; books that were the object of reviews or analyzed in critical works. If it proved impossible to select enough books meeting these criteria for a given country, the agreed protocol established that other books should not be considered instead. As it turned out, the publishing policies of the various countries influenced the choices made by our researchers. In France, for instance, the type of picturebooks of interest to us were already in production soon after the war, so there were plenty of books available for our purposes. In Portugal, the production of genuine children’s picturebooks only began in the 1980s. In Italy, up

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until the 1960s, there were books with similar characteristics, but they were not yet picture books proper.

The starting point of our research was an analysis of the meanings and representations of the *espace vécu* and domestic environments in the sense of: a place that provided care, protection, memories; a place in which to build the most profound relationships, the most deeply-rooted and positive affections; but also a place where power is wielded, norms are imposed, and children experience the most obscure and hidden sentiments. The home, in particular, is often associated with a space consisting of rooms and objects under a child's gaze on a daily basis, that influence children's development because they are charged with shared and also entirely personal meanings.

The home, as a place of family intimacy and the first significant relationships that children experience, is always a space indispensable to their development, but it is also a vital space that changes over time in line with social, economic, political and cultural changes in the society around it (Zago, Callegari & Campagnaro, 2019). Educational architectures have been the object of study for pedagogists for some time, largely because places are never neutral, and they influence educational relationships. When Vanna Iori published her work *Lo spazio vissuto: luoghi educativi e soggettività* in Italy in 1996, she was the first to emphasize the important role of places in educational events. The presence of an objective, measurable dimension of a geometrical physical space remains, but alongside it she added a subjective experiential dimension of this space. As mentioned earlier, this latter dimension varies with the viewer's changing mood, becoming steeped in an ever-new educational and pedagogical valence: the classroom, the home, the streets and squares of the city all express different ways in which the educational relationship is spatialized. Italian pedagogical researchers subsequently produced numerous other contributions. Topics like the materiality of daily reality, consisting of spaces that may be open and closed, urban and rural, scholastic and domestic, elitist and popular have been amply studied and discussed, also appearing in the historiography that focuses on settings, roles and symbolisms (Covato, 2014).

Children's literature has offered interesting opportunities for analysis and reflection, and a child's *espace vécu* and domestic environment have been the object of research in other

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countries too (Reimer, 2013; Sachiko Cecire, Field, Mudan Finn & Roy, 2015). Our particular project aimed to cover a broad period of time, and that is why a historical-comparative analysis was adopted, reconstructing the historical period from after WWII to today.

The childhood reflected in the picturebooks (or similar works that preceded them) is a childhood that, by the end of the 19th and in the early 20th centuries, and with the educational experiences revolving mainly around the schools active at the time (from the best known like Maria Montessori's *Casa dei bambini* and the Agazzi sisters' *Scuola Materna* to the less famous like Giuseppina Pizzigoni's *Scuola Rinnovata* or Mr and Mrs Franchetti's *Villa Montesca*), had come to be seen as having its own particular features, that Rousseau had already partly described in *Émile*.

The studies that appeared in Italy and elsewhere in Europe from the 1960s onwards charted a course that from the pedagogical and legal acknowledgement of the identity of childhood led to a respect for its particular characteristics – as also described in works by psychologists published from the early years of the last century onwards. These characteristics included, among others, spontaneity, imagination, creativity, and especially freedom and autonomy. But there was still space for a strict behavioral control and normative impositions that were often typical of the attitude of adults to children, especially in bourgeois family homes.

The Freudian image of childhood as a “polymorphous perverse” time of life that often escapes adult control persisted throughout the 20th century, in the background behind the conquest of the rights definitively sanctioned in the UN's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* approved in New York on 20 November 1989. The path towards actually achieving these rights is still long and arduous, however, especially in some parts of the world where, instead of commanding respect, children are still exposed to all sorts of physical and psychological exploitation (Contini & Demozzi, 2016).

In Europe, during the “Century of the Child” (Key, 1905), children found new educational spaces in which to grow up, spaces that provided teaching and protection. These privileged places increasingly relied on a caring, proactive educational relationship

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that left children space to develop independently and, among such places, the home was undeniably special.

## **2. The historical-comparative method applied to the research**

The classical method of comparative education was encoded by Bereday (1969), and Hilker (1967) in the 1960s, and arranged into four stages: description, interpretation, juxtaposition and comparison proper. The method was subsequently adjusted by other authors (Noah & Ekstein, 1969). Today there are more modern comparative models available, such as the cube proposed by Bray and Thomas, which intersects the geographical-locational dimension with that of non-locational demographic groups, and that of educational and social aspects (Bray, Adamson & Mason, 1995, p.18). Although the method has been integrated in the light of contributions from other disciplines, such as statistics and ethnography, especially inasmuch as concerns the first two dimensions, it is still the method acknowledged and used by comparatists today. In our project, from the methodological standpoint, we wanted to examine how a combination of the historical method and the comparative method could be applied to research in the field of children's literature. This combined approach could be delineated on the basis of the very structure of the history of education as a discipline that is no longer narrative, but has become interpretative, complex and plural. The historian of education thus uses research frames that can also be applied to comparative education, including: the "encounter" with the authors and educational practices of the past; contextualization; attention to what is not immediately evident; wide-ranging document reviews; an interdisciplinary approach; and links with other human sciences, and politics in particular (Callegari, 2016). As concerns the encounter, by following this paradigm we can relativize the history of Italian pedagogy, and place it within a broader landscape – as in the case of our research, which aimed to produce a European picture of children's literature. On the matter of contextualization, our research was conducted in an intellectually honest effort to explain past or present realities, and connect them dynamically and constructively with the future. Each according to their own cultural

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identity and expertise, we investigated the particular mentalities and hidden facets detectable in the works of children's literature in different European countries.

Paying attention to what was not immediately obvious (Zani, 1990, p.86), we reflected on the fact that often what is not said in children's literature, but conveyed between the lines can offer some precious hints on real life. These less obvious analytical approaches can be used in all pedagogical traditions, which warrant careful investigation if we really want to reconstruct a European and world history of education, to understand the present in all its facets, interpret it with more penetrating and refined analytical tools, and design a pedagogically-aware future. Wide-ranging document reviews are essential from an interdisciplinary perspective, even when dealing with unusual sources such as children's literature. Since we know that objectivity (in the sense of a neutral description of things) does not exist, such reviews enable an honest interpretation of the available documents in the light of the political, economic and cultural events of a given historical moment, in the society of a given nation state. What sometimes emerges from such reviews – as happened in our own research regarding the historical situation in Croatia up until the 1980s, for instance, or that of Eastern Germany up until 1990 – is the close relationship with politics that often influences, or even dominates education processes.

The aim of our project was also to delineate any possible transfer effects, i.e. the shifting of an idea or educational practice in space and time, in the sense of the translation and transformation suggested by Robert Cowen (2009, 2010), which can be applied and adjusted in every national social, political and economic context. Taking this view, we could think of recommendations

<sup>1</sup>, even of an architectural nature, to transfer some of the features of the spaces in a home from one European country to others. We might wonder, for instance, whether there is an optimal structure and layout of the furniture and fittings in a child's bedroom (a room frequently represented in the picturebooks of all six European countries considered in our research), or in a dedicated space where children can play.

The data for our project were collected and interpreted by the individual researchers in the European countries taking part. At the meetings we conducted they jointly identified the criteria for an interpretative framework that enabled each of them to

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construct their final report, focusing on how the representation of children's *espace vécu* inside and around the home evolved in the works considered. The juxtaposition phase was managed by the team in Padua, and the comparison was completed by the project manager. Drawing on our set of historical, political and literary information, an effort was made to answer our core research questions: How has the representation of children's *espace vécu* inside and around the home evolved over time? What are the differences, convergences, and similarities between the various European countries? What idea of childhood is conveyed, albeit in a fictional dimension, by the representations in the picturebooks? Is it a childhood that is free, autonomous, and therefore potentially subversive of the adult world, protected and pedagogically "cared for", or is it a childhood that is rule-bound and controlled? Finally, is there or has there ever been imagined a model "home" in which to raise happy children? If so, what characteristics does it have? The following pages provide a first account of the results of the analysis and qualitative comparison of our findings (which are certainly open to a more in-depth examination).

### 3. Research tools

To collect data that were comparable for the various countries involved, we needed to use the same categories and substantiate them with meaning as precisely and clearly as possible. In this specific case, English was used as the shared language by the whole international research team. The definition, meanings and representative modalities of the *espaces vécus* were proposed by the group in Padua, then analyzed with, and approved by the European partners. The same procedure was adopted for the tools used for data collection purposes. Taking a qualitative approach, we designed a composite datasheet for analyzing the selected picturebooks and three Excel spreadsheets, which were first used in preliminary trials, then the results were shared with the research group, and the tools were adjusted as necessary. In particular, the adjustments involved adding several items of information to the analytical datasheet that would speed up the identification of appropriate picturebooks. The additions might also be helpful in the

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event of a quantitative analysis, as the extra details regarded the time and place(s) in which the story was set. A visual map, proposed by the geographer on the team, was also included in the datasheet to give a schematic account of the movements involved in the story. The Excel table relating to the child's identity was divided into two, separating the emotional from the physical, cognitive, creative and social facets for the sake of clarity and to facilitate the data input. The team also discussed at length what English terms could best reflect the shared meanings attributed to the words and expressions used. In fact, the proposed datasheet and spreadsheets were first conceived in Italian and then translated into English, so they suffered in a way from an Italian historical, cultural and pedagogical mindset. For them to be used in cooperation with the researchers from other countries it was necessary first to share and focus on the meanings attributed to the terms they contained – also bearing the other social, cultural and education systems in mind – in order to arrive at a mediation and an English translation that could work for everyone.

The group of researchers ultimately fine-adjusted two tools: a *Word Picturebook Datasheet* and an *Excel Data Matrix* comprising four different tables. The first tool consisted of 27 items used to describe and analyze in detail, from a narrative standpoint, the protagonists and objects in the selected picturebooks, paying particular attention to the environments (*kitchen, bedroom, living room, dining room, bathroom, playroom, hallway or entrance hall, under the stairway, cellar, attic, garden*). The last item in the datasheet was the visual spatial map of the protagonists' movements.

The second tool consisted of four different tables: Table 1 *Description of domestic spaces*; Table 2 *Identity formation in domestic spaces (physical, cognitive, creative and social identity)*; Table 3 *Identity formation in domestic spaces (emotional identity)*; Table 4 *Relationship inside domestic spaces*. In this data matrix, the domestic spaces and the dimensions of the protagonist's physical, cognitive, creative, social, and emotional identity become units of observation, and are used to describe the symbolic meaning of the home as a positive place providing care and protection, and opportunities for discovery and development, or as a negative place that hinders children's development because it is where they experience carelessness, physical or psychological violence, and

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solitude. These identities were expressed through actions taking place within the spaces of the home: the physical actions of sleeping, eating and playing; the cognitive actions of drawing, playing, reading, interacting with machines, and writing; the creative action of constructing, fantasizing, imagining, playing, inventing; the social actions taken in groups with peers, in groups with adults, cooperating, playing and talking. Emotional identity was expressed by means of a lengthy series of types of behavior, such as embracing, caressing, kissing, destroying, crying in anger or pain, laughing, hugging, trembling, shouting, and many others, all of which can be brought down to the seven principal emotions identified as: joy, surprise, fear, disgust, sadness and shame. By intersecting the places with the facets of emotional identity and the protagonists' relations with themselves, their peers and adults, the last table enabled us to ascertain the child's compliance with the rules or desire to break them. The adults' attitudes refer to an idea of children whose behavior should be supported or sanctioned.

Now the research project has been completed, we can provide some brief critical comments on the tools used to collect our data. The 27-item descriptive *Word Datasheet* proved useful and accurate in describing the spaces and the timing of the stories in the picturebooks. It enabled us to produce an accurate outline of the structure and content of the stories, but completing it was also very effortful and time-consuming. For some countries, like Germany, it was impossible to meet the requirement that the children's books be written and/or illustrated by authors of the same nationality as the country they represented because many of the available books had been translated (and the geographical origin of the works proved significant, pointing to publishing decisions of a political and cultural nature). The requirements concerning the aesthetic and literary quality of the works were always met, but – especially in the earlier decades – only by including some works that, strictly speaking, were not really picturebooks, but their predecessors, or books that bore some resemblance to the picturebook format (as in the case of Portugal and Norway). The less recent publications sometimes did not have the picturebook layout, or they were longer, or the internal structure did not reflect the one generally used today (as proposed in the datasheet), but this did not pose particular analytical problems.

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The spatial map and tables did reveal some critical issues, however, and could be improved in view of a possible future continuation of the research project. The visual map proved difficult to use because our researchers reported that it was not always suitable for the picturebooks they analyzed. There was sometimes more than one itinerary for the various characters in the story, and their movements were sometimes complicated and articulated. This difficulty might have been manageable, since the datasheet allowed for numerous possible interpretations, but one of the main problems related to the need for a specific digital expertise in manipulating shapes to construct the map. When used by the research team's geographer, however, the map generated some interesting perspectives because it revealed a spatial itinerary that could also be read as a personal identity-forming pathway. This tool thus demonstrated how an interdisciplinary approach, which is certainly very fruitful in pedagogical and comparative studies, benefits from scientific exchanges, but also demands capabilities that need to be acquired by specialists in the various disciplines involved, and this would necessitate some quite serious continuous education development programs.

Using the *Excel Data Matrix* comprising the four spreadsheets revealed some critical issues too. The first table describing the domestic space was the easiest to complete because the reference to places, objects and furnishings was clear. But some spaces that had been overlooked, such as the cupboard, the study or the lift, might be important because they mark the boundary between inside and outside the home; and the garage, for instance, proved important in the picturebooks analyzed. It also emerged that the "garden" did not always encompass outdoor spaces that might be better described as courtyards or simply spaces between the buildings.

We found that the domestic space was sometimes the protagonists' own home, but sometimes it was the home of other people that the protagonists or other characters in the story visited, especially in the German picturebooks. In such cases, it was difficult to convey a different meaning of this domestic space using the first table. As for the presence of furnishings, objects, machines, books, toys and games, we found that the way they expressed the domestic spaces was sometimes revealed only gradually from a succession of images as the story developed, and they could be seen from different

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angles. The first difficulty could be avoided by stating in the title of the spreadsheet whether the domestic space was the protagonist's own home, or someone else's, or two separate spreadsheets could be used. But for the second problem, it will be necessary to devise a different tool that can shed light on: the importance of the home in the story, its symbolic meaning to the protagonists, and in what way they belong there; and the succession of furnishings and objects that make their appearance in the story, possibly also from different perspectives.

Examining our European partners' recommendations, we also noticed that the leading characters in the stories are not always human. Some are pets or wild animals, or fantastic creatures, and it remains to be seen whether or not these characters stand in for children. Moreover, when there is more than one protagonist in a story it becomes harder to complete the datasheet because different characters behave differently, while moving simultaneously in the space. As for the identities to capture as they develop in the narrative, it will be necessary to provide for more detail concerning ethnic-cultural identity. The team preparing the datasheet had intended this to remain largely implicit, only emerging perhaps in the last two decades (in stories reflecting the globalization phenomenon), but they will be added as a separate item in any further development of the research tool. In fact, other European societies have more longstanding multi-ethnic roots than Italy, and this was apparent from the children's stories.

The greatest difficulties were encountered when it came to compiling the spreadsheet relating to the protagonists' emotional identity, which proved difficult to establish because of the very wide range of emotions involved. Sometimes the pictures did not reveal the characters' emotions. Sometimes the combinations of actions and emotions in the table were excessively prescriptive. We also found that characters were often confused, or lost in thought, or concentrating on an activity or idea, and it was not easy to guess their emotions. Some of the researchers suggested the need for a greater variety of terms describing positive emotions.

This critical issue prompts at least two considerations. First, the range of human emotions is so vast, rich, articulated, and charged with shades of meaning that it will always be difficult to try and squeeze them into a precise frame. Even in the light of the

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critical literature on the topic, a degree of approximation seems inevitable. We might add that every reader sees and perceives different emotions, depending on numerous factors, some certainly cultural, others entirely personal, and again difficult to identify. Of course, this is a troublesome aspect of our research, and a potential weakness of the proposed model that will be re-examined and might possibly be overcome by resorting to different, more flexible data collection tools. Some of our researchers initially suggested leaving a space free for comments or suggestions, but this would generate data that would be difficult to compare – and consequently of little use for our research purposes. We shall look into how we might absorb a suggestion from the German researcher that written texts convey emotions better than pictures, even in picturebooks by undeniably artistic illustrators.

Another issue concerns the difficulty that emerged at times in establishing whether the characters had broken the rules in their homes, and whether the children were consequently represented as being subversive. To clarify this issue, which seems to relate partly to the cultural interpretation of the behavior being described, we will need a discussion with the European researchers on the significance of certain pedagogical categories underlying education practices, in an effort to finding shared interpretations.

#### **4. Preliminary findings**

The research findings presented below are the result of the juxtaposition and comparison of the data provided in the spreadsheets and the researchers' reports. In the present paper, partly to save space in this *Special Issue*, we comment only on certain particularly significant findings (in the hope of having an opportunity to describe them in more detail in future).

The corpus of picturebooks considered was quantitatively similar in each country, with 34 books for Italy, 42 for France, 34 for Norway, 38 for Germany, and 39 for Croatia. The exception was Portugal with only 22, due to a paucity of options available, especially in the earlier decades. This is because Portugal did not have a tradition for illustrators of children's books until the 1980s, and the country's isolation (also in the

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cultural sense) as a result of the dictatorship in power from 1926 and 1974 prevented the translation of books from other countries. So, in the case of Portugal, we considered the pioneering works of a generation of illustrators who began publishing only in the 1980s. The selection of German picturebooks came from both the Federal Republic and the Democratic Republic (before their reunification in 1990), taking into account the particular political situation that facilitated the translation of numerous foreign works with a view to promoting an internationalization and political pacification in these regions after the partition imposed in 1945.

Generally speaking, the researchers reported that it was more difficult to find children's books with the characteristics of the picturebook in the earlier decades considered because publishers had begun to choose this particular style of book only relatively recently. In almost all cases, their books were narratives. In a few exceptions, publishers also produced volumes of poetry, songs and nursery rhymes, mainly intended to help children learn specific skills such as writing, telling the time, or counting. While we certainly cannot claim that the set of 209 books that we analyzed is absolutely representative of six decades of European children's picturebooks, it is nonetheless a significant sample that lends itself to a qualitative data analysis.

A first finding concerns the influence of social, political, and cultural factors on how the home was represented, and its symbolic meaning in the picturebooks from the various countries. On this fundamental aspect, we found numerous strong convergences and similarities in all the European countries, and a few equally significant divergences.

According to the logic behind our research, one historical development of home represented as an *espace vécu* that emerged from the data obtained in all the countries considered, and the thoughts of all the researchers involved, was that the end of the Second World War marked a turning point for Europe, when its social structure changed. In the case of France and Norway, the 1950s and 1960s were the years of post-war reconstruction, initially "lean" years that led to adjustments and economic improvements that are also reflected in the representations of domestic interiors in children's books. For other countries the picture is rather more complicated because of the various problems posed by their totalitarian political regimes. In Italy, the changes

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recorded in children's books seem to have related mainly to the new family units being formed, which were smaller and less stable, but also economically independent. Although their economic conditions were precarious, the generational dynamics regarding children's education based on the strict rules experienced under the fascist regime began to weaken. It could be said that the new sociopolitical dynamics led children to experiment in private, abandoning a model of identity construction based on sharing, and on the public imposition of rules to interiorize. In Germany, during the years immediately after the war, it is interesting to see that the devastation of the war and the shortage of homes are not represented: the picturebooks show family life carrying on smoothly, with an abundance of food and furnishings. Although we can interpret this (as the German researcher suggests) as an escape from reality, or the dream of a future peaceful time, the fact remains that the German children's literature does not reflect the social reality of the moment. It is only with the revolutionary movement of 1968 that reality and fiction come together, claiming the rights of the child and paving the way to psychological studies on their thoughts and feelings that are then reflected in children's books. As already mentioned, the dictatorship in Portugal isolated the country from the rest of Europe, and seems to have emphasized the idea of a family space where parenting (and gender) roles remained unchanged. The children's books show domestic spaces where the usual daily routines play out and the rules are rarely broken. It seems that, up until the early 1980s, the children's books available in Portugal reproduced social, family and domestic situations characteristic of the decades before the fascists came to power in Europe. In Croatia too, in the post-war years under Tito's dictatorship (which ended in 1980, and had defined the social and family educational dynamics of Yugoslav children, the "Young Pioneers", for decades), the picturebooks reflected the political and ideological influences on children's identity construction. This was initially based on a collectivist logic, as seen in the books published in Eastern Germany too. Then gradually, starting from the 1980s, it changed to reflect family and personal values belonging to the private sphere of the individual.

The influence of politics on educational practices (a paradigm of historical research adapted to the comparative approach) was thus confirmed in the content of Italian,

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Portuguese, Croatian and German picturebooks, and suggests at least two considerations. One concerns the dynamics between public and private spaces (inside and outside), which was not the same everywhere in Europe. The Portuguese dictatorship, like the Italian fascist regime, saw the family and private homes as the primary units for transmitting their ideology and consequently looked “inside”, or just outside the home, in the courtyards where children play. On the other hand, the Croatian and Eastern German approaches (both communist and collectivist) projected children “outside” the home into communal spaces like the street, school, public places, and the child’s identity formation was shifted to the public space.

Starting in the 1970s, albeit with a different timing and different trends, the life represented in European children’s books became more private, but for different reasons and in different ways. What all the works share is the construction of *espaces vécus* inside the home, and a decline of public spaces represented as safe and protected places for children. What distinguishes each country’s works from the others, because it is rooted in their social, political and economic fabric, is the way in which what is “inside” takes priority over what is “outside”.

In Italy, this process meant the creation of reassuring spaces that became more and more accessorized and opulent, to which children initially returned after their adventures “outside”. But with time they gradually shut themselves in, losing the elements of discovery and risk-taking in their self-construction, and ultimately beginning to feel lonely. In Portugal, home was the safe haven where children’s daily routines and games played out. It is where they found wellbeing and intimacy, although the limited interaction with adults (also mentioned by the Portuguese researcher) seems to leave the educational relationship in the background. In France, the living space became intimate, providing warmth and rest. The collective dimension of families living together, possibly in the apartment blocks typical of the 1960s, acquired egalitarian features, with a fair sharing of the available space, but children were gradually relegated inside enclosed, sometimes sad spaces. In the 1990s, the “inside-outside” dynamics acquired more permeable boundaries. The threshold of the private space of children and their families became a line to step over, to go beyond in order to move outside, then return

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to the safety of home, introjecting new meanings in the process. In Germany, the home seems to be a more dynamic environment: starting from the 1990s, we see various itineraries that prompted the children to leave their home, go far away, and then return, or visit other people's homes. But then they too gradually shut themselves inside urban apartments where the educational dynamics are played out in verbal battles and oppositional communications, though they always end well. The children's self-construction passes through similar itineraries to those seen in the French picturebooks, but the social relations appear more evident, lively and diversified.

In Croatian books from the earlier decades, the public space was represented as a safe place for an ideologically and politically defined and oriented child-hero. Outdoor spaces of aggregation even protected the children from their own families. Significantly, the Croatian books include the only story in which a parent is represented as violent and potentially destructive for the child protagonist and, instead of being reassuring, the end of the story remains open and unsolved. In subsequent decades, the Croatian children were still curious explorers, but in the 1960s the outdoor spaces became dangerous. Despite all the efforts made in the 1970s to restore the idea of the adventurous child, the outbreak of another war in Croatian territory in the 1990s changed things, and it is the family and the home that safeguard the children and give them a sense of belonging.

To sum up, these different European societies with similar national histories thus generate the depiction of spaces for children to inhabit that are similar in some, but not all aspects, and the types of education to support the children's growth and development differ to some degree.

The country that stands apart is Norway, where domestic interiors are not particularly significant and the important educational experiences mainly occur outside the home – not so much in a social context as in contact with nature. The country's scarcely-populated territory, particular elongated shape and educational traditions have always given space to outdoor education, and its picturebooks succeed in amply and profoundly expressing a sense of belonging and safety offered by Norway's particular outdoor environment. It is this natural environment that has a fundamental role in educational and self-educating practices. The Norwegian picturebooks show how

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nature helps the children become autonomous, resilient, active and responsible heroes, who often take care of themselves, and also of animals and the environment without any adult help.

The particular case of Norway is only comparable with that of one French picturebook illustrated by Jean Cana, in which a nomadic tribe of pygmies living in the equatorial forest builds a home made entirely of plants and light. They can abandon this home whenever they like because it does not disfigure the landscape, but it is still a symbol of life lived in harmony with nature. The Norwegian landscape offers this opportunity to children in Europe: it has places where they can experiment and feel part of the natural world, at least partly disproving the concept of empiricist tradition emerging from the other countries' picturebooks, according to which children are the outcome of the society in which they live, and consequently pre-determined.

This first comparison of our data led us to draw an important conclusion: over the last 65 years, childhood has been represented in both indoor domestic spaces and in the outside world. The former prevail and, though they characteristically provide care and security, they end up by enabling an adult control over childhood. Outdoor spaces, be they natural or social (Fig.1), are more challenging. They lead children towards adventures and the domain of nature, making them run risks in order to grow up and learn as they strive to go beyond the limits of their own personal identity.

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Figure 1. Bruno Munari (1972). © Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl

While the picturebooks from most of the countries focused on the educational role of peers and adults, the Norwegian stories indicated “self-care” as a pedagogical category that finds space in the natural world. An effort to include this particular type of care, configured as self-education, as part of each country’s pedagogical traditions relating mainly to their informal education methods could be one way to construct a pedagogical cohesion in Europe. The “self-care” approach to childhood places children outdoors again (Fig. 2), free to experiment independently with their own capabilities, and to build personal and social skills that they can spend not only for their own purposes, but also to change the adult society of the future. This would mean returning to pathways that have been shut off, to what we now like to call outdoor education, which really has its roots way back in time, and probably in every European country’s pedagogical traditions.

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Figure 2. Illustration by Stian Hole (2011)

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Another conclusion concerns the role of the objects appearing inside the home, and has to do with the economic conditions developing after the difficult early post-war years. From the 1950s onwards, the representations in some countries' picturebooks remained essential and rather minimal. In the Portuguese and Norwegian books, domestic objects were sometimes charged with symbolic meaning (as in the case of tables and beds), but served mainly to identify the spaces. In themselves, they were not important to the educational relations, which seemed to play out in the domestic environment irrespective of their presence. In the French books, on the other hand, these objects are charged with a different meaning: instead of keeping the children at home, they seem to drive them (partly in an imaginary sense) out into the world, where they can experiment with broader social relations or embark on projects conceived at home. This is the case, for instance, of the protagonist in *Devine qui fait quoi*, who goes beyond the confines of his own home to find a branch, with which he builds a boat, embarking on a journey towards the construction of his own social identity.

In the German books, the pictures show more and more furniture and domestic objects as time goes on, suggesting a constantly improving economic well-being, but they also convey other meanings. From the 1980s onwards, toys, teddies, games, technological devices like televisions, radios and computers, and books are scattered all over the floor of the bedroom or playroom, bearing witness to an untidiness that the adults tolerate. There seems to be a loosening of the previously tight house rules, and children can decide whether or not to tidy their own rooms. The more unrestricted and untidy childhood represented in these books thus subverts some of the old rules, and the children gain in decision-making space.

In the Italian picturebooks, the household objects increase considerably in number with the passage of time, becoming important in family relations in recent years. The children sometimes seem to have a significant relationship with objects in the home, such as the refrigerator and the kitchen table, which become a surrogate for their care and education. These domestic objects keep the children inside the home, which is reassuring and protective, but they also deny them any genuine care and affection, and the freedom to go out and experiment in the world. Solitude drives these children

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towards various forms of self-education that differ from those of the Norwegian and French children, though they share the same imaginative capacity which nourishes their desire for action.

In children's picturebooks, spaces, objects and furnishings reveal the quality of the educational relationship, in terms of both the adults' control and the children's emancipation. An accurate analysis of our data (to be conducted in another paper) will lead to further, more in-depth comments.

To interpret the illustrations of domestic furnishings, objects and toys, we need to consider the different national cultures. In Norway, where children spend much more time outside, it is naturally not so important for illustrators to capture details of home interiors, though even in this case it is worth noting that shared educational strategies could be implemented. Containing the consumerism that induces children to accumulate toys and other objects, preventing these things from serving as the medium of family relations, and possibly soliciting and suggesting unusual and alternative uses for domestic objects to nurture children's creative spirit could all be part of the shared goals of European educational practices.

Now, moving on to examine another aspect that emerged from our comparative study, the picturebooks showed the same rooms in the home, with much the same features. The kitchen and living room are social spaces where children encounter their peers and the grown-ups, where meals are eaten (an activity that marked a decisive step towards private life in a Croatian picturebook of 1985), where there is sometimes conversation, and where the adults go about their daily activities. The bedroom and playroom are the children's private spaces. The bedroom, in particular, was interpreted by all six researchers involved in our project as having symbolic meaning. It represents the children's belonging to the home. The bed in their room is one of the items of furniture that appears in every country's picturebooks. It sometimes represents the care provided by adults (as in some German picturebooks), but in other stories it is where children's projects take shape, where their imagination and fantasy worlds roam free. In this sense, for instance, Emma's bedroom (Fig. 3) in the Italian picturebook *E' un pomeriggio d'autunno in via Curiel 8*, and Sofia's in the Portuguese book *O Papão no Desvão*

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interpret the children's most genuine self, which is identified with the need to have a space where they are free to plan experiences and overcome their fears<sup>2</sup>.



Figure 3. Illustration by Mara Cerri (2009)

In the picturebooks analyzed, the period in which the stories take place is either undefined or irrelevant. There is never a future and, on the rare occasions when there is a past, it refers to the experiences of other characters, like the grandparents or Yugoslav partisans who tell children their stories. The idea of night-time as the most interesting part of the day because it coincides with darkness and a lack of adult control is rarely used as a narrative device. Apart

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from its possible literary interpretation, this lack of temporal depth suggests that the idea of childhood as a value with its own place in the world (not merely with a view to a child's future development into an Other) is now a shared European heritage. Childhood is now commonly seen as having particular physical, psychological and emotional characteristics, which emerge from the representations and can serve as a shared basis of the debate among European pedagogists with a view to constructing shared pathways for children's education.

Another comparative analysis conducted on our data concerned the spatiality of the homes represented in the picturebooks, interpreted in relation to the emotions aroused by the layout of the rooms. In the most recent Italian picturebooks, the vertical dimension of the home disappears, replaced by a horizontal dimension that reassures and protects, but also has a dampening effect on the opportunities for emotions associated with the discovery of places like lofts and cellars. There is little scope for experiencing feelings that, though they might be considered "negative", are necessary to the process of a child's identity construction. Even when such emotions are envisaged in a story, there is always a happy ending, bathed in the light of an evident, manifest and scarcely adventurous spatiality. The importance of vertical space is evident from a French picturebook, *Ma Vallée* by Claude Ponti, which describes a treehouse. The house has ladders leading up from a cave-cellar to a loft open to the stars. It is a house that offers an image of the world in which the protagonist's identity is constructed as the child passes from one threshold to another, taking possession of the space and becoming independent. In the German picturebooks *Zupp* and *In der Dachkammer brennt noch Licht*, the attic and the loft are emotionally-charged places of discovery, of strange meetings with a purple lion or with a stranger who introduces the child to the view of the city by night.

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The inside of today's European homes is laid out according to architectural rules that draw on tradition, social and economic changes in the country, and the practical needs of the types of family occupying them. The need for a "vertical space" in which to grow up, which seems to be shared by the children of Europe, could be metaphorically met by pedagogically-oriented architectural solutions capable of devising alternative housing options, possibly drawing on combinations of the architectural traditions of different European countries.

As concerns children's emotional education, it is interesting to note that it was only in the previously-mentioned Croatian book that its protagonist Darko associated the inside of his home with a sense of genuine fear. In all the other stories, home is a place that provides safety and tranquility. Even situations that might cause sadness (such as a parents' divorce or the death of a grandpa in two German picture books) or fear, or disgust are always transient and solved without leaving any emotional scars. The areas adjacent to the home, such as gardens and courtyards, do not escape this rule, except in the Norwegian picturebooks, where nature (seen as home) enables the protagonists in the stories to experience emotions. They experience joy and are unafraid of the difficulties they encounter. They have escapades that prove to be educational both from the physical and, more importantly, from the emotional perspective.

An education that also aims to develop children's emotions and feelings can be hypothesized in Europe, but only if educational spaces are provided in the natural and outdoor social world, and if children perceive them as part of their "home", and capable of offering experiences that arouse their emotional awareness.

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## 5. Conclusions and new research prospects

Our comparative study on the data we collected indicates that the *espace vécu* of the homes represented in children's picturebooks from the various European countries taking part in our research is a space that provides security, care, protection, and a chance to learn to cooperate with siblings and parents. Children trust these domestic spaces. They explore and observe them, play inside them, and take care of them. There is a prevailing sense of belonging and the representation of a tranquil, easy life that seems almost impeccable and idyllic in some countries (e.g. Portugal), more variegated in others, but never dangerous. The home is a refuge, a safe haven where children gain experience, and to which they return after going away to discover the outside world. When there are controversies and problems at home, they may experience negative emotions of sadness or fear, but they are always transient; dialogue, communications or the children's imagination find solutions to any problems.

But, with time, the children pay a price for all this. Their mobility inside and outside the home becomes more limited. They have fewer opportunities for free and independent formative experiences at home and elsewhere. This is true regardless of the fact that the rooms of the home seem to shrink in some countries and expand in others. In Italy, for instance, in very recent years, the playroom has disappeared, while in Norway children only acquired a room of their own in the 1990s. In Germany, the bathroom had become a room not just for personal hygiene, but also for relaxing already several decades ago. The characterizations suggested by the stories certainly depend on the social and cultural, political, historical and anthropological contexts of the various countries and, although different shades of meaning are sometimes important, the overall picture that emerges is as described above. We found our research hypothesis confirmed, i.e. children's literature has the capacity to intercept changes in these various contexts, and to give an account of them, albeit in a fictional dimension.

As we have tried to demonstrate by comparing and interpreting our data, there are similarities and differences between European countries, but we can trace some pathways and features that they share. In all the countries considered, the representation

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of the spaces where children live inside and outside the home has evolved over time, but does not seem to reflect all the subversive potential of childhood. What is represented is still a time of life that necessitates care and education, but also rules and adult control – albeit allowing some space for independent action.

The idea that, to raise happy children, we need to provide educational spaces more permeable to the outside world, be it natural or social, emerges from the picturebooks of all six countries examined. This makes us wonder whether it would be possible to design domestic spaces that have less clear-cut boundaries. Borrowing from Italian tradition, for instance, maybe we could retrieve shared spaces similar to what was once the courtyard of the old colonial houses and early urban homes, or create green spaces other than public parks, adapting them to the new educational needs of today's children. The new ecofriendly homes, for instance, offer innovative living solutions and, by using bio-architectural projects and buildings that draw on the experience of northern Europe, they can better combine indoors and outdoors. There is no question that the excessive privatization of domestic spaces does not facilitate the construction of free, independent and contented personalities, which seem to need the experience (sometimes emotional) of conquering the space outside, and inside the self.

It is worth mentioning at least two possible ways to further pursue our research. Some of our data were not included in our comparative analysis because they did not find echoes in at least two of the European countries considered. This was the case, for instance, of findings concerning female gender (a factor considered in the Norwegian picturebooks, but not identified by the other researchers), which is worth investigating further. Another analytical opportunity may stem from attempting (as the Croatian researcher did) to combine the use of quantitative and qualitative methods to process the data. This would entail returning to the data acquired for the project and trying to aggregate it according to statistical rules to see if this can make any significant contribution to the outcome of our research.

Our project certainly generated some interesting and thought-provoking results, and points towards several new issues worth investigating. Our findings also support the

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conviction that comparative methods offer good opportunities for shedding light even on research questions outside the conventional domain of academic systems.

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<sup>1</sup> Given its international scope and objectives, the research program was in line with the goals of Horizon 2020 and the calls scheduled in 2016 (the year when the project began). Its aims were consistent with both the call “Understanding Europe. Promoting the European public and cultural space” (H2020SC6CULTCOOP20162017), Pillar “Societal Challenges”, Work Programme “Europe in a changing world – inclusive, innovative and reflective societies”, and the call “New constellations of Changing Institutions and Actors” (H2020SwafS20162017), Pillar “Science with and for Society”, Work Programme “Science with and for Society”. In fact, one of the main purposes of the project was to meet the need to fine-adjust a new method for research in the sphere of the history of pedagogy that would enable us to reconstruct and improve the perception in Europe of the extent of the European community’s affinity and cohesion, paying particular attention to the world of childhood and adolescence. The research also underscores the importance of reflecting in terms of an exchange of good practices, exploring new forms of cooperation with research bodies, publishers, industry, civil society, organizations and politicians involved in the design of spaces and environments capable of coping with the transformations and tensions of a rapidly-changing society, sometimes insufficiently aware of the needs of children and their cognitive, social, cultural and civil development.

<sup>2</sup> Emma imagines a tropical forest behind the wallpaper in her bedroom, and Sofia shares her private space with a bogeyman after realizing that he is as lonely as she is.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/10037>

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