This paper presents the results of a qualitative analysis, based on the principles of action research in education, of three teaching sequences taught during Geography classes in Southern Switzerland. Each sequence included a controversy on a management project of a public space located in the daily life space of the pupils involved. Different studies have analysed the advantages of a teaching method based on the introduction of controversies into teaching sequences. They stress, for example, the role of this method in the following areas: furthering collective and cooperative learning; enabling pupils to construct personal informed opinions and reinforced statements; developing pupils’ autonomy and responsibility. The research underlying this paper aims to measure the impact of this method in terms of strengthening critical thinking competencies, and educating pupils as spatial actors and dynamic citizens. The Geography teaching sequences were planned, under my supervision, by three students of the Teaching Education Institution of Southern Switzerland, where I work as a lower secondary school teacher trainer, as part of their teacher-training programme. Each student taught the planned teaching sequence in one of their classes. Altogether, three classes were therefore involved in this research study. The analysis was conducted on material produced by the pupils of the three classes during the teaching sequence.

**KEYWORDS**
citizenship education, controversies, critical thinking, Geography teaching, public space, Switzerland

### 1 | CONTROVERSIES AND TEACHING

Research in education affirms that, regardless of the level, teaching is not simply a matter of knowledge transfer; the issue is more one of fostering the acquisition of the instruments required in order to live citizenship dynamically and as spatial actors. Over the last few decades, cognisance of this task has driven education policy makers to rewrite school curricula on the basis of competences, a concept defined by Weinert “primarily as the mental conditions necessary for cognitive, social and vocational achievement” (2001, p. 56). This focus on competences is even more important if we consider the conceptualisations of spatial actor and dynamic citizenship, as used in this text.

The concept of spatial actor is interpreted here as a combination of the sense given by Lussault to this concept, and the understanding of human action provided by Arendt. Lussault (2007, p. 165) considers an actor as a person moved by the need and the will to act, and therefore provided with strategic competencies, margins of manoeuvre, capacities of arbitrage and with the capacity to act formed by and for socialisation. According to Arendt “[a]ction […] corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (1998, p. 7). Action, unlike
Citizenship is understood here as the result of a choice (Staeheli, 2011, p. 394) of a chosen, not an inherited, belonging (Audigier, 2002, p. 21). It “is always in formation, is never static, settled, or complete” (Staeheli, 2011, p. 398) and “is not a monolithic social category that is determined by state edict and endures unchanged through time and across place” (Marston & Mitchell, 2004, p. 110). In short, it is dynamic, not static. Therefore, dynamic citizens are provided with the competencies of the spatial actor, and their action is always inside the plurality of other citizens.

In order to further the development of dynamic citizens, always renewing and deepening their choices, as reported by Staeheli, always modelling the chosen belonging evoked by Audigier, in an environment always in motion, and in order to promote the education of a spatial actor equipped with the capacities and competencies, as defined by Lussault, and able to act in an environment in relation with other actors as indicated by Arendt, it is important to strengthen critical thinking, as the driver allowing the judgement necessary to establish choices, evaluate the environment and remodel citizenship.

In this text, critical thinking is perceived as a competence that requires the capacity to classify information coming from different sources, with the aim of formulating a critical judgement based on weighing up contrasting views of a controversial situation, considering them from different aspects and evaluating the issues involved. Critical thinking therefore implies a choice or statement, which one should be able to defend with appropriate arguments, and challenge whenever required, mobilising self-correction and self-criticism which are fundamental for critical thinking (Facione, 2000; Gagnon et al., 2018; Moon, 2008). Gordon et al. lean on the concept of critical spatial thinking, defined as “a deeper understanding of relationships such as spatial dependence or spatial heterogeneity; or to reflexivity in the use of spatial data and technologies” (2016, p. 4). This concept plays an important role in the dynamic of this text. Nevertheless, the data collected during the research underlying this paper have been analysed focusing primarily on critical thinking: a transversal competence, more than on critical spatial thinking.

For a teaching programme aimed at furthering the acquisition of competencies, one trend in educational sciences recommends using a method based on the introduction of controversies, or “questions sociales vives” (“living social topics”), into practice. A controversy is a topic that generates debate in the referential scholarly knowledge, in society and families, and/or at school and in its practices (Albe, 2009; Floro, 2011; Heimberg, 2011; Tutiaux-Guillon, 2006). Controversies are therefore suited for organising interactive and discursive teaching/learning activities developing citizenship. To this purpose, teachers’ attitudes towards controversies play a central role. First, as recognised by Nehrdich (2011, pp. 16–17), it is appropriate that teachers present controversies in their integrity and in their unresolved form. Second, teachers should assume at least the perspective of “neutral impartiality,” if not one of “committed impartiality,” as described by Kelly (1986, pp. 121–134).

The benefits of this teaching method have been analysed in different studies, which can be summarised as: furthering collective and cooperative learning (Floro, 2011); educating pupils to respect each other’s point of view (Kelly, 1986); building pupils’ informed opinions and reinforced statements (Albe, 2009); acquiring the competencies of complex thinking (Albe, 2009; Tutiaux-Guillon, 2006); developing pupils’ autonomy and responsibility (Simonneaux & Legardez, 2011). As indicated by De Pietro and Gagnon controversies allow a commitment with what they call the “public genres constitutive of the society” (2013, p. 176). This could impact the way pupils deal with the society and contribute to building a public space based on the ethics of discussion (De Pietro & Gagnon, 2013, p. 174). Finally, Albe (2009, p. 191) considers that, with the introduction of controversies, teaching is no longer based on the leading role of the teacher. This method leaves space for negotiation with pupils on the organisation of dynamic activities, conferring them an active role in the construction of knowledge, and modelling teaching/learning experiences in more interactive activities, in the sense of a more dynamic pedagogy.

The purpose of this paper is, through an empirical study, to contribute to the reflection regarding the impact on furthering dynamic citizenship by strengthening critical thinking competencies and forming the consciousness of being spatial actors, brought about by the introduction of controversies into Geography teaching. The study was conducted based on the analysis of three Geography-teaching sequences, each of which included a controversy concerning a public space management project. Public space offers interesting opportunities for introducing controversies related to urban space into Geography teaching. The influence of urban space in citizenship education has also been studied by Pikett who analysed how young people learn their place in the world through the realities of living together in particular places and social contexts [and sustains that] space, people and practices are active in shaping citizenship. (Pikett, 2009, p. 806)

Other controversies used in Geography teaching can also be cited, such as the one illustrated by Lupatini (2016, pp. 229–234). The introduction of controversies is not the only opportunity to foster competencies and citizenship education through
Geography teaching. Gordon et al. (2016), for instance, propose an interesting study on the impact of interactive spatial technologies in building civic engagement.

As shown by Paquot (2006, p. 107), public space is a polysemous concept and, as he writes (2009, pp. 50–51), this polysemity originates from the different conceptions of the distinction between private and public sphere, according to culture, people and even sex and age. This separation appeared in the West in the 17th and 18th centuries, with the closing of the domestic space of the nuclear family, and the separation of living and working spaces (Paquot, 2006, p. 107; Paquot, 2009, p. 57).

Considering the polysemity of public space, the effectiveness of introducing controversies on this subject into teaching depends on its conceptualisation. To define it, I first refer to Lussault (2013, p. 361) and interpret it as a space that does not belong to any legal person governed by private law. This definition excludes what Staeheli and Mitchell (2008, p. xvi) define as “publicly accessible spaces” that are “privately owned and controlled.” Lévy (2013, pp. 364–366) emphasises its high level of accessibility, because mutual knowledge is not required to enter it, therefore making it space where it is possible to be involved with the risk of otherness, or as Paquot (2009, p. 7) writes, where the self experiences the other. As Lévy (2013, p. 366) maintains, the possibility of meeting otherness confers public space its political character.

Focusing on publicity, Arendt says that the term “public” should be interpreted both as the space of appearance because “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity” (1998, p. 50), and as the “world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us” (1998, p. 52). Both phenomena of publicity strengthen the political nature of public space. First, Arendt (2003, p. 96) notes that public space is the space where everything appears in its “all-sidedness” (allseitigkeit), and seeing everything from every side means seeing it politically. Second, as written by Arendt (2003, p. 11), politics arise “between-the-people” (zwischen-den-Menschen). This space “between-the-people” designates the world, one of the two phenomena signifying publicity (Arendt, 1998, p. 52). This world seeps through wherever people interact between them, it is constructed by human interaction (Arendt, 2003, p. 25), and it assumes the aspect of a “web of relationships” (Arendt, 1998, p. 181) developed by the plurality of individuals at its origins. It is in this space that human action happens (Arendt, 1998, p. 182). Lussault (2007, p. 91) goes a step further, considering that action occurs with space not on space and that space and its spatial arrangement as an operator in human action (2007, p. 41).

On these bases, public space could be defined as a space common to all of us, not belonging to any legal person governed by private law, where everything appears in its “all-sidedness” in its plurality, and where it is possible to meet otherness. It is therefore forged as a space of the political and of the politics, and as an ideal space for the treatment, and analysis, of controversies.

2 CONTROVERSIES ON PUBLIC SPACE IN GEOGRAPHY TEACHING

In order to discuss the role played by controversies in Geography teaching, this paper reports the results of a qualitative analysis of works by 13–15-year-old pupils undertaken during teaching sequences on urban space, in three lower secondary classes in the Canton of Ticino (Switzerland) in the school year 2016–2017. The main learning objective of the sequences was to reinforce the awareness of urban space as the continuously changing product of the interactions between different actors, who act at different levels, based on their specific objectives and resources. The aim was to strengthen the cognitive process of attribute, for the knowledge dimension of urban space, as illustrated in the Piano di studio della scuola dell’obbligo ticinese (Repubblica e Cantone Ticino DECS Divisione della scuola, 2015, p. 195).

In Switzerland, school is organised mainly at the Cantonal level, following general Federal guidelines. Compulsory education starts at the age of four, is divided into three educational cycles and lasts 11 years. The three classes selected for this study were in the third cycle, which, in Canton Ticino, covers the final four school years. In Ticino, compulsory education is based on the principle of integration. School classes are not created in accordance with pupils’ capacities and abilities, and pupils with different levels of learning abilities are integrated in the same class.

In order to correspond to the objectives of a competency-based teaching practice, controversy should be part of a teaching sequence structured into the following phases: introduction; preparatory phase; executive phase; and conclusion. In the introduction, the three teachers first focused on the polysemous character of the concept of public space, asking pupils to define this in a think-pair-share activity, and then to discuss the results of this activity with the class as a whole. The teachers then introduced a controversy concerning the management of a public space located in the pupils’ daily life space. As Hertig (2012, pp. 56–57) writes, this introduction should raise the level of pupil motivation, foster the emergence of their conceptions about the subject, and awaken their questioning and their problematisation. In the preparatory phase, each class analysed its project, considering both the positive and negative aspects and implementation issues, by referring to local
newspapers and political, social or economic local actors. The aim here was to examine the topic in greater depth, and to foster the acquisition of the knowledge, abilities, capacities and competencies necessary in order to tackle the controversy in a critical manner, and to deal with it productively in the subsequent phase. The executive phase consisted of an in-class debate on the project under examination. This allowed pupils to tackle the controversy and to have sufficient information to present, in a text, their justified points of view on the controversy. This phase should reveal the level of acquisition of the knowledge, abilities, capacities and competences introduced in the second phase: if they have been developed properly, they will be mobilised and used here. This should not be the end point of the teaching sequence, since the conclusions are even more important. As Hertig (2012, p. 62) writes, in this phase it is essential to synthesise, conceptualise and institutionalise the knowledge, abilities and capacities acquired during the teaching sequence. Without a similar structure, the introduction of a controversy could be an entertaining activity for the pupils, but little more.

At the time of the data collection, the three teachers were students at the teacher training institute of Southern Switzerland, where the author teaches Didactics of Geography. The activities underlying this research were part of their educational programme as future lower secondary school Geography teachers. Teaching sequence planning was conducted under his supervision.

Data collection and the qualitative analysis of these data are set in the frame of an action research in education as described by Guay and Prud’homme (2011, pp. 183–187). This combines action, research and teacher education and is considered essential for contributing to the bettering of teaching practices. As Guay and Prud’homme (2011, p. 188) write, an action research in education is a methodological practice centred on the resolution of a concrete problem in a real pedagogical situation, aimed at contributing to the vocational development of the participants.

The data analysed here come from works executed by pupils during the course of the sequence. The data were transcribed on NVivo and analysed with the help of what Paillé and Mucchielli (2013, p. 19) define as themes: a tool that can be used to tag and note data extracts in a thematic analysis. As reported by the same authors (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2013, p. 232), this consists of marking, assembling and subsequently examining discursively the identified themes of the corpus, with the aim of tracing parallels and documenting divergences between the themes.

The circumstances in which the data were collected raise questions about the positionality of the researcher, because of his role as teacher trainer of the teachers involved. This text presents the results of the analysis of data collected from pupils. The teachers were simply intermediaries, and the researcher did not intervene in the classes. The positionality of the researcher can therefore be considered as neutral. His absence during the data collection phase raises another question. According to Paillé and Mucchielli (2013, p. 13), a qualitative research study implies direct personal contact between researcher and the subject of the research. This did not happen here, in order to avoid the presence of an external observer making a negative impact on the spontaneous participation of the pupils. On the other hand, however, as explained in the data analysis section, this absence prevented a deeper analysis of some interesting points.

The three classes were in different schools, located in the suburbs of three towns (Locarno, Bellinzona and Lugano). Capital letters (A-B-C) are used to identify the classes. Class A worked on the project of a group of Locarno citizens, supported by an important player in the Swiss clock-making industry, to build the biggest sundial in Europe in Piazza Grande (the main square of the town). This project would involve partially replacing the current cobbled paving in the square with slabs of granite. The municipality opposed the project because it affects the architectural structure and the traditional paving of the square. At the time the pupils tackled the controversy, the project had been rejected. Class B worked on a project promoted by the administration of their school to install security cameras outside the building in order to prevent vandalism outside teaching hours. When the pupils tackled this controversial issue, the cantonal authorities, which direct all public secondary schools in Ticino, had already rejected the project for reasons of privacy. Class C worked on the proposal made by the Municipality of Lugano to transfer the Cantonal Natural History Museum to the historic public abattoir, and to assign the current spaces used by the museum to an overcrowded lower secondary school situated nearby, a school of the same level as that attended by the Class C pupils. Since 2002, part of the historic public abattoir has been occupied by an alternative lifestyle group, united in a Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito (Occupied, self-directed, social centre). These people are called, and call themselves, the molinari. They have made this building their cultural meeting centre. The project is still pending, and will continue to be so until an alternative sustainable solution for the molinari has been found. The projects examined by Classes A and C have generated debate in the local society, as proven by their presence in local media. The project for Class B was the subject of debate in the school, mostly between pupils, and between teachers and other employees of the school.

Do the spaces involved in these controversies correspond to the conceptualisation of public space as defined before? Class A’s case concerns the main square of the town, the one where the weekly market and the most important cultural events, such as the Locarno Film Festival, take place. The publicity of this space is undisputed. For Class B’s case, it is
important to stress that the controversy concerns the spaces outside the school, which are freely accessible and used by young people of the neighbourhood as a meeting point. Free accessibility and interaction are basic characteristics of public spaces. The abattoir in Class C's case is a public building and, as explained below, its accessibility is controversial. Nevertheless, its municipal ownership status allows it to be considered as a public space.

3  |  A CONSCIENCE IN FORMATION

The analysed data are of two different types. Some are definitions of public space given by the pupils in the introductive phase. For Class B, the definitions were depicted in a diagram (see Figure 1), drawn on a whiteboard by the teacher, using the definitions collected orally. Other data come from the statements written by the pupils after having dealt with the controversy. To preserve pupils’ anonymity, their quotes have been coded using a capital letter (A-B-C) to differentiate the classes; a small letter (d or s) to indicate whether the quote comes from the definitions or from the statements; a number distinguishes pupils or groups of the same class.

3.1  |  A solid understanding of the subject

The data analysis reveals that pupils have a solid understanding of public space. This is shown by the terms used to describe it, by considering its public ownership and by their capacity to pick up its contradictory aspects.

In the definitions, accessibility and interaction are the more frequently used terms to characterise public space, as for instance:

\[\text{Ad1: Public space is a place where you can stay in contact with people.}\]
\[\text{Cd1: It is a place where we can meet with the others, without any specific invitation.}\]

In the statements, accessibility is a central point of a potential controversy between Cs7 and Cs9. Their perceptions of the accessibility to the space occupied by the molinari, and therefore to its publicity, diverge. Cs7 refuses to consider it as a public space because “the molinari do not allow everyone to enter.” This position is virtually refuted by Cs9, who writes: “it is anyway a public space, because if you want you can go there.”

In their texts, pupils also refer to the interactive function of public spaces. When rejecting the sundial, As8 writes: “I think Piazza Grande must not become a kind of ‘museum’ […] it should become again the place where you go to meet other people” Again concerning Piazza Grande, As6 proposes erecting a musical fountain, and stresses the need

**FIGURE 1** Diagram definition of public space created by teacher B, with the contribution of his pupils.
to “build something special that could attract people of every age, from children to the elderly.” Bs8 rejects the idea of putting security cameras to avoid vandalism around the school, because they would interfere with the interactive function. As they write: “being a public space it should be a time you spend in peace chatting and laughing with people you like, with your friends,” therefore implying that security cameras disturb interaction, because of their control function.

The definitions reveal pupils’ understanding of public space as a space owned publicly. This is present first in noticing the presence of rules that guide common life in public spaces. As, for instance, when defining public space, Cs1 writes: “a place where you have to respect some rules,” or Ad4: “where there are two or three essential rules.” This understanding is also present in the observation that public spaces are financed by taxes.

3.2 | A space of contradictions

Pupils’ works also reveal the perception of public space as a simultaneously equalitarian and authoritarian space. Equalitarian, since they consider it as a freely accessible place, where they can interact with everyone. Authoritarian, when they focus on forms of control exercised in public space, such as, for instance, the use of security cameras, or limitations on accessibility, or when they mention the role of rules. The fact that they consider it to be a space of both liberty and control can also be seen in Figure 1. Despite considering public space as a place where you have to respect some rules, they also view it as a place where it is possible to experience freedom from the family.

3.3 | A space invested by different spatial actors

Another interesting point emerging mostly from the texts is the identification of spatial actors involved in the controversies discussed, and the self-awareness of some pupils as spatial actors themselves. For instance As8, writes:

To revitalize Piazza Grande everyone should do something: the inhabitants have to discover that Piazza Grande is also a space for them, restaurateurs and storekeepers have to propose interesting products and the town should organize even more exhibitions and events.

A number of spatial actors involved in the controversy about the sundial in Piazza Grande in Locarno have been identified here: the inhabitants of the town; the restaurateurs and the storekeepers on the Piazza; and the municipality. In other texts, young people reveal themselves to be involved actors, indicating personal involvement with the analysed projects, because they consider themselves a part of the controversy. For instance, As7 writes: “I think they should make changes also more favourable to young people.” Bs6 stresses that the security cameras will “prevent that place being a meeting place for young people.” They focus their interest on the need to include young people’s requirements and requests in the spatial planning of public spaces. In Class C, many pupils support the municipal administration proposal because it allows more space to be allocated to another lower secondary school. For instance, Cs7 writes: “The molinari themselves are not a problem, but given that one needs more space for the school, I think it is better to use the space for the school.” This pupil writes as if they were directly affected by this decision.

3.4 | A space to look after

Pupils’ personal involvement with the controversy can be also testified by their care for the aesthetics and the appearance of the spaces concerned. As6 considers Piazza Grande to be “one of the nicest squares in Switzerland,” so it is important “to reflect on the aesthetic impact of the proposed sundial.” As9 rejects the sundial simply because “this project has nothing to do with the architectural style of Piazza Grande.” In Classes B and C, further evidence of the importance given by pupils to the aesthetic appearance of public space is seen in the references to vandalism, and its inclusion in their arguments. Bs7 writes: “with this debate I changed idea … because [with the security cameras] there will be less vandalism.” Cs8 and Cs9 write that it is important to find alternative solutions for the molinari in Lugano before evicting them, to avoid vandalism. Otherwise, as written by Cs8, they will “make mess and mistreat the town.”

This care for the appearance of urban space is related to its attractiveness and to its function as a place for interaction. For instance, As6 proposes building a “musical fountain” in Piazza Grande because, as they write: “this would surely be an attraction for every day of the year, and would make the Piazza more joyful and less silent.”
3.5 | A critical thinking competence to be reinforced

Besides these positive considerations, the analysis of the texts also shows partially satisfactory results concerning critical thinking. Pupils are able to classify information coming from different sources, make a critical judgement on a controversial project and justify it using appropriate arguments. However, they seldom discuss their judgements by referring to arguments opposing their statements, in order to counterbalance and to reject them. This capacity to weigh one's own judgement should be developed as part of the process of enhancing self-correction and self-criticism attitudes.

In synthesis, the analyses of the collected data reveal pupils’ satisfactory knowledge of the concept of public space. Their self-awareness as spatial actors, involved in the examined spatial controversies, and their cognisance of public space as an egalitarian and authoritarian place, appear solid. Less positively, they show a partial possession of a critical thinking competence, and the need for further exercises to fortify it.

Notwithstanding this generally positive judgement, it is important to stress that the teaching sequences as described here are not intended to be a formula, but instead offer one possible configuration. Furthermore, to be effective, teaching based on controversies should not be reduced to one single extemporary experience. Moreover, this research study has not sought to measure the real effect of such an approach on students’ action outside the school, so no statements can be made on this point.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to the introduction and treatment of controversies in discursive and participative practices, “pupils learn from each other in informal ways and understand themselves in relation to ‘others’” (Pikett, 2009, p. 819). Consequently, they reinforce their sense of otherness and togetherness and, using Arendt words, they weave a “web of relationships,” and the world seeps between them. In this way they become spatial actors, as defined above.

The strengthening of their self-awareness as spatial actors produces a more responsive chosen belonging, fundamental for dynamic citizenship. Cognisance of the egalitarian and authoritarian aspects of public space leads to a deeper knowledge of publicity, and of the role played by spatial actors in public space and in its management. Hence pupils acquire a deeper concern for publicity, as suggested by Biesta (2012, p. 693), and a stronger understanding of the mechanisms ruling public space. This contributes to increased awareness of their action in public space.

Encouraging pupils to deal personally with the controversy, and to discuss it in group activities, has contributed to strengthening their reflexivity and their capacities for collaboration, both considered by Gordon et al. (2016, p. 12) as essential for civic engagement.

In order to evaluate the project considered and sustain their statements, in opposition to contrasted and contested points of view and opinions, focusing on controversies has pushed pupils to mobilise their critical spatial thinking, in a sense different to that used by Gordon et al. (2016, p. 4). This is because critical spatial thinking is conceived here as deep understanding of the role played by spatial operators, and by space itself, with its actual arrangement in constructing new spatial arrangements (Lussault, 2007). These participatory activities therefore stimulated pupils’ reflexivity and their critical engagement. These interactive, discursive classroom practices and their entrenchment in local spatial controversies could influence pupils’ future action in society as dynamic citizens (De Pietro & Gagnon, 2013). They certainly contributed to creating between them the relational space described by Arendt (1998), Arendt (2003), which is intrinsically public, and therefore led to the transformation of the classroom from a place for passive learning into a public space, where, as noted by Albe (2009), the relationships between pupils and teacher, and between pupils themselves, are constructed on an authoritative rather than an authoritarian base.

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ENDNOTES

1 The original material is in Italian. The English translation tries to preserve the linguistic structure used by the students, so for this reason it is not always grammatically correct.

2 This term refers to their first location, which was an old mill, mulino in Italian.
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