

## **Educational Third Places as Sites of Inquiry and Social Emancipation: Lessons from Community-Based Adult Education in Northern Italy**

**Sabina Barbato**

### **Introduction**

Contemporary adult education is increasingly shaped by socio-economic dynamics that prioritise individual performance, employability, and measurable outcomes. Within this framework, learning risks being reduced to an adaptive mechanism, marginalising its collective and democratic dimensions.

In response, educational third places emerge as hybrid environments located between formal education, work, and civil society. These spaces allow for alternative configurations of learning grounded in participation, dialogue, and shared experience.

This article explores educational third places as sites of inquiry. By bringing Dewey's theory of inquiry into dialogue with critical pedagogy, it proposes a framework capable of reconnecting learning with democratic life and social transformation. The study is based on two empirical cases in Northern Italy and aims to develop a model that can be generalised beyond the specific contexts analysed.

### **Inquiry as a Process of Knowledge and Transformation**

Dewey's theory of inquiry provides a key framework for understanding learning as an active and situated process. Inquiry begins in an indeterminate situation, where habitual action is disrupted and requires reconstruction through reflection and experimentation.

This process unfolds through identifiable stages: the emergence of a problematic situation, the formulation of hypotheses, experimentation, and the reconstruction of meaning. Inquiry is therefore not only cognitive but practical and social, linking individual experience to collective dynamics.

While Dewey does not explicitly frame inquiry as emancipatory, his conception of democracy as a form of associated living opens a space for dialogue with critical pedagogy. Freire's concept of conscientisation and Giroux's understanding of education as a cultural and political practice extend inquiry by foregrounding power relations and social awareness.

In this perspective, inquiry becomes a mediating process connecting experience, reflection, and social transformation.

### **Educational Third Places: From Concept to Practice**

The concept of the "third place," initially developed by Ray Oldenburg, refers to informal social spaces distinct from home and work. In education, third places have been reinterpreted as hybrid environments that combine learning, social interaction, and civic participation. They are neither schools nor workplaces, yet they engage with both.

Educational third places are characterised by openness, accessibility, and relational density. They welcome diverse publics, often across generations, and foster learning through participation rather than instruction. For adult education, these spaces are particularly significant because they allow learning to emerge from concrete projects, community needs, and shared interests.

Importantly, third places challenge the idea that education must be confined to institutional settings. They expand the geography of learning and reframe education as a collective endeavour embedded in local territories. This territorial anchoring does not limit their relevance; rather, it creates conditions for learning that can be interpreted and adapted elsewhere.

### **Methodology and Context**

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach consistent with the logic of inquiry. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the research develops through engagement with empirical contexts, allowing analytical categories to emerge progressively.

Fieldwork was conducted between 2022 and 2024 in two Italian educational third places:

- Cascina Oremo (Biella)
- Rondò dei Talenti (Cuneo)

Data collection included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of educational materials. This approach recognises knowledge as situated and constructed through interaction between researcher and context.

## Case Studies

### Case Studies and Functioning of Educational Third Places

The two case studies do not present predefined educational models. Instead, they consist of evolving practices that respond to concrete needs within their territories. Their functioning can therefore be understood only through interpretative analysis.

**Table 1 - Functioning and Characteristics of Educational Third Places**

Aspect	Rondò dei Talenti (Cuneo)	Cascina Oremo (Biella)
Type	Educational third place (childhood, civic, cultural)	Educational third place (youth, social inclusion)
Target	Children, families, educators	Adolescents, young adults, vulnerable groups
Orientation	Experiential, creative, intergenerational	Critical, inclusive, emancipatory
Territorial link	Strong school-family-city connection	Local anchoring, inclusion, social integration
Co-education	Highly present	Present
Spatial function	Modular, sensory, circulatory	Refuge-space, self-development, natural setting
Innovation	Imagination and plurality of talents	Transformation, engagement, reorientation
Educational aim	Revealing diverse talents	

These structures function as environments where inquiry is enacted through practice. They do not apply a fixed methodology; rather, they generate situations that require interpretation and reconstruction.

At Rondò dei Talenti, inquiry emerges through creative and dialogical mediation: educators initiate processes through questions rather than instructions, and learning develops through collective experimentation.

At Cascina Oremo, inquiry is embedded in practices of inclusion and reconstruction, where individuals engage in activities that reconnect them with social and professional pathways

### **1. Cascina Oremo (Biella)**

Cascina Oremo is an educational community located on the outskirts of Biella. It brings together training programmes, cultural activities, environmental projects, and social initiatives. Adult education at Cascina Oremo focuses on inclusion, sustainability, and citizenship, often engaging adults who have experienced educational or social marginalisation. Inquiry at Cascina Oremo emerges through collective projects linked to the territory, such as ecological initiatives or intergenerational workshops. Educators act as mediators, helping participants articulate problems, explore alternatives, and reflect on their actions. Learning is embedded in doing, but always accompanied by moments of reflection and dialogue.

### **2. Rondò dei Talenti (Cuneo)**

Rondò dei Talenti is a large educational hub dedicated to guidance, creativity, and talent development. While it works extensively with young people, it also offers pathways for adults, particularly in relation to career transitions, lifelong learning, and civic engagement. Adult learning at Rondò dei Talenti is structured around inquiry-based pathways that encourage participants to explore their interests, competencies, and social roles. The emphasis is not on performance but on orientation and judgement. Here too, educators function as facilitators of inquiry rather than instructors.

### **Findings: What Do These Third Places Teach Us?**

The analysis shows that inquiry operates as a process through which individual experiences are transformed into shared knowledge.

Three main dynamics emerge:

- Problematisation: learning begins from indeterminate situations that require interpretation
- Mediation: educators support the formulation of hypotheses through dialogue and practice
- Reconstruction: experience is reorganised collectively, generating new meanings

These processes highlight how educational third places function as environments of democratic learning.

However, tensions also emerge. These spaces operate within broader socio-economic frameworks that may limit their transformative potential

### **Discussion: Toward a Pragmatic-Critical Framework**

The study proposes a framework based on the articulation of three dimensions:

- Inquiry (Dewey) as a method of investigation
- Experience as the material of learning
- Critique (Freire, Giroux) as a political orientation

This articulation forms a pragmatic-critical framework in which:

- inquiry structures action
- experience grounds learning
- critique directs it toward social transformation

Educational third places can thus be understood as laboratories where this integration becomes visible and operational.

Importantly, this framework is not limited to the Italian cases analysed. It can be transferred to other contexts of adult education where learning is connected to experience, participation, and social engagement.

### **Conclusion**

Educational third places contribute to rethinking adult education by reconnecting learning with experience and social life. The integration of inquiry and critical pedagogy provides a framework for understanding education as both a practical and a political process. Rather than offering a fixed model, this study proposes a transferable orientation that can inform educational practices in diverse contexts.

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## Educational Third Places as Sites of Inquiry and Social Emancipation: Lessons from CommuniBased Adult Education in Northern Italy

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### Abstract

University education in prison has expanded significantly in recent decades, supported by the recognition of education as a fundamental human right and by its transformative potential in contexts of deprivation of liberty. Drawing on a university teaching experience in prison, this article presents *Higher Education in Prison: Needs Analysis (HEPNA)*, a participatory research project that involves incarcerated students as co-researchers in defining aims, tools, and practices. The article argues that participation in research can transform students' relationships to themselves and to the knowledge they produce and mobilize.

### Keywords

university in prison, technologies of the self, de-prisonization

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## Les tiers lieux éducatifs comme sites d'enquête et d'émancipation sociale : leçons de l'éducation des adultes basée sur la communauté dans le nord de l'Italie

Sabina Barbato

### Résumé

Cet article explore des tiers lieux éducatifs en tant que sites communautaires d'apprentissage, d'enquête et d'émancipation sociale pour adultes. En s'appuyant sur la logique d'enquête de John Dewey et les idées de la pédagogie critique, il examine comment l'apprentissage émerge de situations indéterminées à travers l'expérience collective, la médiation et la participation démocratique. À l'aide d'une recherche qualitative menée dans deux tiers lieux italiens – Cascina Oremo (Biella) et Rondò dei Talenti (Cuneo) – l'étude analyse comment ces espaces fonctionnent comme des laboratoires pour l'éducation des adultes, favorisant le jugement,

l'inclusion et l'engagement civique. Plutôt que de présenter l'éducation comme neutre ou purement instrumentale, l'article soutient que les tiers-lieux basés sur la recherche permettent aux adultes de reconstruire leur expérience, de développer une capacité d'action critique et de s'engager dans leurs contextes sociaux et territoriaux. Les résultats mettent en évidence le rôle des éducateurs en tant que médiateurs, l'importance de l'investissement et de la gouvernance locaux, ainsi que les tensions inhérentes au fonctionnement dans des cadres néolibéraux. L'article conclut en discutant de la pertinence des tiers lieux pour les éducateurs d'adultes à l'échelle internationale et de leur contribution potentielle à la reconstruction démocratique.

### **Mots-clés**

Enquête, Communauté éducative, Participation démocratique, Transformation sociale, Pensée critique

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### **Lugares de Terceros Educativos como Sitios de Investigación y Emancipación Social: Lecciones de la Educación de Adultos Basada en la Comunidad en el Norte de Italia**

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### **Resumen**

Este artículo explora los terceros lugares educativos como espacios comunitarios de aprendizaje adulto, indagación y emancipación social. Basándose en la lógica de la indagación de John Dewey y en los conocimientos de la pedagogía crítica, examina cómo el aprendizaje surge de situaciones indeterminadas a través de la experiencia colectiva, la mediación y la participación democrática. Utilizando investigación cualitativa realizada en dos terceros lugares italianos— Cascina Oremo (Biella) y Rondò dei Talenti (Cuneo)—el estudio analiza cómo estos espacios funcionan como laboratorios para la educación de adultos, fomentando el juicio, la inclusión y la participación cívica. En lugar de presentar la educación como neutral o puramente instrumental, el artículo sostiene que los terceros lugares basados en la indagación permiten a los adultos reconstruir la experiencia, desarrollar agencia crítica y comprometerse con sus contextos sociales y territoriales. Los hallazgos destacan el papel de los educadores como mediadores, la importancia de la inversión y gobernanza locales, y las tensiones inherentes a operar dentro de neoliberal marcos. El artículo concluye discutiendo la relevancia de los terceros lugares para los educadores de adultos a nivel internacional y su potencial contribución a la reconstrucción democrática. Palabras clave: Investigación, Comunidad Educante, Participación Democrática, Transformación Social, Pensamiento Crítico.

### **Palabras clave**

Consulta, Comunidad educativa, participación educativa, transformación social, pensamiento crítico