
A Global Citizenship Education as an Opportunity for Re-inventing Citizenship. Insights from an Empirical Research Experience in a Multicultural Neighborhood

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ABSTRACT: *The paper will examine the theory of 'Global Citizenship Education' (GCE) and analyse its theoretical assumptions, showing how both are embedded in the Human Capability Approach and how this theory reveals its strengths especially in relation to vulnerable social contexts. Educational research can support active citizenship by creating participation opportunities through bottom-up empowerment processes and social cohesion movements, starting from the youngest inhabitants. In this approach, girls and boys, who often have recent migration backgrounds, are considered as competent subjects and, moreover, as citizens entitled to have their voice heard. This theoretical framework will be combined with insights emerging from an empirical research experience inside a multicultural neighbourhood. The underlined assumption is that public spaces are endowed with an educational potential in particular in the field of GCE when children can act as competent stakeholders thus expressing their voices about the way they use, represent and re-imagine the place where they live. This becomes even more important when the public space functions as a stimulus to promote experiences of civic engagement and participation that involve the young generations and their families regardless of their cultural background and the legal recognition of their citizenship. The impact of the methodology and tools used during the research project will be discussed as it gives interesting indications for developing innovative and sustainable methods that could be further explored and eventually used by teachers to respond to the challenges of the complex, multicultural and more and more unequal contemporary world.*

KEYWORDS: *Global Citizenship Education, Interculturalism, Empowerment, Public Space, Innovative Methods.*

Introduction

In this paper we will explore the need to rethink the concept of 'citizenship education' within the framework of the Global Citizenship Education to encourage a more situated interpretation of the educational impact of this concept when involving the youngest –

especially minors with immigrant backgrounds – in educational research.

First, we will provide an overview of the main theories regarding the concept of citizenship education within the international scene.

Then, we will discuss an example of research carried out inside a multicultural and multi-problematic Italian suburb.

Finally, we will offer few methodological insights from the above-mentioned research to discuss 'values and potentialities' of educational research in fostering active citizenship processes and civic participation dynamics.

1. A conceptual framework on citizenship and citizenship education

The COVID-19 virus has been defined as a «revealer-generator of diversity» (Contini, 2020, 16), because it exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities, increasing inequities for those already in poor and vulnerable situations (ISTAT, 2020). In Italy, immigrant families represent the majority of poor and marginalized individuals. Those people often have few possibilities to face the current health and economic crisis because they also have limited cultural and social capitals (Ambrosini, 2020).

In this context, as on the one hand the claim of citizenship strongly emerges, on the other hand there is the need to further problematize the issue of citizenship especially when we refer to those who formally do not result as Italian 'citizens'.

It should be said, however, that being formally entitled to citizenship rights does not mean itself behaving as a citizen and being a 'good citizen': someone moves from the condition of 'individual' to the one of 'citizen' only exercising the political responsibility (Mortari, 2008).

For these reasons, the idea of 'citizenship' cannot be considered only from a bureaucratic and legal perspective, but it requires a political and pedagogical framework to be further problematized and understood as a key-perspective to promote children's participation, agency and civic engagement. Coherently, Piero Bertolini suggested that we can move from the mere entitlement of rights to the capacity to exercise civic virtues through the educational practice: in light of this premise, citizenship education is seen as political education (Bertolini, 2003) which enables people to take care of the social bond (Mortari, 2008). Citizenship, therefore, has to do with the rights and the capacity of all citizens to take part, to be active member of a local community and the broader society, to express themselves, to engage and participate.

1.1. OECD approach to citizenship education and global competence

Taking into consideration the document *Transforming our world: The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015), it is interesting

to note how the concept of citizenship education is often expressed through the notions of «global citizenship education» and «global competence education». Although the two concepts could appear interchangeable, they are embedded into two different theoretical approaches (Vaccari, Gardinier, 2019).

Organizations with an economic office usually use the expression «global competence education» to refer to the concept of citizenship education. In this case, the term 'competence' is functional to the need of the economic international organizations to measure and compare educational performances between States (OECD, 2018). Within this perspective, human being is seen as a worker who is required to improve his competences to effectively participate to the economic competition on the global market (Vaccari, Gardinier, 2019). Citizenship education is therefore conceptualized as the need to promote one's capacity to contribute to the broadern economic competition.

The *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* exemplifies this approach (ibid.). The OECD theoretical framework, as it is well known, roots in the *Human capital theory* (Schultz, 1963; Becker, 1964), an approach elaborated in the Sixties in which the individual is seen as a sum of competences to be improved (Benasayag, 2015), knowledge is considered as a key production-factor, while education is conceptualized as 'a variable' that must be controlled by economic power (Alessandrini, 2017; Galimberti, 2017).

Citizenship education, once again, is mainly conceptualized under the economic-lens, reducing its meanings and practical impacts to the need of capitalism.

1.2. UNESCO Global Citizenship Education

The *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* exemplifies the opposite approach to citizenship education, although this perspective is today powerless than the previous one. From this point of view, «global citizenship does not imply a legal status. It refers more to a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity, promoting a 'global gaze' that links the local to the global and the national to the international» (UNESCO, 2014, 14). The subjects of the Global Citizenship Education are the 'human beings' who hold human rights regardless of their participation to the global market and apart from their entitlement of one State citizenship rights.

UNESCO citizenship education theory has its roots in the «lifelong education» debate (Faure *et al.*, 1972) of the Seventies, when lifelong education started to be claimed from the social movements (Moosung, Friedrich, 2011). Education was seen as a possibility for the human being to realize himself in a communitarian dimension and, as a consequence, the not formal and informal educational fields started to be legitimated (Coombs, Ahmed, 1974). Martha C. Nussbaum brings these issues inside the *Human Capability Approach*, underlining how human dignity should be given priority over mere economic growth

(Nussbaum, 2009). The *Human Capability Approach* – which is the formal theory behind Global Citizenship Education – was born in stark contrast to the Human capital theory and focuses on social justice, interculturalism and human rights (Vaccari, Gardinier, 2019). Accordingly, citizenship education focuses on the development of knowledge, attitudes and values which can promote a more inclusive, equal and sustainable world (UNESCO, 2014).

1.3. A pedagogical choice

Although nowadays the OECD-approach is prevailing, as we have observed above, we argue that it is important to preserve an educational gaze when we consider the need to promote citizenship education since the early years. To some extent, the OECD perspective seems to be reductive and far from the complexity of the pedagogical paradigm (Cambi, 2003).

The economic logic inside the global competence education is identified by Biesta with the word «learnification» (Biesta, 2010), where the educational processes are just an adaptive movement, and the subjects always have to change and update their competences according to what the market needs (Galimberti, 2017).

On the other hand, the pedagogical perspective is able to go out from the single thought of capitalism and utilitarianism, and we think that the GCE proposed by UNESCO is far close to this view.

This theory reveals its value especially in relation to social contexts that are particularly vulnerable. GCE is a not-prescriptive framework in which the meaning of 'citizen' can emerge from the local context, and be valid and legitimate even if the social context is multi-problematic. Global and local are not seen as opposite concepts, but in a continuous dialogue within an equal relationship (UNESCO, 2018).

For this reason, it is possible to foster the sense of being 'global citizens' while supporting the commitment to local contexts. Educational research can promote the «sense of place» (Mortari, 2008) and support active citizenship by creating participation opportunities through bottom-up empowerment processes and social cohesion trends, starting from the youngest inhabitants.

With these premises in mind, in the following paragraphs, we will present some methodological hints emerged from a study that we consider as an example and a promising outcome of citizenship education based on the active engagement of the youngest.

2. The research: brief overview of the study

The research project – entitled *M.O.S.T. of Pioltello – Migration over the Satellite Town of Pioltello - Sperimentare politiche innovative d'integrazione dei minori immigrati tra casa e scuola, gioco e lavoro: un progetto pilota per la periferia metropolitana di Pioltello* – was carried

out in the neighborhood of Pioltello 'Satellite' by a team of interdisciplinary researchers. Funded by Polysocial Award 2017, the research was coordinated by a group of Scholars from Polytechnic University of Milan (PI: Prof. A. Di Giovanni) in partnership with educationalists, psychologists and anthropologists from other Universities (Statal University of Milan, PI: Prof. P. Inghilleri; University of Siena, P.I. Prof. A. Cutolo; University of Milan-Bicocca, PI: Prof. Chiara Bove¹). The group included other important stakeholders (Città Metropolitana di Milan, Centro Studi PIME, Comune di Pioltello, Save the Children; Camera del Lavoro Metropolitana di Milan).

The main goal of the research was to investigate the physical and social characteristics of Satellite, a highly problematic and multicultural neighborhood with the 80% of the population with more than seventy different nationalities, to design a pilot project of *participatory urban regeneration* of peripheral areas based on the active involvement of children with immigrant backgrounds.

Within this project, our research unit (University of Milan-Bicocca) was responsible for the 'WP3 – *Designing of pilot-site specific projects*' with a focus on designing innovative methods for encouraging the involvement of children and families in a multicultural and multi-vocal process of rethinking and reconceptualizing the means and ends of their everyday lives in the neighborhood.

To do so, we consider of crucial interest the involvement of the local schools as *key public-sites* not only to access the voices of children, but also to promote an experience of 'citizenship education' (Portera *et al.*, 2010) based on a strong collaboration between researchers, teachers, and families. We assumed that the school could played the role of '*pilot site*' to both explore the impact of innovative methods to elicit the voices of children as students but also as citizens, and to reduce the gap between children's lives at schools and their everyday life in the urban-public space (Bove, 2020).

More specifically, main goals were:

- to explore children and adults' representations of public space as 'lived space' (Iori, 1996);
- to promote children's active engagement and participation as *experts* in the public debate on urban spaces;
- to encourage intercultural dialogue on the use and the meaning of public spaces to enhance social cohesion.

¹ Chiara Bove was the scientific supervisor and coordinator of the Unimib-Unit involved in the MOST study with a main role in the WP3; Alessandra Mussi acted as a researcher in the study and was responsible for the design and implementation of the indoor and outdoor workshops carried out with the students and in strength collaboration with the local schools. We are grateful to all students and teachers who actively participated to the project: without their involvement, this project would have not been possible. A more detailed description of the research can be found in Di Giovanni, 2018 (link: <https://ilgiornaledellarchitettura.com/web/2018/10/03/most-of-pioltello-proposte-per-la-periferia-di-Milan/>).

The assumption was that public spaces are endowed with an educational potential in particular in the field of GCE, especially when children can act as 'competent stakeholders', meaning when they are encouraged and legitimated to express themselves, the tell stories about the how they use the public space, to represent and re-invent/re-imagine the place where they live. This process of combining perspectives, views and voices becomes even more important when the public space functions as a stimulus to promote the construction of experiences of civic engagement and participation that involve the young generations and their families regardless of their cultural background and the legal recognition of their citizenship.

In the next paragraphs, we will illustrate the methods used to meet these goals, discussing their impact as tools to promote experiences of 'civic education' within the school and outside it to respond to the challenges of an increasingly complex and unequal society.

2.1. The research: design and methodology

From a methodological perspective, the research was inscribed in a qualitative/ethnographic paradigm (Denzin, Lincoln, 2011; Caronia, 1997, 2011) and adopted a 'research-training' approach (Asquini, 2018; Bove, 2009; Wells, 2001; Nigris, 1998) aimed at encouraging the active engagement of different participants (teachers, children, parents) as key subjects and co-researchers.

Within this framework, methods drawn from the tradition of sociological studies known as 'Research with Children' (Christensen, James, 2008) were combined with ethnographic walking methods (O'Neill, 2014) to elicit and listen to the voices of children. The assumption was the need to combine multiple tools to promote the active engagement of children not only as 'informants' but also as co-researchers (Mortari, 2009).

The research included two phases: an exploratory phase (phase I: May 2018-March 2019) and a pilot phase (phase II: March-September 2019). In phase I, three focus groups with teachers and five focus groups with parents were conducted with two aims:

- to explore how they represent and use the public spaces and how they orient/supervise their children's everyday lives in the neighborhood;
- to engage them into dialogue on the means and the ends of public space.

At the same time, a co-design process was initiated with the teachers to develop an innovative way to involve children as partners and active actors in the process of re-designing urban spaces and their uses.

As a result, in phase II, three participatory workshops were co-designed and conducted, and 3 different aged-groups of students were involved: pre-schoolers (4-5 years old children); primary school (9 years-old) and lower secondary school (11 years-old). A total number of nine workshops were carried out with 58 children involved. Among them,

two workshops were conducted as 'in-door workshops' and one as 'outdoor' workshop.

The ultimate goal was to elicit children's voice and ideas about their city (Grion, Cook-Sather, 2013), also encouraging their capacity to observe, describe and interpret their neighborhood. Through a 'mosaic' approach (Clark, Moss, 2011), a wide range of expressive channels, tools and languages were used.

A more detailed description of the three workshops is provided in the next paragraphs.

2.2. First in-door participatory workshop: representing neighborhoods

The first in-door participatory workshop took place within each of the three classrooms involved (preschool, primary school, secondary school) in order to explore how children usually 'use' and 'represent' their neighborhood. The workshop includes three steps:

- at first, children were invited to talk about their experiences and daily use of the spaces through drawings, stories and games. They were also asked to draw a map of their neighborhood, indicating the places they would or would not recommend to people who did not know it.
- Then children were asked to put their map into words. They showed their happiness and enthusiasm: they liked being treated as 'expert'.
- Finally, the maps were recomposed into a 'collective map' of the neighborhood and the voices of children were intertwined, generating composite, dynamic and multi-vocal narratives.

The following excerpt is an example drawn from one of the reflexive reports that we wrote during each workshop to keep track of the process. A 9-years old girl is explaining her map:

B: 'Then *I suggest you go near the palace [...], there is a giant tree' [...]* 'There is this giant tree that for me is very beautiful. If you look at it for a while, then peace will come to you. [...] Then I suggest you read Quran, because...because it's much more...it helps in two fields: you will learn a new language and you will understand many things, Pakistan history and a lot of other things. *After school I go directly to that road to read Quran* for an hour. [...] Then *I don't suggest you go to the little park*, at night but also during the day, I never go there because there are some children who say: 'I don't want to play with you'.'

A: 'If you don't go there, where do you usually go?'

B: 'I go to the parks almost never, I only go to read Quran and to school. [...] Sometimes I go out with my dad, I look at the sky, it's very beautiful, otherwise *I go to a park sometimes*. [...] I go there *with my dad or with my brothers*'. (Report of the first in-door workshop, 18/03/19).

This excerpt shows how the workshop was for the children a first citizenship experience, within which the activities stimulated a first «sense of place» (Mortari, 2008) able to connect the local dimension of the neighborhood with the global characteristics of the everyday

practices implemented by the numerous and multicultural families that live there.

2.3. Second out-door workshop: exploring neighborhoods through ethnographic walks

The second out-door workshop was mainly based on narrative ethnographic walks (O'Neill 2014) aimed at exploring the same places that the children have already described during the first workshop. The neighborhood became a real 'open-air classroom' (Guerra, 2015; Monti *et al.* 2019), where the children assumed the role of co-researchers, acting now as guides, now as speakers, now as explorers, now as photographers. In doing this, they were re-discovering already known places and getting to know new ones.

Thanks to the use of photography, a tool in the hands of children, each child was able to observe and document the neighborhood. In the role of photographers, the children had the opportunity to share their perspective, feeling a sense of protagonism and legitimation (Ripamonti, Boniforti, 2020; Wang, 2006). In this way, they not only caught the 'beauty' and the 'ugly' – and their very personal view about them – in the neighborhood, but they also experimented the new role of being 'social actors', sharing impressions, values, perceptions about the place they live in.

At the same time, the walks gave rise to *new and unexpected* discoveries and encounters, which stimulated opportunities for intercultural dialogue, as in this excerpt:

Children directly ask questions to [the shopkeeper]. S: 'Are you Arabic?'; another child answers they are Pakistani and the shopkeeper points at the child who answer correctly, and he starts talking with him in Urdu language.

The child smiles and he seems to be ashamed but also proud of being able to act as a mediator, using his language. Also B. is a mediator. Alessandra encourages children to translate, and B. answers: 'He's asking me if I want to ask him a question'. B. asks a question in Urdu language, and then other children raise their hands to ask other questions.

H.: 'Do you have fruit which arrives from (many communities)?'. B. translates and the shopkeeper answers in Urdu language. B. translates the answer: 'Almost from every countries, also from here'. Children seem to be proud of their national origin because they ask to the shopkeepers if they have 'their' products, the Spanish ones, the Russian ones, and so on. A.: 'Also from Russia?'. He answers and B. translates: 'Very few'. R.: 'España?'. 'Yes', she smiles and seems to be satisfied. S.: 'And from Bangladesh?'. (Report of the second out-door workshop, 02/04/19)

The children explored what was inside the ethnic shops of the neighborhood and talked with the shopkeepers regardless their origin. Yet, they had the opportunity to feel proud while sharing their cultural and language background but also to experiment new habits (the day after an Italian girl brought her mother in the same shop in order to buy and cook the new discovered food).

2.4. Third in-door workshop: re-imagining neighborhoods

The third in-door workshop aimed at helping children to express their desires and needs reimagining the public spaces and their physical and social uses. The children were invited to ideally transform the existing spaces through drawings, manipulation of the photographs and maps, expressing their aspirations for changes.

In the following excerpt, a boy is describing an art-work realized by himself with a class-mate based on a photo taken during the walk. He was suggested to reproduce the photo as it was reflected in a lake, free to modify it as it pleased:

G: 'The reflected image is inverted as it would be a real lake: in the drawing instead of being day it's night and we just add a carousel that would be an underground path, from here to here. Then there are the carousels that were already in the picture, as swings, and *a tree made up of precious stones which represents the ethnic richness of our neighborhood*'. (Report of the third in-door workshop, 16/04/19).

Drawings, transforming pictures, plastic models and narrating them were different methodological devices that were developed in order to support the young participants in thinking the 'possible' (Bertin, 1971), a horizon of possibilities not always perceived in the urban suburbs. In this way, children had the opportunity not only to explicate their own wishes and needs, but also to become more aware of them by narrating them to others (Diazi, 2011). As a result, children experimented a sense of involvement, acting as key protagonists of their own city. In a word, they played the role of active citizens, within a protective, inclusive and democratic 'educational space'.

Conclusion and future perspectives

To conclude we will summarize some particularly important results in order to formulate some conclusive reflections.

First, we observe that, although the study was designed as a pilot's one, a significant number of children were actively involved as key-actors not only in a process of urban multicultural planning, but also of co-construction of the meaning of 'citizen' from the ground and the practice (UNESCO, 2018). In this perspective, the research contributed to the promotion of a «sense of place» (Mortari, 2008) that was able to support a sense of *belonging* to the local that at the same time was linked with a global dimension of citizenship. Notably, public space – although highly problematic – played a crucial role as a stimulus for promoting intercultural processes of sharing and negotiating its uses and meanings.

Then, the result was an experience of GCE that promoted inter-agency and connections, reducing the many barriers that often separate school and extra school, indoor and outdoor education, formal, informal

and non-formal education and – moreover – immigrant and non-immigrant children and families.

Finally, although the impact of this process can't be generalized, it flags some important points to be considered:

- the need to co-design a democratic process of sharing and discussing about these issues with the schools and the teachers;
- the value of combining methods, tools and languages to promote authentic and sustainable processes of children's engagement;
- the potential of involving children and teachers in *out-door* experiences that could reduce the gap between children's lives at schools and outside them.

The research took place before the explosion of the COVID-19 Pandemic; after the crisis, as we all know, the situation drastically changed. Many existing difficulties were exacerbated by the pandemic and new challenges emerged. Therefore, new interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial actions – as the ones promoted by a new on-going project in the same area² - are required to respond to the new needs of children as 'citizens' in the post-pandemic era.

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² The project, named *Abitare Insieme* (FAMI 2014-2020), is coordinated by Prefettura of Milan in partnership with Polytechnic University of Milan (PI: Prof. A. Pavesi), University of Milan (PI: Prof. P. Inghilleri), University of Milan-Bicocca (PI: Prof. Chiara Bove) and Consorzio Brianzia, Pop, Fuori Luoghi, CS&L, Libera Compagnia di Arti & Mestieri Sociali, Progetto Integrazione.

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