

Place-Based Education: An Educational Approach Inside Local Place

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Abstract

Sense of place is rooted in people. Several studies show that attachment to a place is connected with the development of identity through spatial, material, and emotional dimensions. It fosters identification and the development of one's social and cognitive skills. In an educational sense, cultivating a sense of place means inviting the individual to gather many authentic experiences that strengthen ties. This study discusses the place-based education (PBE) approach at the epistemological level, in the context of the learning-teaching relationship. PBE can help to understand culture, the environment and space by creating a multidisciplinary approach. Moreover, PBE can build a new assumption of being a collective resource. Starting from some studies and evidence that support a positive partnership between the individual and the place, some PBE experiences are analyzed to develop deep learning with children and students.

Keywords

Place-Based Learning; Teacher Education; Science Education

Place as Glocal Milieu

Place based education theorists and practitioners recognize that the natural community and social milieu in which the school or the educational experience is embedded serves as text for student learning (Thomas, Muga, 2014).

Several studies, in fact, show that attachment to a place is connected with the development of identity through spatial, material, and emotional dimensions. It fosters identification and the development of one's social and cognitive skills. In an educational sense, cultivating a sense of place means inviting the individual to gather many authentic experiences that strengthen ties.

Glocal is therefore not a definable or defined space: it tends, instead, to broaden, to inter-connect, and to permeate new spaces of life (Margiotta, 2015).

Globalization is a trend common to all sectors of society, and education is no exception (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). Several studies show that an attachment to a place is connected with the development of identity through spatial, material, and emotional dimensions (Gruenewald, 2003a; 2003b; Smith, 2002; Soebel, 2004). It fosters identification and the development of one's social and cognitive skills. In an educational sense, cultivating a sense of place means inviting the individual to gather many authentic experiences that strengthen ties. An environment is a place if it has an identity

dimension, as Augé (1993) suggests. There is a need for anchoring to a local territory, which appears, or reappears, as a central element of the economic (though not exclusively, and to an increasingly lesser extent) dynamics of interindividual relations. The local appears to us not only as a space for locating the activities and systems of action of each individual, but as a matrix of social and cognitive interactions that unites it to the global level (Margiotta, 2015).

The very idea of “city” refers specifically both to a concrete physical space and to a symbolic dimension, to which the cultural and communicative codes, the experiences, expectations, and representations of the people who live there contribute. Through a process of incorporation of the environment, individuals have a complex experience with places, which accurately describes, by defining it, the very meaning of so-called *citiness* (Bourke, 2017), an expression that brings the experience of the city (of the place) closer to a feeling, which includes the way of life that takes place there.

The territorial dimension seems to regain, in the global/local logic, a centrality that seemed lost: the territory becomes once again an element of identity, a set of properties and socio-cultural characteristics of a given and specific place, which forms the *milieu* (Governata, 1997; Costa, 2008).

The *milieu* constitutes the common heritage of a certain local collective, the foundation of specific collective identities and the whole endogenous potential of development. It is the set of those resources and possibilities of action that are available and can be developed in the global environment, which must be recognized and activated by the dynamics of interaction between local and global nodes.

This study discusses the place-based education approach at the epistemological level,

in the context of the learning-teaching relationship.

Place-Based Education

The sense of place is rooted in people (Rocca, 2019). Meaningful connections are created between people and places that aim to meet human needs (see Relph, 1976) and encourage people to spend more time in those places (see Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014). In general, studies have revealed that attachment to a place leads to a commitment to, and involvement and interest in, their community. As Brown and Perkins write (1992, p. 284): “[attachment to places] includes the positive bonds, sometimes present without awareness, that have developed over time from affective, behavioral and cognitive relationships between individuals, groups and their socio-physical environment. These ties provide a framework for the individual and common aspects of personal identity” (see also Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014).

At present, there seems to be a certain consensus concerning the use of the expression place attachment as an emotional and affective link between people and a place that also manifests itself in the desire to maintain proximity (see Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Environmental psychologists have shown that people develop an attachment to a place, developing characteristics similar to those of interpersonal relationships (see Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014). As is the case with the caregiver’s style of secure attachment, a “secure” connection to one’s own territory, and its internalization, strengthen the relationship with others and openness to the outside world. In the same way, it can be assumed that positive ties of attachment to a place can lead to a systematic

tendency to adopt protective behavior towards that place.

From a pedagogical point of view, the sense of place and attachment to the place is interesting both because it focuses on the protagonism of humans in their “placemaking” (Gruenewald, 2003), and because it aims to make people aware that places are a cultural product. In this process of attribution of meaning, education plays an essential role in giving each and every individual the opportunity to access this process. Starting from the assumption that culture is the production of space, it is the spaces of action that define who the person is. By implicitly choosing not to pay attention to the spatial form, one risks contributing to the maintenance of power relations. On the contrary, offering opportunities to manipulate spaces also in educational terms, means educating in terms of the protagonism and the development of citizenship skills while respecting, valuing, and paying attention to others.

In the development of a methodology that could promote a sense of place, in the 1990s a pedagogical approach called place-based education (PBE) was developed, on which many scholars worked, among them: Gruenewald (2003), Sobel (2005), Gruenewald and Smith (2008), Smith (2007). Place based education is inherently embedded within a *life place*,

The task of PBE is to present the reflections concerning the relations of economic, political, ideological and environmental interdependence between near and far countries and, in this interweaving, to outline which ideas of person and culture are promoted, and consequently which identity of place results from them. From the paths of awareness according to the key of multiscalarity, students must be accompanied to identify existing social

relationships, so that they can autonomously ask legitimate questions aimed at identifying more equitable, inclusive societies, attentive to the diversity that embraces the places made by differences (Gruenewald, 2003).

Places become pedagogical fulcrums, they teach us how the world works, in them we can exercise the power of our decisions and choices, and the consequence of our actions - imagining and implementing sustainable, fair, inclusive places. By living in them, our identity is formed and defined through our possibilities (Gruenewald, 2003) and in the same way, by an inverse process, places are formed and characterized through our own experience.

Although there is a clear connection between culture, identity and sense of place on the one hand, and the importance of this connection for the promotion of individual and social well-being (Casey, 1997) in educational systems on the other, the relationship between them is largely overlooked. As schooling progresses, in fact, institutions become increasingly disconnected from their context. This phenomenon is exacerbated to the point of almost total disconnection at university, just when young people experience other places independently, in a formative moment of their existence in which they could be given, through PBE, the keys for the experimentation of citizenship skills, or at least, to develop in them an awareness of places and a taste for discovery while verifying their orientation.

The educational perspective of PBE (Gruenewald, 2003a; 2003b) suggests that educational institutions, such as schools, take an active role as agents of change promotion by means of immersive teaching and direct contact with the territory through the promotion of experiences in the field. In this sense Sanger (1997) suggests working in education in order to

build connections with places, building communities that live in them, placing importance on language, stories, and the sense of place. The relationship between teacher and student in the community is thus reconsidered, as a relationship of the exchange of information and knowledge but above all of experiences in both directions, with an acceptance and strengthening of personal ties that consequently increases the attachment to the place (Sanger, 1997). At the foundation there is a trust in the students' abilities, giving strength to act with respect including with regards to the awareness that "within the different communities, the members all share the common present in one place having a unique past and a role in the common future" (Sanger, 1997, p.6). Moreover, contact, for example through interviews with members of the community, allows for the creation of a bond, the learning of stories from the local tradition and thus renders the experience dense with meaning, and consequently, produces local culture that will then resonate in the environment of each student's origin and in their subsequent profession.

The place and environment are less and less a local territorial system, and more and more systems of functional and generative relations (Margiotta, 2015). Place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit (Gruenewald, 2003).

According to Semken and Freeman (2008), place-based education is an instructional method that involves experiential learning in and about local or regionally characteristic natural and social settings; transdisciplinary and cross-cultural synthesis of place-related knowledge and pedagogy; and

service learning or other forms of community outreach (Dani, 2019).

PBE Experiences: Reading and Developing an Attachment to Territory

An example of a place-based approach around sound.

The role of sound in understanding and building the "local" traits of places is essential. Since the early 1970s, with the emergence of the concept of "soundscape" (Murray Schafer, 1977), this statement represents a widespread belief in the scientific community. Despite the broad theoretical reflection of the last 40 years – which has better clarified many concepts such as "silence", "oral narrative", "sonic effect" etc. – this field still has no shared operative tools and strategies, making the dialogue among actors difficult, as well as preventing the opening of reflection in external disciplinary fields. The strength of podcasting is in narrating places, reaching for the origin of place itself and building an "oral culture" that is able to connect authors and listeners. Nowadays podcasting represents a rapidly expanding technology – which is attracting the interest and investments of many big companies – but has not yet been explored in terms of its potential for promoting scientific research. Podcasting represents great potential for favoring new participatory practices for studying and researching territories, fostering a dialogue among the many actors that live and dwell there, especially the ones not properly represented by traditional methods. The opportunity to create sensual listening with podcasting, driving listeners towards an emotional and passionate participation that involves all senses. According to neuropsychologists, hearing represents the most primitive sensory organ, able to awaken instinctive and archaic forms of learning. In this perspective, podcasting could represent an innovative educational mediator – for formal,

informal, and non-formal learning – able to promote place attachment. Accordingly, “linking to something” is a fundamental part of human experience: human beings were born with the necessity to establish connections with people, groups, objects, and places to achieve stability and security for their physical and social environments. A positive sense of attachment to place could generate good consequences, both for individuals – developing their identity and personality – and places.

The idea of using podcasting technology to develop an acoustic narrative thought is based on the effectiveness of oral narrative to improve the “self-efficacy” of individuals – as a cognitive process related to the capability of human beings to organize and perform actions with a view to obtaining specific results – as well as the “sense of place” (Sanger, 1997) and the local attachment to territory. In scientific debate, the “sense of place” represents an articulated concept, referring both to the idea of *genius loci* (Graham et al., 2009) and the habits through which people experience their places, developing a sense of attachment and identity (Convery, Gerard & Peter, 2012). Since places frame and make personal identity possible (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014), place without individuals cannot exist, similarly to individuals without places. Relph (1976) focuses on the role of body, senses, perception, and emotions to establish a contact with place.

Through acoustic narrative thought, human beings act like the protagonists of their own complex plots, mixing parallel and complementary experiences, placing present, past, and future events and sensations in relation with each other. Oral narrative pushes individuals to give significance to places – elaborating, interpreting, understanding, relieving, describing, telling and explaining them – on the basis of their social and cultural

conditions (McClennen, 2016). Telling a story, but also listening to other people’s stories, means moving toward a geography of the sense of place. From this perspective, the representation of place becomes the product of many autobiographic explorations, made significant by memories and episodes having shaped personal and collective identities (Lewicka, 2008).

By developing innovative forms of acoustic narration, the project aims to identify specific elements – which will be the basis of the toolkit – to create emotional links between places, personal identities and cultural collective experiences. Environmental psychologists (e.g., Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014) have argued that the processes that foster attachment to place are similar to the ones that create interpersonal relationships, pushing individuals to find a contact with their objects after a detachment. Interpersonal attachment, as well as attachment to place, represent fundamental elements for the physical and psychological well-being of human beings, safe spaces which allow individuals to start new explorations and face new situations (Preston, 2015). Where they are not physically possible, these connections are recreated in a symbolic horizon (Semken, 2012), as confirmed by some studies on the psychological growth of children (Hart, 1979; Israel, 2012).

In this respect, the new forms of podcasts take the role of caregivers, fostering the positive attitude of people to protect and “project” (take care of) their territories. Producing a podcast not only means finding acoustic elements to join together, but to understand and express the cultural categories necessary for their interpretation. The podcast becomes a place itself, a “projective acoustic vision” able to reflect the local values, the personal perceptions, the symbolic and cultural beliefs connected to the physical shape of place. The possible use of podcasts as a support for design activities may

provide a contribution to the notion of “participatory project” in the direction of an “active involvement” of people instead of a mere “consultation” process, fostering a “placemaking” that raises the awareness of communities for the cultural and symbolic meaning of places (Gruenewald, 2003, 2008; Mueller-Sims, 2016; Rabuzzi, 2016). According to Sanger (1997), the design activity should not refer only to the physical construction of space but also to the creation of a sense of community among people, enhancing social and cultural differences and promoting attachment to place (Tovey, 2007; Sabato, 2014). The definition of a community that gathers around podcasting, developing, and sharing new social and technical skills, is a clear contribution in this sense.

Increasingly, knowledge of the world around us comes through hearing (Schafer, 1992). While sight, privileged until now, has been able to develop highly sophisticated tools and techniques to store, manipulate and interpret perceived data, hearing is still “in its infancy” in its approach to the world (Mayr, 2014). In fact, the soundscape is still struggling with tools and methods of verification although, because of this vagueness, it stands out as an interesting field of multidisciplinary investigation (Galassetti, Galfetti & Rocca, 2014). The acoustic property has within itself a more objective component (measurable and comparable in terms of noise pollution) as well as a more subjective one (directly anchored in the perception of the individual and the community, and so in the very concept of “landscape”). Recalling this duality, the geographer Geneva Raffestin (2007) highlights the distinction between territory – “material reality”, a result of continuous changes, subject to recurrent alteration – and landscape, defined as: “immaterial reality which, by contrast, is the result of a process of mental production, originating from a human gaze, in

turn mediated by different languages . . . the expression of a break in time: it is a ‘snap-shot’” (Raffestin, 2007). To understand the territory, it is therefore necessary to: “acquire images representing the equipment which allows for an exploration of reality” (Raffestin, 2007). Thus, there is a “mediated relationship”, through sound, between man and his environment (Tuan, 1990). Activating advocacy for the acoustic dimension means, in fact, increasing the aptitude for awareness, recognition, respect and appreciation of the elements of sound diversity, which constitute a value in themselves and which connote, in a cultural sense but also in a practical and informative one, a section of territory. Amphoux (2007) considers the soundscape as the result of a fusion of the natural environment and the social actor. These are the characteristics of the typical urban soundscape, leading Böhme (2000) to say that the feeling of “*heimat*” (German: the relationship of a human being towards a certain spatial social unit) is transmitted primarily by the sound of an area. Bringing this listening point to light has tremendous value in terms of education for sustainability and heritage in the context of life-long learning.

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An example of place-based approach around photovoice

Photovoice plays an important role in place-based education (Briggs et al., 2014). Various ways of using photography as a data-gathering tool have been presented, including

the photo-narrative, the participatory photo-interview, and photovoice (Kaplan, 2008; Rose, 2012; Bööck & Mykkänen 2014).

Photovoice was originally developed as a research design and methodology that involves participants taking photographs related to personal and community issues that are important to them, and then using the photos as the basis for critical discussion and social change (Wang & Burris 1994; Dani, 2019). Photographs can be seen as an “ice-breaker”, a medium that creates a comfortable space for discussion (Collier, 1997; Bööck & Mykkänen, 2014). Using this method, participants act as co-researchers who investigate a question that is of value to them. The strategy has been successfully used with school learners, in both formal and informal educational context, and also with teacher candidates (Dani, 2019).

Photovoice allows you to capture lived human experiences. The collected stories of the places with their related photographs and narrations identify personal experiences and influence the perception of knowledge about them. They encourage new learning within and around the community (such as school, university), stimulate reflection on prior knowledge, assumptions, and prejudices about the places themselves. Photovoice promotes a critical knowledge of the place, an identification with the sense of place and provides some tools to get to know the contexts in which people live, study and work.

Place-Based Education Could be an Educational Approach Inside Local Place

Educating in order to increase awareness of places is of fundamental importance by activating students as problem-solvers and builders of places themselves, taking them beyond mere experience and the study of

places, promoting commitment to the local management processes that determine what places are and what they will become. Proposing opportunities in which to identify the problems of nearby places, learning to analyze them and hypothesize solutions means offering opportunities to experience the complexity and richness of networks and links, but also the action that takes place in relation to them.

It is a matter of considering the local/global duality differently, i.e. several environments (global/local) of different types which at the same time influence and allow knowledge and learning to be formed.

The PBE approach aims to be an immersive, deep learning environment that places students at the center of their cultural heritage, history, and landscape, by using the experiences offered by the context for the study and knowledge of art, language, mathematics, science and other subjects of the curriculum. The idea of a multiple learning space approach acknowledges the many spaces a teacher works in, and seeks to value each space, without merely privileging the classroom space (White & Reid, 2008).

In PBE, “local” is a first level that serves to give meaning to the second one, “global”. Learning processes based on local cultural contexts act as mediators to understand global challenges. The experiences on the territory that are centered on the students are significant for them because they can experience them directly.

These educational experiences are based on experiential pedagogical ideas, in which students are at the center of a contextualized, direct, authentic form of education (Smith, 2007; Gruenewald, 2003). Developing knowledge, skills, motivations regarding places allows students to be more involved and active,

to play an active role and to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the context (Rocca, 2019).

Place-based pedagogies foreground the local and the known. They allow teachers to structure learning opportunities that are framed as meaningful and relevant to their students because they are connected to their own places, to people and to the popular cultures and concerns that engage them (Comber, Reid, & Nixon, 2007). Place-conscious pedagogies are more interested in developing and projecting awareness outward toward places (Gruenewald, 2003), beyond the immediate and the local, with a clear and articulated sense of the relationship of the local to the global, and of the social lifeworld to the natural environment (White & Reid, 2008).

In the PBE, the learning space is defined as enlarged because the local community is often an integral part of educational paths and teaching activities. In this sense, the classroom can also be defined as “enlarged”, it is a community. Place-Based Education can be an approach that supports new rootedness in a territoriality, that becomes identity, care, value and also a cognitive asset for individuals, while learning is personally relevant to students and enables student agency.

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