

PEDIBUS: SPACE AND CITIZENSHIP

ANDREA GUARAN

University of Udine, Italy, Department of Human Sciences, e-mail: andrea.guaran@uniud.it

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge and the progressive cognitive and relational "appropriation" of the neighbouring area (road, block, neighbourhood...) by the child are the basic conditions that lead to citizenship as a concept. In this context, the 'Pedibus' service, i.e. taking children to school on foot, has proved to be successful in particular if it is carried out during pre-school years. Walking along the same section of the street from home to school, observing and becoming familiar with some parts of the landscape surrounding the town or the neighbourhood, is a very useful geographic exercise that lays the foundations for a conscious expression of active citizenship. In addition, the distance covered with other children promotes the consolidation of relational skills and especially the development of behaviour, which entails the ability to observe the road rules, respecting other people and the natural and social environment.

Keywords: *space education, active citizenship, 'Pedibus', urban sustainability*

INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This contribution revolves around two key conceptual issues: space and the value of citizenship. In the case of space, we refer in particular to spatiality and related forms of education, so that children can develop spatial skills, transferring what they live at an experience level into effective construction of representation forms. Certainly, the reference to space and to the idea of spatiality implies that we must be aware that these are complex dimensions characterized by multiple meanings involving different levels of interpretation and analysis at the same time. The reference regards plural interlaced spaces that are properly explained by Elena Falaschi when she

admits the existence of physical, psychological, sociological, philosophical and, lastly, biological spaces. These are all different variations expressed at the same time upon which we must reflect and that we must handle within educational itineraries to space (Falaschi, 2010).

Citizenship, which is the second key issue, implies daily and conscious practice of certain rules and the certification of some values in different social contexts where each person acts. Therefore, this interpretation of citizenship wants to overcome the classic vision that follows the legal definition that identifies citizenship with the duties and rights of people in relation to institutions, first of all, to the State (Santerini, 2002; Brunelli, 2010).

Even if spatiality and citizenship are categories that cannot only be confined within a particular period of existence and they don't refer to a specific stage of the educational process, we wish to offer here some points for reflection regarding in particular the link between the forms of space education and the values of citizenship for children attending pre-school (approximately from three to six years old).

THE 'PEDIBUS' EXPERIENCE

The connection channel between these two conceptual key aspects is expressed by the practice of 'Pedibus' (also called 'Piedibus' in Italian wording). This is not a new phenomenon at all, but an organized and safe modality to go to school on foot that established itself in the last ten/fifteen years within urban sustainability initiatives, mainly and widely realized for the benefit of older children who are attending primary school.

Today, even if we do not want to explain this practice in its details or delve into its implications in terms of usefulness in the broader subject of urban mobility, we consider it necessary to provide some elements that can help for a more appropriate contextualization of this experience. We can start considering one of the proposals to solve the acronym 'Piedibus' (Italianized expression) that in a very efficient way makes clear what 'Piedibus' is, how does it come about and what effects it produces, especially in terms of active citizenship (www.piedibus.it).

The practice of a human bus going back and forth from school is, without doubt, a good occasion to exercise, that is an important factor in contemporary society where sedentary habits and the increase of obesity in early childhood are spreading. The fact that several students from the same school can make use of 'Pedibus' leads to a restraint of private cars on the road (especially in proximity of schools), thus making a small but significant contribution to reduce polluting emissions, if only for the positive message conveyed. For certain, walking, following a "driver" and under the supervision of "inspectors" (both adults), entails the progressive acquisition of basic rules about how to behave in the street, which are essential to guarantee your own safety and to respect other people's right to circulate.

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The implications of this experience concerning geography are evident. To cover every day the same distance enables you to observe and know the neighbourhood or the town you are crossing better, adding every day one more pieces to the representative frame that is your own reference territory, encouraging more efficient self-sufficiency and confidence related to the sense of direction and geographical awareness.

If we want to linger over the most specific social components related to individual and collective good, we want to assert that taking part in 'Pedibus' is an easy way to spend some good time with other people, having fun, having occasion to socialize with others. Moreover, the "human snake" crawling across the neighbourhood acquires a highly emblematic value, being a good example for everybody, not only for kids.

The 'Pedibus' experience in the Italian context is part of a regulatory framework that, from early 90s of the last century to most recent actions of 2012, has produced some legal measures specifically devoted to the road and some interventions related to education (Programs and Guidelines for the curriculum). Even if we think that this is not the right occasion to delve into the legal aspects nor those about school programs, because they are extraneous to our topic, however, we consider it appropriate to specify that at the level of regulatory elaboration and at a consequent enforcement level, the attention reserved to young users of the street has been significantly increasing in the last twenty years. Many regulations belonging to the new rules of the road issued in 1992 concerning street mobility are particularly centred on education, calculating specific interventions on behalf of the young and very young generations, within educational paths as well as outside the school context. In fact, most recent measures regarding the organization of didactic activity, in pre-school as well as in the two phases of first educational cycle (primary and secondary school) – Legislative decree no. 59, from the 19th of February 2004, *Definition of general norms regarding pre-school and first educational cycle under the law no. 53 from the 28th of March 2003*, with attachment A: *National directions on Customized didactic planning in pre-school*, and with attachment B: *National direction on Customized Plans in primary school*, Ministerial decree, 2007 – *Directions for pre-school and first educational cycle's curriculum, directions for the teaching experimentation of "Citizenship and Constitution"*, from the 4th of March 2009, and the recent revise (2012) *for new National directions for pre-school and first educational cycle's curriculum* – are clear indications of a more conscious road education and of the need to plan new forms of road education.

Schedule and manners of the didactic activities related to street mobility would be an interesting item to delve into in an adequate way, but we think that on the one hand it would divert our attention from the thematic and problematic axis we are focusing on, and on the other hand it would require a thorough approach that the author of this article doesn't have.

PROPOSAL FOR A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF 'PEDIBUS'

Our reflection focuses on the importance of initiatives such as 'Pedibus' for a fundamental learning process and for strengthening of citizenship responsibilities. Where by citizenship we intend the discovery and rediscovery of common spaces, i.e. street, square, area, country, etc., and especially the search of social interaction situations in those areas for the benefit of the experimentation of forms of democratic coexistence, that maybe in atomized societies characterizing the cities in the advanced regions of our planet is too weak (Morin, 2000). Purpose-built accommodation, family unit's organization and individual mobility, making use of private means of transport above all, constitute some factors that separate people from the values of a common commitment, i.e. mutual helpfulness, sharing, recognition of common good and values, sympathy, and participation. That determines, on the contrary, closure attitudes and a "selfish" evaluation of our role in the community, mixing (even if in an unconscious way) duties and rights, changing to one's own benefit the scale of priority. Mobility, especially in urban areas, is an efficient litmus test for the process of supremacy of individual values and self-fulfilment needs, to the detriment of other's requests and of common good. For instance, observing carefully the drivers' parking behaviour, we would see the progressive domination of the individual's needs and an increasing disregard for other people. In brief: the lack of fundamental principles of community.

Trying to identify a conceptual and methodological framework within which to place the argument described here, you can think of the educational activism of the philosopher John Dewey, and in particular, the decisive role assigned to experience (Dewey, 1954). You can also think of some of the basis for constructivist thought, in particular of its social variant (Wygotski, 2007; Varisco, 2002) and of education linked to the principles of constructivism. We would also like to call your attention on the problematic learning situations that promote the construction and co-construction of knowledge and skills, and consequently of abilities, through some actual processes of collaboration and sharing between peers or people of different ages and roles.

The 'Pedibus' experience, aimed at children of pre-school age, promotes and creates a triangular network connecting space, educational practices and citizenship values. It gives rise to processes where there is a positive interaction between families and various educational agencies in the territory, among which school, thus showing off the positive synergic intertwining of formal, informal and non-formal education forms (Figure 1). 'Pedibus' does actually trace a bond between different education forms, for how it crawls along the streets and from the point of view of somebody who lives it and those who observe it from outside. Furthermore, since it is usually organized in order to get children from home to school, it seems like it confirms the centrality of school institution, intended as "the cognitive and ethical space where you basically learn how to be a citizen thanks to some projects and practices [...]. In other words, school as a community, a

«community of practices» [...] responding to the new needs of young people that are created by a society of uncertainty, risk and inequality of globalization” (Deiana, 2003, pp. 11-12).

An important aspect to be considered refers to the need of overcoming the idea of ‘Pedibus’ as a simple way to learn some basic road rules and of behaviour, in order to overcome this mere functionalist concept that belongs to traditional educational forms. In fact, this conception might identify the ‘Pedibus’ just with an adequate occasion to make useful exercise of good behaviour in the street. On the contrary, this practice should be considered as a much wider opportunity for education and training, provided with greater intervention capacity: opportunity to know the main dynamics of the local area, condition to promote awareness and safe forms of mobility, opportunity to assign value to relationships, intra-generational and inter-generational, favouring and promoting very important social processes of networking.

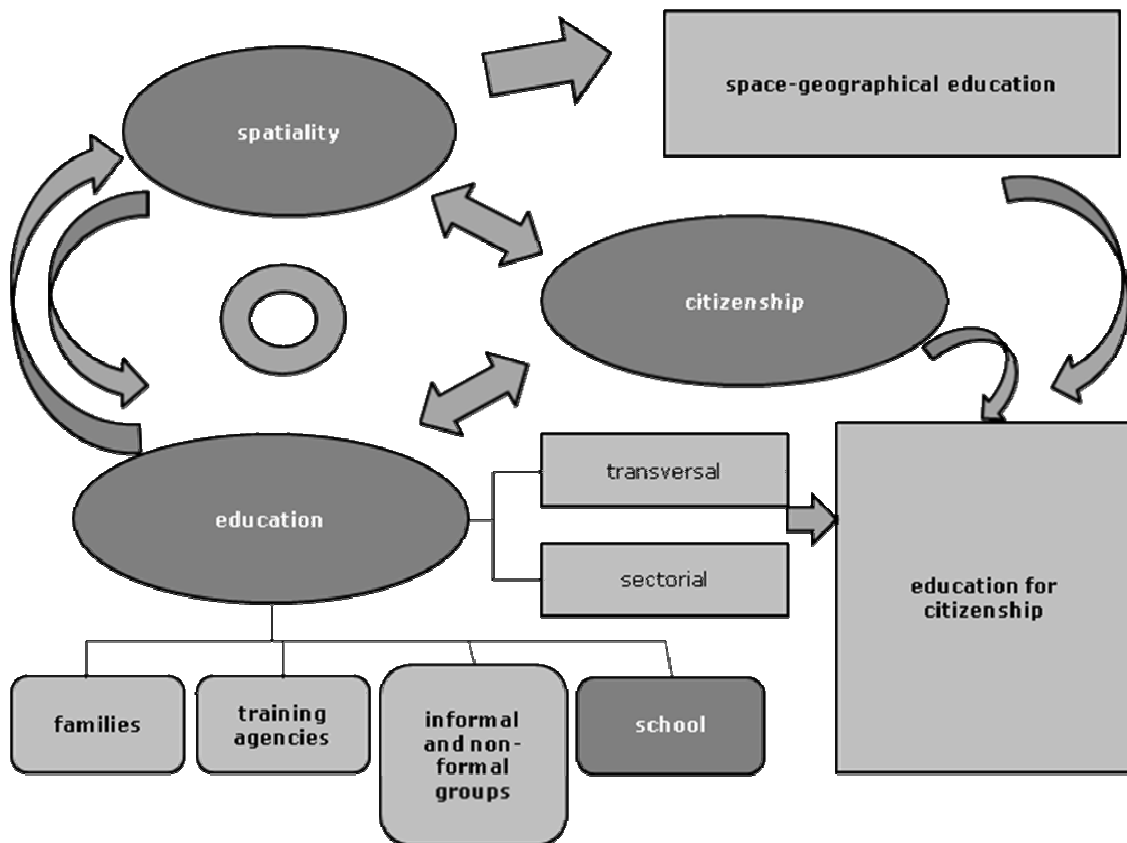


Fig. 1. Process of interaction between spatiality, education and citizenship

Now, let us focus mainly on the effects on space, since ‘Pedibus’ is actually an important opportunity of education to geo-graphics, resulting in significant implications on the process of space-time organization (Figure 2). The use of ‘Pedibus’ starting from four years old children favours the awareness of their side dominance triggering significant side dominance

dynamics, allows them to develop their power of observation and interpretation of geographical space and action in it, enables them to acquire a sense of direction and the command of the symbolic language typical of space and geographical approach.

Therefore, 'Pedibus' is potentially an effective occasion to teach the sense of direction, where by "sense of direction we intend the ability of moving in space, but above all, the ability of moving in a cultural horizon constituted by symbols and meanings that give sense, structure, functions and values to space" (Mason, 2011, p. 164). In short, 'Pedibus' is a modality of guided appropriation of space, that accomplishes an important function that is part of the practice of territory education, since: "teaching the sense of direction means to make the actions that men accomplish within space conscious and intentional, as they interact with the organization of space, transforming it, interpreting it" (Mason, 2011, p. 165).

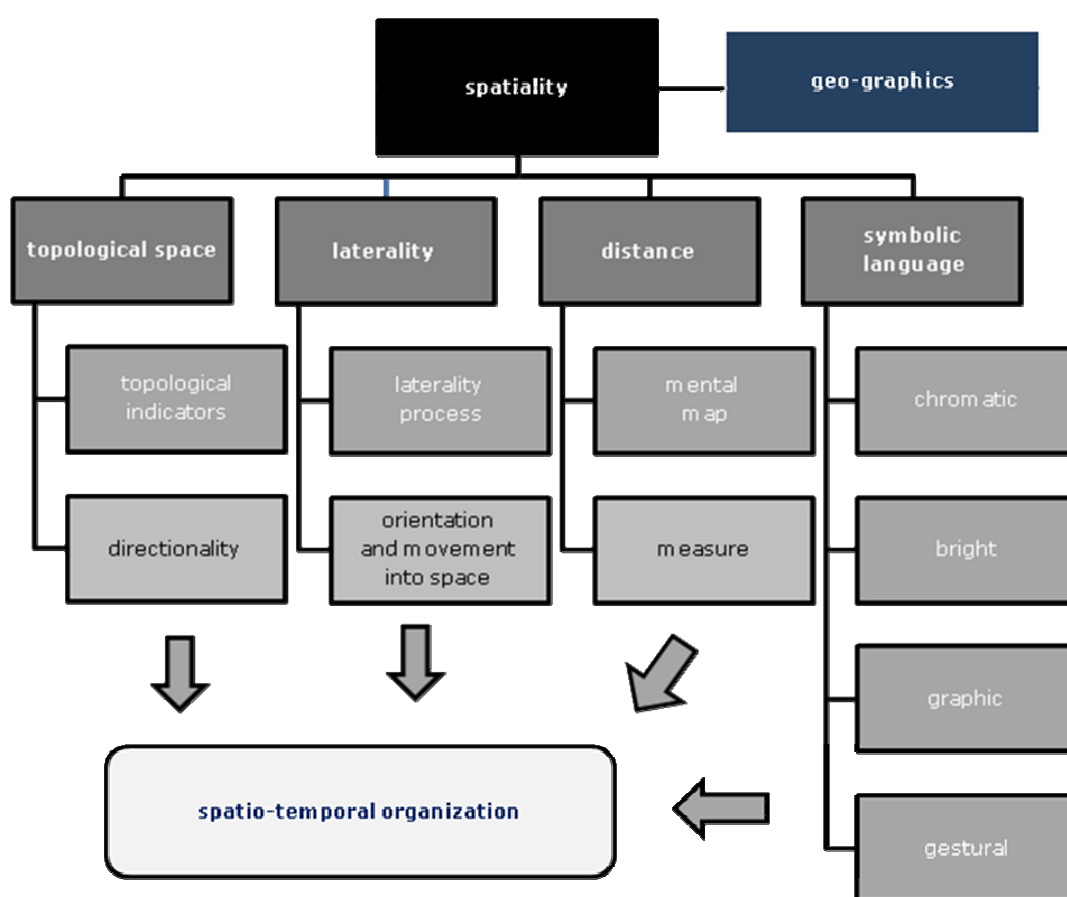


Fig. 2. 'Pedibus', geo-graphicity and time-space organization

We want to underline that the apparently simple exercise of getting to school on foot with other people can provide a significant contribution to the achievement of some of the fundamental abilities that geographical education allows to promote, in particular "the development of individual and social competence, with particular focus on spatial dimension in

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everyday life" (IGU-UGI, 1992, p. 14). Furthermore, it is a stimulus to develop the "awareness of the meaning of behaviour and values when you make a decision" (IGU-UGI, 1992, p. 15).

As regards the effects of a conscious spatiality while practicing citizenship, it is worth to remember that 'Pedibus' encourages the reflection on citizenship rights such as safety, health, identity (both individual and collective) and participation. Making use of the proposal made by France Gagnon and Michel Pagé (1999) that refers to a broader and deeper conceptual and theoretical elaboration framework, in our reasoning citizenship is conceived as a manifestation of the balance between identity values related to social, cultural and territorial affiliation, and the values of equality, which implicate the concrete manifestation of rights and the acknowledgement of the values of civic participation.

Proposing a process of synthesis and simplification it can be argued that the citizenship education, that 'Pedibus' encourages, results in certain elements and ideas of education for observing rules (such as road rules, but mostly the reason of those rules in full compliance with the *critical* approach of pedagogy law) and of education for ethical and democratic behaviour, which is also caused by the elimination of socio-behavioural differences when pupils get from home to school.

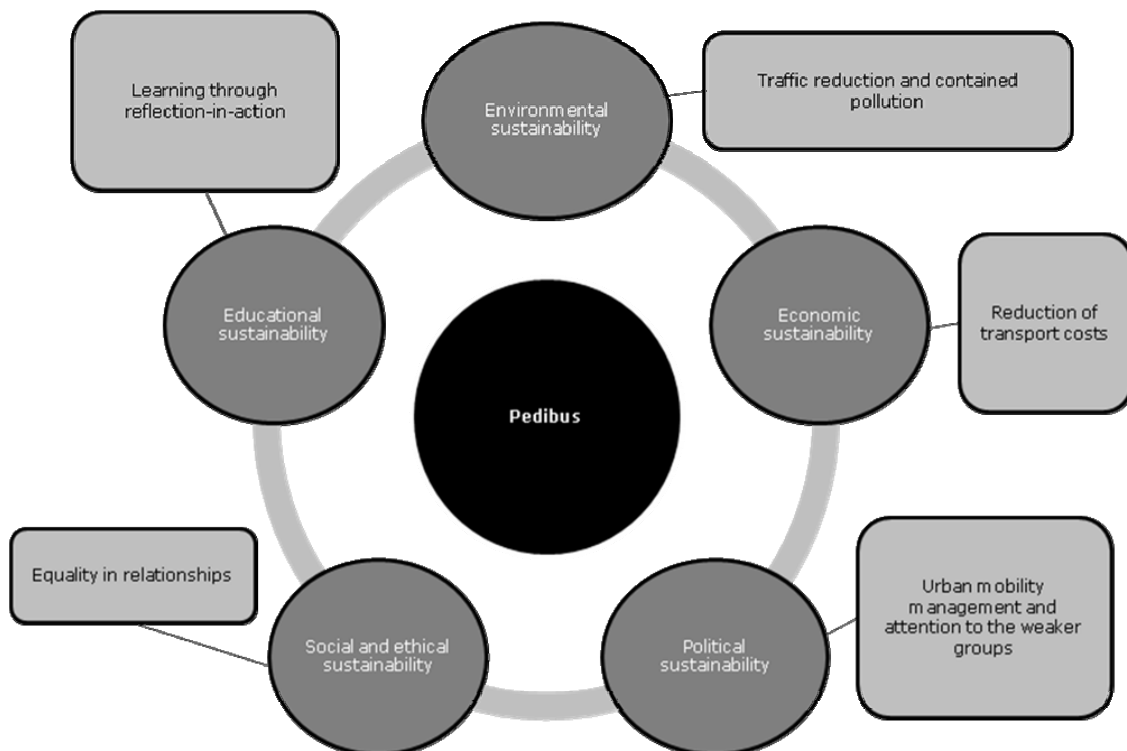


Fig. 3. 'Pedibus' and sustainability values

The multidimensional and multi-factorial reasoning we conducted, using the ideas of analysis brought by the practice of 'Pedibus', allows us, in short, to interpret this activity also under the paradigm of sustainability. The

reduction of urban traffic and the reduction of polluting emissions refer to the subject of environmental sustainability. The lower number of cars on the road, and consequently the potential reduction of the risk of car accident, has also a positive impact in terms of economic sustainability; the political sustainability manifests itself especially in the forms of urban mobility management. The remarkable opportunities to express social sustainability (socialization and equity) and especially educational sustainability are obvious and have already been widely exposed (Figure 3).

CONCLUSION

We can finish this presentation by using the expressive words pronounced by Milena Santerini, that effectively enclose the main meanings of the subjects and values that have been here examined. Related to education for citizenship the educator Milena Santerini from Università Cattolica in Milan asserted a decade ago: "Citizenship education is not that much a question of content and transmission of information and knowledge, but rather like plunging into a living environment that «talks» and «communicates» in many ways its messages" (Santerini, 2002, p. 149). Her point of view suggests the need to support the traditional routes of education related to how to behave on the road with less specific educational interventions that are more suitable to guarantee the development of a positive expression of citizenship on the road. Moreover, these interventions relate in particular to spatiality and geo-graphics.

Education and the 'Pedibus' activities are a great potentiality for effective situations of acknowledgement and action on the territory. In fact, "The *school* [and 'Pedibus' used since pre-school] is the place where you can employ courses of action capable of making students feel like *citizens* rather than guests of their environment [district, street, square, park ...]" (Centro Studi di Acmos, 2010, p. 56), promoting the development of a real sense of belonging: emotional, cultural and social belonging, by weaving the fundamental link between the new generations and their territory.

Certainly, "People are not born Citizens, they become Citizens" and, as Lorenzo Caselli says (2009), "The transmission of values develops thanks to exemplary behaviour rather than oral statements". And 'Pedibus' can be identified just as exemplary behaviour.

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