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JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND DIDACTICS IN

GEOGRAPHY

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# Planetary citizenship education through worldwide solidarity in primary schools. Reflections on the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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## Abstract

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which addresses the issues of what we might call "planetary citizenship", can help restore a fundamental dimension of geographical education that has been lost following Italy's most recent ministerial programmes, namely that of the supra-national and planetary scale. It is important to "educate" the humankind to a worldwide peer and place-based collaboration and also to the value of solidarity right from the very first school year. This paper proposes a theoretical reflection aimed at enriching the "Territorial Education" model through the integration of global territorial dynamics. In order to understand the role played by planetary topics in primary school, we discuss the results of a survey submitted to a sample of primary school teachers in Lombardy (Italy). Lastly, we provide a didactic approach to apply the "Territorial Education" model to the UN 2030 Agenda goals.

**Keywords**: Geographical Education, Planetary Citizenship, Worldwide Solidarity, UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Nature, Forests, Primary School

## 1. Introduction

In educational and training terms, students and schools are key players when it comes to fulfilling the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda, which addresses what we might call "planetary" citizenship issues[1]. In recent years, there has been considerable discussion on the complexity and interdisciplinarity of working didactically on citizenship in order to make this concept real and locally embedded (Molinari, 2017). Citizenship is indeed the result of an experience matured over time and space that is passed on to others, with places, historical memory and culture representing the resources for its creation

[1] The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a development programme endorsed by 193 member countries of the United Nations (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/develop ment-agenda/). The Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS) in Italy promotes the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

and expression. Primary schooling plays, in particular, an important role in providing the basic requirements needed for effective thinking and action with regard to sustainable development, above all by stimulating spatial and naturalistic intelligence, thus overcoming a merely "executional" rationale. To achieve this goal, a *place-based* teaching framework is needed (Grunewald, 2003), inspired by a humanistic approach and built on an experience-based method, with games and practical activities that are linked to a child's daily life. The approach should start by childrens' experiences, emotions and values, enabling them to actively reframe these factors, and co-construct knowledge, thus developing both a spirit of critical thinking and a sense of belonging to places. In this way, "localised" knowledge becomes the first cognitive reference by which children can then relate to both remote and more generic knowledge.

Over the past two decades, such an approach has brought about a profound rethinking of how geography is taught in Italian primary schools. This has been essential for counteracting widespread *geographic illiteracy* and the negative stereotypes often associated with the teaching of the subject in schools (De Vecchis, 2016). Indeed, the teaching of geography and the UN 2030 Agenda can further nurture and reinforce each other, especially since the UN 2030 Agenda can further stimulate the didactics of geography. On the one hand, building local knowledge in children aged between 6 and 11 can help "connect" the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda to the pupils' life experience with enormous benefits in terms of their active involvement in caring for their own area[2]. Likewise, the 2030 Agenda can help restore a fundamental dimension of geography that has been lost following Italy's most recent ministerial programmes, namely that of the supra-national and planetary scale. Indeed, if in this framework anything with an international dimension is considered somehow "distant" and disconnected from the child's daily experience,

today global or international dynamics have a very concrete impact on our lives (migrations, conflicts, pandemics, global change, etc.), bringing risks and concerns for the future of the planet and sudden changes to our lives. Since many challenges are common and anxieties occur daily, strategies for counteracting and adapting to them can only be coordinated and elaborated through a careful understanding of both local dynamics and global interconnections. Thus, a crucially important educational and cultural issue emerges: it is important to "educate" the humankind to a worldwide peer and place-based collaboration and also to the value of solidarity right from the very first school years. As widely highlighted in literature[3], "child citizen" and "citizenship in the classroom" should be regarded as ways in which children in school and in society, through rights, duties and responsibilities, begin to consciously experience full participation within their group. Education-wise, this means that the *voluntary* contribution of people is not enough, and rather we need to work together to cultivate empathy, solidarity, peace, equality and intra-generational, as well as inter-generational, sustainability.

It is precisely in this respect that, in relation to the 2030 Agenda, this article seeks to put forward some ideas and suggest some methodological and didactic proposals to strengthen children's ties with the space they live through better knowledge of their own territory and the various changes it experiences. In addition, territory has to become the space for an educational intentionality through the "power of places" and the rights of nature. The "power of places" derives from the uniqueness of the interrelationships that are established between global-scale interconnections and dynamics and the everyday reality of individual and collective behavior as a result of unequal access to space, resources and relationships (De Blij, 2009). Inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, these transformations must, however, be "fair" and respect not only the rights of current and future generations, but also nature's rights, i.e., those of the planet, other animals and ecosystems, which should not be viewed as "objects" or commodities as it currently occurs in the Anthropocene (Moore, 2017). Based on

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[2] Some of these considerations were discussed by the authors during meetings held during 2021 and 2022, as part of the *Teach the UN Global Educators Network*, coordinated by Lilli Schindler (UN Department of Global Communications).

[3] See, for example: Santerini, 2010; Tonucci, 1997.

these considerations, the second paragraph of this paper will propose a theoretical reflection aimed at enriching the "Territorial Education" (TE)[4] model through the integration of global territorial dynamics. In the third paragraph, we will discuss some educational observations related to the UN 2030 Agenda based on a questionnaire submitted to a selection of primary school teachers in Lombardy (Italy); in the final section, we will propose a didactic approach to apply the TE model to the UN 2030 Agenda goals.

## 2. Looking for a methodology for a UN 2030 Agenda-based primary school geographical education

This paper is based on the assumption that being citizens capable of understanding, shaping and acting on one's own territory while fostering civic sentiments – to which the concept of responsibility is directly linked (Bauman, 2001) – is first and foremost a question of local knowledge. Developed over the last decade, in Italy these considerations have resulted in a dedicated survey methodology called "Territorial Education" (TE) (Giorda and Puttilli, 2011; Dematteis and Giorda, 2013; Giorda and Puttilli, 2019) serving as the benchmark approach to develop programmes of citizenship, sustainability and environmental education.

The establishment and evolution of TE-related thinking have radically innovated the consolidated approach to teach geography in Italy, providing fundamental theoretical and practical tools applicable to the local area and helpful in developing *regional and landscape literacy.* These link the proposals to children's real experience, turning them into active citizenship activities, so as to stimulate their ability to see themselves as part of the local project of the territory in which they live (Magnaghi, 2010).

The TE methodology is based on the principles of the "real task" translating the analysis of local places and territories into a four-stage educational opportunity: identifying the global in the local; recognising the future in the grassroots; identifying the territory's values; translating these values into action (Giorda and Puttilli, 2019). From the initial stage, the model is based on the principles of transcalarity, which are also fundamental for the purposes of the proposed considerations. It starts with the idea of developing a competence in pupils that is based on the ability to understand the influences small-scale processes have on local dynamics (phase one). At the same time, the model incorporates the diachronic dimension that characterises Earth's dynamics: turning to the past so as to project the present into a specific idea of the future (phase two). It is clear that all this is closely linked to the need to promote practical field experience, sensory relations with places and encounters with the community and their inhabitants. Field trips are particularly effective for this purpose (Molinari, 2012), through which pathways useful to identify the territory's resources can be designed (phase 3). Lastly, the model has the advantage of proposing the translation of the skills gained from the ongoing work into action, creating real intervention projects in the territory together with the children (phase 4).

The intention of this study is to integrate the suggestions of the UN 2030 Agenda into the methodology, while exploiting (and simultaneously promoting) the UN's educational message. Our aim is to achieve this goal by projecting the potential of *place-based education* across a cross-scale dimension, capturing not only evidence of the global in the local, but also using everyday life as an opportunity to make sense of global processes that children would otherwise find haphazard and incomprehensible. Highlighting the importance of the global dimension would restore centrality to the vertical relations of the territory in a dynamic way, a radical departure therefore, from what was done in the past in order to understand the significance of ongoing global processes. Indeed, global change cannot be understood without introducing an analytical dimension based on an in-depth knowledge of the complex

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[4] In this paper we do not refer to a generic dimension of geographical education, but to the analysis model proposed by Giorda and Puttilli (2011 and 2019), whose name is not directly translatable into English.

entity we call *nature*. Our current awareness that nature is a social construction (Castree and Brown, 2001), whose significance derives from intricate negotiations among multiple actors on both practical and narrative levels, aims to avoid the risk of falling back into conventional geography's traditional passive, instrumental and dichotomous approach. By introducing the principles of the social construct of nature into the TE model, we regain a fundamental political perspective, as *social nature* depends on laws, policies and economic guidelines on all scales. Hence, at the end of a process that starts, as we saw, with the identification of the global in the local (phase 1), we might add a further phase in Agenda 2030: "Projecting the local into the global". Once local values have been turned into practical actions, we can dedicate significant space to the return to the global scale in order to find supportive collaborative strategies aimed at stimulating a sense of responsibility and providing the opportunity for everyone to contribute – personally and collectively – to addressing major global challenges. In this respect, the UN 2030 Agenda encourages us to make that extra effort, by adding collaboration to the project action dimension.

## 3. The topics of the 2030 Agenda and the local level: a primary school survey

A random survey conducted in December 2022 and January 2023 allowed us to gain a better understanding of whether the 2030 Agenda topics and the practice of including the local area in educational activities are widespread in primary schools in Lombardy. In total, we collected 156 responses across 49 municipalities in the region from full time teachers, substitute teachers and fifth year students of the University Degree Course in Primary Education[5]. Approximately 72% of those surveyed have been teaching in primary schools for over five years. All the respondents claim that it is possible to talk about "global" issues (climate change, education rights, peace,

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[5] We submitted a semi-structured questionnaire to the selected respondent group consisting of seven pre-coded fixed questions and four open-ended questions.

migration, etc.) to primary school children and two thirds state they have had the opportunity to talk about the United Nations Organisation (UNO) in their teaching activities, mainly during civics, geography, history, science and Italian lessons. Geography and civic education play a major role for a substantial proportion of the teachers consulted. The topics of global importance that, by far, they prefer to tackle in primary school are: the right to education, peace, war, energy, world hunger and access to clean water. The topics that, on the other hand, are most rarely addressed are: workplace dignity, social and environmental justice and, surprisingly, sustainable cities. The teachers' reports highlight several highly interesting reflections concerning the forementioned topics. Many projects coincide with UN-established World Days (those for peace, human rights, children's rights, water, Earth) and consist, for the most part, of awareness-raising activities (including the ones on issues such as war or waste recycling) and traditional teaching projects carried out in the classroom or in school, in which there seems to be little emphasis on the local dimension and the hands-on involvement of the pupils. A proportion of the illustrated projects (24%) describes *place-based* learning activities that include initiatives carried out in their area that also involve local actors. The outcomes of these activities are, for example, the creation of eco-calendars produced together with municipal administrations to promote virtuous everyday behaviors; demonstrations, peace marches and walks of solidarity in the neighborhood; model building of sustainable cities.

More than 75% of the respondents declare that they introduced the concept of "sustainability" in their teaching activities: around 18% through theoretical presentations, approximately 24% by providing teaching activities exclusively aimed at contextualising this concept in the students' living space, and, lastly, around 58% through an in-depth theoretical study combining both activities.

Roughly 45% of the respondents stated they had never presented any of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promoted by the UN in the 2030 Agenda project in their classroom. Approximately 17% of the sample then highlighted some critical issues related to

how the SDGs are dealt with in primary schools. Primarily these referred to the difficulty in appropriately simplifying the topics to be covered and the lack of time available for these to be properly developed and later reflected upon. In particular, they stress the difficulty in incorporating direct experience and in linking the SDG issues to everyday situations, so as to avoid an abstract or theoretical approach. Furthermore, teachers complain about the difficulty of organising specific workshops and field trips in the area, especially to counteract the sense of powerlessness that sometimes threatens to overwhelm the children when faced with such broad and complex topics.

The survey confirmed that schools give considerable importance to a fairly wide range of "planetary citizenship" topics and that civic education and geography occupy a central role in this field. At the same time, there is considerable dissatisfaction with the difficulties in bringing these issues into the children's everyday life. The reinterpretation of the TE model being proposed here intends to provide a response to such educational and didactic anxieties in order to help children understand – based on their everyday experiences – how to interpret the changes and territorial challenges taking place, and to control their own understandable fears associated with them.

## 4. Teaching suggestions for applying the geography learning method to the 2030 Agenda

More than just a political document, the UN 2030 Agenda is a sort of a "framework document" aimed at promoting a direct commitment to improving the living conditions of many human beings and most of the Earth's ecosystems. The 2030 deadline is obviously a symbolic date, a step along a broader path. The underlying logic is that of sustainability; the anthropocentric vision is not called into question and the entire document is centred on improving the living conditions of human beings, hence the call for a commitment in support of ecosystems. This agenda is essentially "narrative", by which we do not intend to belittle its importance. It serves as an "umbrella" document, one that can

engage and steer debate for many years, raising fundamental ethical issues that are valid – with the appropriate contextualisation – in all regions of the planet. From this stems the need to design curricula based on TE's cross-scale aspirations, starting from a *place-based* approach but which sets global objectives through cooperation and worldwide solidarity. All of which comes under the aegis of an education based on an ethos of the ecumene (Berque, 2021).

To understand this better through some practical proposals, we can draw inspiration from one of the 2030 Agenda's goals, highlighting that the proposed method can be applied to all others as well.

First, let us consider Goal 15 "Protect, restore and promote the sustainable use of the Earth's ecosystem", which is aimed at developing strategies whereby the Earth's ecosystems ("viewed as resources that are available to humans, consistent with the principles of sustainability") would be protected or restored after experiencing a process of degradation. One of the key themes of this goal is centred on trees and their relevance in ecosystems (Table 1). From a global perspective, the goal description basically focuses on the fight against deforestation and desertification brought about by human activities. The idea of starting with the relationship with trees as a basis for working on the targets of Goal 15 of the 2030 Agenda is evidently a harbinger of many appealing incentives for *place-based* education[6]. But in a context like that of Italy, one must make an effort to "localize" this concern, as the problems related to Italian woodlands are somewhat reversed compared to those in other regions of the planet.

As we already noticed (Zanolin, 2019), in the Anthropocene, Europe's forests are not at risk of deforestation; rather, woodland areas are increasing in many countries (including Italy) and are, contrary to what one would expect, an indicator of biodiversity loss as the formations

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[6] For further information on publications on this subjects for children and young adults and therefore potentially useful for teaching centred on this objective, please refer, by way of example, to the special issue of Andersen magazine dedicated to the 2030 Agenda, no. 387, November 2021.

are largely recent, compact, homogeneous and clearly the antithesis of older, more diversified forests. The ongoing reforestation in Italy (+208% from 1936 to 2018) (Agnoletti, 2022) is a consequence of the abandonment of agro-forestry and pastoral practices that, based on the productive interaction between humans and other living beings, for millennia actively contributed to establishing vibrant and vital ecosystems (Agnoletti, 2018). Thus, while in tropical or equatorial areas deforestation is removing space from local populations and undermining biodiversity, the Italian reforestation process is linked to the abandonment of rural areas and is leading to a depletion of biodiversity. The long timescales associated with ecological processes are likely to generate new positive dynamics, probably resulting in the creation of old-growth forests capable of hosting multiple life forms. However, this process is far from being achieved and it is by no means a foregone conclusion that will come about everywhere without negative impacts. In the meantime, at present, Italian woodlands are highly exposed to the risk of deterioration resulting, for example, from wildfires, hydrogeological instability, the spread of non-indigenous diseases, etc.

A *place-based* education aimed at teaching the values proposed by Goal 15 of the 2030 Agenda cannot disregard these matters and would fail in its intentions if it claimed to raise children's awareness regarding the fragility of forests by insisting that the loss of forest biodiversity stems from deforestation, simply because any experience in a forest environment of a child living in Italy would prove the opposite. Clearly, photographs or videos are not sufficient to disprove what first-hand experience confirms almost everywhere.

Thus, we must begin with a direct relationship with trees and an understanding of the role that humans have had and should still have in their stewardship. Only once the children are fully aware of this aspect, will it be possible to teach them that even Earth's great forests have been growing and building their ecosystem dynamics for millennia in synergy with human beings; and only then can we make them think about the problems of deforestation in an informed manner. The *place-based* approach allows us to appreciate that trees are not expressions of extra-human nature but are essential components of ecosystems to which humans also belong (or can choose to belong), and once they have made their choice, they can play either a constructive or destructive role. This is a general principle, which children can learn through practical experience in the field. Once the concept has been acquired, applying it in reverse to regions of the planet they cannot directly experience is relatively easy by applying the cross-scale process. By projecting "the local into the global" in this way, we fulfil a fundamental ethical outcome that applies to all the goals of the 2030 Agenda, thereby encouraging a sense of responsibility towards ecosystems and all other living beings, based on the realisation that any action we take has the potential to either nurture life on earth or destroy it. The outcome depends on the choices we make as individuals, as communities, as societies and as humankind. Furthermore, we might observe that many forests are located in border areas, across different regions or states, and their management and conservation require joint actions of solidarity, to which young citizens can also contribute in many ways, by informing and raising awareness in their own community, through e-twinning projects with the other countries involved and through their own choices of consumption.

| Identifying the global in the local | - Identifying the forests closest to the school and discovering their features.<br>- Identifying forests as key elements for the global change and Earth's ecological dynamics. |
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| Recognising the future in the grassroots | - Recognising the forest as a dynamic ecosystem evolving over time, co-constructed by humans and other organisms that inhabit it (agro-forestry and pastoral activities, etc.).<br>- Identifying the species of the forest in order to understand their level of biodiversity. |
| Identifying territorial values | - "Diving" into the nature of the forest in order to overcome the urban perspective that forests are external and marginal spaces, relegated to a temporary use (e.g. by proposing role plays that simulate the life of rural communities in the past).<br>- Identifying the forest as a territorialised space, experienced and therefore socialised in today's world (e.g. by watching wood cutting activities carried out by professionals according to appropriate forestry techniques). |
| Enhancing territorial actions | - Planning micro-interventions to take care of the forest (e.g. forest cleaning).<br>- Planning responsible actions with regard to forest (e.g. adoption of a forest by the school).<br>- Planning constructive actions in the forest aimed at making it a living and lived place (e.g. tree planting; creation of trails in the forest).<br>- Planning actions to raise awareness of the values of the forest (e.g. creation of virtual storytelling presenting it as a social space). |
| Projecting the local into the global | - Starting from the awareness of the role of rural communities for the preservation of Italian forests, discovering stories of people who have built their societies within and in relation to the world's largest forests (e.g. Pygmies in the Congo Basin; Seringueiros in Brazil), as well as of individuals who fought to defend these spaces (e.g. Chico Mendes).<br>- Starting from the awareness of the importance of well-crafted forestry activity, reflecting on the destructive action of deforestation in large equatorial forests.<br>- Starting from the awareness of the role played by humankind for the preservation of biodiversity in Italian forests, understanding the constructive and destructive effects of contemporary policies with regard to equatorial forests (e.g. conflict between PetroAmazonas and Yasuní National Park in Ecuador). |

Table 1. An example of application of the Territorial Education model to the Goal 15 of the UN Agenda 2030. Elaboration of the authors.

## 5. Conclusions

By virtue of its scientific statute, geography deals with territorial transformations, with "double-sided" and contradictory phenomena that bring about positive and/or negative effects. For individuals and societies, this can be a source of disorientation, confusion and crisis, precisely because it creates short circuits in our established rationale, our "given" order. In

modern-day schools, therefore, it is imperative to counter this disorientation and not convey an excessive anxiety regarding ecological matters, climate change or globalisation, leading to a feeling of powerlessness or anger that robs them of hope for the future, not least because of political choices that have shifted the risk of an environmental, economic, political and social crisis onto future generations (Marks et al., 2021). Good geography supplies students with the tools to describe, portray and interpret the changes taking place in a complex, interconnected and multi-located world; in other words, to think and act in space in an engaging, supportive and proactive manner even in the face of great challenges. Interpreting change serves precisely to (re)find one's place in the world, individually or collectively, to "bring order" and to "reinvent the world", that is, to launch oneself into the future through scenarios designed to imagine fairer and more inclusive territorial configurations.

The reinterpretation of the TE method proposed here in terms of cooperation and global solidarity responds to these needs, thanks, clearly, to the mediating role played by the teacher, and by assigning an active role to the child in "giving order to the world" and "reimaging it" through choices made both personally and collectively, thus projecting their own living spaces onto the global scale.

The findings of the survey reveal a common struggle on the part of teachers to include teaching activities capable of bringing the 2030 Agenda issues into the daily lives of children. Against this backdrop, this article aims to propose an initial step in a partially new direction, with the aim of providing a space for further reflection to be explored in theoretical and practical terms over the coming years.

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