

# In the middle of nowhere: the issue of space in global citizenship education

*RAFFAELLA FAGGIOLI*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7458-0488>

✉ [raffaella.faggioli2@unibo.it](mailto:raffaella.faggioli2@unibo.it)

## **Abstract**

This article is part of a broader debate on learning environments and educational spaces, with a focus on GCE. Space in relation to the quality of people's experience, in a transformative perspective that includes bottom-up models. The aim is to suggest further research on how space - and its characteristics - shapes democratic participation and global citizenship skills. It seems that space is essential in GCE practices, especially when it promotes lived experiences and actions that make people feel included in these landscapes.

**Keywords:** Learning environment, Living space, GCE, Global transformative approach.

## **TESTO**

### **I. The space turn era in European schools**

The issue of the educational space, as a physical place and a learning environment, is the core of a growing number of studies and research and has significant relevance in national and international policies (Parricchi, 2019). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has structurally been dealing with this since 2007, with the Learning Environments Evaluation Programme (LEEP); together with the OECD European Investment Bank (EIB), a programme of good practice in school construction, using predefined spatial models and characteristics, was launched in

2011. The assumption is that the improvement of learning spaces corresponds to an improvement in the effectiveness of learning processes. Empirical evidence is substantiated by several research but it's difficult to measure the whole impact with a direct overall correlation, given the number of variables present (OECD, 2017). The Clever Classrooms Report (Barret, 2015) notes how certain variables (colour, light, air, disposition) can increase progress in primary school pupils' learning to 16% in a year. There is a broad landscape of research that underline how space contributes to the increased involvement of subjects in processes (OECD, 2017). The need for an effective link between architectural design and educational project is not new, if we think of the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart in 1919, the multiple interventions of School Building by Herman Hertzberger, (Hertzberger, 1984), to the recent schools in Northern Europe such as the famous Telephonplan Vittra in Stuttgart. In Italy there are several documents that underline the importance of the relationship between the learning environment and the quality of processes, from the Guidelines for School Building (INDIRE, 2013) to the Guidelines for the Curriculum (2012-2018), and documents and initiatives of the INDIRE research group (2013-2019). This sensitivity therefore affects even public education where it seems obvious that *"the project of a school consists of two undivided parts: the educational and didact project and the architectural project."* (Weyland & Galletti 2018; p.9). This problem was already central in the various method schools (frobeline, montessoriane and steineriane, just to name a few) and in the approach of Reggio Children where the space is called "third educator" (Malaguzzi, 2010). The establishment of outdoor schools since the last century has highlighted the need to rethink the typical places of teaching, and deconstruct their rigidities, a change that was clearly related to the passivity of methods (D'Ascenzo, 2018). Outdoor Education (OE) further explores the subject in a key that we believe is pivotal (Schenetti & Guerra, 2018). It is however more interesting asking whether a space, before being effective from a learning point of view, respects the right of boys and girls to live the necessary inducements to think their environment as something to take care of. In that case we should research from student's point of view. Speaking about top-down model versus bottom-up research, means to suspend the evidence-based research issue and try to make space a site for participation. It is obviously relevant trying to change educational spaces in relation to the evidence of their efficiency; but, as Biesta (2010) acutely underlines, the problem is not in the question "what works" but who is asking it.

The tendency to characterize educational space from explicit theoretical models (as in OECD survey) with a top-down process, cannot catch a lot of data in relation of how people live and transform a space, a dynamic and social process. Often educational places are anonymous, chaotic, neglected or even vandalized. Peculiarity of the urban peripheries, of the "non-places" as Marc Augé defines them (1992). Another question is therefore necessary, which is related to the capabilities of the space: is a space affordable (Gibson, 1979) democratic and inclusive? Has this specific place a role in global citizenship educational effort? Le Bourdon underlines the importance of creating setting where adolescents can feel free to participate, a key to cultivating a sense of aging and empowerment (Le Bourdon, 2020). Inside her work she finds the need for further research to analyze the place where GCE is real happening. From the point of view of a GCE orientation (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016) public spaces, schools at first, are the core of the construction of social relations, etc behaviors, and global citizenship. Apart from Le Bourdon's research, already mentioned, there is not much work in this field, perhaps this could be explained by the difficulty of observing the spatial dimension as something dynamic related to the relationship with the people who inhabit it.

The concept of space as a living place incorporates multidisciplinary dimensions and preserves the dynamic quality of the phenomenon, a lived space is not statically defined, but continuously *produced*, to say it with a Lefebvre's term, spaces that are qualitative, fluid, and dynamic (Lefebvre, 1976). The theme is intertwined with the need to analyze the symbolic implications present in the environments, which are political, social, and economic, and which play a fundamental role in the educational processes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Using the concept of lived space, phenomenologically defined, in constant relation to its elements and subjects, is a key to considering them in their relation to both learning and social dimensions. "In the experience that emerges from the concreteness of existence, an interhuman, subjective and shareable knowledge opens from the fundamental elements of 'body', 'time' and 'lived space'" (Iori, 2016; p.19; trans. by author). Architectural objects, lines, and perceptual physical dimensions, acquire an embodied relationship with actions and emotions. Thus, the interest in lived space in places of formal and informal learning is an interest in the quality of life of young people, educational professionals, but especially in the dimension of citizenship that should characterize them. Space is represented -with a slightly different

connotation- as landscape. Landscape is a more generic concept, considered from a social point of view the sensitive mediator between society and territory, the place (or a set of different places) where people live and construct objects within a specific environment, the connection between landscape and citizen-participant is an original area in which some characteristics of the goals of GCE can be found. Most importantly when it comes to global citizenship in the context of the 2030 Agenda education.

## **II. Global Citizenship and space as an oxymoron?**

However one of the major objections to the concept of global citizenship lies precisely in the diatribe between local and global, action space, these distinctions include those who argue that addressing the global dimension leads to unhinging traditions, customs, and ties to places of origin and belonging, in essence altering privileges of a specific social class (Yemini, 2018); other positions conceive of the space that citizens can care for only through the local toward the global, *glocal* (Robertson, 1995; Mannion, 2015). Unfortunately, it comes to suggest, ties to places are either truly alive, thus fluid, and open, or they are forced, limited, instigated to separate us from those who are established as outsiders. What is local and what is global? If they are closed places in which experience is a fiction of a remote past with which we are supposed to identify, as soon as we are not, they become foreign to us, and we become strangers. Therefore, they are deeply aleatory. But what is the place of a global citizen? In recent research, I found that the mobilization of global activists often begins in their schools and cities, where young people act, and these spaces are already global, both in terms of social composition and in terms of political, economic and rights (Faggioli, 2023). By acting, they feel empowered to change where they belong now. And it is precisely in this action that the horizon becomes real: caring for a cultural heritage linked to one's origin is the same process of caring for the new places that one crosses. It is about the living experience of the space. In contrast, alienation from the space in which one lives is a visible feature in all cities around the world, a junk spaces as Khoolas named them (2014). The innovative drive of new generations, even when this need is expressed in ways that are not legitimate, manifests a deep connection with these places. At least the need to feel it is one's own and to participate in its definition. That is why I think it is essential that education, and GCE firstly, take this on. Finally, I think it would be

essential to explore a process in which the education of the global citizen is implemented through the modification of space.

There are many volunteer programs where NGOs for with sustainability goals develop trainings where people from different backgrounds learn how to care for these environments. It would then be interesting to observe how, in the relationship with these spaces, the identity of citizenship is being changed. Research on how travel, in a sustainable context, is an educational tool for participation and global citizenship is also increasing (Tarozzi, 2021). The most significant element of the relationship between global citizenship and space, is not decided by physical distance or cultural origin, but by the depth of lived experience in those places and the possibility of transforming them from below. The theme at the heart of GCE is rather the idea of reappropriating the space in which one lives or moves by taking care of it both in terms of social sustainability and in terms of redesigning it based on the rights of world citizens. Le Bourdon (Le Bourdon, 2020) observed how participants construct their GC skills and how space has an influence in these processes. That study may bring out some considerations in the perspective of planning future educational programs within schools and in the public spaces. From an educational and didactic point of view, considering the educational space as a place to be built together fosters the emergence of the agency that underlies active participation (Faggioli, 2021) and group experiences that are essential in global citizenship participation.

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