

XVII | 1 | 2019

Nuova serie

Pedagogia oggi

rivista semestrale SIPED Società Italiana di Pedagogia

Spazi e luoghi dell'educazione **Educational spaces and places**

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Numero doppio | Double issue



Pensa

Pedagogia oggi

anno XVII | n. 1 | giugno 2019

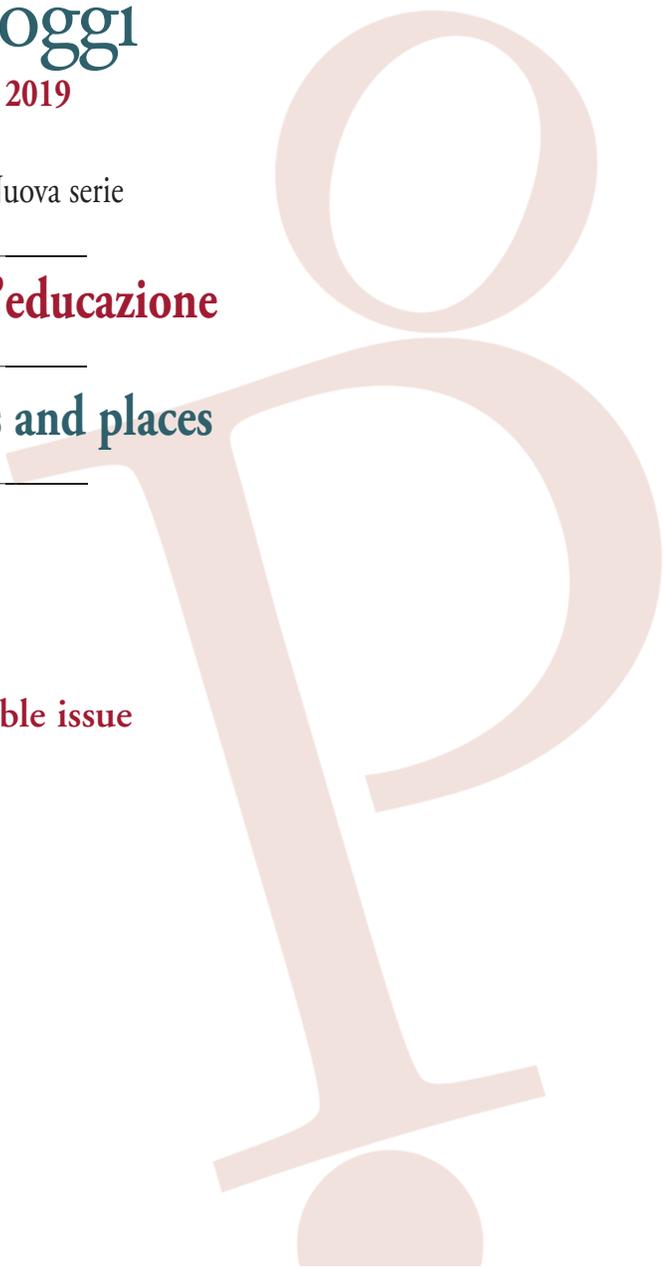
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ISSN 2611-6561 versione online

Autorizzazione Tribunale di Napoli n. 5274 del 28-01-2002

Finito di stampare: Giugno 2019



Editore

Pensa MultiMedia Editore s.r.l. – Via A.M. Caprioli, 8 - 73100 Lecce

tel. 0832.230435 • info@pensamultimedia.it • www.pensamultimedia.it

La rivista, consultabile in rete, può essere acquistata nella sezione e-commerce del sito www.pensamultimedia.it

editing e stampa Pensa MultiMedia - Progetto grafico di copertina Valentina Sansò

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LORENZO CANTATORE, SALVATORE COLAZZO, GIUSEPPE ELIA, FABRIZIO MANUEL SIRIGNANO

Public libraries and *visual narrative*: inclusive readings and good practices

Biblioteche pubbliche e *visual narrative*: percorsi inclusivi e buone pratiche

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abstract

Public libraries are traditional safeguards of democracy, where books sustain the empowerment of communities. International scientific literature provides evidence for the fact that in suburban areas and border territories around the world these institutions qualify as open spaces, education laboratories, strong enough to counteract the area's educational poverty and to favour an intercultural dialogue. This entry's aim is to promote the role of public libraries in protecting the rights of everyone, especially children, to be an active part of a community, fostering a journey towards a proactive citizenship. The purpose is to locate tools and methodologies that qualify these spaces, strengthening their educational rather than their preservative dimension. In this regard significant educational experiences that give value to visual narrative will be presented. Specifically, this will feature wordless picture books as a starting point for intercultural encounters, defining the role of social educators better by building inclusive routes through these kinds of books.

Keywords: public libraries, education, wordless picture books, children, communities

Le biblioteche pubbliche sono per tradizione presidi di democrazia dove, attraverso i libri, è possibile sostenere l'empowerment delle comunità. Nei luoghi di confine e nelle periferie del mondo, come documenta la letteratura scientifica internazionale, queste realtà si qualificano come spazi aperti, laboratori pedagogici in grado di contrastare la povertà educativa dei territori e favorire il dialogo interculturale. Il presente contributo mira quindi a valorizzare il ruolo delle biblioteche pubbliche nel salvaguardare i diritti di tutti, in special modo dei bambini, di sentirsi parte della comunità in modo attivo e propositivo, promuovendo percorsi di cittadinanza attiva. La finalità è individuare strumenti e metodologie che qualifichino questi spazi potenziando la dimensione educativa rispetto a quella conservativa. A questo riguardo si porteranno alcune esperienze pedagogiche significative valorizzando la visual narrative, nello specifico l'utilizzo dei wordless picture books, per l'avvio di pratiche interculturali, definendo il ruolo dell'educatore/animatore nel costruire percorsi inclusivi con tali testi.

Parole chiave: biblioteche pubbliche, educazione, libri senza parole, bambini, comunità

1. Changing societies: the educational role of public libraries

As of late, social pedagogy has been called upon to take on new, ever so demanding, challenges. It has had to measure up to a multitude of changes, from globalization to the continuous and disorderly migration processes, which have deeply modified the appearance of our society, with important repercussions on the times and spaces of learning, which dilate. Throughout these last few years, a school-centered conception has progressively been replaced by a formative polycentrism. This conception reiterates “the right to an informal education over the course of every citizen’s life [...] as a pedagogical answer to all those other daily educational needs that formal education does not cater for” (Orefice 2017, p. 24; Tramma, 2017, p. 112). In the Seventies, intellectuals such as Ivan Illich, invited to deschool society. This seems to be extraordinarily in line with the present because, if the schooling system itself wants to be truly incisive in some contexts and build communities, it must leave self-referentiality and form virtuous allegiances with all the other educational realities of a given area.

To accommodate the needs of the new built-up areas, multi-centres of stories, cultures, memories and different experiences, setting up “third places” (Oldenburg, 2001), where it’s possible to nurture different cultural interests and find occasions for meeting and sharing, presents itself as an educational urgency (Zizioli, 2018b). Third places can offer an alternative to the “non-places” (Augé, 2009) that modern societies have created, counteracting the spread of an “informal, generally excessive and instable” system (Frabboni, 2013, p. 50), produced by the leading corporate logics, which have mined civil sense and quality of relationships.

Therefore, within educational programming, extra-scholastic spaces take on a decisive importance in the realization of inclusive processes.

In this scenario, it is possible to reevaluate the educational role of public libraries that have traditionally carried out an educationally relevant function in the construction of democracies. Throughout the history of education public libraries have been precious places for moral and cultural assistance and, through the culture of the alphabet, they have promoted the culture of a dignified and civil citizenship, feeding the possibility of salvation.

By emphasizing their social vocation and starting up specific networks and projects, in the last few years, public libraries have strengthened this tradition, offering occasions of emancipation thanks to an active role in

the communities. Growth of spaces, enrichment of materials and a diversification of the public, to respond to a much more varied and ample use, have been witnessed. Offering the so-called weak users key information-processing competencies, in other words, that set of socio-cultural knowledge and notions, which allows us to give our daily life direction, public libraries have met wide exploratory necessities regarding the need for knowledge, unfulfilled by the earlier mentioned formal education.

For this reason public libraries are now considered “agoràs of knowledge” (Agnoli, 2009), places of welfare which transform non-places both in built-up and in border areas into services able to fulfil the need for knowledge and also the desires for integration and human relations.

As underlined in the UNESCO Manifesto (<http://www.aib.-it/aib/commiss/cnbp/unesco.htm>), by encouraging the freedom, the affluence and the development of communities and individuals, helping them play an active role, public libraries can:

- support identity and citizenship processes;
- contrast the consumer and corporate drift of present societies, offering a lived-in space, a meeting point, but also a symbolic place where to access the elsewhere and build new imagery, especially in deprived and high-risk areas.

In this respect, there are some evocative international researches, like Johnson's. In *Improbabilis Libraries* (2015) he goes through an iconographic selection of the world's most unusual libraries to present the different creations and, thus, the revolution that's underway, demonstrating how and how much these institutions can arrive anywhere, even in the most remote places, to increase the cultural capital of the areas, surpassing the opposition germinated from deprivation, as well as the scarcity of resources, especially “ideological” ones (Parlato, 2017), the most complex ones, the ones generating doubts and suspicion and feeding the culture of fear.

Public libraries therefore, become an outpost of inclusion, educational spaces able, not only to contain, but also to contrast the so-called educational poverty of the areas, protecting citizenship rights, particularly those of children. Accessible, welcoming, attractive, they are able to propose themselves as familiar and pro-active places, where to promote social and civic knowledge and abilities. An example of this is the Island of Lampedusa, where the newly established library, started up thanks to an

international cooperation project promoted by the Italian section of IB-BY (*International Board on Books for Young People*), has involved different professionals from the book industry, free of charge, in collective readings and a variety of expressive activities with children and teens, who also actively participated in the management of the library. The library thus became a gymnasium for democracy and citizenship, able to reactivate generative relations and promote child protagonism (Zizioli, Franchi, 2017). For this reason it is a replicable good practice which can, on the same level as other successful experiences around the world, for example Oslo's *Biblio Toyen* or Stockholm's *Tio Tretton*, started up on the basis of needs emerged from *focus group* with children and teens (Save the Children, 2017, pp. 314-315), represent a model and qualify the service as an educational space where to broaden ones knowledge, but also to be conscious and pro-active citizens.

This reflection opens up a series of just as important considerations regarding the role of reading. A role exhaustively documented by national and international researches, which highlight how the scarcity of texts and the lack of familiarity with reading produce a cognitive, emotional and social developmental delay in individuals, especially in children (Wolf, 2007).

In this regard, Michèl Petit documents how the access to libraries and, thus, to books, helps to reconstruct oneself and must therefore be claimed especially by those who do not possess a "licit cultural capital", especially by those who, to use an expression of Pierre Bordieu's, come from underprivileged contexts (Petit, 2002).

So, while cultivating the prospect of change, communities vastly characterised by cultural disadvantage and by the feeling of impotence, look at books as an important educational resource, a starting point for inclusive routes. Reading literature guarantees us a protected time during which we can recharge, a space which allows the enraptured/enchanted reader to get to know otherwise unknown worlds, to identify with extraordinary experiences, particularly with those distant and different from our own, because a book is "always more than a book" (Recalcati, 2018), it's an event which significantly affects everyone's life. It is not here needed to recall the educational potential of narrative, already well highlighted by numerous scholars, first and foremost Bruner, and to underline how formative literary practices in youth are.

Growing up amongst reading and literature, means being able to conquer the freedom necessary to push yourself beyond your destined path,

this is why the subversive function of literature is underlined, to defy our prejudice and our deep-rooted habits (Chambers, 2011, pp. 67-68).

Everyone therefore has the right to a story, their own story, because everyone should be guaranteed a broader cultural universe, especially when the thread with their own cultural origin has been broken.

Reading must thus be increasingly lived as a civil and social commitment, where, according to the writer, within educational paths aimed at creating inclusive democratic communities, the ethical dimension cannot be separated from the aesthetic one. With this idea of literature, so to speak, we will try, in these pages to provide an interpretative key to reshape the world, discovering beauty as an important resource to contrast poverty and, through “narrative imagination” and the sharing of stories, cultivate humanity, to activate participatory and generative change processes (Nussbaum, 1997; Zizioli, 2018a).

Responsibility, reciprocity, solidarity and possibility become key words that seem to better give back a sense of militancy, which finds precious allies in books, and privileged spaces in public libraries. This was the case of the aforementioned Lampedusa library, in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, a crossroads of stories and cultures, where inclusion processes have been encouraged thanks to reading experiences through visual narrative.

2. Educational itineraries through visual narrative: ethics and aesthetics

In the last few years, local and international organizations, often linking forces with public libraries, have been building educational paths to defend rights through books. I bring IBBY as an example. With national sections present over the five continents, it promotes the right to read across the world, especially in border and conflict areas or areas suffering from severe poverty and works with the most vulnerable categories, like unaccompanied minors or refugees. We had the chance to present this during the last international congress in Athens, between the 30th of August and the 1st of September 2018 (<http://www.ibby.org/ibby-worldwide/congresses/>). But we must not forget the work done by *Save the Children* and *Amnesty International*, that have been using books as engines of change to contrast exclusion processes for years.

Attention is mainly given to visual narrative, picture books, where the worded and iconic parts build a constant game of cross-references, and to wordless picture books (silent books) in which only the images tell the story. These are special books, for the reading of which you need a specific grammar and whose international shelf is getting longer (the French and Korean products stand out for originality of themes and creations). They are able to build a figurative dictionary and arouse astonishment for the marvel and the beauty of the images, creating empathy with the particular story that accentuates the determination, the resilience and the cooperation of characters, most of them children.

Over the last few years, these books have aroused growing interest both on a cultural level, as we can see by the increase in research regarding them (Arizpe, Colomer, Martínez-Roldán, 2014; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014; Terrusi, 2017), and in their use. Flexibility, universality and simultaneous attention to diversity, the activation of the reader as a protagonist and the opening towards beauty (Zizioli, Franchi, 2017), make books without words suitable for the most diverse contexts.

These stories, in fact, are not guided by words, they can be read in any language and they are read and told keeping different interpretations open at the same time. Moreover, in a classic picture book, the richness of possible inspirations follows a hierarchy given by the author and the illustrator and thus presented to the reader, in silent books there is no reading order and it's the reader himself/herself who decides what to look at and what story to follow. In this way, the distinction between the reader and the listener is broken down and they find each other looking for and sharing the narrative solution together, filling the educational relationship and the wonder unveiled in interpretative games, with possibility. These books have definitely contributed to teaching how to see and, so, they have sustained the pedagogy of the gaze, giving out new eyes to look at the world without prejudice and without fear. They have promoted a new culture of the symbolic space in children, defending their right to grow happy and free, giving back a voice to those who have been uprooted, to those who have had to undergo violence, to those who have suffered separations and detachments, satisfying the needs for security, belonging, and favouring an international dialogue.

Retrieving some of the considerations of the last few years and elaborating on them, paths to implement inclusive practices will be proposed in this entry, systematizing part of the experiences that have been had and responding to the necessities of today's "heterogeneous" contexts, where

diversity, in all its multitude of meanings, is the distinctive characteristic (Zoletto, 2017).

Through silent books it is in fact possible to build new alphabets for inclusion and for reception practices, safely away from easy trivialization, obtuse academics, sterile appeasing attitudes and simplistic readings, to create a “well built head” (Morin, 1999), cultivating a critical eye, able to dismiss asphyxiating and often stereotyped reasoning and approaches.

Words like borders, escape, invisibility, limit, memory, migration, fear, hope, and journey take on new meanings, meanwhile rediscovering words like friendship, courage, cooperation, care, empathy, rights, to propose a new, protagonist, resilient, pro-active, interdependent, daring and able to choose vision of childhood, with beauty becoming an educational resource objecting to the opaqueness and heaviness of the world.

The goal is to give possibilities, broadening the reader’s horizon of anticipation, working on the symbolic dimension to reshape open educational spaces of discovery, in the awareness that for a child “the perception and representation of space are always connected to the emotional allocation that he/she carries out on places, distancing or approaching themselves from or towards it, depending on events and experiences” (Iori, 1996, p. 21). So, the more an educational relationship is rich and significant, the more intense the experiences.

The starting premise is that, because of the enveloping characteristics of reading, an encounter mediated by a text can charge a relationship of affective and emotional tones and that the building of an educational path with books must not necessarily be based on the choice of a theme. On the contrary, to cultivate diverging thoughts and overthrow perspectives, it is necessary to subvert and operate a patient and attentive de-construction of categories.

Let us take migration as an example. What fascinates, seduces and motivates us to educate through silent books is that migration does not resolve itself in proposing texts that present the theme of migrant journeys, instead past and present are compared, or points of contact or differences between cultures are dwelt upon to facilitate the encounter. The symbols/conditions of the wander enter the visual narrative: from luggage to the various means of transport, from the different depictions of escape to the integration difficulties in a new country, but the register used allows to give back the complexity of the phenomenon, removing it from emergency, enhancing the individual life stories, giving importance back to memory, lingering on the concept of empathy through the

representation of the different emotions. The pain of separation, the longing for loved ones and places, the hope in a better future, so that everyone can recognize oneself or at least understand and tune in.

Books like *The arrival*, *Migrando* and *Mirror* have become classics, also thanks to the practices that they have given rise to. They allow us to identify in the disorientation of those who are facing a new world, in a non-rhetorical way, trying to make the experience of a migration journey universal, to tie it to human condition itself.

There is also a migration that hints at something deeper, that allows going beyond, representing escapes from everyday reality, to come back to it changed, enriched. A crayon is enough to reshape our daily life, to give it colour and transform it through imagination. In this respect, Aaron Becker's oneiric trilogy is eloquent, in it journeys are fictitious and their purpose is to build a real "child" citizenship, which originates from wonder, and battles against adult obtuseness.

This teaches us that creativity is a precious resource, which can upset categories and train eyesight towards a different gaze, and that stimulating imagination means making the resistance/resilience capacity of communities and individuals stronger, as there is a growing stirring risk that the market is creating desires, thus producing fake and approved behaviours, which generally create stereotypes and prejudice. This is the starting point for the construction of so-called subversive paths, where, for example, it is possible to go beyond the fear of the Other through the use of a metaphorical language, or to experiment a new point of view and let go of some certainties, discovering that the wolf is not always as bad as most traditional fairy tales told us, but that he can also save lives. In the French book *Loup Noir* the overcoming of prejudice is given by the chromatic variations: after the brave act of saving the boy from the avalanche, the animal goes from black to white. So what we see is not always authentic. As in the Korean book *Shadow*, by the famous Suzy Lee, and in the less known South American *Engaños*, through a refined game of shadows, some books' objective is to unveil the tricks in which a superficial reading may induce us.

In wordless picture books visibility takes on a very particular significance because it hints at the ability to reveal and expose the invisible. Illustrators are excellent at this, many of them fill their pictures with details, compelling the reader to sharpen his/her view, to train their gaze discovering and opening up new scenarios. In these cases, spaces reveal as many layers as the depth of the readings. So even a summer dive into an

overcrowded pool can hide a surprise, unpredictable encounters, hidden worlds, making us swim beyond the grey chaotic surface towards unexpected depths, which gain colour along the way. The artist JiHyeon Lee tells this story in *Pool*.

The meeting with the Other, with he/she who is different from us, is without a doubt a test to overcome, which may generate anxiety, uncertainty and sense of loss; it can try us, but it can also stimulate our interdependence and push us to look for an original solution to problems, conquering life's trials together. Many silent books satisfy this need. In *The ladybug race*, that has also become a great classic representing cooperation, many ladybirds, all very different in shape and colour, decide to respect the rhythm of others to cut the finish line together, contrasting sterile competition and homogenisation mechanisms, overcoming fears and obstacles.

Wordless stories push us to go beyond our inner and outer limits. Suzy Lee teaches this in her *Trilogy* (2012), where she presents the poetics of the silent book, declaring the care these books need, starting from the book's flyleaf.

To briefly summarize, to contribute in the creation of a culture of reception and, thus, promote inclusive practices, having the courage to move from our reassuring position putting idealism back into circulation is needed, because books don't only give us wings, as Paul Hazard (1958) has taught us, but they increase "civil awareness" (Bertin, 1976, pp. 149-156). There is an infinite number of paths that can be proposed through silent books, as many as the readers who decide to put themselves out there, overcoming fear and awkwardness, with educators/mediators who are able to promote active listening, to respect the unspoken and the unspeakable, appreciating silence. These figures must thus take care of the participants' experiences showing interest, dedication, thoughtfulness and concern (Iori, 2006, pp. 54-58). In taking on the role of facilitators in the group that will interpret the narration, they must also organize the space, keeping well in mind that today "the ability to read spaces and professional actions in the widest socio-historical context" is required of them, because the operating environment "cannot be analysed and addressed only as a technical, and apparently neutral, matter" (Tramma, 2017, p. 115).

As practices have demonstrated in these years, each educator will choose their own style to build a "narrative community" (Jedlowski, 2009, p.128) and will be able to follow the silent reading and the inter-

pretation of the story with expressive activities most suitable to the chosen book, translating the reading into actions. Working with silent books certainly is a great challenge, because these books teach us “to put the world in the right position” starting from children, as Jella Lepman (2018), the founder of IBBY, said. This organization, which we’ve already talked about, has been considering books as bridges for the construction of a united world since 1953. So much so, that the precious collection of *Silent book. From the world to Lampedusa and back*, with wordless picture books sent from all countries of the 5 continents, has reached its fourth edition, so as to increase the island of Lampedusa’s library’s allocation and enrich the Scaffale d’arte of Rome’s Palazzo delle Esposizioni through a permanent and accessible exhibition (<https://www.palazzo.esposizioni.it/pagine/servizi-educativi>).

This is a very current message that offers the possibility of a militancy against new forms of intolerance and exclusion, to contrast cynicism and resignation and build visions, re-establishing a “civilization of childhood” (Rodari, 2014, p.104): enlivening free educational spaces, like libraries; investing on child potentials and resources, encouraging their protagonism and their active participation with the “*freedom of reason and the gamble of imagination*” (Frabboni, 2013, p.180); recovering the visionary surge that good books can undoubtedly fuel.

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