

Spontaneous geographical maps of Europe by Italian school children

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Background

The present preliminar investigation is part of a wider research on children's spontaneous ideas and representations of Europe (Amann Gainotti, 2006) that include their notions about what Europe is, where Europe is, what nations are part of Europe etc.. and also their ideas about their national and/or european identity. The study was carried out with reference to J.Piaget's (1926) and neo-piagetian researchers' (Berti and Bombi, 1981; Vianello and Lucangeli, 2004) findings on children's ideas about the world, other countries, society, and also about political and economical institutions. As part of that wider research, children were also asked to make a drawing of Europe.

Modern period of cognitive studies of geographical environment can be dated back to the work of E.C. Tolman, whose classic 1948 paper "Cognitive maps in rats and men" introduced the term "cognitive map". Other works of great influence were J.Piaget' and B.Inhelder's 1947 book " La représentation de l'espace chez l'enfant" and K. Lynch's 1960 work " The image of the city".

In the period 1978-1985 several serious empirical work on geographical cognition have been conducted and published by psychologists (Mark et al. 1999).

Spatial knowledge and geographical knowledge both require mental representation. On the basis of that assumption, the purpose of our study was to outline developmental patterns in mental representations of a complex geographical entity as Europe, that cannot be organized on the basis of personal experience of physical environment, but depends on informations that are

culturally provided. In Italian schools geographic notions are started being taught in 4th or 5th grade of elementary school.

Subjects were 150, male and female, elementary school children, 30 in each of the 5 grades of elementary school.

Method

At the end of an individual, flexible interview on their ideas about Europe and being European, subjects were asked to make a free drawing of Europe.

Results

A qualitative and quantitative analysis of children's drawings of Europe were made that evidenced a sequence of different qualitative patterns starting, at a first level, with drawings of landscapes including houses, trees, persons, cars etc.. Following, were drawings of rough mono-coloured, undifferentiated surfaces that progressively evolved in the direction of wholes composed, in different ways, by several, spatially organized, elements.

Conclusions

It is argued that children's construction of geographical notions about Europe run in parallel with the organization of logical operations of partition and inclusion, and with topological notions as "besides", "above" and "under".

References

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