

Building global citizenship through the teaching of civic education: case study on the perception of the new generations in two Italian territories of the Tuscany Region

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Abstract

With the aim of countering populist and nationalist tendencies, it is now recognized at the European level that we need to pursue social cohesion by encouraging citizens to consciously participate in the political and social life of society. At the same time, unsustainable practices have caused a global emergency and the need to rethink our behaviors and encourage sustainability and innovative technological progress while respecting the world.

For this reason, in Italy, the teaching of civic education, articulated in sustainability, digital education and constitution, has been included as compulsory in schools by Law No. 92 of 2019, with the aim of promoting conscious citizenship.

The research aims to investigate the effectiveness of the law through a qualitative analysis by administering semi-structured interviews and organizing focus groups in order to know the perceptions of about 100 adolescents in the province of Pistoia and Grosseto of the Tuscany Region (Italy).

The research consists of an analysis of the Italian, historical and socio-legal context of civic education based on literature at the national and international level; and an analysis of the perceptions of a sample of adolescents on the importance of civic education and the topics covered at school. The results show an insufficiency of efforts at the Italian level to promote citizenship and human rights education, which clashes with the interest adolescents show in these topics. The research calls for an extension of Law 92/2019 aimed at making the subject of civic education compulsory, autonomous and equipped with specific learning objectives.

Keywords: civic education, policy, constitution, case study, national guidelines

1. Introduction: Law 92/2019, a tool for peace.

Questions and issues around the right to education are many and need to be addressed through equally differentiated approaches and methodologies.

The first form of the right to education refers to its guarantee in terms of access; on the other hand, it is essential to focus also on the substantive part of the right that guarantees it in qualitative terms, and therefore in terms of content.

Indeed, it is on the edifying role that education plays in the construction of personal and collective identity that this investigation intends to dwell, through a reference to the Preamble to the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization of 1945 (UNESCO, 1945). With this text education is outlined as an instrument that can guarantee international peace through education, science and culture, permanently rooting positive values and ideals and make peace a shared culture.

The text of the Preamble to the Constitution makes an accusation against ignorance and, with it, prejudices, as the cause of the misunderstanding of peoples, of the denial of the democratic ideals of dignity, equality, and respect for the human personality, stating that a peace based on purely economic interests could not be lasting and that such peace must therefore be rooted in people, inspiring in them intellectual and moral solidarity (UNESCO, 1945).

It is precisely to this role of education in the fight against hatred that this investigation proposes to turn its attention through an analysis that touches on many other disciplines such as pedagogy, history, economics, and sociology, which outline the profile of humanity that needs to make its way through utilitarian interests and animal instincts and find, through education, that element that makes the human being: the reason (Lee, 2020).

In the light of these reflections, whether the right to education, as it is currently implemented at the international, regional European and, more specifically, national Italian level, can be considered consistent with what the UNESCO Constitution calls for.

What we intend to investigate is the role that education can play in the promotion of human rights and with them the sense of belonging to a community that shares core values, creating a form of perceived citizenship that goes beyond the assigned legal citizenship.

The idea lies that only by knowing rights is it possible to exercise them and demand their effectiveness.

In the era of ever advancing globalization, in which national borders are becoming increasingly thinner to the point of insignificance, the real and only limit to the construction of an international society seems to be the fear of diversity that is ingrained in individuals. A fear, this one, founded on ignorance and non-knowledge, and which through the right educational methodologies can and must be combated (ICC, 2018).

It is with this in mind that this analysis proposes to present a brief historical excursus of the path of human rights and citizenship education on different levels, with reference to Italy and its latest big step coinciding with the adoption of Law 92/2019 on the introduction of the

teaching of civic education as compulsory within schools, defining its scope and then investigating how this introduction has been perceived by young students.

2. The troubled path of citizenship education within the legislative framework of the Italian education system: influence and compliance with international and regional European guidelines.

The right to education is recognized as a fundamental human right by several instruments of international law. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights presents three essential aspects of the right to education, stating that it should be aimed at engendering a sense of the dignity of the human person, that it should enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, and promote understanding among all ethnic groups, nations, and racial and religious groups (CESCR, 1999). The letter of the article can be read as a call for the teaching dedicated to global citizenship education, and it is worth questioning whether a state could not be sued before the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for violation of Article 13 if it had not taken all measures at its disposal to implement such a teaching. However, it is important to point out that such a legal case was never presented to the committee, and that this possible allegation remain totally hypothetical (CESCR, 1999). Nowadays, in which national and inter-regional borders are increasingly thinned by globalization, and the various populations find themselves getting to know each other, tolerance and mutual understanding constitute the one great objective to aspire.

Education plays an essential role on the road to human fulfillment, since through education everyone can acquire those skills that will enable him or her to delineate and define him or herself autonomously and freely as an individual, thus obtaining the possibility of living in dignity (Lee, 2020).

More generally, it is appropriate to bring to light the awareness-raising function that education performs, highlighting through the minimum standards imposed those social values that give rise to a community and not just a formal one.

The sense of belonging to a community can now be found not only in place of birth or residence, but rather in the customs and traditions, in values, in the social customs (Lee, 2020). At the European regional level, the right to education emerged as a corollary of the cardinal principles of freedom from discrimination, acquiring relevance in the context of the constitution and development of European citizenship only with the drafting of the Maastricht Treaty, in which the notion of European citizenship first appeared (M. Cocconi, 2006). It identifies the possibility of belonging to a wider community, which can go beyond national borders with a view to integration, mobility and understanding, but also to sharing opportunities. The relevance of such a notion is to be found in Article 8 of the Maastricht Treaty, which identifies European citizenship as an instrument for obtaining a block of rights at the regional community level that overlaps with national citizenship without now replacing

it. The concept is a clear reference to belonging to a supranational community, without this having to imply a renunciation of one's national identity (Alulli, 2015).

Equally important is the activity carried out by the Council of Europe with the promotion of the plan for Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education through a long process that began in 1997 through which education was recognized as playing a strategic role in defending social obstacles to democratic citizenship and human rights, such as violence, racism, extremism, xenophobia, discrimination, and intolerance. Education was identified as the means to promote and achieve greater social cohesion and justice (Council of European Union, n.d.).

The goal was to establish programs that could support states and education toward these goals, leading to the issuance of a Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on Education for Democratic Citizenship in 2002, which reaffirmed the importance of developing an active awareness of democratic citizenship, which is necessary for the solidity of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, the founding pillars of the Council of Europe. It emphasized the need for education for democratic citizenship to permeate all levels and types of education, hence the call for states to reform their educational policies in this direction and to encourage as many initiatives as possible (Council of Europe, 2010). Such a recommendation reveals an assumption of great awareness and commitment in countering the most critical social issues for the construction of a truly democratic, inclusive society that respects human rights, as it is not enough to provide rigid mechanisms - often sanctioning and punitive - to ensure the respect of certain rights, but that it is, on the contrary, necessary to root the understanding of these rights in the subjects through the use of formative processes that can affect and influence their personalities (Fallacara, 2008).

Finally, regarding the Italian legal framework on the right to education and education for citizenship and human rights, calling for a kind of citizenship education in schools of all levels is tantamount to affirming the will to provide this teaching to all, since *all* are the holders of the subjective right to education, without distinction.

The aim was to promote common values, shared in a unitary manner within the community and coinciding with the identity of the community itself, as to implicitly affirm that educating to these values is meant to rooting national identity (Vitiello, 2008).

As for the place to be given to citizenship education, Italy is still struggling to identify it, succumbing in the succession of historical events and apparent priorities to the relegation of this teaching to a marginal activity, complementary to other subjects or even optional to profit from teachings deemed more important from time to time, with the result that today's Italian population is - mostly - ignorant of constitutional issues and human rights, and is increasingly falling prey to nationalism and populism, which rely on this very lack of knowledge to assert themselves (Corradini, 2008).

After some deceptive attempts, Moratti Law 53/2003 called for education to the fundamental principles of civil coexistence to be included in school programs and translated into six types of education: citizenship, road safety, environment, health, nutrition, affectivity, and sexuality,

all of which can be traced back to the same subject on a teaching level: a discipline that proved difficult to implement and was soon forgotten by the teaching world.

But it was only in 2008, with the Gelmini Reform, that civic education was given a didactic role, under the teaching of *Citizenship and Constitution Studies*, without, however, any specific objectives being set for the discipline in didactic terms and thus leaving a wide - perhaps excessive - margin to teachers in choosing which activities to undertake and how.

Quite recently, and therefore belatedly, civic education has been the subject of a new legislative intervention with Law 92/2019, which maintains the wording of the teaching of Citizenship and the Constitution but attempts to give it a more solid role within the school curriculum, making it compulsory for 33 hours per year in primary and secondary schools, and to provide for educational initiatives in this sense in pre-schools.

If the provision of 33 hours dedicated to a teaching subject seems insufficient, the challenge proves even more daunting in light of the content of the law establishing it, which invites teachers to organize teaching on a considerable number of topics ranging from the Constitution to the institutions of the Italian State and the European Union, to the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, but also to digital citizenship, the foundations of law and in particular labor law, environmental education, legality and the fight against the mafia, the promotion of cultural heritage and training in civil protection (United Nations, 2015).

3. Investigating the perceptions of the younger generations on citizenship education: objectives and methodological framework.

The research aims to investigate the effectiveness of the law through a qualitative analysis of the perceptions of adolescents attending secondary schools in two Italian provinces of the Tuscany Region. The research had the following objectives:

1. Understand the views of the younger generation on the teaching of civic education at school or within youth centers.
2. Understand the new generation's interest in pursuing civic education courses in addition to those already conducted in the classroom or within youth centers. The research question was articulated in four corollary questions defined as follows:
 - What topics are addressed in secondary schools in the territories of the Tuscan region included in the research?
 - Are civic education courses conducted in youth centers?
 - How interested is the younger generation in the teaching of civic education in schools and youth centers?
 - Would young people participate in new civic education courses tailored to their needs?
 - How is it possible to give citizenship education a relevant role in the Italian educational context?

The research phases were distributed as follows:

- construction of a theoretical framework aimed at reflecting about populist and nationalist tendencies/social cohesion;
- a reasoned analysis of the literature about Italian, historical and socio-legal context of civic education based on literature on a national and international level;
- a sample of about 100 boys and girls from the Pistoia and Follonica areas (Tuscany Region, Italy);
- analysis of the results that emerged from interviews and focus groups through the identification of categories of meaning, triangulation of the data collected and definition of research results.

Educational research is characterized by a plurality of dimensions (philosophical, historical, theoretical, empirical, etc.) each of which considers specific problems and follows its own methodological criteria and necessarily goes to meet the others.

Research in the pedagogical field is generally placed in an empirical investigation, which is the best way to study a reality, or a phenomenon based on the data collected in the field. An empirical investigation is a way to get to know reality in depth, a tool for reading reality. Each research always takes place within the framework of a paradigm, a set of assumptions or premises that guide the researcher's action. The paradigm chosen for the research is defined as ecological, conceived by Bronfenbrenner (1986). According to this view, reality is so complex that it is not always quantifiable and subject to experimental procedures. This paradigm has the main purpose of understanding reality in depth. Based on the researcher's expectations and choices, this research can also be defined as qualitative. Qualitative analysis is concerned with understanding situations in their uniqueness while always taking context into account; therefore, it does not seek generalizations, as quantitative research would. Qualitative research has a high degree of flexibility. The research design is unstructured, open-ended, and the research team has shaped it over the course of the surveys. The encounter and interaction with the subjects involved in the survey were the preconditions for understanding the data. Thanks to the characteristics of qualitative research, the research team intensively studied the object of study, identifying its main characteristics and attempting to abstract conceptually and theoretically inductively based on the empirical findings (Corbetta, 1999). Of the possible strategies, our choice is the case study. This strategy is used when the intention is to acquire an adequate understanding of a phenomenon seen in its singularity and originality. In this research, the tools that are most appropriate and that we have used are focus groups.

The sampling method chosen for this research is defined as "snowball" and is a non-probabilistic sampling method, which involves choosing a certain number of subjects with the characteristics required by the survey, interviewing, and asking them for other names to interview, in order to create a "snowball effect".

On the basis of the sample selected, the research team has carried out 12 focus groups with around 100 individuals in total.

The validity of the assertions produced by case studies is confirmed through triangulation processes and the research team performed three different types of research triangulation.

- Data triangulation. Researchers collected data in different times, contexts, and situations;
- triangulation of researchers. The research was carried out by a team of different researchers who studied the same phenomenon, used the same methods and techniques to reach the same conclusions.
- theory triangulation. Researchers have different studies in their backgrounds and carry different points of view with which they have examined the same phenomena.

4. Research results from empirical evidence

Based on the research methodology applied to research, the object of study was intensively investigated. The research team semantically identified the main features and processes underlying the object of study (Corbetta, 2003). The relationship between empirical observations and theorizing was predominantly inductive.

The research favored a strategy more oriented towards analytical deepening, in order to identify the most relevant features and deepen some perspectives of units of analysis. When pursuing research oriented to analytical deepening, research privileges inductive reasoning as inferential strategies. In relation to the theme of inductive logic, the research team introduced the concept of "saturation". The research reached saturation point when the information became redundant and, therefore, information gathering could be terminated (Olivier De Sardan, 2008). Induction applied to research is considered a method for empirically defining conceptual categories derived from the isolation of the essential features of a social phenomenon. Such categories, once produced, are considered a conforming representation of the structure of reality. The reification of such conceptualizations is the basis for the certainty of knowledge itself (Ragin, 1994). The research techniques used make it possible to collect data in the form of verbal code (discursive exchanges, oral reflections) transferred into written texts. For this reason, in the data analysis phase, researchers have focused on content analysis as a procedure for processing the collected data. The most common way of analyzing the written texts produced presupposed several stages of data systematization (Semeraro, 2011).

In the first phase, researchers considered texts by performing a content analytic segmentation. The aim was to identify different analytical units (words, sentences, statements, whole paragraphs) from which meaning cores emerged. These cores are defined as "codes" and are the outcome of inference processes. In the second phase, researchers looked for possible types of relationships among the codes created taking into account the following criteria (Johnson & Christensen, 2004):

- inclusion (the identified code is part of another code with a wider meaning);
- cause-effect (the identified code is the result, or cause, of another code);
- generative (the identified code generates another code);
- functional relationships (the identified code is a function of another code);
- sequences (the identified code is a part of a sequence of codes);
- attributions (the individuated code covers a characteristic of another code). The next step consisted in the construction of code aggregations following various established criteria. The criteria used are summarized below:
- Structuring criterion that refers to the aggregations that define the situation. The researchers aggregated the codes on the basis of the sample's opinions on a certain topic, bringing together the different views of the subjects.
- Criterion of aggregations describing processes. Researchers have included all the codes that express a sequence of events, changes that occurred over time and passages from one status to another.
- Criterion of aggregations that describe specific activities in operational contexts. The codes described specific modes of operation and behavior, carried out in a given context.
- Criterion of aggregations that describe relationships in micro and macro social systems. Researchers aggregated codes that concerned both informal relationships, experienced in everyday life, and relationships of a formal nature, which described relationships based on roles and definitive social positions as in the working world.

Based on the data analysis process described here, several interesting results emerged.

Below are the summary categories of the research results.

The lack of civic education in youth centers.

In youth centers, civic education courses are rarely structured. In some cases, a few hours of civic education are organized within larger workshops/courses/activities.

The general interest in civic education is medium-low.

The focus groups conducted revealed a percentage of approximately 30 percent of boys and girls who showed both an active interest in the teaching of civic education and who, at the same time, would also participate in an additional course based on their interests and knowledge needs on the subject.

The younger generation's interest in rights and the enhancement of individual diversity is medium-high.

Several boys and girls showed some interest in issues related to diversity, appreciation of individual characteristics, and respect for others. Despite the medium-low interest in the teaching of civic education, it is necessary to emphasize that human rights issues, on the other hand, were more popular. In fact, many people who participated in the focus group stressed their interest in studying the history of migration, women's rights and gender discrimination, and the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community.

New generation's interest in sustainability and respect for the environment is medium- high.

As with issues of diversity, inclusion and respect for others, environmental sustainability also seemed to be central to the discourses of the boys and girls who participated in the survey. Almost all were aware of famous environmental activists and all knew the importance of perpetuating virtuous behavior towards Planet Earth. The sample appreciated the themes emerging from the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015).

The interest of the younger generation in studying the Italian Constitution is medium- low.

A critical issue found in the research certainly concerns the lack of interest among the younger generations in teaching the fundamentals of the Italian Constitution, a crucial part of civic education teaching in Italy. It is often perceived as a necessary but tedious teaching and the current teaching methodologies used in Secondary Schools are not attractive to learners.

Conclusions: Call for giving citizenship education a substantially relevant role within the Italian education system.

In the light of the research presented, emerges insufficient efforts made at the Italian level to promote citizenship and human rights education, which clashes with the interest adolescents show in these issues (ICC, 2018).

The knowledge deficit about these issues leads not only to an insufficient openmindedness, but also to a lack of capacity to participate in the social and political life of the community itself (ICC, 2018).

What transpires is a low level of awareness of one's role as a national and European citizen, and on the other, a widespread sense of mistrust in institutions that leads one to believe that one does not have a decisive role in the political landscape, forgetting that voting is a right but also a duty and, above all, that it constitutes the way in which the people exercise their sovereignty and, consequently, democracy.

Citizenship education therefore translates not only into individuals who know how-to live-in peace, but also into safeguarding democracy itself.

Like every right, in fact, the vote and consequently the democratic principal risk losing their weight and effectiveness if they are continually disregarded. Without democracy, there can be no rule of law, and without rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms cannot be enforced (CESCR, 1999).

In conclusion, educating citizens to actively live their citizenship implies ensuring that the great humanitarian achievements made so far are not in vain.

Many doubts revolve around the recent law 92/2019 on civic education, which, despite being the fruit of a long and troubled historical and legislative journey, continues to relegate citizenship education to an excessively restricted role in quantitative, but above all qualitative terms. What is worrying, in fact, is the wide margin of action left to teachers within the

framework of the law to carry out teaching activities in this area, which are still not sufficiently defined and organized, insofar as they are placed as corollaries to other disciplines. This research hopes that the Italian education system will succeed in positioning citizenship education in an essential and central role to be able to train not only individuals with a lot of notions in their heads, but true citizens capable of taking an active part in an increasingly changing national, regional and international society which, as such, needs great adaptability. Based on these assumptions, the research calls for an extension of Law 92/2019 aimed at making the subject of civic education, understood as education for citizenship and human rights, not only compulsory but also autonomous and endowed with specific learning objectives to which to contribute through a mix of practical and theoretical approaches, with the aim of developing, just as advocated by the UNESCO Constitution and the ICESCR, the human personality.

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