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## The Role of Experiential Learning In Citizenship Education: Lessons From The Field

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**ABSTRACT:** *Over the past decade, civic education has been at the heart of a significant cultural debate and policy review concerning its purposes, main topics of interest, methodology and practice strategies in school learning. The major driver behind the implementation of citizenship education has been the aspiration to respond to a number of perceived current social problems and concerns about young people's lack of knowledge and confidence in topics related to civic awareness and values, social cohesion as well as duties and obligations to the community. In the absence of these virtues or traits the civic educational mission has been almost totally entrusted to the public school system. Besides family, friends and local communities, school is in fact considered to have a fundamental role in preparing and supporting young people in the acquisition of knowledge and attitudes that will lead them to be truly involved in all the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Nevertheless, citizenship is a multidimensional, dynamic, complex and contested concept. For that reason, teachers, as well as the other members of the educational community, constantly face new challenges in the training of young citizens. However, school is an agent of socialization and a place where transformation, adaptation and developments of citizenship take place, providing an exceptional framework in which new civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours can be identified, promoted and observed. Multicultural and digital citizenship, both as emerging topics and real conditions, are two examples of this peculiar phenomenon. In this context, a clear need to improve participatory approaches in the training of pupils arises. Since civic education is meant to prepare young people for an active and positive contribution to society, it should not only convey theoretical knowledge but also promote behaviours which are necessary to effectively participate in the civic sphere. This paper aims to describe how empowering practices, as associated with experiential learning with a very particular interest to the context of what young people encounter on a daily basis, can be an effective way to promote youth civic development. The first section introduces the increasing emphasis on citizenship education and the approaches to citizenship education according to national curricula. The second section details the results of the experience Fondaca - Active Citizenship Foundation gained during the last years in conducting workshops for students, teachers' training and in promoting acts of civic engagement. The final section discusses what appears to be happening in terms of approaches to citizenship education in schools and how these insights impact on students in term of learning effects. The evidence base for this paper is drawn from a variety of sources,*

*from Fondaca's studies on citizenship education and from concrete empirical data.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Citizenship Education, Public Education System, Experiential Learning, Participation, Multicultural Citizenship*

### **1. Civic education in Italy: expectations and formative purposes**

Over the past decade, there has been a wide resurgence of interest in questions about civic education and democratic citizenship. Politicians, decision-makers, journalists, scholars, religious leaders, teachers and educators have all expressed their points of view on the necessity of the development of policies concerning civic and citizenship education. The focus of the debate has been on how (civic) education could contribute to solve several pending issues concerning social coexistence, lack of civic-mindedness and practice in the exercise of duties and responsibilities towards one's community, political disaffection (Fondaca, 2018) and even aggressive behaviours such as bullying or violence among young people (Santerini, 2010).

In other words, as Bobbio noted more than thirty years ago, civic education has been accused of being one of the unfulfilled promises of democracy. Since democracy is realized in the democratic practice of citizens, one of the greatest threats to such a system is represented by the 'uneducated citizen', victim of political apathy, disinterest and responsible for vote trading and abstention (Bobbio, 1984).

More specifically, young people have become the main target of governmental (and non-governmental) educational initiatives aimed at countering the perceived tendency of political and social alienation. Young people, in fact, have been seen as the segment of the population mostly characterized as disconnected from politics, with lower levels of knowledge of their country's history and political systems, lack of awareness of civic values, as well as on duties and obligations to the community, and a lower interest and commitment to participation in public and political life (see e.g. Furnham, Gunther 1987; Park 1995; Pirie, Worcester 2000; Putnam 2000; Curtice, Seyd 2003; Euyoupart 2005; Wattenberg 2007; Joint Research Centre 2018).

In the absence of these virtues or traits the civic educational mission has almost totally been entrusted to the public school system. There are several reasons to emphasize the role of schools. First of all, school is one of the most influential places for socialization. At school, students learn how to live together, and which communication strategies can be used to communicate with each other, but it is also the place where young people acquire knowledge and skills, learn to recognize their own rights, and where they can experience a practical sense of duties and respect for common rules. Secondly, there is evidence that civic

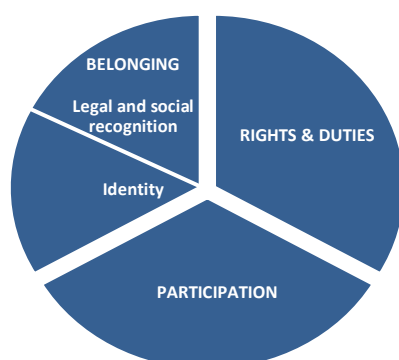
attitudes and values are easier to influence when people are still young. For this reason, school has proved to be a more suitable place than others in educating young citizens (Sherrod *et al.*, 2002). Besides family, friends and local communities, school has therefore been identified as crucial in preparing and supporting young people to acquire the knowledge and attitudes that will lead them to be truly engaged and participate as active, responsible citizens in all decision-making processes that affect their lives (see e.g., Torney-Purta *et al.*, 1999, 2001; Torney-Purta 2002; Corsi, 2004, 2011).

Over the years a relevant number of countries have invested significant resources in civic and citizenship programmes in order to promote understanding of the pillars of democratic governance (Torney-Purta *et al.*, 1999).

The meanings and uses of the terms 'citizenship education' and 'civic education' are widely debated in literature. For the purposes of this article, citizenship is understood as an empirical phenomenon structured in a set of three dimensions: belonging in the political community (considered as legal and social recognition but also as a sense of identification with fellow citizens), rights and duties arising from that belonging, and participation in political and social life. Based on these assumptions' citizenship can be defined as a device: the promotion of inclusion, cohesion and development of the political community are the main functions of the democratic citizenship as a device.

The transformations and developments of citizenship, so determined, can be observed in a number of 'places', namely: in 'constitutional norms' (national law, international treaties, European law etc.); in the 'civic acquis' (i.e. the set of contents of citizenship, based on laws, public policies, administrative acts, judgments, etc., which are much more rapidly changing than constitutional norms); in citizenship practices i.e. the dynamic relations between citizens and the political community, which arise from daily practice (Moro, 2016, 2020).

**FIG. 1.** *The democratic citizenship device*



In democratic societies, civic education is part of a traditional, formal educational framework, aimed at conveying key notions, for example those about the administrative and political organization of a State, about the different forms of government or even about the role of citizens' participation in the context of a democratic system. On the other hand, citizenship education is generally understood as supporting students in becoming informed, active and responsible citizens, capable of effectively and constructively interacting with others, involving not only the teaching and learning of theoretical knowledge, but also practical experiences through activities in the school environment and in wider society (Eurydice, 2017).

The Italian context is characterized by a long tradition of civic education. In Italy civic education has been introduced as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum since 1958 in middle and high schools (students aged 11 to 16) with the aim of interweaving the didactic proposal with the civic one, in order to project students «towards social, juridical and political life, that is to say, towards the principles that rule the community and the forms in which it evolves» (D.P.R. 585, 1958). Since 1958, schools and teachers have been left to decide, almost in complete autonomy, on how to organize and implement the topic of civic education, as well as the methodology and practical strategies to be used. A review of the existing literature reveals that, despite the general agreement on the importance of the topic, civic and citizenship education have achieved mostly modest results, especially in the long run (see e.g., Cavalli. Deiana 1999; Santerini. 2006).

To better understand how and under what conditions civic education was being taught in school, in 2018 Fondaca - Active Citizenship Foundation, conducted a systematic research by analysing the contents in citizenship education programmes and websites of more than 400 Italian upper secondary schools. The results of the study suggest that civic education programmes covered an (excessively) wide and varied range of topics. The approaches to civic education were also found to be various, mainly organized in extra school time, whose effects in terms of learning did not seem to be registered (Fondaca, 2018).

With respect to this analysis, what has changed with the latest legislation on civic education is that Law No. 92/2019 has extended the teaching of this subject to all school cycles (kindergarten, primary and secondary school). The new law also recognizes civic education as 'cross-curricular', so that the principles of civic education are present in all the national curriculum subjects, with a timetable of at least 33 hours per year (1 hour per week). Civic education is subordinated to periodic and final assessments. This framework has been complemented by the Ministry of Education's guidelines, which conceived civic education as divided into three main concepts: knowledge of the Italian Constitution; sustainable development and digital citizenship.

## 2. Civic education beyond crisis: challenges and directions

In the relevant literature there is an increasing recognition that citizenship is a multidimensional, dynamic, controversial, and often contested concept (see e.g., Turner 1993; Crick 2000; Miller 2000; Mackert, Turner 2017; Moro 2020). Citizenship, although portrayed as a natural event (e.g., the process by which a non-citizen of a country may acquire citizenship or nationality of that country is called 'naturalization'), is actually a historical and social product in constant crisis, construction, and evolution. The complex and contested nature of citizenship has led to different ways of approaching it over time. This has also been reflected on how citizenship education has been defined and approached (Kerr, 1999; Torney-Purta *et al.*, 1999).

School is one of the main agents of socialization and a privileged place to observe the transformations of citizenship, providing an exceptional framework in which civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours can be identified and promoted. In other words, the school is one of the places where not only citizenship education, but citizenship itself, is built. Multicultural and digital citizenship, both as emerging themes and as actual conditions, are two examples of this peculiar phenomenon.

Some scholars have suggested that citizenship is becoming post-national, cosmopolitan, or global (Soysal, 1994; Jacobson, 1996; Norris, 2000). National boundaries have become increasingly porous, for example due to the creation of transnational human rights institutions or even regional institutions such as the European Union (Benhabib, 2004, 2008; Moro, 2020). The advent of globalization, the increase in international migration, the presence of children born or raised in Italy without a document that could testify to their belonging, are all phenomena that demonstrate how the concept of citizenship has undergone important challenges and changes in recent years. In such a society, schools should at the same time embrace and offer a new model of citizenship as a result of the shift from a national level to a more global and inclusive one. This is based on a more fluid concept of identity, promoting social cohesion and developing in students a sense of belonging, as well as duties and obligations to a community and encouraging the active participation of all in society. In other words, citizenship takes into account the multicultural character of the school as much as the school puts effort into instructing young people in civic education from an intercultural perspective.

A similar discourse can be made in respect of 'digital citizenship', to be understood as the ability to participate in the digital environment, which consist in networks powered by information and communication technologies, which allow the exercise of digital activism and political engagement actions (Castells, 1996; Moro, 2013; De Blasio, 2014; Sorice 2014, 2018). It is clear that schools must deal with the process of digitization, accelerated in the course of the global pandemic we are

experiencing. At the same time, school is essential in developing students' digital citizenship skills and in limiting risks due to incorrect or unconstructive use of digital.

### **3. Fondaca's experience with 'democratic citizenship workshops'**

The research conducted by Fondaca shows that the approach to civic education in Italian education system is characterized by the complexity of topics and the variety of activities. On this basis there is a clear need to promote a systematic approach that could be translated into a coherent didactic approach. With this aim in mind, in recent years, Fondaca has designed its *democratic citizenship workshop* which place citizenship, understood as a device consisting of three components, at the centre of its reflection.

The *democratic citizenship workshop* is a theoretical-practical programme that brings student's attention to citizenship in its daily appliances. The programme aims to encourage learning processes that increase civic competencies and promote the development of stances on citizenship, understood as a mechanism for inclusion in society. The methodology used is participatory. A participatory approach favours the use of a range of activities that have normally been excluded from traditional learning methods, such as role-playing, dramatization, problem solving activities etc, which lead students to play an active and influential role in taking decisions that affect their lives. The workshop also aims to fit within the annual teaching programme, with particular reference to civic education in cross-curricular subjects.

Fondaca's *democratic citizenship workshop* consists of five training modules: Introduction to the democratic citizenship device; Belonging to the political community; Rights and Duties; Participation; Formalization of learning

#### *3.1. Introduction to the democratic citizenship device*

As noted in approaching citizenship education, what is needed, first and foremost, is a clear and precise theoretical framework that makes it possible to precisely select the topics and the activities to be proposed and to trace student's outcomes back to a general framework.

In the Fondaca approach the reference framework is represented by the *democratic citizenship device*, which synthesizes all the aspects of the democratic citizenship paradigm and is organized based on a precise thematization of the phenomenon.

The first training module aims to introduce students to the democratic citizenship device and its dimensions, highlighting how citizenship is part of (their) everyday life.

One of the activities of this module in which students are involved is called the 'Citizenship box'. This activity involves the use of a number of objects or images depicting common objects, people or situations that

can be connected to citizenship and its dimensions (flags, dictionaries, banknotes and coins, passports, the text of the Constitution, electoral cards, leaflets or brochures of civic activism associations etc.). Students, divided into teams, are involved in a relay race in which each team member, in order to gain a point, has to reach the place where the objects have been placed, and to select or pick up an object they consider connected to citizenship. At the end of the selection phase, each student is asked to briefly explain why they selected those objects and why they connect them to citizenship. At the end of the game, it can be clarified that each object or image has a link to citizenship.

### *3.2. Belonging to the political community*

As already mentioned, belonging concerns legal and social recognition, i.e., the fact of being formally recognised as a citizen, but also identity, i.e., feeling oneself as a citizen in relation to the community or territory in which one lives, studies or works.

The activities planned by Fondaca in the topic of 'belonging' deal with it with reference to concrete aspects of what students encounter on a daily basis on both a personal level and a social one. Using this method has a dual advantage. On one side, it facilitates students' involvement, who find themselves reflecting on issues that affect them personally. On the other hand, leading students through a path of discovery that starts from an everyday place or situation, allows them to become familiar with the values and principles of the democratic process and to understand the meaning and usefulness of citizenship itself.

It is clear that the development of students' (civic) knowledge is influenced not only by what happens within the school, but also by what happens in the larger society. For this reason, citizenship education should begin in school but should also extend to the local communities, which provide students with meaningful opportunities to be engaged in civic activism.

In the *democratic citizenship workshops* ample space is reserved for visits to one's own neighbourhood or city, to local community institutions and representatives, to civic activism organizations, for mapping activities etc. Collaboration with local entities is always encouraged (third sector associations, non-profit organizations, volunteer groups at local, national and international level, informal networks etc.) in order to strengthen relations and collaboration between the school and the territory.

In relation to identity linked to one's own community and territory, the example of the activity called 'Discovering the neighbourhood' can be given. In this activity, students are accompanied in a visit to the neighbourhood where they live, or where their school is, with the aim of tracing the elements that shape the territorial identity. The observation is guided by the compilation of a template in which students are asked to note the presence and the conditions of some urban elements (e.g. places for socialization, urban furniture, murals, flags, bins for waste

collection, toponymy etc.). When back in the classroom students are called to reconstruct their neighbourhood's identity on the basis of the elements observed.

### *3.3. Rights and duties*

The activities concerning 'rights and duties' within citizenship, aim to make students reflect on their definitions and meanings, to recognize their everyday expressions and to highlight the reciprocal relationship between rights and duties.

With the aim of introducing the first part of the Italian Constitution (on citizen's rights and duties) and associating moments of everyday life with the articles of the Italian Constitution, Fondaca designed the 'Constitution Cards' activity. In this activity two decks of prebuilt cards are used. A first deck containing the text of Articles 13 to 54, in a simplified version, and a second deck containing pictures representing the content of each article. The activity consists of two phases. For the first phase, students are asked to pair the text of each article with its pictures. In the second phase students need to memorize the content of some articles, then they are divided into groups and take part in a 'capture the flag'-like game, whereby students, in order to get a point, have to explain to their peers the content of the article when it is called. A third phase may involve an in-depth analysis of some articles.

### *3.4. Participation*

Participation is the dimension of citizenship primarily associated with the exercise of voting rights, but participation can be also associated with the direct mobilization of citizens in public policies with the aim of promoting or protecting rights, taking care or regenerating urban commons and supporting people in need. The activities proposed aim to make students aware of the presence of active citizenship associations in their area and to stimulate students' participation in tackling real problems.

During *democratic citizenship workshops*, students are usually involved in an activity called 'Micro-planning of civic intervention'. Young people are called to identify a problem, preferably linked to the school context or to 'places' particularly close to their lives, to formulate hypotheses aimed at its resolution, to evaluate the ways in which citizens can act together, to solve the problem identified and thus to contribute to the development of society, and eventually to identify the channels for pursuing them and the third parties to be involved.

In the development of the 'micro-planning' activity, students are helped through the use of some guidelines and tools. However, it is essential that the context and content of the project are chosen by the students themselves, as well as the actions to be carried out, which must be realistic and effective, in balance with reality and with the resources that they have or think they will have, since the project usually ends with its actual implementation.



### 3.5. Formalization of learning

Fondaca's approach includes a validation of the knowledge acquired and the attitudes assumed by the students with respect to the topics covered. In particular, it can be understood: by knowledge: the increasing or changing in the information acquisition in relation to topics connected to citizenship; by attitudes: the formulation of judgments in relation to notions, people, events and situations related to citizenship.

A fundamental aspect of this approach is the elaboration of outcomes (e.g., texts, artistic or technical products, civic interventions, etc.) that can help students to formalize knowledge and encourage the clarification of individual stances with respect to the issues addressed. As already mentioned, it is not only citizenship that influences citizens, but also the citizens, in their daily actions can shape citizenship. This means that one is a citizen also and above all when they behave as a citizen. To make an example in the development of the 'micro-planning' activity already described, students are called to apply the knowledge they have gained by experiencing real problems and exploring opportunities in their own lives and communities. At the same time, developing a civic activism project allows them to test their skills in the area of civic participation (critical analysis, problem solving, propensity to research and communicate information, discuss common issues, etc.).

On other occasions, to assess the formalization of learning, students were tested on their theoretical knowledge, their attitudes or their participatory inclination toward their community through quizzes or participatory activities. Another example related to this concept may be the creation of 'class rules'. Since a class is identified as a real community when it defines a system of rules and common ways of working, and since one of the aims of the *democratic citizenship workshop* is to allow daily life to be organized in such a way that everyone can be a protagonist, one of the activities often carried out is the definition of 'class rules', in which everyone participates. In a community of practice such as the classroom, the rule, co-constructed and discussed together, becomes understandable as well as shared and requires that everyone take responsibility for respecting it and making others respect it. Any transgression involves a response from the transgressor to the entire group to whom one must explain the reasons for their behaviour (Grion, De Vecchi 2016).

## 4. Lessons learned

The activities discussed are only a few of more than 30 activities that the Fondaca's working group has designed and tested in different Italian schools. The activities are various, but have some common elements,

which can also be seen as criteria in approaching civic education. These criteria are: to adopt a clear and precise theoretical framework; to focus on topics that are relevant and detectable in student's daily lives; to alternate individual work and work group; to formalize acquired knowledge and attitudes; to incorporate game elements.

## **Conclusion**

In the Italian school system, civic education is declared not only as a cross-curricular subject, but also as one of the fundamental objectives of the school institution as a whole. Although the newest legislation has promoted a rationalization of the subject, to the present day there still seems to be a lack of a systematic approach that could be translated into a coherent teaching method.

In this context, what emerges in particular is the need to improve participatory approaches that arise from the experiences and the contexts of what students encounter on a daily basis on both a personal and a social level. Using this method has a double advantage. On one side, it facilitates students' involvement, who find themselves reflecting on issues that affect them personally. On the other hand, leading students through a path of discovery that start from everyday place or situations, allows them to become familiar with the values and principles of the democratic process and to understand the meaning and usefulness of citizenship itself. In doing so, traditional citizenship education give way to an «education for/through citizenship» (Kerr, 1999; Keating 2009) that aims to equip students with the knowledge, values, and attitudes necessary to effectively participate in the civic sphere, allowing them to be treated as citizens right now, rather than seeing school only as a place of preparation for adulthood. Fondaca's experience reinforces the idea that experiential learning, linked to a precise thematization of citizenship, in which the emphasis is on its daily appliances, could encourage learning processes increasing civic competencies and promoting the development of stances on citizenship.

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