

Chapter 23

Education for Citizenship as a Permanent Laboratory

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors discuss the results of three focus group discussions conducted in the context of the teacher professional development project STEP (school territory environment pedagogy) undertaken by researchers and teachers from three EU Countries—France, Spain, Italy—and one non-EU country, Switzerland. Specifically, they present findings regarding changes in how the teachers in the Milano Bicocca case study represented citizenship education practices. The focus group data was subjected to content analysis, using a set of categories drawn from the national reference documents on curriculum design and the transnational curriculum defined in the STEP project. The changes in the teachers' representations concerned three main aspects: dialogue with the local community and territorial context, the gap between teachers declared intentions and actual educational actions, and the adoption of a complex perspective in the choice of knowledge to be mobilized.

EDUCATING FOR CITIZENSHIP AT SCHOOL: THE CURRENT DEBATE¹

The Italian school system has undergone continuous change in recent decades: partly due to reforms that have not always been shared and planned with those operating “in the field”, that is to say, those with a practical grasp of education, as Mortari has defined them (2007); and partly due to legitimate attempts to respond to the historical, social and cultural transformation underway in society (Ligorio, Pontecorvo, 2013).

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In contrast, the thinking and action of teachers in Italian schools has often been, and even now continues to be, self-referential in nature, with the result that the doors of the classroom and of daily educational work are often shut against events taking place “out of school”, that is to say, in the outside world.

This statement is borne out by the findings of the research project *La scuola che vorrei. La voce dei giovani sulla scuola* [“The school that I would like”. The voices of young people about school], conducted by the Fondazione Intercultura in 2010-2011 in collaboration with the University of Milan Bicocca², a study that explored the perceptions of groups of young people who were able to view Italian schools from a comparative perspective, having also experienced attending school in another country (Mantovani, Pastori, 2017). The key criticisms voiced included the lack of meaning and vitality characterizing Italian schools, as compared to the participating students’ educational experience abroad which they described as more stimulating and closer to real life.

Foreign students described school as boring, because the proposed learning always involves the transmission of broad general knowledge, underpinned by the widespread implicit conviction that theoretical knowledge is superior to practical learning. This emphasis derives from the idealist paradigm, which is very deeply rooted in Italy (Pastori, 2017).

This said, we should not underestimate the role of the school as an educational agency “in which participation is universal and which, therefore, can potentially reach all [citizens]” (Nigris, 2008, p.30), regardless of their background and values: children go to school to construct shared values with others and acquire the skills they need to learn about and interact with their environment. This universal nature of school reflects the universal right to education and, at the same time, affirms the responsibility and duty of society to provide the conditions for each person to fully develop as a citizen. In this sense, although school is not the only educational agency in a territory, it is the first public institution - with a full mandate - that every citizen encounters and with which every citizen establishes a relationship that does not end with the completion of his or her schooling. School, from early childhood education to university, is the place that has been institutionally designated to foster citizenship practices, and thus to contribute to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of the broader community, be it at the national, European or global level.

It thus becomes the place where the child can experience and learn about the dimensions of collectivity and belonging to a community.

As highlighted in the most recent document drawn up by the Ministerial Commission on National Curricular Guidelines - presented at the Ministry of Education in Rome on 22 February 2018 - which is now the official normative framework for curriculum design by teachers, “The social and cultural scenarios in which teachers and educators find themselves operating are characterised by the multiplicity of cultures and languages now present in our schools. Today an intercultural model is required to enable all children and young people to mutually acknowledge and recognize one another’s identities. (...) At the same time, both old and new forms of cultural marginalization and illiteracy are present. These intersect with “relapses into illiteracy”, with the risk that many will not be able to fully exercise their citizenship (...) Thus, teaching today implies accommodating radically new and complex modes of learning, while providing constant guidance, paying attention to method, exploiting the new media and engaging in multi-dimensional inquiry. At the same time, it implies caring for and consolidating basic competences and knowledge, which are essential because they lay the foundations for making conscious use of broader knowledge and enable subjects to efficiently avail of all the other learning opportunities they will encounter in the course of their lifetimes.

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