A PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE FOR BUILDING INTERDISCIPLINARY AND LONGITUDINAL CIVIC EDUCATION CURRICULA: A CASE STUDY IN ITALY

ABSTRACT

The Italian school system is trying to accommodate some radical changes in its Civic Education (CE) curricula. Teachers across subject areas play a key role in delivering effective and engaging lessons on CE. Teachers implement the curriculum according to their own epistemological and ideological beliefs about learning. Consequently, what teachers believe about CE goals matters. Students' needs and school context are crucial in choosing the target topics, and they reflect the overall role of the individual in a society with particular cultural values. Through the community of practice, educators share their concerns about a topic and deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.

In order to meet the global changes and international goals, the current CE curricula need to be revised. The state law 92/2019 attempted to redefine the subject by promoting its cross-disciplinary and shared evaluation. Therefore, the authors and their colleagues from nursery, primary and middle schools of the same institute have dedicated 25 hours to formulating and coordinating lesson plans focusing on five main areas in CE, namely 1) play and rules, 2) environment, 3) digital identity, 4) affections, and 5) inclusion. The chosen methodology can be roughly defined as action research. While working independently, the different groups still managed to follow the same guidelines and converged towards the same issues.

The first outcome is a set of hands-on lesson plans which guide students, aged 3-14 years, through the five pillars of CE consistently across all disciplines. The experience of sharing the same task caused some tensions due to the perceived burden of such a demanding assignment, however, the combination of expertise and teamwork resulted in a remarkable journey towards responsibility and innovation.

INTRODUCTION

The Italian school system is trying to accommodate some radical changes in its Civic Education curricula. Especially in the early years, the adjustments are challenging. Due to the mixed structure of teaching in nursery, primary and middle schools, many educational institutions have decided to plan independently for each segment. In fact, reaching a consensus that respects and protects the peculiarities while embracing a cohesive view requires time and structure. This paper contains the final outcomes of a one-year training on the job, which engaged the whole teaching body of a comprehensive educational institution in a mid-sized municipality near Padua, Italy. The goal of this project is ambitious: the students attending the different schools of the institution are aged 3-14 years and cover a large territory.

In the next sections of the paper, two aspects of this pedagogical experience will be highlighted:

- The process led the participants to address the issue of whether it is feasible to frame a comprehensive approach to Civic Education across school grades (from nursery to middle school) and subjects (languages, science, art, ...). At the end of this training, it is possible to argue that this is feasible and desirable.
- The community of practice approach linked the existing different professional expertise within the school staff with the surrounding agencies, thus allowing the project to fully express its potential.
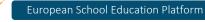
CIVIC EDUCATION IN ITALIAN SCHOOLS

The situation in Italy has been relatively untouched since the introduction of Civic Education in the 1970s. The Italian school system was mainly influenced by social, cultural and political scenarios: civic and citizenship education was often confused with social, moral and emotional learning, which are closely related but not totally overlapping.

In fact, the syllabus for the primary school, written in 1945, under the influence of USA counsellor Charleton Wolsey Washburne, was democratically oriented against totalitarianism and nationalism. Civic Education was officially established for the first time in Italy by a decree of Aldo Moro dating as far back as 1958 (Programs for Civic Education in Institutes and Schools of Secondary and Artistic Education).

The 1985 syllabus for the primary school established social studies and knowledge of social life. The programmes included education for a democratic coexistence. The Law Citizenship and Constitution 169/2008 laid the basis for regulating civic and citizenship education in the Italian school system at all levels and grades; it is integrated by the Document for the experimentation of the teaching Citizenship and Constitution (04/03/2009) followed by the Ministerial Circular Letter 86/2010 which explicitly stated that dedicated and cross-disciplinary themes of citizenship and constitution must pervade the teaching action in all possible occasions. Issues related to civic education, although without a precise timetable and without marking, are present in primary and middle schools within the curricula of history, geography and science, and in secondary school within the curricula of history, law and economics, bioethics, etc.

Santerini (2010) considered the decrease in legality and participation as a consequence of rapid social changes. Like many others, Corsi (2011) reminded us of the importance of the cooperation between family, society and school. Civic education is used in a very broad

manner in the Italian school system and refers to '*that sphere of values and issues essentially concerning the domain of the citizen, without however neglecting its connections with ethical, civil, social and economic issues relating to the person and worker*', as established in the Ministry of Education directive No. 58 'Civic Education and Constitutional Education' (MIUR, 1996).

The national guidelines for the curriculum (MIUR, 2012) declared the central place of Civic Education in the broader school scope: the stated aims are to build a sense of legality and to develop forms of ethic responsibility by choosing and acting consciously while performing their own duty.

Even with the content improvements brought in by the new legislation, an element was still not fully considered: how teachers of different subjects could build shared competences in Civic Education through a mandatory and clearly shaped curriculum (number of lessons, evaluation, interdisciplinarity).

The global changes and the adherence to international agendas require an upgrade which cannot be satisfied by mere content amendments. With the state law 92/2019, an attempt has been made to redefine the subject at a deeper level, promoting trans-disciplinary and shared evaluation. Currently, in Italy, there are no specific requirements for teachers to teach courses related to Civic Education, and it can be taught by Italian language, History, and Geography teachers, as well as those of IRC, Science and Foreign Languages. Following these changes, it becomes clear how the community of educators must find innovative ways to come together and agree on the paths to achieve common goals.

TEACHERS AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Schools are a place of inclusion and collaboration, therefore they become an example of how to demonstrate these two values. Every member of the school population is asked to be protagonists. The system itself leads pupils to behave and to adhere to the collective action which results in a personal acceptance of the citizenship school standards. Civic Education is a key subject to test the strength of communities of practice in schools (Amoia, 2021). The nature of this discipline is in itself a community dissection, through which teachers and students confront individual expectations and societal boundaries to adjust and interact in mutually satisfactory ways. According to Ferrero (2022), student empowerment is strictly connected to the practice of dialogue which is the main tool in taking a conscious stand in front of emerging civic issues, in making choices, and in heading collectively towards a common project or a concrete goal.

Teachers across subject areas play a key role in delivering effective and engaging lessons on Civic Education. However, their actions are not neutral or aseptic: teachers can be seen as 'curricular-instructional gatekeepers' implementing the curriculum according to their own epistemological and ideological beliefs about learning (Thornton, 2005; Reichert & Torney-Purta, 2019). More generally, teachers' beliefs can act as filters in selecting topics and classroom activities (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Consequently, what teachers believe about Civic Education goals matters to their teaching and the quality of students' learning. Teachers' beliefs directly and indirectly affect teaching-related decisions.

Teachers must be selective: while the general goals are clearly stated at a national level, they still offer options for personalisation based on their beliefs about self, context, content, specific teaching practices, teaching approaches and students. Students' needs

and school context are crucial in choosing the target topics, and they reflect the overall individual's role in a society with particular cultural values (Alexander, 2001; Casinader, 2021). Unsurprisingly, these values influence the extent to which teachers aim to help students adopt a role in the existing social order or be prepared to change society.

Social learning theorists suggest that communities provide a foundation for sharing knowledge. It is believed that individuals can learn by observing and modelling other people. Bandura (1977) emphasises that observing other people's behaviour allows for a safer and more efficient way of acquiring complex behaviour or skills than learning by trial and error. Social constructivists, such as Cobb and colleagues (Cobb, 1994; Cobb & Yackel, 1996), understand learning as an individual responsibility and the community is the means by which people learn. Communities provide a safe environment for individuals to engage in learning through observation and interaction with experts and through discussion with colleagues. Only through participation and collaboration with others in cultural activities and practices does human social and cognitive development occur (Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1991).

In a community of practice, the socio-cultural perspective offered an extensive discussion on the dialogue between individuals and groups. It is argued that people construct and develop their identities and understanding in particular social communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; 2001; Falkner & Payne, 2021). As members of a community of practice interact, share and participate in a particular cultural setting over time, they develop their understanding about the practice, about who they are and about what they know in relation to the community and its goals. According to Wenger (1998), there are three forms of 'belonging' to a community of practice that shape an individual's learning and development: engagement, imagination and alignment. Individuals develop their sense of belonging and alignment to a community of practice and its way of thinking and doing through their active engagement.

The same authors advocate for the legitimate peripheral participation, a notion that is an essential starting point to achieve the three modes of belonging to a community of practice. Through collaboration and active engagement in a community of practice, members are able to imagine themselves, their roles and their future in the practice as they move from peripheral to full participation, or from novice to expert, in making meaning of the tools, concepts and processes that co-construct and cultivate the practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). With advanced levels of participation, participants' identities and understandings become increasingly aligned to the practice, as they become more skilled in their knowledge of the practice.

The value of communities of practice is in the depth of participants' reflection and inquiry, and how they put co-created knowledge to action in their local school community. The community creates the change with the negotiation of values (De Luca, 2020).

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR CIVIC EDUCATION: A PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE

Civic Education has the capacity to renovate the school system and it can contribute to steering society towards new directions by promoting lay values and shared goals. To do so, all the agents must be involved and connected by a circular movement that progressively negotiates consent upon smaller steps while keeping in focus the larger picture. Moreover, the areas of interventions are broader and overlapping, and not so clearly defined as in the past. The fluidity characterising the modern era poses challenges

that can only be roughly anticipated, thus requiring more attention to be placed on the 'how' rather than 'what' has to be taught.

In this report, the authors' intent is to reflect on these new requirements and how the whole teaching staff of a state institute has worked jointly to implement them. Some elements have been deemed pivotal for the success of the process, well beyond the final pedagogical products. To stay true to the motto 'the journey is more important than the destination', all the participants exploited the chance to work together, and a few pillars supported their joint efforts.

The research question, which moved and oriented the participants' efforts, was the learning components of Civic Education which could be embedded in the learning process across different school subjects and pupils' ages.

In this context, the whole teaching body of a group of state schools, spanning from nursery to middle school, has come together to pursue two sets of aims, one primary and one secondary.

First of all, the main goal was to achieve self-education through workshops and a hands-on approach. This was the preferred method as it leads to building knowledge by-doing in the key sections of planning and actions. As a starting point, for such a large group, a few preparatory tasks had to be performed in order to optimise the results. Even though the group is the sole author of the proceedings, it was useful to start with the assistance of experts in the area of investigation and, with their help, to establish some solid ground. The complexity of the task required that all the members were made aware of the shared meaning and usage of the specific jargon, which derived from the acknowledgement that not everybody has access to the same level of expertise in all the areas involved. Scopes and structures of learning units had to be negotiated and comprehended, as should also be done for the evaluation check-lists.

Secondly, the involvement of the entirety of the teaching body opens two levels of analysis: one horizontal (across disciplines and scientific areas) and one vertical (encompassing the students' whole learning experience). Surely, this wide spectrum can be considered an unwelcome complication. However, its necessity lies in the opportunity that each educator keeps a clear focus on the emerging problems regardless of their specialty or age-group. Cooperation and involvement are at the core of everybody's actions and the accountability for formative results must be shared to be owned. Further, keeping these two dimensions simultaneously activated enables the production of holistic learning units: the efficacy of teaching civic education cannot be achieved without a harmonic development of the stimuli around the learners, so that they can truly become mature agents as they are enabled to reach an adequate level of self-consciousness, responsibility and participatory actions. The verticality of the experience facilitates an uncommon collaboration among teachers that, more often than not, are kept separated. The merge of these peculiarities can create a circularity and a spiralling of knowledge across the age groups, adapting the offering to the needs and skills of each target group without losing the larger picture. Moreover, it contributes to the inclusion of other spheres of the pupils' identity, i.e., their emotional development, ethics and learning styles.

Finally, and it has already been partially covered, working together is never easy but it is always worthwhile. During this challenge, teachers had to be active team-players, facing their own struggles and sharing their skills with their colleagues. Active participation was

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required at every stage and the common goals supported the efforts to overcome difficulties by peer-tutoring and mutual understanding.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The process was initiated by the headteacher MSc Francesca Mazzocco, and the deputy headteacher MSc Patrizia Crimi. All the meetings were held in person and were introduced by two experts, namely Prof. Maria Renata Zanchin and Prof. Maria Antonia Moretti. Their role was to assist the headteacher and the teacher body in plenum by planning, coordinating and evaluating the formative path. They provided five-hour inductive prompts and common blueprints to be used during the group work. Furthermore, they provided feedback and were available to the group leaders for any queries which could arise along the way. The group leaders played a crucial role on two levels: a) within the groups, they assisted and finalised the creative process, and b) among the groups, they shared the outcomes with their colleagues so as to keep the process cohesive and consistent. The writing authors and all the colleagues (approx. 150 educators) from nursery, primary and middle schools of the same institute have dedicated 15 hours of extra time to the plenary sessions and the group work.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Five fundamental areas were identified: 1) play and rules, 2) environment, 3) digital identity, 4) emotions and stereotypes, and 5) inclusion. The first and the second areas included teachers from each grade while the remaining three areas had only primary and middle school teachers working together. All the subjects were also represented in the sub-groups. The chosen methodology can be roughly defined as action research: researchers and participants coincided and continuous modifications were made as the project progressed through collective, self-reflective inquiry. The effectiveness of the intervention has not been monitored yet, so the process is still at a theoretical level in regard to the results.

While the distinct groups worked independently, they still managed to follow the same guidelines and converged towards the same issues. The group-leaders helped their colleagues to meet the deadlines and to organise the final ideas in the most detailed and practical way possible. Apart from structuring the timing and the target students, the final products included a project-based task and the analysis of the competences that need to be developed. Moreover, the joint expertise allowed the groups to be creative in the foreseen methodologies and in the evaluation, adapting contents and teaching techniques to the students' cognitive and social abilities. Usually, such a process is too time-consuming to be performed routinely and consistently. This training provided an extended time and place for sharing such a rare debate at every stage.

PROCESS

The educators met five times after school. Each appointment was introduced by a short theoretical presentation and continued in smaller groups for the production and application of the plans. The group-leaders kept the work together by referring to the experts and the other group-leaders to solve every discrepancy or uncertainty.

The first meeting revolved around the novelty introduced by the 2020 law, the state demands, its core topics and all the requirements affecting Civic Education and its assessment. The second part of the meeting had the large group split in five groups, still comparatively large, with a mixed representation of curricular subjects and grades. Notably, SEN and Religious Study teachers were also involved and were appointed to one of the five groups. All the members familiarised themselves with the template provided by the experts, and there was the opportunity to clarify the goal: the production of a lesson plan which covered the given area in an interdisciplinary and vertical approach.

In the second meeting, the theoretical part covered the learning environment and a pedagogical approach by competences. A work plan was offered to keep the process steadily moving and monitored. The work-groups were smaller in size and homogeneous in age-groups. The goal was to generate different lesson plans that shared common boundaries across the age span but with a clear target group based on the teachers' expertise.

In the third meeting the experts discussed the different sections of the provided blank template for the successful organisation of the lesson plan that could allow for a more straightforward connection to the Civic Education curriculum previously elaborated by the school and already available. The sub-groups remained the same as in the previous meeting and could continue working on their ideas by filling in the template with more details and instructions.

The fourth meeting was dedicated to the assessment grids. After discussing several examples, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, the groups could proceed independently and finalise the plans. It was also necessary to prepare a presentation in order to share the final outcome with the rest of the assembly which was scheduled to happen during the last meeting.

The fifth meeting concluded the process and verified the final products. The different plans were presented to the groups within the same area to assess the congruence with the common ground that was agreed upon. On this occasion, the groups were asked to evaluate the training, to comment on the different stages (theoretical introductions, group-work, finalisation) and to offer critical elements for a cohesive analysis of its impact on their professional growth.

The profuse effort reached its culmination in the compilation of a set of twelve lesson plans ready to be used and still easily adaptable. In furtherance of exemplification, the following table illustrates the main elements of three lesson plans referring to the same area but adapted for different age-groups.

Table 1. Comparison of lesson plans in the area of the environment across grades and subjects.

LESSON PLANS COMPARISON			
Grade	**Nursery**	**Primary**	**Middle school**
Civic Education area	Environmental goods		
Title	Travelling through the space and the history of our territory		
Civic Education goals	• Respect towards oneself and others, social rules, caring for one's and the common goods; • Show kindness, responsible handling of the community; • Adopt sustainable behaviour and respect the environment		
European Competences	• Social and civic competences; • Cultural awareness and expression.		
Real task/ Final product	Make a poster in order to describe the park near the school.	Create a river environment lap book.	Organise a photo exhibition on the city of Rubano
Steps	- Observation of the environment (science) - Listening to stories and guided discussion (Italian) - Circle time (Italian) - Art project (art and science) - Group work (interdisciplinary) - Self-evaluation	- Listening and guided discussion (Italian) - Historical frame (history) - Access to a museum/observation (geography and science) - Lap book (art and technology) - Self-evaluation	- Listening and guided discussion (Italian) - Gathering of materials (media) - Survey (Maths and Social studies) - Exhibition planning and implementation (entrepreneurship) - Report to the mayor (Italian and Law) - Self-evaluation
Evaluation	Interaction rules Behavioural rules		
	Techniques and content	Techniques and content	Techniques and content

The above synopsis encompasses three different projects under the umbrella of the same general goals and objectives. The underlying competences and skills are shared throughout the school subjects and the school grades, even though they are clearly adjusted to meet the students' developmental stages. The evaluation is also tailored to account for the same aims with clear differences in depth and content specifics. For instance, in the above example, students' environment awareness is heavily dependent on their age: it might be egocentric and self-referential among the youngest; it could be seen as an external object of study with proper characteristics and care-requirements

when in primary school; it can offer a fruitful ground to reflect on active citizenship and the virtuous vs. vicious human-nature interactions among teenagers (Niyazova, 2021).

This structure allows for a spiralling movement, repeating and reinforcing the social competences at different points in time. This progression consistently increases student agency and self-awareness, thus sustaining both the cognitive and the behavioural growth of individual students and the class groups.

Apart from their longitudinal dimension, each plan unravels the contribution of different subjects, intertwined to reach a common goal. The increasing complexity of the tasks fosters various subject matters: some are present at any stage, while others start to play a role only later in the learning path. By virtue of this convergence, students can face a multifaceted approach to a meaningful issue by getting accustomed to a composite piece of knowledge and applying specialised methods of investigation. In addition, the evaluation can be truly shared among different teachers, reducing biases and broadening the observable outcomes (Eli et al., 2020).
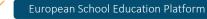
Moving further away from the final products, the involved teachers took part in a self-training exercise that helped to draw attention to the advantages and struggles of this style of collaboration. Among the main benefits, educators appreciated the opportunity to meet and work together, enriching each other's work and taking time to care for their own professionalism. This is a point of innovation that diverges from teachers' planning routines, and it has been mentioned by every group as a key factor that led to such a successful experience. On the other hand, working across different age-groups and subject specialism has also been troublesome and it left some frustrating remains in the overall analysis: minor misunderstandings have been recorded in each team and certain parts of the plans were only partially covered due to lack of agreement (Caena & Redecker, 2019).

Secondly, the discussion on evaluation played a central role and absorbed a great amount of cognitive energy. This is mostly due to some major changes that have been recently introduced in the evaluation system at the primary level and the impossibility to operate with common parameters among age-groups and school subjects. Nevertheless, the debate agreed on the necessity to consider the student as a whole and to record not only mere cognitive outcomes but any changes that might hinder deeper steering in values and attitudes: the effects of a Civic Education curriculum can be considered acquired and enacted only when internalised and personalised by the students.

The majority of participants recognised the inner value of this opportunity and expressed positive sentiments towards this way of training on the job. Certainly, on a practical side, some organisational changes could have been done differently or skipped altogether. However, it is likely that such a planning style will be further employed by considering smaller tasks or mixing groups differently.

DISCUSSION

To summarise the importance of this pedagogical experience, some positive insights should be highlighted, keeping the separation between the final products and the process. The first, and most evident, outcome is the creation of a complex set of lesson plans which lead students, from nursery to middle school, to explore five pillars of Civic Education consistently across all disciplines. The tasks have been designed to fit the actual student body characteristics of a specific geographical area. Still, the global assumptions and the

adherence to the international requirements for the discipline goals make them flexible and adaptable, so they can follow future changes both within the school staff and the surrounding community.

The second point worth noting is the experience (and the effort) to share the same task with the whole teaching body and the involvement of the headteacher and two experts. Surely, it was not a straightforward process and some tensions arose from the perceived burden of such a demanding assignment. However, the quality of the plans is directly connected to the quality of those who produced them, but it amplified the single expertise and resulted in an original artefact that, hopefully, will stand the test of time.

Besides, it seems apt to identify some limitations and further directions that could help to improve and expand on this topic. Primarily, the surrounding school system plays a role in shaping the needs and the desired outcome of such a process. Though some general principles should be applicable in different cultural contexts, the restrains that the Italian system put on the final products and the mindsets of the participants must not be overlooked. Furthermore, the amount of time and energy dedicated to this ambitious project could be rarely replicated and might even seem excessive when compared to the limited amount of 'visible' work that has been accomplished. The quotation marks are necessary to remind how the hidden proceedings are as important as the lesson plans; however, it is common knowledge that school standards expect more in exchange of such a costly investment of their own resources, therefore this form of training is generally considered too wasteful and not feasible. Thus, it is advisable to employ a similar approach in a slightly diluted fashion, with strategic changes in allotted time and group compositions, to continue this fruitful inner debate within the school staff focused on short-term and narrower targets.

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