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Policy brief

A multiscale Citizenship Education Policy for the European Education Area

by Daniela Martinelli and Francesco Pigozzo – 09 November 2024

THE CONTEXT

▷ Citizenship education is in principle a key subject in international, European and specifically EU policy initiatives.

▷ At the global level, UNESCO and OECD are the key players promoting cooperation among national school systems and empirical studies aimed at comparative assessment and evidence-based policy measures. Their research contribution is complemented by IEA's ICCS studies.

▷ The latest OECD publication on the subject is the Policy Perspective titled *Engaging young citizens: Civic education practices in the classroom and beyond* (2023), which focuses on specific practice areas that proved to strengthen democratic skills, values and knowledge of students: community involvement programmes, participatory budgeting, media literacy initiatives.

▷ Among many other initiatives, UNESCO's work on citizenship education, linked also to the 4th objective of the UN 2030 Agenda, is notably framed by:

  ✓ the *Futures of Education* theme prompted by the 2021 report *Reimagining our Futures together: A New Social Contract for Education*, to which is also devoted a special issue of the *Prospects* journal and two research papers series;
  ✓ the Educating for peace and the planet framework, where *Global citizenship and peace education* find its institutional place, recently enriched by a standard-setting recommendation adopted in 2023;

▷ The latest ICCS study cycle has been ICCS 2022, while ICCS 2027 is already on track.

▷ At the European level, the Council of Europe works on the subject in the 2010 adopted legal framework of the ***Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education***. In 2013, under the Andorra Chairmanship, the Committee of Ministers adopted a Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture aimed at providing a systematic approach curriculum designing in the field.

▷ A first action plan about education and training, in general, was launched in 1976 inside the European Communities. The birth of the European Union coincided with both the first mention of "education" in the Treaties and the juridical legitimation of a "European citizenship".

▷ The topic of citizenship education in particular, including but not limited to European citizenship, increasingly gained attention from EU institutions during the first quarter of the XXI Century, at least in terms of a "sustained declaratory commitment", as the 2022 report signed by MEP Domènec Ruiz Devesa and approved by the Parliament puts it. Comparative reports and studies by the Eurydice network actively contributed to collect evidences about the state of the matter in European education systems.

▷ Since the goal of achieving a European Education Area was launched, in 2017 at the Social Summit in Gothenburg, the widely recognised need for a European policy in citizenship education found a new, more concrete framework for discussions, proposals, experimentations and advancements. The Devesa report on the implementation of citizenship education actions, mentioned above, and the Equality and Values EEA working group ISSUE 2023 with its linked Policy brief 2024 on citizenship education are the last key documents where one can find both a detailed juridical and political context for our topic and a package of concrete policy proposals that remain valid for the 2024-2029 term.

▷ 29 November 2023 Council conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship invite Member States to "PROMOTE cooperation through the exchange of good practices among education and training institutions and all relevant educational actors at EU level on curriculum development, delivery and assessment. CONSIDER EXPLORING cooperation on common content and approaches."

OUR CONTRIBUTION

The Research Centre on European Multiscale Citizenship Education, Culture and Agency CITOYEN·NE·S, founded in 2021 at eCampus University on the initiative of Francesco Pigozzo and Daniela Martinelli, is an academic subject that stems from the experiences and results of a twenty years old and still ongoing research and action about "civic agency" in the pedagogical, artistic and social fields. Also known as *Gli Spaesati*, the founders had been developing an original approach to citizenship education within the framework of numerous European projects involving a vast number of academic, institutional and school partners in different EU member states since 2005.

The foundation of the Research Centre is directly linked to the aim of widening the scope and upscaling the impact of this intense work of theoretical study and practical experimentation around a paradigm-shifting curriculum for citizenship education that can both fit with critical pedagogy perspectives and with the needs of the emerging European Education Area. The Jean Monnet Teacher Training project *Multiscale EU*, co-funded by the European Union (2022-2025), has provided a strong impetus for the development and experimentation of this original 'critical and multiscale' approach with teachers, students and schools of all levels and from various European countries.

This contribution to political reflection in the educational field on a European scale is the natural outcome of our dedicated commitment, whose concrete realizations and fronts of action are numerous: training courses tailored to specific needs of thousands of teachers, consultancy and co-designing of Civic Education *curricula* for single schools educational offers, experimentation and documentation of original didactic activities consistent with our curriculum and reaching out to tens of thousands of students, specific pedagogical experimentations also in homeschooling and non-formal *outdoor* contexts (whose recent growth in many countries needs to be taken into account by school systems), university teaching on the subject for Bachelor and Master degree courses (with an open-access handbook for Italian students and prospective teachers) and for other postgraduate qualification courses dedicated to in-service teachers, scientific publications both in journals and monographic volumes. Finally, Gli Spaesati are also coordinators of a multilingual online platform offering free resources for updating and supporting the activities of teachers of all disciplines in synergy with Citizenship Education (Virtual Learning Environment on Europeans' Unity – available in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Croatian as of today).

We therefore believe that the fruits of our work can make a timely and relevant contribution to the advancement of European cooperation in the field of citizenship education in particular.

With this brief publication, we want to stress the importance for policy-makers in the European Education Area to make a step forward in the path toward a truly European citizenship education framework **shifting the policy debate and actions from the education to European citizenship to a European education for citizenship.**

Tacking stock of both the legal and political framework recalled above and of our twenty-years-old action research in the field, we want to particularly highlight and relaunch the **need for a demonstrative European curriculum for citizenship education**. We developed and tested an upscalable one that is going to be published in a Springer book in 2025. Our key take-home messages on this topic, lest it becomes an empty slogan, are summarized in the following pages.

A DEMONSTRATIVE CURRICULUM FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE EEA SHOULD IMPLY:

A THOROUGH REFLECTION AND DEBATE ON ITS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

• Declaring principles and good values is not enough, but even institutionalized critical thinking still lacks something. We identified two main conceptual gaps in both the public debate and the legal and scientific literature about citizenship education.

• Our public debate and school systems systematically forget to ground (historical and contemporary) objectives, principles, rights and duties, values and existing norms on *problems, issues, conflicts, power struggles and contradictions.*

• They also ignore the need to adopt the non-hierarchical notion of *interdependent scales* in order to analyse and frame civic agency, and to fully grasp and intellectually master its inherent complexity.

A CONSISTENT AND PROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING OBJECTIVES ALL ALONG SCHOOL CYCLES

• Learning objectives must obviously include both knowledge acquisitions and ability improvements. Specific attitudes should on the contrary be excluded from curriculum design, while working on the development of self-reflectiveness about the whole spectrum of *attitudes* in interpersonal relations, their context-dependent individual costs and benefits, pros and cons.

• Citizenship education learning objectives must help teachers of all fields to explicitly notice and enhance consistencies and create synergies with their own subject's objectives.

• Model activity outlines should consistently complement the curriculum in order to provide concrete didactic examples that help fostering its actual experimentation. They must be "outlines", i.e. designed to stimulate local adaptations by teachers. Their conception must follow curriculum progression, from the pre-primary to the upper secondary level.

A SERIOUS REQUEST TO PUT INTO QUESTION AND REVISE ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION RATIONALE AND METHODS

- Such a task should interest school systems at all levels: from individual teachers to school communities, from the pre-primary to higher education institutions

- It's key to stop taking for granted that pupils and students' assessment is a technical issue with no impact on learning objectives themselves: the more ambitious goals of a democratic citizenship education are most probably in full contradiction with individual and selective assessment methods and approaches. Even more, they can be in contradiction with the very idea of an "objective" or "external" assessment process...

- Our school systems need to discuss, develop, experiment and share assessment practices and methods aimed at measuring learning objectives achievement in terms of self-imposed and not just externally imposed, class-group and not mainly individual goals, in terms of self-reflective and reality-congruent rather than authoritarian and aprioristic procedures, in terms of formative feedback rather than summative grading.

- This does not entail at all that public authorities and researchers in the field would not have the means and ways to keep assessing citizenship education achievements!

OPENING THE DEBATE ON STRUCTURAL FLAWS THAT AVOID SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS TO REALLY ACHIEVE CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION GOALS AND ON CONSISTENT REFORMS. SOME KEY ISSUES:

- Do job contracts for teachers at all school levels include a significant amount of paid hours that must be devoted to peer-to-peer dialogue and cooperative curriculum development on transversal learning objectives inside school teams?

- Are school management practices and hierarchical structures consistently geared toward a democratic participatory paradigm whose actual example reinforces instead of contradicting the very goals of the citizenship education curriculum declared?

- The European Union should promote and support initiatives by higher education institutions to develop a truly European teacher training offer on citizenship education. Teacher training on the subject should become a compulsory requirement to access any teaching position on any subject at any school levels in any EU country.

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