CIVIC EDUCATION AS A «LIVED» EXPERIENCE OF ACTIVE AND INTERCULTURAL CITIZENSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND EXTRA-SCHOOL. INSIGHTS FROM A RESEARCH EXPERIENCE WITH YOUTH FROM AN ITALIAN MULTICULTURAL NEIGHBORHOOD

LA EDUCACIÓN CÍVICA COMO EXPERIENCIA «VIVIDA» DE CIUDADANÍA ACTIVA E INTERCULTURAL ENTRE LO ESCOLAR Y LO EXTRAESCOLAR. APORTACIONES DE UNA EXPERIENCIA DE INVESTIGACIÓN CON JÓVENES DE UN BARRIO MULTICULTURAL ITALIANO

Alessandra Mussi[1] and Anna Chinazzi[2]

[1] *Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca {UNIMIB}, Italy*
alessandra.mussi@unimib.it
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8280-8630

[2] *Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca {UNIMIB}, Italy*
a.chinazzi@campus.unimib.it
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7670-6657

ABSTRACT: **Introduction:** In the context of global and multicultural societies, civic education could reveal its formative potential if declined in a wider project of intercultural and transformative citizenship education inside and outside school. The theoretical discussion will be combined with insights from an ongoing empirical study on active citizenship education, framed within an interdisciplinary and inter-agency project («Abitare Insieme»), carried out in a multicultural and peripheral area in Northern Italy. **Method:** 107 young people (secondary school and adult students) were involved as participants in a training–research project in which we experimented with innovative methodologies and approaches for promoting active citizenship in workshop settings. Data were generated through the qualitative observation of students' participation in the workshops and analyzed with the aid of a Computer–assisted qualitative data analysis software. **Results:** Preliminary insights from this ongoing research project corroborate the idea that fostering active citizenship requires empowering pedagogies. Suggestions in this direction come from the empirical study, characterized by the

administration of a questionnaire as a tool to give voice to students, a talent-mapping activity as a way to make their resources and competences visible and the promotion of connections between curricular and extra–curricular activities related to civic education. **Conclusion and discussions:** The study, grounded on theoretical reflections on civic engagement in our contemporary societies, has empirically supported the necessity to frame civic education in an intercultural, empowering, and active perspective, providing helpful guidance to teachers, educators, and policymakers.

KEYWORDS: active citizenship education; interculturality; multiculturality; young people.

RESUMEN: **Introducción:** En el contexto de las sociedades globales y multiculturales, la educación cívica podría revelar su potencial formativo si se declina en un proyecto más amplio de educación ciudadana intercultural y transformadora, dentro y fuera de la escuela. La discusión teórica se combinará con reflexiones a partir de un estudio empírico todavía en curso sobre el tema de la educación ciudadana activa, enmarcado en un proyecto interdisciplinario e interinstitucional («Abitare Insieme»), que se está llevando a cabo en una zona multicultural y periférica del norte de Italia. **Método:** 107 jóvenes (estudiantes de secundaria y adultos) participaron en un proyecto de formación–investigación en el que experimentamos en talleres educativos con estrategias y enfoques innovadores para promover la ciudadanía activa. Los datos fueron generados mediante la observación cualitativa de la participación de los estudiantes en los talleres y se analizaron con la ayuda de un programa de análisis de datos cualitativos asistido por ordenador. **Resultados:** Aportaciones preliminares de este proyecto de investigación en curso corroboran la idea de que la promoción de la ciudadanía activa requiere pedagogías empoderadoras. Las sugerencias en esta dirección provienen del estudio empírico, caracterizado por la administración de un cuestionario como herramienta para dar voz a los estudiantes, una actividad de mapeo de talentos para dar visibilidad a sus recursos y competencias y la promoción de conexiones entre actividades curriculares y extracurriculares relacionadas con la educación cívica. **Conclusión y discusiones:** El estudio, basado en reflexiones teóricas con respecto al tema del compromiso cívico en nuestras sociedades contemporáneas, ha apoyado empíricamente la necesidad de enmarcar la educación cívica en una perspectiva intercultural, empoderadora y activa, proporcionando una orientación útil a profesores, educadores y responsables políticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: educación ciudadana activa; interculturalidad; multiculturalidad; jóvenes.

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

Civic and citizenship education is a long-standing objective in many democratic societies. It has become a «hot issue in educational, social, and political discourse» (Keser, Akar

1. The article is the results of a joint and collaborative work among the authors. Specifically, Anna Chinazzi wrote the introduction and conclusions, Alessandra Mussi the methodology and results.

& Yildrim, 2011, p. 809) meanwhile civic and political disengagement of young people has given rise to international concern. Policymakers have tried to address this silent crisis – described in terms of «political apathy» and «depreciation of active citizenship» (Missira, 2019, p. 56) – through the renewal of old practices and the implementation of new citizenship education initiatives, both in the school and extra-school educational contexts.

The literature highlights the necessity to problematize the so–called «civic deficit» in order not to shadow the potential structural, cultural, and social constraints for youth's participation because «citizenship is inevitably and necessarily bound up with the problem of the unequal distribution of resources in society» (Turner, 1993, pp. 2-3). A civic education agenda has to address the sense of powerlessness, disempowerment and marginalization young people often experience, especially when they come from low-income and migrant families (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Kersh *et al*., 2021). Moreover, it has to be considered that, before engaging in any active citizenship activity, migrants have to engage in complex processes of sense-making and redefinition of their identity (Marasso, 2012).

Another perspective can help us get a more nuanced understanding of this complex issue: besides the dominant narrative of the youth civic crisis, some authors have warned against the adult–centric perspective that may lead to assessing civic engagement in light of traditional practices, ignoring that «the varied nature of, and possibilities for, political engagement» (Peterson & Bentley, 2016, p. 8). In this range of possibilities, digital technologies stand out for their affordances (Kahne *et al*., 2016; Mirra & Garcia, 2017): the Internet can be read as a political space for participation, acting as an information source, communication medium and virtual public space for users to share and discuss ideas (Vromen, 2008). Studies bear witness to «the growth of a 'new civic culture' […] linked to more informal social movement groups rather than to more formal conventional political parties and groupings» (Kerr, 2008, p. 170).

In the Italian context, an example of the renewed interest in citizenship education can be found in the recent promulgation of Law 20 August 2019 No. 92 – approved by the Italian Parliament – establishing the introduction of civic education as a compulsory curriculum subject in schools of all levels. The assumption is that civic education «contributes to educating responsible and active citizens and to promote full and aware participation in the civic, cultural and social life of the community, and the respect of the rules, rights and duties» (art. 1, law 92/2019, translated by the authors). The new discipline has a threefold focus on the Italian Constitution, sustainable development, and digital citizenship. Some relevance is also acknowledged to the extra-school sphere related to students' families, local non-profit organizations, and the local institutions. Civic education is meant to be taught as a formally separate subject, but adopting a transversal approach for which teachers are expected to share responsibility. The educational reform has been criticized for its several ambiguities and organizational shortcomings (Losito, 2021). On the other side, thanks to the high degree of educational and organizational autonomy granted to schools and teachers in Italy, this new discipline can be seen as an opportunity for educational innovation inasmuch schools can design their curriculum and educational activities to respond effectively to the needs of their stakeholders (Giannelli, 2021).

The ongoing research project discussed in this article is based on three main theoretically and empirically informed assumptions. First – while acknowledging the importance of school

as an educational and socialization agent – citizenship education is not seen only as a curriculum subject. We believe that partnerships aimed at bridging curricular and extracurricular activities should be encouraged.

Secondly, intercultural and civic education should be considered intertwined by an «indivisible link» (Nestian Sandu, 2015). Cultural diversity is a structural characteristic of our contemporary society and thus being a citizen entails dealing constantly with pluralism. The exponential increase in the trans-national mobility of people has challenged «many traditional nation-state-focused assumptions […] about state membership, belonging and participation» (Kalekin-Fishman & Pitkänen, 2007, p. VII): citizenship education is called to be redefined and meet the important challenge of balancing unity and diversity (Banks, 2004). Educating in a plural society calls for a reflexive attitude towards our own underlying cultural assumptions, beliefs and self-understandings (Monti, 2017). This attitude can lead practitioners to consider other ways in which civic skills can show themselves and thus provide a breeding ground for a strength-based approach to citizenship education.

Last but not least, we refer to citizenship not as a mere juridical and political status but as a multi-layered concept that «takes on new meanings related to cultural and ethical dimensions» (Massetti, 2019, p. 75), reflecting our multi-layered belonging and lived experience. In other words, we endorse a notion of citizenship that is «not bound to membership in a specific kind of institutional, political entity. Rather, it emerges from the participation» (Monti, 2017, p. 141). Our firm belief is that «a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience» (Dewey, 1930, p. 101). Hence, we value active citizenship, a concept that stresses the role of praxis and participation.

The context of the study discussed in this article is a multicultural area in Northern Italy, of the municipality of Pioltello in the province of Milan. More specifically, the study was conducted in two schools located in the Satellite district, Pioltello's most heterogeneous neighborhood, with people of about 70 different ethnic groups. The inter-agency project «Abitare Insieme»[2] (Italian for «Living Together») aims at strengthening, in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, the system of public services of Pioltello related to three prioritized areas: housing, work and active citizenship. Concerning the latter, we are involved in a training-research project within which we have experimented with methods for promoting active citizenship education while activating processes of capacitation for the local youth workers.

Consistently with the declared assumptions, the purpose of the project is to promote transformative learning processes by empowering students and by bridging the gap between

classroom-based civic learning and experiences of «lived citizenship» (Kallio *et al.*, 2020) that take place outside the classroom.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research experience discussed in this article is framed within a broader research project, a mixed methods training-research, a declination of the action-research approach (Bove, 2009; Nigris, 1998; Wells, 2001). This research project is carried out by the research unit of the University of Milano-Bicocca, which is responsible for the WP1 Task 5 – Creating qualitative and quantitative tools and methods for analyzing the community housing-needs (WP2.1) and the dynamics of active citizenship (WP4.1) (cf. Bove & Mussi, 2021) and Task 8 – Co-designing and supervising in progress the three micro-experiments in collaboration with the project-partners responsible for each WP (with specific regard to the micro-experiment in the field of Active Citizenship)[3].

Local youth workers[4] were actively involved in co-designing and conducting citizenship education workshops in local schools. Sixteen two-hour long meetings with students were organized between February and March 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, different arrangements were adopted: completely online, completely in presence or mixed (students in presence and the workshop facilitators online). The expected outcomes of this research project are twofold: the capacitation of the practitioners (involved as co-researchers) and the empowerment of the young citizens regardless of their cultural background. In this paper we are focusing on the latter. In particular, we will discuss insights regarding the impact of the educational methodologies on the students involved as participants.

2.2. PARTICIPANTS

107 people were involved in the workshops. This sample consisted of 67 secondary school students (aged 17-18) and 40 students from a CPIA, provincial center for adult education (aged 16-38). They belong to eight different classes and two different schools, located in the Satellite district.

2.3. Data-collection

Data were generated through qualitative observations of students' interactions during the workshops. For each class, two workshops were co-conducted by a trained fieldworker (one of the members of the academic research team) and two youth workers. During those meetings, several activities were conducted, including the administration of a questionnaire composed of open and closed questions. Data emerged from the survey itself is not the object of this analysis, but their attitudes and spontaneous discussions prompted by the questionnaire items are.

2.4. Data-analysis

Text data produced during the observations, i.e., direct quotations and field notes, were analyzed with the aid of a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo) through a bottom-up coding process (Saldaña, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3. RESULTS

During the first meeting with every class involved in the research project, students were guided to fill a questionnaire about their representations and experiences concerning their relationship with the three dimensions of housing, work and active citizenship. Moreover, they were invited to reflect on their personal resources by building a personal talent map (see Figure 1).

Thereafter, the youth workers developed a collective talents map for each class to be shared and discussed in the second meeting. The talents map served as a prompt for students to elicit a brainstorming on how their talents could have been deployed for the sake of their neighborhood. Several recurrent talents-areas were at the base of the final proposal made by the youth workers to the workshop-participants of voluntarily taking part in groups in charge of developing and carrying out active citizenship initiatives outside school in the following months.

These experiences in schools have elicited some insights on the possible methodologies and approaches to active citizenship education.

The questionnaire was not just a useful instrument to collect data on citizens' representations, resources and needs, but also a potential prompt for bottom-up discussions among students. To actually serve the purpose of empowering the participants by enabling reflexivity and agency, we did not only combine the close-ended questions with open-ended questions, but we also paid attention to the ways it would have been administered. In order to make the questionnaire an opportunity to collectively reflect on the meanings and practices of active citizenship, we decided to guide the students throughout the compilation and to administer it to all classmates simultaneously. We were present (online or face-to-face) while the students were filling the survey, encouraging them to share any emerging reflection or doubt with all the group. Also, we focused on adopting an attitude characterized by a maieutic approach and non-directivity (Rogers, 1959): the answers were not given but stimulated through exchange

and dialogue among students. Conceived as a method in a participatory research project as in this case, the questionnaire can be seen as a pedagogical and emancipatory tool itself: students were given a voice by asking them to self-report on topics regarding their experiences in the neighborhood, their aspirations and their conception of active citizenship.

Figura 1. Talent map example

Source: Example elaborated by the youth workers involved in the project and based on the model proposed by Silvia Bona.

Feeling to have the possibility to express yourself – and doing it – is an important component of active citizenship (Arnstein, 1969; Nigris & Balconi, 2020; Rocca, 2010). This in particular for young people with a migrant background, who tend to be less aware of the possibilities to share their point of view or even do not feel entitled to do it – especially in a political context such as the Italian one where they are not legally recognized as citizens (Santerini, 2017). Involving them in the survey and legitimizing their point of view was a first experience of education to active citizenship. «At last, someone asked us foreigners what we think!» a CPIA student commented after the workshop.

The activity of talent mapping was useful in order to make visible some of the resources and competences owned by the students that, especially in the case of migrant-background students, often remain invisible to the eyes of teachers, schoolmates and students themselves. For instance, we noticed that proficiency in other languages was not considered as a talent worth putting on the map by many students. Far from dismissing it as a simple oversight, we believe it is emblematic of the condition of many students: the desire for integration may sometimes lead to the depreciation or even to the desire to give up one's mother tongue (Favaro, 2013). As the National Observatory for the Integration of Foreign Students and

Intercultural Education has pointed out, for a long time the school integration of children and young people from migrant backgrounds has been mainly based on a compensatory approach, focusing on their gaps and recognizing very little of their knowledge and skills, for example, in the mother tongue. On the contrary, the document suggested embracing a new perspective able to value the language diversity and recognize that the multiculturality of the classrooms is an enriching opportunity for everyone (MIUR, ministerial circular No. 5535 of 2015). Intercultural and citizenship education is in the front line, with the delicate role of taking advantage of this opportunity, but many Italian teachers might still consider plurilingualism more as a hindrance rather than an asset in the formal education of students (Sordella, 2015).

A final remark is related to how the aim of bridging school and extra-school activities was pursued. The workshops – facilitated by youth workers and academic researchers – took place in the school setting during school time and in the presence of one or two teachers. The activities proposed in the workshops allowed students to talk about their interests, passions, and values. At the end of a workshop, one of the teachers told us she was grateful because she had the chance to see her students in a new light and discover what interests they cultivate beyond the school walls. In addition, the students had the chance to start thinking about potential ways to be actively involved in the community, both in the school and extra-school contexts, overcoming the artificial separation of these two important spheres of students' life. It is interesting to notice how the participants, who are now taking part in the initiatives outside school and experimenting with «lived citizenship» (Kallio *et al*., 2020) in the territory, are inviting the schools to be involved inside them.

By observing and reflecting on the experience of the workshops, we have identified some potential constraints. One main constraint to participation and full comprehension of the activities was the lack of language skills among some non-Italian students. In order to overcome this limit, we had translated the questionnaire into several languages (that were not enough to cover all the language needs). In any case, we must always be aware of the special attention to be paid to the instructional communication strategies in multicultural classrooms and of the necessity for the development of education practitioners' intercultural and metacultural competence.

Another obstacle to participation originated from the impossibility of a face-to-face meeting (due to the COVID-19 measures). The computer-mediated communication made it more difficult for the workshop facilitators to pick up the nonverbal cues and anticipate linguistic or conceptual doubts. In addition, it may also have slightly inhibited the dialogue among students. Nevertheless, providing young people with spaces to express themselves and connect in a wider social dimension, even if limited by these obstacles, was crucial in this socio-historical context, giving the long period of social isolation because of the pandemic.

4. CONCLUSIONS

When it comes to citizenship education, it is important to consider that «the conceptualization of what it means to be a citizen, what it means to be engaged in a public sphere and

political life and how this creates one's identity as an active participant in a society differs among various social groups» (Petrovičová *et al*., 2012, pp. 335-336).

In light of this consideration, our research project has tried to meet the challenge of promoting active citizenship education in a multicultural neighborhood by framing its mission in a wider project of intercultural and transformative education. A strength-based approach was adopted: we did not only explore students' needs but also acknowledged their personal and collective resources. The purpose was to give the youth a voice and help them develop awareness of their potential to determine the(ir) future.

The experience of the school workshops has elicited insights on the beneficial aspects of the presented approach to citizenship education, but also its possible limitations. All things considered, the preliminary insight from this ongoing research project corroborates the idea that «fostering active citizenship requires empowering pedagogies» (Akar, 2020, p. 520).

It may be concluded that the study, grounded on theoretical reflections on civic engagement in our contemporary societies, has empirically supported the necessity to frame civic education in an intercultural, empowering, and active perspective.

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