

# **CIVIC AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN A CHANGING WORLD. THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS IN A DIGITAL ERA**

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Quoting the Italian jurist Piero Calamandrei, we can rightly say that school is a *constitutional body*. A place where, at least in our expectations, it is possible to remove obstacles, to fight inequalities and to assign value to individual differences. In sum, a school open to all and for all. As always, it is quite difficult to translate in practice general principles, as constraints and lack of resources can play an important role in downgrading the prospects. There is undoubtedly a gap between what school can rightly promote and what is actually conveyed, particularly when it comes to civic and citizenship education.

In the last decades, there has been a widely shared concern on the possibility of countries to foster the democratic citizenship development of their citizens, present and future. Print (2007) argued that “established democracies face a conundrum that challenges their very legitimacy”. On the one hand, major Western democracies agree on the importance of fostering engagement and political participation, on the other hand, in the same democracies a significant decreasing of citizens’ participation can be retrieved.

To this already complex picture, another dimension must be added, the one descending from the rapidly evolving digital world, that offers its own specific ways to be student and citizen. At least three possible ways to define digital citizenship can be retrieved in recent scientific literature (Cortesi et al. 2020):

- a normative perspective, that focuses on the need for young generations to correctly use digital technologies, following their values and norms

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- an economic and political perspective, that focuses on the skills needed to use technologies for personal economic gain, i.e. in the workplace
- a social and political perspective, that focuses on how young people tend to engage with civics and politics in different ways with respect to previous generations.

More in details, the framework for Digital Citizenship Education promoted by the Council of Europe envisages ten Key Domains<sup>1</sup> grouped in three areas:

- Being online (Access and inclusion, learning & creativity, media and information literacy)
- Wellbeing online (Ethics and empathy, Health and wellbeing, ePresence and communications)
- Rights online (active participation, rights and responsibilities, privacy and security, consumer awareness).

Still, some complicating elements remain to be clarified. Given the pervasive presence of digital devices, the specification *digital* citizenship it is controversial, sometimes made in order to differentiate it as a form of CCE of diminished importance. However, there is the questionable idea that young people could actually perceive this difference when referred to themselves, being immersed in technology in almost every aspect of their life.

Several studies at national level have been carried out to shed light on these topics. In this essay I will try to offer an overview of the results of the IEA-ICCS 2016 large scale assessment study (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study), carried in 21 countries and 3 national entities. Results focus on planned and implemented learning opportunities to prepare students as active and informed citizens along with contextual factors assumed to be related to educational outcomes (Schulz et al. 2016; 2017).

In order to grab the essence of these kind of studies, we need to make a step back and to get to their origins. Early International Large Scale Assessment (ILSA) studies were promoted, among the others, by Benjamin S. Bloom, a well-known American educational psychologist that proposed the idea that educational systems could be seen as giant “experimental laboratories”, in which different treatments were applied in terms of national curricula, teaching methods, and classroom practice. Comparing these three levels across countries, namely the intended curriculum, the implemented and the attained one, could provide information on the *opportunity to learn* that students had in each national context. After the first attempts on Mathematics, the IEA Six Subjects Study (1967-72) included also an in-depth study on Civic Education.

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<sup>1</sup> For further reference: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/digital-citizenship-education/home> (03/04/2021).

From the Seventies up to now four studies on CCE have been completed and one of them, ICCS 2022, is currently in its field trial phase.

The focus of these studies has been differently detailed across cycles assuming various meanings according to the relevant issues debated. In ICCS 2016, *civic education* refers to “the principles, mechanisms, and processes of decision-making, participation, governance, and legislative control” (Schulz et al. 2016). that take place in any community that shares connections at a broader level than the family. The definition is more oriented toward knowledge, whereas the notion of citizenship is dispositional and it includes attitudes, values, and beliefs linked to the legal status of being a citizen of a nation state, the individual participation, the citizenship identity or sense of belonging to different levels of community, from local to national or to supranational. The two levels are strictly connected, as without civic knowledge and a disposition to engage, it is can be challenging to practice citizenship.

The development of an ILSA is a lengthy process that requires several specializations. The first step is the development or the review of an assessment framework (Schultz et al. 2016), which includes proposed new areas, and / or changes to existing constructs according to the analysis of literature and previous studies. This theoretical activity is followed by a qualitative research activity that includes carrying out few focus groups and interviews in schools with teachers, students and principals that accompanies the construction of the first version of the survey instruments. The set of questionnaires is then proposed to an external expert committee and to national survey coordinators for feedback. On this feedback, survey instruments are reviewed and further informal try outs are carried out in some local contexts. Once refined, the field trial instruments are translated in the different languages of the participating countries. A complex translation verification process is put in place, with the use of counter-translations from the English version to the national language/s version/s and then back to English, in order to guarantee the maximum adherence to the original instrument and to allow comparison. The Field trial phase lasts about a year and it exactly reproduces what will be the Main study phase, anticipating and solving every possible inconvenience, from sampling to data entry (in case of paper and pencil administration) and to the data cleaning procedures. On the basis of the data collected a set of statistical analyses are carried out to verify the robustness of the scales, their validity and reliability with respect to the constructs targeted by the study. Results are presented both to the external experts’ committee and to national coordinators, in order to agree on revisions to survey instruments for the Main study. Similarly, also the main study lasts about a year. It is carried out on a different sample from the field trial and it is followed by the same analysis and review procedures.

Last completed ICCS cycle took place in 2016. The study was carried out by the Australian Council for Educational Research, IEA Data Processing Center in Germany and Roma Tre University.

Domains considered in the study were, other than Student's civic knowledge, also students' attitudes and engagement, and contextual data related to classroom, school, family and community.

The study involved over 94,000 13-14 years old students, and 37,000 teachers that were surveyed using different instruments. I had the privilege to work to the development of the questionnaire addressed to teachers and school principals. Several educational systems in bold participated both in ICCS 2009 and in 2016.

Other than the implementation of CCE at school, ICCS casts a light on students' participation in different contexts, both school and community and if and to what extent the school contexts relate to students' outcomes, in terms of knowledge, attitudes and involvement.

All over the participating countries, 35% of students is on the highest level of the civic knowledge scale. A student reaching the top level is for instance able to justify the separation of powers, whereas at level B he is able to generalize the economic risk deriving from globalization, and so on, until the level D where simply students can recognize that all people are equal before the law or similar kind of knowledge (Schulz et al. 2017).

Top performing countries, well above the international average score, are Denmark, Chinese Taipei Sweden and Finland. But this is probably the less interesting information to consider. This especially because variation of civic knowledge can be found both within and across countries, and it is possible also to have a trend in levels for those countries that participated both in 2009 and in 2016 study. There was a general increase in civic knowledge across countries, even if not for all the countries. For some of them, and Italy is an example, there was no statistically significant difference between the two cycles.

In addition, ICCS offers also a repertoire of results concerning students' habits at home, with peers and families. For instance, watching news programs on TV is a less relevant habit, as in 11 of the 18 countries that participated in both ICCS cycles, and the same applies, more evidently to reading articles in newspapers (16 countries). On the other hand, talking to parents about what is happening in other countries has happened more frequently since 2009 in 12 countries.

With reference to the use of resources from the Internet, there is probably a lower percentage than expected (31%) and a low direct involvement in political engagement through social media, i.e. posting a comment or image on political and social issues on the Internet or social media (9%) or commenting

on or sharing another person's post regarding political and social issues (10%). However, the engagement was higher for those who generally expressed interest in civic issues in all countries.

With respect to future young voters, ICCS provides us with a comforting picture: students expect to vote in local and in national elections (86%) and more importantly to get information about candidates before voting in an election (81%) in a quite large percentage.

In this general picture, it could be worthy to understand the role that teachers can have in developing CCE. One predictor, consistent across cycles, is the construct of the "open classroom climate" (Torney-Purta et al. 2001), which is composed by classroom management factors, and the possibility for example for students to freely express their opinion during classes. This of course has a lot to do with how classes are run, on how the topics and controversial issues are presented and if they are actually presented in their complexity and different possible perspectives on to students.

Among major civic knowledge predictors, there is also the socio-economic background of students. This element is confirmed unfortunately by almost all ILSA, irrespectively of their subject area. However, a distinctive feature of CCE is the possibility of enhancing its development through open climate for discussion of political and social issues. The role of female students should also be taken into account, as they usually tend to have higher levels both of civic knowledge and civic engagement.

These kind of studies are rich in information and it is not possible to present them all here. Nonetheless, there are some implications for educational policies that should be considered. Even though different approaches in delivering CCE at school are present, a relatively high degree of consensus among teachers and school principals that the most important aims of civic and citizenship education concern the promotion of students' knowledge of citizens' rights and responsibilities and development of critical thinking. Moreover, cross-nationally, about half of the teachers saw promoting respect for and safeguarding of the environment as a key objective of this learning area.

Trends shows higher levels of student engagement in discussion about political and social issues, and this also applies to confidence in civic participation. But it is worth noticing that civic engagement is negatively associated with civic knowledge and expectation of active political participation, and this could be an area for further investigation.

Future prospects are generated both from the use and consideration of data collected. All results and databases produced by the study are freely available for researchers. The Joint Management Committee of the study, together with National Research Coordinators is currently working on ICCS 2022 field

trial. Undoubtedly, these data can contribute to shape the future of our educational systems and ultimately of our societies.

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