

Working with Schools and the Case of Ecological Citizenship

Recently, international organizations and national governments alike have advocated, and in some cases adopted, the integration of school curricula with education for sustainable development (ESD). UNESCO included ESD in Target 4.7 of the Education Goal of the Sustainable Development Goals:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals)

According to the Guide for Teachers developed by UNESCO, the content of education programmes in schools should include climate change, biodiversity, disaster risk reduction, sustainable consumption and production, and the resilience of ecosystems, among others (UNESCO, 2016). The purpose of adopting such an educational agenda globally is to facilitate societal transformation and social change. Students, teachers, schools and local communities

are agents of public engagement with climate change to motivate young people and learners of all ages, backgrounds and contexts to adopt sustainable lifestyles. The purpose of ESD is also to equip learners with the skills for ‘green jobs’.

Both international organizations with an education mission and national governments worldwide have adopted or are in the process of designing new regulatory tools for education policy in this domain (House of Commons, 2019). The British Parliament is discussing a bill to introduce environmental education in schools. The bill was initiated in the House of Lords in 2021 and is now being discussed.

In 2019, the Italian Parliament passed a law that introduced environmental education in all schools alongside civic education. In this chapter, I will examine this case to illustrate the potential for societal change and some of the critical issues that emerged in Italy during the implementation. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of such educational initiatives on climate change as they are intended to produce positive impacts in the long term.

On the one hand, in regard to changing human behaviour, which is an important element of climate change policies, market-based tools have been widely used. Several scholars now agree, however, that these are not always sufficient and that it may be more helpful to focus on policies and processes that engage citizens in a deliberative mode. For an unprecedented challenge such as the one we are facing, societal change that also starts at the grassroots level is needed. On the other hand, the utilitarian assumption whereby human beings are regarded as selfish and rational maximizers is outdated, as demonstrated by several studies that show how individual choices can follow criteria of social justice that may even harm self-interest (Aumann, 1997). Policies that promote virtuous environmental behaviours through fiscal incentives and monetary disincentives such as taxes and sanctions for undesirable behaviours show immediate and short-term effectiveness, which, according to Dobson (2007), in most cases spontaneously and instantaneously decrease to the elimination of the initial benefits. For this reason, legislators have initiated environmental education campaigns aimed at internalizing and changing attitudes in parallel with the tools already mentioned.

This chapter analyses ESD policies established at the national level in Italy and their implementation in selected schools. The proposition is that despite the regulatory tools introduced by law,

the engagement practices at the local level and in schools are not entirely aligned. First, I will map the policies aimed at teaching environmental citizenship education, highlighting their potential strengths and weaknesses. Then, this chapter summarizes the key lessons learned from the analysis of qualitative interviews conducted with a small sample of compulsory school teachers in Italy. The overall purpose of this chapter is to raise concerns about the potential gap between the central government's ambitions presented in hard regulatory tools of governance and what happens on the ground with actors who are expected to engage with climate change, often with limited resources, unclear coordination mechanisms and a lack of training. This is to say that 'magic concepts', such as public engagement, need to be filtered down to the level of professionals, students and their families.

Education for sustainable development in Italy

Until 2019, Italian schools adopted environmental education only on a voluntary basis while awaiting a new national policy framework. The Ministerial Circular Eighty-six of 27 October 2010 issued by the Ministry of Education stated the need to teach the course *Citizenship and Constitution* (introduced by law 169/2008) in an integrated way and underlined the importance of the topics of environmental awareness and ESD. Special regard was given to the development of social and civic skills aimed at energy saving and the protection of artistic, cultural and environmental heritage (Law 169, 2008; [Italian Ministry of Education, 2010](#)).

To raise awareness of environmental education, the Department of Education in Italy in 2016 launched the *School 2030* project. This ambitious project was the product of institutional collaboration between the Ministry for Education (MIUR), the National Institute for Educational Documentation and Research (Indire) and the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (AsviS). The main goal was to contribute to Goal 4 of the UN 2030 Agenda, Quality Education, and in particular to Target 4.7 ([Colella, 2020](#)):

[B]y 2030 we want to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development through education for sustainable

development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and the enhancement of diverse cultural heritage and the contribution of culture to sustainable development. (*Progetto – Scuola2030*)

One of the objectives of the project was to identify training courses for teachers through the use of new technologies, including a free e-learning training course. Furthermore, with respect to the autonomy of schools and teachers, the main project activities included supporting teachers and schools in the curriculum design and integration of issues related to sustainable development, their inclusion in the three-year training plan, and the self-assessment and social reporting of schools. Thus, the national project aimed to provide support to schools with a view towards integrating the existing curriculum with content related to education on sustainability.

Adoption of mandatory civic education in schools

Law 92 of 20 August 2019 introduced compulsory *civic education* in all Italian schools starting from the 2020/2021 school year. The decision modified the teaching of ‘Citizenship and Constitution’, which was established in 2008. The 2019 law aimed to educate responsible and active citizens and promote their full participation in the civic, cultural and social life of communities. In the Italian school system, law 92/2019, which entered into force on September 2019, introduced the compulsory teaching of environmental values through the subject of civic education. While environmental education and sustainable development represent a central aspect of raising civic awareness, personal development and citizenship, they are not yet a separate and distinct subject in schools but are part of the broader field of civic education (Colella, 2020).

According to Article 3, guidelines are defined for the teaching of civic education that must take into consideration fundamental issues such as the following:

- the constitution and institutions of the Italian state, of the EU and international organizations; history of the flag and the national anthem;

- 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015;
- digital citizenship education;
- fundamental elements of law, with particular regard to labour law;
- environmental education, eco-sustainable development and protection of the environmental heritage, identity, production and territorial and agri-food excellence;
- education on legality and to fight against the mafia;
- education to respect and enhance cultural heritage and common public goods;
- basic training in civil protection.

Environmental education is a wide, cross-cutting issue that has multiple and varying articulations, according to policy makers. The need to deal with fundamental issues concerning education for sustainability is recalled in various points of the law. It starts with the overall goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and includes environmental education, which is understood to include not only instruction for eco-sustainable development but also instruction for the preservation of cultural heritage, identity, production, territorial excellence and agri-food excellence.

Municipalities play an important role in promoting initiatives in collaboration with schools to teach about the functioning of local administration, historical knowledge of the territory and the best use of green spaces. Legislators believe that this education should be integrated with extracurricular activities, with environmental networks, and with other stakeholders from NGOs and civil society. The MIUR established the Register of Good Civic Education Practices. This register, a novelty in the Italian school system, collects the best practices adopted by educational institutions as well as agreements and protocols signed by the MIUR for the implementation of issues related to civic education. The main goal of this provision is to share and disseminate organizational solutions and best practices to create a network that is often lacking between schools.

Finally, as stated in Article 6, the financial allocation of four million euros per year is earmarked for the training of teachers on issues relating to the teaching of civic education. In this regard, educational institutions are required to survey the training needs

arising from the new prescriptions of the law. Furthermore, they can establish partnerships and agreements with local entities for teacher training in full compliance with their organizational autonomy and the principles of horizontal subsidiarity.

The operational governance of the content of Law 92 of 2019 was delegated to a subsequent Decree of the MIUR, issued on 22 June 2020. The Ministerial Decree and the annexes that are an integral part of it presented guidelines for the cross-cutting and integrated teaching of civic education and the new competencies required for students at the end of the first and second cycles of education ([Italian Ministry of Education, 2020](#)). In Article 2, it is also established that for the 2020/2021, 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 school years, schools define the civic education curriculum, taking into account the guidelines indicating competence goals, the results of learning, and any specific learning goals, in coherence and possible integration with the national guidelines for the curriculum of kindergartens and the first cycle of education as well as those for high schools and technical and vocational training schools.

Operational concerns from the street level

As part of a larger research project on One Health One Earth funded by the University of Milan, from May to September 2022, I conducted semi-structured and qualitative interviews in secondary schools in the city of Milan, Italy. The schools varied in their demographic population, location (half of them were located in the city centre and half of them in deprived neighbourhoods outside the city), their adoption of education for sustainability projects, and their level of engagement with climate change. Schools also varied in their organizational typology, although they were all publicly funded state schools. The type of interview adopted was the semi-structured qualitative type, whereby we developed a topic guide and structured our conversations along key themes but also allowed for the exploration of new issues that emerged from the interaction between the researcher and the interviewee. We mainly interviewed professionals and teachers. The duration of the interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 60 minutes. This pilot study was part of a much larger project that is not within the scope of this book. The structure of the topic guide we constructed for questions for the

interviewees had eight sections: regulatory framework; three-year training plan; co-production with parents; influence of external bodies and actors; available funds; citizenship course content and modalities; student assessment; and course evaluation. For the purpose of this book, I reflect upon only a selected few, namely, the three-year training plan required by law, co-production with parents, and external stakeholders.

Three-year teacher training plan

General compliance with the law's requirements emerged from the interviews, with no substantial critical elements or areas of concern. All the schools examined had drafted the Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa (Three-Years Teaching Offer Plan) following Law 92 of 2019 or, in a few cases, had revised existing ones by assigning the relevant functions to the teaching staff. At this level, criticism emerged concerning how the responsibilities for teaching civic education were divided among the teaching staff. Teacher (a) from School E said:

‘Civic education as it is does not work. It should work, but it is impossible in this way because one person cannot be an all-rounder. On the contrary, it would take a person in charge, someone who would coordinate the allocation of tasks and content to designated people who then would in turn have to pass them on to others, because otherwise it is too much left to the individual.’

This quote refers to the poor coordination at the operational level in the school. Teachers generally reflected their frustration with new responsibilities without a framework of support, guidance and coordination. This concern is not only an organizational one; it also involves the content of the courses. The main criticism here relates to the so-called interdisciplinarity of teaching civic education (which includes various elements) and to the guidelines received by teachers, which are too loose and not indicative of the topics to be taught. Moreover, teachers complain about the small amount of teaching time, even subtracted from the teachers' general number of contractual hours. On this issue, teacher (b) from School F says:

‘It has to be an assignment that has to go beyond school hours, and therefore it should have a minimum of financial compensation. Because that’s why Civic Education is also done badly. Because we do Civic Education within our contractual hours, so it is part of the programme ... three hours, four hours, five hours of my programme I now have to allocate to Civic Education ... there is no compensation.’

Teacher (c), on the other hand, from School D, referring to the topics to be covered, said:

‘[I]t is a cross-cutting and interdisciplinary subject. As Civic Education, you can put anything into it. Every teacher decides to put in whatever they want within Civic Education. In my opinion, in fact, it’s a very vague thing, and I don’t really agree with this structure because, as you can well understand, anything can go into Civic Education ... and then it ends up that each teacher does what he or she wants ... many teachers, those who have many hours, include ... other topics that are not related to environmental citizenship.’

Co-production with parents and with the local community

In this section, I attempt to ascertain whether and how parents can enter into the decision-making and organizational process of the courses provided. I ask whether they have a say and, if so, in what form. The purpose of these questions, which focus on the citizenship education course, is to examine the teaching autonomy of the school institution with the active, voluntary and committed participation of the pupils’ parents.

The interviews revealed that schools emphasize teaching autonomy, giving teachers maximum independence in their job. Communication with families is present and fundamental thanks to the various meetings they organize and the internal governance of schools, such as class boards and governing boards, in which parent representatives participate. However, the topics and methods are decided autonomously by the teaching staff and individual

teachers with no input from parents or communities. In some contexts, however, the voluntary participation of parents has made a difference. For example, in School B, teachers (b) and (c) declared a valuable collaboration with some parents who positively proposed collaborations with local authorities to organize environmental education activities. In other cases, teachers emphasized strong parental participation in other educational initiatives organized by them. In this particular case, the teachers organized a food market in which they sold vegetables grown directly in the school garden. The children were directly involved in harvesting, pricing and bagging (with materials such as recycled paper), while the parents handled the sale of the products. The revenue from sales was used to self-finance the school garden, and the children were thus educated in food production and consumption, fostering a circular economy and reducing packaging and waste. Regarding this project and the environmental education provided in general, teacher (b) said:

‘So environmental education, or at any rate outdoor education, is not something preconceived; that is, even if you buy yourself a manual you don’t have a decided path, so it is more than ever a subject to be built and to be built together with your pupils, all the more so by involving the families, because through the enthusiasm of the children it is easier to reach the parents as well. We feel a bit that a pilot project can also arouse in the parents greater awareness of what green can be.’

Teacher (d) confirms the view that supports the positive impact of the involvement of parents and families in educational initiatives:

‘In the sense that there is family involvement at an institutional level, in the school–family dialogue, participation of parents in councils, dialogue with teachers, participation obviously through representatives in school councils, initiatives by parents are welcome ... we have also had co-management over the years in which we have involved parents in activities ... specifically in environmental education ... perhaps in the plastic recycling workshop there was involvement

... but let's say it is not systematized, OK? There is obviously openness to dialogue with families, but the educational activities do not necessarily involve them. So even on the environmental front, they are not necessarily involved. It can happen.'

Influence of external stakeholders

With regard to this issue, the picture that emerges is more complex. I want to ascertain the capacity of the teachers' schools to extend a network with associations, professionals, NGOs and local authorities for the management and production of activities aimed at environmental education. What we found was general confusion of the educational institutions, which relied solely on the ability of individual teachers to cultivate personal contacts and working collaborations on a purely voluntary basis and through personal knowledge.

Teachers complained about a substantial state of neglect on the part of local institutions that should help individual schools coordinate with each other and with civil society to integrate educational activities.

In this regard, teacher (e) expressed himself as follows: "We do not network, which is certainly important, between school and territory. But networking requires resources, time, even financial resources ... but in the school, this message ... everything is left, there are few resources ... everything is then left to the initiative of us teachers." This sense of neglect and lack of institutional support was shared in virtually all the interviews administered. In some cases, the school was able, over the years, to develop a solid network of contacts that could be used for these occasions. In other situations, this was not the case. Some teachers complained about the corporatization that recent legislative reforms entailed for schools, which were guilty, in their view, of distorting the objectives and tools available to schools.

Discussion and analysis

Law 92 of 2019 is certainly innovative from multiple points of view. First, it responds to an ever-growing need to introduce the teaching

of civic, digital and environmental subjects at an earlier age. It also removes the responsibility for this teaching from the personal will of individual teachers, thus eliminating the risk of differences even within the same schools between classes with different teachers. The most recent climatic events have shown the entire continental and world political class that it is increasingly essential to train responsible citizens who are willing to embrace a more eco-sustainable lifestyle from an early age. With this in mind, the compulsory teaching of environmental education is certainly on the right trajectory, albeit belatedly inserted.

Despite good intentions, several limitations need to be discussed and possibly resolved. The absence of a dedicated staff constitutes the first critical point. Choices made in the name of multidisciplinary could create confusion, possibly leading teachers to ignore the value of the discipline. Although it may be interesting to integrate this subject in a holistic way into all the others, it is debatable whether this choice results from an overly optimistic argument or the consequence of a budget constraint that prevents hiring and training additional staff.

Furthermore, the headmaster designates an ad hoc person who, after participating in ten hours of training, conducts support and monitoring actions for colleagues for an additional 30 hours. This support activity does not correspond to training but is envisaged as a functional activity by some teachers identified by the managers with the appointment of the teaching body. The additional work is performed by a teacher chosen by the manager but paid with the ordinary financial resources of the school fund.

The resources for the training of teachers amount to four million euros. The availability of funds seems to be inadequate for the ambitious objectives set by the law. This is probably only an initial and experimental phase destined to be implemented by subsequent reforms in the future, but it should be admitted that the impact of training courses risks being limited until then.

Finally, an innovation such as this, which includes an enormous list of contents, although organized in the three areas of the Constitution, Digital Citizenship and Sustainable Development, could be a harbinger of difficulties in schools. The 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and its 17 goals, included in Law 92 of 2019, would probably require well over 33 hours per year and

are only part of the arguments to be developed. School autonomy and organizational flexibility risk constituting an excuse for the government to leave schools alone in this project.

Conclusions

In 2019, climate change protests by schoolchildren around the globe mobilized the attention of the media, policy makers and society at large. Greta Thunberg's speech to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP24) was a political, emotional and cultural awakening for a generation of young people who mobilized publicly against climate change. These protests stimulated wider debate on the role of environmental awareness and citizenship around the globe. In this chapter, we analysed one of the policy responses to such societal pressures associated with public engagement and citizenship: the Italian statutory provision in 2019 to include environmental and sustainable citizenship in the national curriculum in all schools. This was a hard governance regulatory tool to incentivize behavioural changes and societal improvement. Schools are the best place to stimulate behavioural change because young people are motivated and can influence their families and their communities. Other countries have introduced bills in Parliament to amend the national curriculum. In May 2021, the House of Lords in the UK introduced a bill to make climate change and sustainable citizenship part of the national curriculum in all maintained schools. The bill would amend the Education Act of 2002 and would revitalize the teaching of citizenship to embed action in sustainability. The bill is under review in Parliament. The new bill 'would instil an ethos and ability to care for oneself, others and the natural environment, for present and future generations' (UK House of Lords, Bill Education (Environment and Sustainable Citizenship)).

The amendment of the existing definition of citizenship by statutory law is problematic in two ways. First, adding programmes to encourage learning and protection of the natural environment entails a necessary reconceptualization of the notion of civic education and citizenship. Dobson has rightly argued that environmental citizenship is a nontraditional conception that goes beyond national boundaries and affects multiple dimensions of the

political and cultural life of citizens. Second, it is risky to assume it can be easily taught by any teachers as part of any subjects, such as geography, history or engineering. In this chapter, fieldwork research in Italy and interviews at the school level showed that teachers need specific training and institutional support to deliver qualified and high-quality teaching of sustainable citizenship. To be effective, my research also shows that the co-production and involvement of parents, families and local communities with a bottom-up approach is essential for impactful local projects. I have discussed the limitation of prescribing public engagement by statutory changes from above and the benefits of doing so with clear guidelines and institutional support offered to actors on the ground who are willing to take on the responsibilities of ecological citizens.