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Civitas educationis

EDUCATION, POLITICS AND CULTURE

Anno X
Numero 1
Giugno 2021

MIMESIS

SUOR ORSOLA
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Iscrizione al registro operatori della comunicazione R.O.C. n. 10757
Direttore responsabile: Arturo Lando

Pubblicazione semestrale: abbonamento annuale (due numeri): € 36,00

Per gli ordini e gli abbonamenti rivolgersi a:
ordini@mimesisedizioni.it
L'acquisto avviene per bonifico intestato a:
MIM Edizioni Srl, Via Monfalcone 17/19
20099 – Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
Unicredit Banca – Milano
IBAN: IT 59 B 02008 01634 000101289368
BIC/SWIFT: UNCRITM1234

Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa, via Suor Orsola 10, 80135 Napoli
Phone: +39 081 2522251; e-mail: civitas.educationis@unisob.na.it

MIMESIS EDIZIONI (Milano – Udine)
www.mimesisedizioni.it
mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it

Isbn: 9788857582993
Issn: 2280-6865

© 2021 – MIM EDIZIONI SRL
Via Monfalcone, 17/19 – 20099
Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
Phone: +39 02 24861657 / 24416383

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Children as Apolitical Human Beings or as Public Educators? Re-imaging the Meanings of Democratic Citizenship

Chiara Carla Montà*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the role and meanings of the concept and practice of Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC). Taking stock of the political and educational crisis we are living through, this paper presents the international policy agendas of EDC, building a framework that is currently in evolution, moving from a national or European perspective to a global and sustainable one. Moreover, studies register a profound gap between the declared and the experienced, especially when thinking of children as democratic citizens. In fact, the dominant culture of childhood perceives children as apolitical and has the tendency to expel politics from educational institutions. At the same time, the young are reclaiming their political role and acting as public educators, reconfiguring the notion of democratic citizenship. The paper calls for a systematic and deep reflection by pedagogy and pedagogical research on the new meanings EDC can acquire by promoting intergenerational political thought and action.

Keywords: *public pedagogy; culture of childhood; education for democratic citizenship.*

1. Democratic citizenship: what are we talking about?

Traditions and approaches to citizenship vary throughout history and across the world according to different countries, histories, societies, cultures and ideologies resulting in many different ways of conceiving and understanding the concept.

The origin of citizenship can be tracked down to Ancient Greece, when citizens were those who had the legal right to participate in the affairs of the State. However, it was only free, male, adult, residents that were considered as citizens. Participation was not only considered as a right but first of all as a duty. A citizen who did not meet his responsibilities was considered socially disruptive.

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This notion of citizenship is still present today and is commonly understood as a legal relationship between the individual and the State, but it is recognized that the concept has several other layers of meaning. The Council of Europe (CoE) (Council of Europe, 2017), in its online portal, provides an overview of the meanings of citizenship. Firstly, it highlights four main dimensions:

- The *political* dimension of citizenship refers to political rights and responsibilities. CoE recommends its development through knowledge of the political system and the promotion of democratic attitudes and participatory skills.
- The *social* dimension of citizenship has to do with the relationship between individuals and society and requires the values of loyalty and solidarity. One can be educated to this dimension through the development of social skills and the knowledge of social relations.
- The *cultural* dimension of citizenship refers to being conscious of having a common cultural heritage. This dimension can be developed through the knowledge of cultural heritage and history and the basic skills (language competence, reading and writing).
- The *economic* dimension of citizenship concerns the relationship between individuals and the labour and consumer market. It implies the right to work and to have a minimum subsistence level. Economic skills and vocational training are crucial for its development.

CoE also mentions that citizenship can be understood as a *practice* which implies working towards the betterment of one's community through participation —from here comes the notion of *active participation*. Finally, it discusses the meanings of *democratic citizenship*, which is a closely related concept, that emphasizes the belief that citizenship should be based on democratic principles and values such as pluralism, respect for human dignity and the rule of law. Especially in the Western world, democratic citizenship has become the synonym of citizenship because democracy is considered as the political form for excellence, that more than any other is able to embody the same essence of politics (Bertolini, 2003).

Today, for many different reasons that have not yet been clearly established[1], there is a general dissatisfaction towards political institutions but at the same time there is a supportive process of democratic principles (Moro, 2016; Somerville, 2011). In 2016 the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) launched the *Global State of Democracy Initiative*, to analyse democratic trends, challenges and opportunities. IDEA's report *Global State of Democracy* (International Institute for Democra-

1 The Global State of Democracy 2019 report (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019) mentions six main challenges to democracy: 1) the crisis of representation of political parties and the rise of populism; 2) patterns and conditions of democratic backsliding; 3) the empowerment of civil society in a shrinking civic space; 4) managing electoral processes in challenging environments; 5) corruption and the role of money in politics; 6) the impact of information communications technologies on democracy.

cy and Electoral Assistance, 2019) mentions that in recent years in Europe the quality of democracy has declined and a number of democracies are experiencing democratic erosion and backsliding. IDEA's (2020) special brief *Taking Stock of Global Democratic Trends Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic* reports that, due to the need to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, many civil liberties have been restrained, such as freedom of assembly and movement and in some cases postponing elections. At the same time, these drastic measures have also demonstrated democracy's resilience and the capacity for renovation. In fact, the special brief reports that: accelerated digitalization has occurred across most democratic institutions. Moreover, democratic institutions, such as parliaments, courts, electoral commissions, political parties, media and civil society actors, have fought back against attempts at executive overreach and democratic trampling or collaborated to ensure effective responses to the pandemic.

2. The reasons for education for democratic citizenship

Citizenship education is part of the broader relationship between education and politics. The term political derives from the Greek word *polis*, the ancient Greek city-State. The word and its derivations were used to designate what concerned the life in the city and of the city. In fact, the word political (πολιτικός) and the word city (πόλις) have the same root (πολ) which means of many. The etymological origin of the word highlights how the political experience —citizenship— was an essential part of life, it was necessary to the formation of one's own personality. It was through *learning* how to participate in the life of the city that the subject could develop his capabilities and aim towards the public good.

When thinking of the relationship between education and politics, Piero Bertolini (2003) argues that no kind of education or formation of the subject can ignore the social dimension of human existence or get lost in abstract or moralistic discourses. The political experience situates education within praxis, so within quotidian experience. The relation between education and politics, in fact, needs to be considered within a contextual and situational dimension that measures itself with historical experiences and real problems. Moreover, John Dewey, in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1923) and in *Education Today* (Dewey, 1940), describes democracy, the political form for excellence, as an *educational principle*, as a *measure* and as a *direction* for education. The democratic process is far from coming natural to a community and cannot be imposed top-down. In fact, in order for democracy to function it requires informed, knowledgeable and wise citizens able to continue their education, their growth and their flourishing. Individuals need to practice their efficacy in transparent, small-group situations from an early age and, for this reason, Dewey believed in the necessity of creating democratic classrooms.

History saw different moments of crisis between education and politics, and consequently of citizenship. Piero Bertolini (2003), in his *Educazione e politica* (Education and Politics), that deeply interrogates the phenomenon we are addressing here, pointed out how politics often subjugated education to create a certain ideal citizen. Education, in return, allowed itself to be subordinated, deceived by the illusion of sharing power —let's think of the totalitarian States of the Nineteen hundreds. Bertolini argues that the crisis of politics and of education, and consequently of citizenship, has become a *structural* component of our society. Specifically, it is democracy, that is considered as the political form for excellence, that more than any other one incarnates the essence of politics itself, in terms of aiming at dialectically conciliating individual interests with the interests of a community, that is being deeply questioned in its contents and procedures. Thus, democratic participation, the building block of democracy, appears to have lost its original meaning, in terms of creating active citizens and thriving civil societies. It has become an empty concept (Theis, 2010), a tyrannical one (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), a buzz word (Cornwall, 2006), but, at the same time, there are many calls for renewed and enhanced political participation and citizenship (Somerville, 2011).

Democracy is intrinsically "vulnerable" (Bertolini, 2003: 50) as it does not aim at imposing a universally accepted truth. It is built on "weak" (*Ibidem*) knowledge and action because it is historically situated. For this reason, it is easily contested. At the same time, it is its structural weakness that represents its strength: it forces a continuous reconstruction of experience, of the meanings of democracy, preventing its crystallization and rigidity. It is here that education for democratic citizenship plays a crucial role in restoring the sense of "thinking and acting politically" (Ibid: 151).

3. Children and democracy: democratic citizenship, participation and children's human rights

When thinking of children and democracy, it is the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) that formally recognised children as subjects of rights, participatory ones included (art. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 30, 31) and these are the foundation for democratic citizenship. Before 1989, the concept of childhood and of children's rights had often been framed in terms of beliefs about their nature and needs and about adults' responsibilities towards them (Becchi, 1994). Now the Convention recognizes the child as an individual with juridical value thus as a *political subject*.

Democratic participation and human rights are reciprocally necessary. For example, without rights to health and education and with restrictions of freedom of expression, poverty and so on, the capacity to take part in the processes and structures which affect one is limited. Equally, without democratic participation, many rights are difficult to access. It is through

participation that one can build a society based on human rights, develop social cohesion, make one's own voice heard to influence decision makers, achieve change, and eventually be the subject and not the object of one's own life (Council of Europe, 2017).

The human rights treaties define what is meant by citizenship. Article 15 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognizes the right to a nationality, a right to change one's nationality, and the right not to be deprived of nationality. The right to a nationality is confirmed in many other international instruments including the *European Convention on Nationality* of the Council of Europe (1997a), whose *Explanatory Report* explains that nationality and citizenship are synonyms.

Being a recognised citizen of a country has many legal benefits, which may include the rights to vote, to hold public office, to social security, to health services, to public education, to permanent residency, to own land, or to engage in employment, amongst others.

Participation in political and cultural life is also a fundamental human right recognised in a number of international human rights treaties, starting with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which provides for the right to participate in government and free elections (art. 21), the right to participate in the cultural life of the community (art. 27.1), the right to peaceful assembly and association (art. 20), and the right to join trade unions (art. 23.4).

Participation itself is also a core principle of human rights and is also a condition for effective democratic citizenship for all people (Council of Europe, 2017).

At the same time, elsewhere (Montà *et al.*, 2020) we have argued that despite the fact that the exercise of power has gradually been extended to previously marginalised groups and minorities, and despite the fact that children have been recognised with all human rights and with special ones due to their age, children rarely enjoy significative democratic rights to influence policies, to pass laws or elect representatives. Moreover, other human rights —protection from all forms of violence, education, health and so on— are breached on a daily basis, even in rich countries (Chzhen *et al.*, 2017).

4. Educating children for democratic citizenship

Today the role of education is often discussed in relation to the erosion of the democratic landscape, also in the European context. We are seeing the rise of nationalism and extremism, combined with a worsening situation for minorities and migrants, as well as a diminishing interest from citizens in political affairs —if we think of the European Union context we can also see dangerous expressions of hostility towards it (Council of Europe, 2020). This cannot leave the world of education indifferent.

Education for Democratic Citizenship became a common goal of education policies in Europe in the late 1990s. It was supported at a political level but rather inconsistently covered by government initiatives. In 2002 the *All-European study on education for democratic citizenship policies* was initiated (Birzea, 2004). Its goal was to map out the national EDC policies in Europe. It was found that there was a real gap between declarations and what happens in practice. This is due to two major reasons: ignoring the declarations of intent and failure to allocate resources. It was also found that it is the formal school curriculum that provided the main pillar for EDC as it consists in a ready-made framework. To this end, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) in their book entitled *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education* argued for the need to rethink ECEC as a space for democratic practice. This idea was further developed in a Bernard van Leer Foundation working paper on early childhood development by Moss (2007). These publications are not only cited widely in the academic field, but also in worldwide policy initiatives and curriculum frameworks in ECEC such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (2006) *Starting Strong II* report and the first Australian national curriculum framework *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

When thinking of the European context today, it is the Council of Europe with its *Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education*, that has been adopted by the Council of Europe's 47 member States in the framework of *Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7*, that defines the meanings of education for democratic citizenship. Specifically, it is described as:

> education, training, dissemination, information, practices and activities which aim, by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding and moulding their attitudes and behaviour:
> - to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law;
> - to contribute to the building and defence of a universal culture of human rights in society, with a view to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms (Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, 2010: 2).

This means young people in Europe are acknowledged the right to participate and are encouraged to learn about Europe and contribute to its democratic development. At the same time, thinking of EDC in the European context means taking into consideration Europe's particular characteristics: a shared history of war and peace, membership in common institutions, such as the same Council of Europe and the European Union

and their programmes supporting and funding European integration in the fields of education and youth such as the Erasmus+Programme.

Democratic citizenship education can take place in formal, non-formal and informal educational settings that range from school, civic organizations, political parties, to families, the neighbourhood, the mass media and so on. Formal education, through the school curriculum, in fact, plays a key role in EDC, but at the same time non-formal education, especially in the context of youth work, is fundamental as it is close to them in their every-day experiential contexts. Notably, also the *European Youth Strategy* for 2019-2027 (European Union, 2019) puts emphasis on developing young people's citizenship competencies through education.

Since the adoption of the United Nations (UN) *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), the terms sustainable or global have been added next to the term democratic when describing contemporary citizenship and citizenship education.

The *Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development* (Westall, 2015) highlights the connection among the concepts and realities of democracy and sustainability. On one side, the ideas and reality of sustainable development and liberal democracies overlap and are interdependent. Democracy can enable high levels of innovation and responds quickly to challenges. The justice, legitimacy and transparency achieved by democratic contexts and safeguards can contribute to making sustainable development fairer, justified and accepted. On the other side, the survival of democracy depends on the conditions of the world —currently unequal, resource-constrained and overheated. This means that sustainable development is a *pre-requisite* for flourishing democracies.

Moreover, the UN 2030 Agenda assigns education a crucial role when thinking of citizenship education with Sustainable Development Goal 4.7:

> 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 General Assembly, 2015: 17).

Furthermore, the Agenda puts children at its heart: "A world which invests in its children and in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation" (Ibid: 5) and promotes their " […] full participation in society" (Ibid: 7). In order to make this possible, we must provide "[…] children and youth with a nurturing environment for the full realization of their rights and capabilities, […] including through safe schools and cohesive communities and families" (*Ibidem*).

The SDGs, in fact, aim at moving beyond the mere economic dimension of development, typical of the contemporary liberal democracies, and

enlarge the indicators of development to more qualitative dimensions, the social and environmental ones. To accomplish this objective, childhood is put at the heart of the Agenda, considered as crucial to human development. According to this kind of perspective, democracy and human rights are functional to the promotion of liberty and not sufficient to themselves (Hammarberg, 2008).

It is within this framework that UNESCO promotes Global Citizenship Education (GCED) (Deardorff *et al.*, 2018), that aims to empower learners of all ages to assume active roles, both locally and globally, in building more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure societies. The concept of Global Citizenship is, in fact, complementary and to a certain extent opposed (Davies, 2006) to national or European citizenship. It is based on the three domains of learning:

- Cognitive: it refers to the knowledge and thinking skills necessary to better understand the world.
- Socio-emotional: it refers to values, attitudes and social skills that enable learners to develop affectively, psychosocially, and physically and to enable them to live together with others respectfully and peacefully.
- Behavioural: it refers to conduct, performance, practical application and engagement.
- Global citizens should not only be able to understand and influence local or Union decisions and understand how these will impact on the world, but also be able to understand and influence decisions taken on a global level. The outcome of GCED is to empower learners of all ages to assume active roles, both at a local and global level.

Recently it has been argued that European education for democratic citizenship can be understood as global citizenship education in a European context (Hoskins *et al.,* 2012). Europe, in fact, has its own complex history, innovation and varied practices in relation to the world and European education for democratic citizenship can be a space to critically reflect on these and to propose actions for change. The young should learn how European actions and inactions —e.g., colonialism, migrations, experiences of cooperation and development of human rights— impact on different groups of people across the world.

The international political level is promoting an education for democratic citizenship that holds together both a cognitive dimension and an experiential one, a local and a global one. It aims at empowering the younger generation, redefining not only intergenerational relationships but also those amongst species. It has the aim of developing a new form of citizenship free from stereotypes, prejudices and closed mindedness, that favours solidarity, dialogue and care (Loiodice, 2018). At the same time, as we will discuss in the next paragraph, there still is a gap, like the one reported in

the *All-European study on education for democratic citizenship policies* (Birzea, 2004), between the declared and the experienced.

5. Children and democracy: the apolitical culture of childhood

Despite these declarations, the road towards the development of a notion of democratic citizenship that is able to embrace sustainability is still a long way away. The *Europe Sustainable Development Report 2020* (Sustainable Development Solutions Network & Institute European Environmental Policy, 2020) is a quantitative independent report on the progress of the European Union and its Member States towards Sustainable Development Goals. This year's SDG Index and Dashboards presents pre-COVID-19 data. Even before the onset of the pandemic, no European country was on track to achieve all 17 SDGs by 2030. The EU and partner countries were performing especially poorly on SDG 2 (No Hunger); major performance gaps are seen for SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production); SDG 13 (Climate Action); SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). The report states that education and innovation capacities must be strengthened to equip EU citizens with the skills they need to build the "future we want" (United Nation General Assembly, 2012). The younger generations look up to the older ones, as they have an educational role towards them and what they are currently seeing is a gap between the declared and the experienced.

Moreover, despite these declarations and educational guidelines, children do not benefit from all citizenship rights —nor from all the rights in general.

The first difficulty they encounter is the possibility to fully participate in society like the 2030 Agenda envisages, remembering that participation is at the base of democracy. Although the UNCRC is the foundation for democratic participation, it itself presents numerous ambiguities. The UNCRC does not cite participation as a right, so the debate around the concept, still in progress, was particularly sharp till 2009 when General Comment No.12 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child linked UNCRC's Article 12 to the concept of participation.

Moreover, Article 12 uses ambiguous terminology leading to numerous questions and interpretations. For instance, it applies to every child "capable" of forming her/his own views. The term "capable" leads to questions concerning who acknowledges capability and on what basis: usually those with the power to do so, the adults (White, 1996). Furthermore, art. 12 states that children have the right to express their views freely in "all matters" affecting them. However, which are the matters that affect a child? It has been argued, for instance, private matters only (Cantweel, 2011) excluding whatever concerns the public good, so limiting them as political subjects. Moreover, children's views should be given "due weight" in

accordance with their age and maturity, but, again, who establishes how much a child's view should weigh?

These points are crucial when thinking about how adults are building a certain socio-cultural image of childhood that impacts on the meaning of democratic citizenship and on how children are concretely educated to it.

In 1986 Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist, educator and writer, wrote *The Political Life of Children*. Here he questions his past indifference towards matters explicitly political in his conversations with children. He refers to a discussion with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in which Dr. King remarked on the seeming "luxury" for white people, in: "their capacity to turn their backs on politics, while at the same time holding on to their power" (Coles, 1986: 27). Coles describes how he began to wonder if this analysis included him. He reviewed taped interviews conducted during a study of school desegregation in the early 1960s and found himself "surprised" by what he referred to as the:

> chronic inability even to recognize the political implications of what we were hearing from both black and white children […] a sort of running political commentary by boys and girls who were, after all, involved in a dramatic moment of history (Ibid: 24).

In 2018 Zsuzsa Millei and Kirsi Paullina Kallio wrote that children are seen as "incomplete, innocent, vulnerable, invisible, and we add *apolitical*"(Millei & Kallio, 2018: 4) [emphasis added].

Moreover, separate facilities for children have been created to answer their specific needs-rights but these *ad hoc* spaces, times, opportunities constrain children into an "institutional margination" (Bertolini, 2003: 69), secluding children from the rest of society, making them live in an artificial society, shifting them away from real life (Nimmo, 2008), although demanding them to be socially involved and responsible decision-makers. Furthermore, the political dimension of existence has been expelled from educational services for children as if they should have nothing to do with politics, as if education should be something neutral. Even if often educational services such as ECEC and schools are meant to provide sheltered islands, in reality they mirror the different political projects prevalent in society, such as "particular institutionalized forms of state violence [that] are neither neutral nor invisible in the lives of young children" (Saltmarsh, 2010: 296). This means that children cannot be thought of as leading non-political lives in their families and in their institutional settings.

> They perform identities in particular ways to convey how they wish to be encountered as gendered subjects. For instance, children balance between the expectations coming from their families, peer communities and the ECEC institution; they take action in situations where things are going wrong from their perspectives; they choose between different practices going on in the nursery to avoid subordination and to gain power; they take sides

> between different groupings for ethical reasons; they follow and challenge the nursery rules as it seems beneficial; and so on (Millei & Kallio, 2018: 4).

Today "instead of seeing political subject formation as an intersubjective mundane process vital to human agency, children were and are regarded as political only if manipulated or instructed by adults" (Ibid: 5). In institutional spaces for children one can recognize two main dimensions of political life: the first, *official* politics and policies that aim to institute certain ideals (Triani, 2020); second, *everyday* politics unfolding in communities that involve all people as political subjects with particular attitudes and awareness, possessing various capacities to act based on their personal stances that must not be overlooked in the attempts to re-politicize these settings (Millei & Kallio, 2018).

With regard to the first dimension, the study *Evaluation of legislation, policy and practice of child participation in the European Union (EU)*[2] (Day *et al*., 2015), mentions how child participation within school decision-making structures varies considerably according to age and ability. In some countries, like Germany, Finland, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia, pupils of all ages are able to join school councils. On the contrary, in Spain laws do not allow children to participate in the school council until they reach mid primary stage and their right to elect directors begins when they reach the age of sixteen. Generally speaking, in EU countries this infrastructure is generally better developed in secondary schools. The situation for younger children tendentially reports more limited provisions for child participation in nurseries and kindergartens. In ECEC some countries are making rapid progress: Italy with its 'Reggio Emilia Approach' is based on a model of critical enquiry, experimentation and research by young children; Sweden's Education Act 2010 states every child's right to participate and sets a strong focus on pre-school settings; in Slovenia preschool children can routinely participate in decisions about their education and care.

With regard to the second dimension, it is found that very few mechanisms support children's individual participation —in subject choices, curricula, assessments and lodging complaints. This is for many reasons: children may not be considered as capable to participate in decision-making, for instance due to their age (Day *et al*., 2015; Lansdown, 2010), teachers may not have an adequate knowledge of children's rights (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) and/or may perceive them as a threat to their authority and control over the classroom (Howe & Covell, 2005) and last but not least children are seen as apolitical and education as neutral.

The contradiction between what policy agendas and political programmes are calling for —the child as a political being, although in ambiguous terms and democratic citizenship education— and the socio-cultural

2 The study was conducted before the United Kingdom left the European Union on 31 January 2020.

image of childhood as apolitical and of education as neutral, is creating a short-circuit. This negatively impacts on democratic citizenship education and consequently on the health of our democracies as well. In fact, young people's trust in democracy as a form of government is decreasing. To this end, two qualitative studies on politically active young people in North and Latin America present the young's views on youth councils, an adult attempt to involve the young in democratic structures, and show how some teenagers perceive the councils not only as elitist and non-representative but also as forms of social control (Taft & Gordon, 2013). This may have two outcomes: the first, not feeling in control of one's own life and questioning one's own role as citizen or the necessity of engaging in politics (Hart & Henn, 2017); the second, engaging in different forms of activism led by children or youth. In the United Kingdom the same weaknesses emerge: the young delegates mention how often their voices are overshadowed (Matthews, 2001) and how the councils risk being a "white elephant" (Matthews & Limb, 2003). "This is only apparently in contradiction with those movements demanding to lower the voting age: the young, in fact, are putting forth a theory of democracy that emphasizes authority and impact, not just voice"(Montà *et al.*, 2020: 9).

In consideration of the crisis education and democracy are going through within a context of the economic, environmental and social crisis the Planet is going through, the time has come for adults, the writers and deliverers of policy agendas and educational programmes to step back, to 'bracke' their ideas about childhood and the meanings of democratic citizenship and education. Maybe it is time for a shift in perspective, a shift that policy agendas are calling for by putting children and the young at the heart of development.

6. Re-imaging the meaning of democratic citizenship education

> The exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary (Le Guin, 2004: 219).

It is through a stretch of the imagination that Giuseppe Sala (2021), mayor of Milan, wrote his latest book. Here, he collects a series of letters written from the children of the future (the 2030 world) that narrate how their cities have become sustainable, in its triple significance: economic, environmental and social. For example, it is narrated how clothing swap markets are organized in blocks of flats, how cohousing has become accessible to more people, how some streets have been blocked off to traffic and many trees planted, in other words how the democratic values are lived in every-day life by adults and children together.

What we must acknowledge is that it is the young *citizens of today* who are at the forefront in promoting these democratic values and sustainability projects. Let's think for example of the spontaneous movement of the Fridays For Future, that is asking to enhance the care of the Earth; or of those youth movements in the US fighting against gun violence or of the young activists in Iraq that protest against corruption.

Based on the writings of Danny Wildemeersch, Jeppe Læssøe and Michael Håkansson's (2021), the idea of considering these young activists as "public educators" and their movements as forms of "public pedagogy" is put forward. Reflecting upon their writings, these notions have two major implications when referring to citizenship: the first is re-imaging the notion of democratic citizenship to *fully* include children's voice and choice; the second concerns EDC that traditionally is directed from adults to children, whereas in this case it is the older generations that can learn about democratic citizenship thanks to the younger voices and choices.

To this end, Wildemeersch, Læssøe and Håkansson present three points upon which to reflect.

First, by building on Margaret Meads' essay *Culture and Commitment* (1970), the authors argue that the young activists of today are putting forward a "prefigurative future" as they advocate for a sustainable future, while criticizing the immobility of older generations. This prefigurative culture also creates new educational patterns. Thus, they argue that a new kind of "public pedagogy" is emerging: "whereby the young both educate themselves and the wider public" (Wildemeersch *et al.*, 2021: 11). When thinking about citizenship, the young are educating the older generation to a new idea of democratic citizenship by, for instance, regaining possession of public spaces —that have been depoliticalized— through sit-ins in front of Parliament or permanent breakfasts[3]; in advocating for the inclusion of other species and plants in policies; by moving from the local to the global through the creation of online groups, where strangers with a certain concern or ideal in common work together irrespective of origin (United Nation Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015).

Second, they draw on Jennifer Sandlin, Brian Schulz and Jake Burdick's (2010) work that describes "public pedagogy" as a theoretical and empirical perspective that locates educational practices outside the realm of schooling so in the informal and non-formal dimensions of education. These activists mainly operate outside schools, yet their actions are also closely connected to schools.

> Their movement mobilizes through face-to-face interaction inside and outside schools, it organizes actions through social media, participants meet

3 A person invites others to breakfast in a public space. In return the guests agree to hold a breakfast in a public space the next day (or on the next possible day), the guests of which in turn hold a breakfast as soon as possible, and so on. The breakfasters document their experiences (text, video, photographs, …) and publish them (www.p-breakfast.net).

> in homes and in the streets, they challenge politicians in public places, and so on. One could claim, in line with the authors of the handbook, that these actions have important educational and learning dimensions (Wildemeersch *et al*., 2021: 11).

In fact, in school children receive information that then leads to action outside the school. Rarely, as previously mentioned, schools are sites of active engagement and experiencing of active citizenship. The role of the school within our society and in relation to the formation of the young demands for deep reflection. In fact, it is crucial to interrogate its role: should it have a "banking" function (Freire, 2018) where children are filled with notions or should it be a space of empowerment, participation and experience (Dewey, 1923)?

Finally, the authors draw on Gert Biesta's work on public pedagogy, citizenship and the public sphere. Here Biesta states that the idea of public pedagogy can also be understood in a more programmatic and political way, which is as: "an educational intervention enacted in the interest of the public quality of spaces and places and the public quality of human togetherness more generally" (Biesta, 2012: 684). Biesta distinguishes between three types of public pedagogy: a) pedagogy for the public: it is a pedagogy that educates the public, so it is who has the knowledge, generally adults, that moulds who doesn't have it, generally children, according to a certain ideal, in this case of citizenship; b) pedagogy of the public: it is a form of in-formal education and takes place between peers, so citizens learn from each other; c) pedagogy for a *publicness*: here private issues are turned into issues of public concern, while creating opportunities for alternative visions and practices to emerge and to be brought into an *inter-generational* public debate and action.

Jennifer Sandlin, Brian Schulz and Jake Burdick (2010) see a mixture of these three different kinds of public pedagogy in young activist groups. Formal school and other formal educational spaces have a role in teaching particular insights but then when putting into practice what has been learnt —usually outside of these institutions— the activists learn from each other. Finally, when thinking of the third dimension: "the young people create public spaces of debate among citizens and policy makers, whereby alternatives to existing practices and laws are examined openly and democratically" (Wildemeersch *et al*., 2021: 12), we could say like in the Ancient Greece agora.

In conclusion, we are living through unprecedented times where education and politics can be reinvigorated by the lessons on citizenship the younger generations are not merely transmitting but are practicing. In order to do so, on one side there is the need to invest in pedagogical research and on the other to address the main critiques that have been done to it. It, in fact, has been accused of not respecting its same reason of being, as it does not create data that is useful for educational practice, nor does it highlight the main issues that policy should address, often it investigates

irrelevant issues and does not have organized research designs, mining its own credibility (Beveridge, 1998; Levin & O'Donnell, 1999; Pring, 2000). Furthermore, it is accused of not being methodologically rigorous (Evans, 2002). Politics, as said at the beginning of the paper, has the capacity to anchor pedagogy to the present, in lived experience, therefore it has the capacity to orient pedagogical research.

Moreover, in line with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there is a strong need to create intergenerational partnerships in which children and adults can work side by side, in respect of each person's individuality, overcoming prejudices and stereotypes connected to age, to re-configure both educational programs and institutions, to fill the gap between rhetoric and reality and co-construct a renewed idea of citizenship, or, in other words, restore the complexity of the meaning of thinking and acting politically (Bertolini, 2003).

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Finito di stampare
nel mese di giugno 2021
da Geca Industrie Grafiche – San Giuliano Milanese (MI)