

EDUCATING TO CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH THE CROSS-CURRICULAR TEACHING OF CIVIC EDUCATION

EDUCARE AL PENSIERO CRITICO ATTRAVERSO L'INSEGNAMENTO TRASVERSALE DELL'EDUCAZIONE CIVICA

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Abstract

One of the main objectives of the “school of competences” is to be able to develop critical thinking in the new generations, starting from a type of teaching that, overcoming the separation of knowledge, privileges its interconnection and contextualization. Through the transversal teaching of *Civic Education*, introduced in the Italian school starting from the school year 2020/2021, education in critical thinking “takes shape”: in fact, the teacher, through various ideas for reflection on civic and social issues, ethical and environmental, must educate students in the use of critical thinking, in an era in which reality is mixed with fiction and where the so-called *post-truth* dominates the way of communicating, informing and discussing. *Civic Education* offers students the opportunity to tackle open, challenging problems drawn from the real world, from everyday life with the guidance of the teacher, an attentive, aware, reflective and flexible “guide” who teaches them to “read them” in the best possible way, favoring resolution through the attribution of meaning to thoughts, events and situations. Therefore, teacher training is necessary in order to promote the development of critical thinking: this was the goal of the training workshops on the cross-cutting teaching of *Civic Education*, proposed to teachers during the test year, by the “E. Fermi” in Aversa (CE), Campania school center for training (Ambito 08).

Abstract

Uno dei principali obiettivi della “scuola delle competenze” è riuscire a sviluppare nelle nuove generazioni il *pensiero critico*, partendo da un tipo di insegnamento che, superando la separazione dei saperi, ne privilegia l'interconnessione e la contestualizzazione. Grazie all'insegnamento trasversale dell'*Educazione Civica*, introdotto nella scuola italiana a partire dall'anno scolastico 2020/2021, l'educazione al pensiero critico “prende forma”: infatti, il docente, attraverso vari spunti di riflessione su tematiche civiche, sociali, etiche e ambientali, deve educare gli studenti all'uso del pensiero critico, in un'epoca in cui la realtà si mescola alla finzione e dove la cosiddetta *post-verità* domina il modo di comunicare, di informare e di discutere. L'*Educazione Civica* offre agli studenti l'opportunità di affrontare *problemi* aperti, sfidanti, tratti dal mondo reale, dalla vita di tutti i giorni con la guida del docente, una “guida” attenta, consapevole, riflessiva e flessibile che insegni loro a “leggerli” nel miglior modo possibile, favorendo la risoluzione attraverso l'attribuzione di significato a pensieri, ad eventi e a situazioni. Pertanto è necessaria la formazione dei docenti al fine di favorire lo sviluppo del pensiero critico: questo è stato l'obiettivo dei laboratori formativi sull'insegnamento trasversale di Educazione civica, proposto ai docenti durante l'anno di prova, dal liceo “E. Fermi” di Aversa (CE), polo scolastico per la formazione Campania (Ambito 08).

Key-words

Critical thinking, teacher training, Civic Education, *post-truth*

Pensiero critico, formazione docenti, Educazione civica, *post-verità*

Introduction

Critical thinking is considered a transversal and strategic skill at all levels of training. According to a study by the *American Philosophical Association*, critical thinking is a form of self-regulatory judgment that takes place in interpretations, analyzes, evaluations, inferences and is based on considerations based on evidence, concepts, methods, criteria, contextual data. Critical thinking is divided into a number of skills and sub-skills:

1. interpretation (categorization, decoding of sentences, clarification of meanings);
2. analysis (examination of ideas, identification and analysis of arguments);
3. evaluation (evaluating assertions and arguments);
4. identification of inferences (seeking evidence, speculating to find alternatives, drawing conclusions);
5. elaboration of explanations (define results, justify procedures, present arguments);
6. self-regulation (implementing self-examination and self-correction procedures) (Facione, 1990, pp. 6-11).

On this basis, it makes it possible to select sources of information and knowledge, to elaborate knowledge autonomously, to analyze and explore problems and situations and to come to terms with them, to formulate judgments on issues of different nature, to justify ideas and to support points of view, to counter arguments and theses that do not seem convincing and founded (Ku, 2009).

The ability to think critically is supported by a number of attitudes and dispositions:

- the search for truth (courageous desire to reach ever deeper levels of knowledge, even at the cost of questioning one's own beliefs, interests and preconceptions);
- mental openness (tolerance to different points of view, self-regulation and control of possible prejudices);
- the ability to analyze (search for evidence, reference to rational procedures, attention to problematic situations, anticipation of consequences);
- systematicity (organizational capacity, focused and systematic approach to complex problems);
- confidence in oneself and one's own reasoning skills;
- willingness to research (desire to acquire knowledge and explanations even when they are not immediately evident, but require a heuristic commitment);
- maturity (prudence in formulating, suspending or revising one's judgments; awareness of the possibility of accepting different solutions as valid and of the need to reach conclusions, even if provisional and in the absence of exhaustive knowledge bases) (Facione, 1990).

Critical thinking is a general and transversal cognitive ability, but it has important applications and declinations in the context of formal learning: it is in fact at the origin of the ability to orient oneself in a text, to solve problems, to make decisions (Sanders & Moulenbelt, 2011). For this reason, it should be systematically implemented in training curricula (van Gelder, 2005). One of the limits to this implementation derives from the fact that, precisely in these contexts, there is no reference to a standardized and shared definition of this ability; consequently, a variety of assessment devices are used which, as they measure different declinations and expressions of this form of thought, do not allow an effective comparative evaluation. Interesting is the research conducted by Stephen Brookfield which recognizes the precious task of schooling to promote the conditions for an optimal development of critical thinking, integrating it within the teaching method (Brookfield, 2012). For the promotion and development of critical thinking dispositions and skills it is necessary that interventions are longitudinal and systematic, which requires adequate training in this sense for teachers who are

required to implement critical thinking work in the context of teaching. disciplines taking into account three levels of difficulty of pedagogical, methodological and organizational matrix widely recognized by teachers to whom it is necessary to pay systematic attention (Facione, 2000).

Is it right to consider critical thinking a discipline? Can it be considered something that the teacher can teach by illustrating the different thought patterns?

In answering these questions, we will try to understand the relationship between “learning to learn” and “critical thinking”. The question of education in critical thinking, which is very relevant, was addressed by John Dewey, in the work *How we think* (1910), a clear and interesting text that describes the various stages of thought. In this work Dewey preferred to adopt the term “reflective thinking” referring to

active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends (Dewey, 1910, p. 6),

that is an active, persistent and careful examination, which Dewey considered an important *educational goal*.

Later Edward Glaser, in *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking* (1941), defined the different constituent components of critical-reflective thinking, highlighting a tripartite characteristic, namely that critical thinking would be composed of the knowledge of the different methods of investigation and of logical reasoning, of knowing how to apply these methods, but also of a certain willingness to reflect and investigate. Glaser believed it necessary to make critical thinking a mental habitus, to be applied always in any context and not only when a specific task had explicitly requested it (Glaser, 1941).

Dewey argued that the formation of thought could not be promoted through a formal procedure, as it is rather the result of a largely informal process. It would therefore be deceptive and illusory to organize a course on education in critical thinking, just as the idea of a single discipline to which to entrust the training of critical thinking would be equally fallacious.

The maturation of critical skills is therefore the overall result of the entire school education, through the competition of the various disciplines and the entire school complex.

Dewey not only believed that the training of critical thinking was “indirect”, but he criticized those teachers who fixed their attention only on the particular subject that the student had to study, at that precise moment, neglecting the “underlying process” and deeper of training of permanent “mental habits”.

In *How We Think* (1910), Dewey wrote:

Each teacher is always tempted to fix his attention on a limited field of the pupil’s activity. Does the student make progress in the particular topic of arithmetic, history, geography, which is being discussed? When the teacher fixes his attention exclusively on this point, he inevitably ends up neglecting the underlying process of forming permanent habits, attitudes and interests. Yet the latter are those that matter most for the future (Dewey, 1910, p. 124).

Dewey stated that in training work there are two levels: one superficial, that is the subject of study, the other deeper, within which single knowledge, critical thinking and skills for lifelong learning or competences are not organized, but rather “mental habits”, forms of thought that for Dewey are the most important product of school education. It is the latter, the “mental habits” that most influence the future of the trainee, what Dewey called “underlying learning”. Critical thinking, therefore, cannot be taught through models, nor through a single and specific discipline; critical thinking must be a method of learning all subjects and topics, it must be the

ingredient that makes all areas of thought fruitful, it must be the ferment that guarantees the growth of the mind.

1. Critical thinking in the school of competences

The teaching of critical thinking favors how to think rather than what to think; in fact, for the pedagogist Robert Ennis critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or what to do (Ennis, 1993; 2011).

But what actions are essential for learning to think critically?

In presenting critical thinking, Ennis breaks it down into some “fundamental or peculiar actions” that subjects endowed with this ability carry out all or in part and which are interdependent (Ennis, 1962; 1991; 1993):

- identify the problem;
- analyze the topics;
- clarify central questions and answers to the problem;
- judge the credibility of the sources;
- observe and evaluate;
- deduct and evaluate the deductions of others;
- make inference;
- identify the important factors;
- define terms and evaluate definitions;
- consider the point of view of others;
- integrate information and positions to make a decision;
- proceed in an orderly and appropriate manner to the situation
- be sensitive and attentive to others;
- adequately present their point of view.

It is clear how “learning to learn” and critical thinking are intrinsically interconnected with training for skills: a student who is able to be autonomous and responsible in knowing how to apply to real life problems all that he has learned in the schools of school, is a student who knows how to fully understand how much his knowledge and strategies in his possession are adequate and functional to solving real problems and how much they require further integration of new knowledge and effective strategies, adding to this also the ability to understand whether to acquire new knowledge he simply needs to use information resources independently or to resort to the support of more competent reference figures (teachers, experts, etc.). Knowing how to recognize “when” and “how” to turn to an expert or other reference figure for help is also an expression of competence (Ennis, 2015).

The school must develop critical thinking if it wants to implement the transition from a school based only on disciplinary knowledge, to a school that, starting from the latter, aims at the achievement of skills. All this implies a change, which is not only formal: it is a question of passing from a didactics that has as its objective the scholastic success of the student through the transmission and learning of contents and procedures, to a didactics in which the student becomes the “true” protagonist of the construction of one's own learning process. On the other hand, skills are not a codified discipline, there aren't textbooks or specific manuals, which is why the traditional way of teaching doesn't work today, there is a need for a change (Halpern, 2007).

Today's challenge for the “school of competences” is to restart from critical thinking, to restart from a teaching which, overcoming the separation of knowledge, instead privileges their interconnection and contextualization. The philosopher Edgar Morin, in *La testa ben fatta. Riforma dell'insegnamento e riforma del pensiero* (2000), in taking up the first aim of the

teaching formulated by Montaigne, according to which “a well-made head is better than a well-made head”, emphasizes how it is necessary to have a principle of selection and organization that gives meaning to accumulated knowledge.

Morin writes:

a “well-made head” means that instead of accumulating knowledge it is much more important to have at the same time: a general aptitude for posing and dealing with problems; of organizing principles that make it possible to connect knowledge and give it meaning (Morin, 2000, p. 15).

The challenge of developing critical thinking, therefore, intends to favor in students the ability to be able to use the knowledge learned, favoring not the bundling of an “inert knowledge”, but rather the development of a “thought in action” (McPeck, 1981). The School must offer its students the opportunity to deal with open, challenging problems, taken from the real world, from everyday life, with the support, of course, of an instructive, constant, flexible “guide” that teaches them to “read” them in the best possible way, favoring resolution through the attribution of meaning to objects, events and situations (Moon, 2008). A “guide” who knows how to accompany them along the training path, supporting them in comparison and encouraging the ability to reflect on the strategies to be adopted, on their own interpretations and actions in order to develop the ability to discover and correct their mistakes on their own. Testing yourself to learn from your mistakes is synonymous with growth and helps you become independent (Baldacci, 2014).

It is of great importance for students, from the youngest to the teenagers, the enhancement of their experiences, but at the same time also knowing how to critically reflect on them, understanding “what is right to consider good”, “what is right to change”: this means having critical thinking, an important requirement for lifelong learning.

For the teacher who trains critical thinking, the training of women and men protagonists of the “society of competences” is important (Capobianco, 2017), in fact he doesn’t set the simple acquisition of knowledge as an educational goal, but rather considers it fundamental to be able to ensure students understanding and developing competence. In light of the constructivist paradigm, the proposed teaching model favors the activation of a constructive learning that sees the student as an active protagonist of the learning process, thanks also to a series of self-monitoring, self-control and self-regulation strategies, taught and made to experiment directly by the reflective teacher.

Teachers, through the creation of motivating learning environments, are able to involve and motivate students through *learning by doing*, which is realized through active laboratory teaching.

The reflexivity acted out by the teacher leads him to continually question himself about «how to improve his teaching», about «how to improve the educational process», about «how to help students learn», about «how to deal with the learning difficulties of some students», on «how to make them competent», on «what are the valid values to inspire educational practice», these and other questions guide the teacher who, in addition to teaching, does research on his own way of teaching. The teacher therefore puts forward a hypothesis, experiments it, then on the basis of the results obtained, formulates another hypothesis and puts it into practice to see what it produces. By doing so he always continues to learn and teach by learning, but above all he learns to self-evaluate (Strollo & Capobianco, 2022), managing to observe the results achieved (theory-practice-theory). This type of approach to teaching improves the professionalism of the teacher and the effectiveness of the educational intervention, as the *agency* of the teacher is expressed through a conscious, attentive and committed *modus operandi*, certainly not improvised or the result of suggestions, but coherent as it is able to use a well-structured

research strategy, a more detailed scientific procedure, therefore it does not expound opinions, but demonstrates theories validated by scientific research (Asquini, 2019).

2. Civic education to promote critical thinking

In light of what has been said, the introduction in all schools of the first and second cycle of education of the transversal teaching of civic education, a discipline capable of giving substance to ethics, can only be accompanied by great trust and passionate participation. responsibility and sustainability (United Nations, 2020), to foster full awareness of being a citizen of the world (Santerini, 2001).

The teacher, through various ideas for reflection on civic, social, ethical and environmental issues, educates students in the use of critical thinking, in an era in which reality is mixed with fiction and where the so-called post-truth dominates the world. to communicate, to inform and to discuss. Today we are surrounded by post-truths, by completely false news that are spread as true and that are able to influence readers, becoming a real topic, with an apparent logical sense. Through social media, the very young absorb, without exercising their critical thinking, an exorbitant number of fake news, whose diffusion has increased exponentially.

An education in critical thinking is urgently needed, an education of civic sense is urgently needed.

Civic Education offers students the opportunity to tackle open, challenging problems drawn from the real world, from everyday life with the guidance of the teacher, an attentive, aware, reflective and flexible “guide” who teaches them to read them in the best possible way, favoring resolution through the attribution of meaning to thoughts, events and situations.

Starting from the 2020/2021 school year, Civic Education has returned to school as a result of law no. 92 of 20 August 2019 (*Introduction of the school teaching of civic education*), which introduced this new discipline in schools with a total annual timetable of not less than 33 hours, to be implemented across the board (Law 92/2019, article 2).

The concept of transversality, cited several times in the articles of law 92/2019 (the adjective “transversal” occurs 9 times), summarizes the desire not to delegate Civic Education to the programming of a single discipline, but to enhance the idea of joint ownership. The latter concept has been better explored in the *Guidelines for the teaching of Civic Education*, adopted in application of the law of 20 August 2019, n. 92 and issued on 22 June 2020 with decree no. 35 of the Minister of Education.

The *Guidelines* formalize the figure of a “coordinating teacher” who is responsible for coordinating and formulating, during the scrutiny, the evaluation proposal to be included in the evaluation document, obviously after having acquired the knowledge elements from all teachers. of the team or the Class Council that have carried out civic education courses.

The transversality and collegial co-responsibility of teaching within the teaching team and the Class Council represent the two cornerstones on which the “civic education curriculum” must be structured, the issues of which were first listed in article 3 of Law 92 / 2019, and subsequently better outlined in Annex A *Guidelines* for teaching civic education (M.I., 2020, pp. 2-3).

Article 3 of Law 92/2019 (*Development of skills and learning objectives*) provides a long and detailed list of all the issues that must be explored and declined in the “cross curriculum of Civic Education”:

- a) Constitution, institutions of the Italian State, the European Union and international organizations; history of the flag and the national anthem;
- b) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- c) digital citizenship education;

- d) fundamental elements of law, with particular regard to labor law;
- e) environmental education, eco-sustainable development and protection of the environmental heritage, identity, production and territorial and agri-food excellence;
- f) education to legality and to fight against the mafia;
- g) education to respect and enhance the cultural heritage and common public goods;
- h) basic training in civil protection (Law 92/2019, p.2).

To all these issues, paragraph 2 of article 3 of the law also adds road education, health and well-being education, education to volunteering and active citizenship, and finally all the initiatives aimed at nourishing and strengthening the respect for people, animals and nature (Law 92/2019, article 3).

All these issues listed in the Law have been better articulated by the Technical-Scientific Committee which, in the Guidelines, has grouped them into three conceptual cores:

1. constitution, law (national and international), legality and solidarity;
2. sustainable development, environmental education, knowledge and protection of heritage and the territory;
3. digital citizenship (Annex B of the Guidelines).

The Guidelines for the teaching of Civic Education, adopted in application of the law of 20 August 2019, n. 92, issued on 22 June 2020 with decree no. 35 of the Minister of Education, promote the correct implementation of legislative innovation which requires a revision of the school curricula to adapt them to the new provisions.

The Minister's decree no.35, which sets a series of indications, in implementation of the legislative provision, the most considerable part of the decree are the three annexes: the most consistent is certainly Annex A, containing the "true" guidelines, accompanied by attachment B (Additions to the profile of competences at the end of the first cycle of education referring to the transversal teaching of civic education) and by attachment C (Additions to the educational, cultural and professional profile of the student at the end of the second cycle of the education and training system, referring to the transversal teaching of civic education).

Therefore, in compliance with organizational and didactic autonomy, each single school institution must design the cross curriculum of Civic Education according to the Guidelines, in order to give substance and shape to a school open to meeting and discussion, able to offer not only opportunities for dialogue, but also moments of reflection, exercise of thought and opportunities for active activity. The transversal teaching of civic education represents a change of trend, compared to those who want to continue to see the school (according to a notional logic) only as a mechanism for distributing knowledge and those who instead would like a school that believes in the possibility of training completes, through education for global citizenship, a school that offers its students the opportunity to practice critical thinking (Capobianco, 2021).

3. The training of teachers in critical thinking through civic education

In line with the request to train teachers in the design, implementation and evaluation of the cross-curriculum of civic education, the *Enrico Fermi* Lyceum in Aversa (CE), a pole school for training in Area 08 of the Campania, has activated, from February to April 2021, no less than nine training workshops for newly hired teachers and teachers with role changes (school year 2020/2021). In particular, the training workshop "New curriculum of civic education, as per Law 20 August 2019, n ° 92" was designed and built with the aim of training teachers to encourage the development of critical thinking through cross-cutting teaching civics education. Starting from the deepening of the three conceptual nuclei contained in Annex A of the Ministerial Decree 35/2020, attention was paid to the interconnection and transversality with

respect to the disciplines (for the teachers of the Primary School and the Secondary School of First and Second degree) and the fields of experience (for kindergarten teachers).

The training workshop (*New curriculum of civic education, as per Law 20 August 2019, n°92*), lasting 6 hours, starting from a broad reflection on the importance of a teaching model that develops critical thinking in students, has activated a didactic planning path of the Civic Education curricula, in line with the PTOF of the school to which it belongs and in connection with the Competence Profile at the end of the first cycle. Each curriculum had to be accompanied by both specific learning objectives, broken down by year, and skills development goals. Furthermore, in a subsequent step, after the second module, the lecturers-students were asked to compile the evaluation rubric of the planning work of the civic education curriculum developed by each one. Each student was offered the opportunity to work individually or in groups (max. 3 or 4 teachers); the many didactic-educational proposals designed by the lecturers-students in the context of transversal teaching of Civic Education, are tangible examples of a school that is truly able to guarantee inclusive and equitable quality education (UN, Agenda 2030), but above all of a school that is able to satisfy the needs of social justice and collective well-being.

The training workshops for newly hired teachers and teachers with role changes were carried out using remote telematic methods, using the synchronous teaching model, divided into the following phases:

1. *live webinar* with interaction between the expert / facilitator and the students;
2. job proposal, by the expert, on the various topics covered in the webinar with reference to real contexts;
3. creation and sending to the training center, by the newly hired teacher, of the didactic products prepared, also on the basis of personal experience;
4. expert feedback on the work produced.

The activities were carried out using the *Zoom application* (for videoconferencing) and the *polofermi8* platform, an e-learning environment to upload study materials by the expert and individual products (project work, case analysis, thematic report) related to the topics addressed by the students. The platform was also used as a virtual classroom for the exchange of documents, general communications and to access the repository of the training experiences developed in the last years of the *National Teachers Plan*.

Conclusions

Through the training workshops, 275 teachers were trained (from Kindergarten, Primary School and First and Second Grade Secondary School), who all teach in schools in the Campania region sadly known as the Terra dei fuochi (*Land of Fires*).

Training in critical thinking through civic education could represent a valid tool in the fight against educational poverty that sees Campania, in first place, among the Italian regions, for the Educational Poverty Index (IPE). In fact, the report *Nuotare contro corrente* (2018) by Save the Children, attributes to Campania the negative record of being among all the Italian regions the geographical area with the highest Educational Poverty Index (IPE) (127.8), a alarming and worrying since the analysis carried out highlights the direct relationship between educational poverty and early school leaving.

Forming the civic awareness of students through the transversal teaching of civic education also means caring for society as a whole, promoting sustainability, guaranteeing social justice and promoting collective well-being. Therefore, the introduction of civic education, as a discipline, in the Italian school is certainly important

to foster awareness of the common good, to form a truly planetary mentality and behaviors, to develop a perspective that is not only international, but truly planetary, terrestrial consciousness (Capobianco & Vittoria, 2020, p.128).

It is clear, and has been reiterated several times, that the role of the school is fundamental (Save the Children, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c), because only by managing to activate the right training opportunities for all, it will be possible to contribute to bridging the gap and to investing in the future (Nussbaum, 2012), thus activating a true process of social and formative regeneration. Anchored to active learning practices, aimed at facilitating in students the ability to learn to think critically and to promote “critically reflective” teaching in teachers, the activated laboratory experiences promote a cognitive approach oriented to “thinking critically”.

The critical analysis process facilitates reflection, in terms of self-awareness, resulting in “critical thinker” students who have learned to develop their own critical habits and habits of reflection. In this way, critical thinking that coordinates with education cultivates those tools necessary for broad thinking, reinforces the maieutic ability to enlighten and emancipate “autonomous thinking” as human free research, determines the thought-action link, making oneself able to see the how of the connections, favors a process of awareness, intentionality, responsibility towards its “correct use” that gives value, guides the experience, stimulates the acquisition of reflective capacity and the active transition skills structured in other contexts.

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