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Introduction to the Special Section. Character and Citizenship: Towards an Emerging ‘Strong Program’?

*Andrea M. Maccarini**

Author information

*Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies, University of Padova, Italy.

Contact author’s email address

*andrea.maccarini@unipd.it

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Introduction to the Special Section. Character and Citizenship: Towards an Emerging ‘Strong Program’?

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The principal questions addressed in this special issue concern a crucial dimension of the educational agenda for 21st century Western societies: in the complex, uncertain, rapidly changing world we live in, which character traits matter most? How are they related with the development of a cohesive society with better rates of employability and innovation, especially among young generations? And how are they best developed? Within this context, special attention must be devoted to citizenship: what are the skills and virtues required for young people to play their role as fully integrated citizens in the emergent European economic, political, social and cultural space? And how can character education improve their social and political participation? Therefore, the scholarly challenge to be met consists of developing the theory of character education and its relation with citizenship education within a sound conceptual frame. This involves integrating approaches, models, data and research methods concerning character traits and citizenship education in Europe. These should also be connected with (i) diverse socialization agencies and the ways they can influence educational outcomes, and (ii) life outcomes in many crucial areas of personal, professional and social life. As part of this general scholarly aim, the question arises about whether there is an empirically emerging common educational framework throughout Europe, that prefigures some sort of new *Bildung* responding to these challenges.

*Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies, University of Padova, Italy. E-mail: andrea.maccarini@unipd.it

Three, mutually related features of contemporary global society are affecting Western, particularly European society and its future development, thereby making the proposed challenge particularly relevant and timely. They can be summarized as follows:

(i) Social cohesion: developing a sound knowledge base about character and citizenship education and the related problems, prospects, and good practices is extremely relevant for the emergence of an innovative and inclusive society, both at the national and the European level. This in turn can result in better coordination between training, education and labour market requirements. Furthermore, the emphasis on such long term implications of education and youth socialization couldn't be more timely, since the extended transition to adulthood, the limited political and social participation among youngsters and the high youth unemployment rate in many European countries are currently prompting serious questions about what the practice and meaning of citizenship will turn out to be during the life course of these new generations. There is an equally important cultural side to this challenge. Most European societies are facing social and cultural fragmentation, and a widespread loss of meaning. This brings about two different, though related reactions, namely the rise of radical individualism or the sheer rejection of Western democracy associated with the risk of intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism. Thus, the prospects for social and cultural integration on the part of various cultural, religious, and lifestyle communities appears to be one of the top priorities for a stronger and safer European Union. Here a common framework for a full-blown educational agenda could play a significant role.

(ii) Technology: technology's exponential growth is rapidly compounding the problems via automation and offshoring, which are producing social disruptions. Education is falling behind, as it did at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This brings up serious issues regarding the necessary technical skills, but also involves a wider and deeper impact on human reflexivity, the way people learn and think, and even calls into question some dimensions of personal and social identity.

(iii) Economy: the recent global crisis is raising serious behavioural and mind-set issues about which character traits, and what sense of citizenship, can enhance employability and entrepreneurship. In this context, the problem of the necessary skills for economic performance is paralleled by the challenge of producing sustainable, long term development.

The three challenges outlined above require profound innovation in educational cultures and practices. As a consequence, it is relevant to draw together the resources of cutting edge theory and research about the character and civic traits necessary to live in a complex world, where the combinatorial explosion of possibilities prompts tremendous opportunities and risks.

The complexity I have quickly outlined is being faced by multiple approaches and scholarly as well as policy oriented research programs, particularly in psychology and the educational sciences. However, it seems still difficult to connect such different perspectives in a systematic way, although their convergence appears as evident as their often profound differences. Moreover, the emergence of changing educational psycho-semantics, as well as the change in the educational agendas being pushed by national and international actors call for a sociological interpretation that may account for their development and rationale. This is what the essays collected here are beginning to do. We are starting to pull some strings together, to generate dialogue and to foster interdisciplinary reflection on a possible emerging paradigm in education and on its inner divides.

The first article, by Chiara Pattaro, aptly opens this special section with a fundamental discussion concerning the concept of character education. Starting from the growing interest about this theme in recent years, Pattaro employs the notion of ‘character education’ as a category to conduct an exploratory research on the main tendencies in the international literature. Such an investigation covers the main topics examined under the heading of ‘character education’, and explores the way these topics develop in terms of theory and empirical research. Pattaro examines titles and abstracts of a huge lot of articles published in 145 peer-reviewed academic journals over the period 2005-2014, selected from Education Source, ERIC, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection and SocINDEX databases. Titles and abstracts have been analyzed through the T-Lab software, using different content analysis techniques. Although many ambiguities affect the meaning attributed to character education, the author identifies some key trends that emerge from the reviewed literature, as the cited articles seem to agree that character education can play an important role in the construction of children and adolescents’ identity, and can result in a distinctive type of intervention in the domain of youth education and socialization.

In the next article, Maddalena Colombo problematizes the notion of character, discussing its possible role in a time of crisis of the educational charisma. Her attention goes to the meaning such a concept can still retain, given the deconstructive influence post-modernity has had on most educational systems – and on the teachers' role and legitimation.

Andrea Maccarini presents a discussion of the emergent psycho-semantic in the educational discourse, trying to provide a sociological interpretation of their meanings, and highlighting both the divergent assumptions on which they rest and the possible, even necessary convergence they may display. Character and socio-emotional skills thus appear as the reference points within the educational domain of different ways to react to the massive social change characterizing contemporary society. They may come to represent the educational instantiation of different anthropological plans, or find a relative integration within a unified perspective.

Charles Glenn's article then shifts attention to the crucial relationship between character and citizenship. The author highlights an important paradox within the American school system. He reminds that the creation of systems of public schooling in Western Europe and North America over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was primarily intended to develop the civic virtues, including national loyalty, considered essential to the nation-building process. And such a project was often carried out in explicit opposition to schooling with a religious character that was provided independent of government sponsorship. However, Glenn explains that in recent decades public schools have for a variety of reasons largely abandoned the mission of moral and civic education and, ironically, it is now faith-based schools that are most consistently seeking to shape loyal and engaged citizens. After a brief survey of research on Catholic and Evangelical schools, the article provides some preliminary findings from a study of Islamic secondary schools in the United States.

Finally, Cristina Stringher closes the special section with an important essay concerning 'learning to learn'. The interest of this article lies in its dealing with a particular kind of competence, which has often been regarded as crucial in the current societal conditions. Listed among the eight European key competencies, this is a complex concept which has recently re-attracted the interest of researchers worldwide. Moreover,

learning to learn could play a connecting role between cognitive and non-cognitive competencies. Stringher's paper examines the notion of learning to learn for the development of an assessment battery providing teachers with essential information on the current state of learning competence in preschool children. This assessment serves formative purposes and represents a basis for interventions geared at children's optimal development, in coherence with national curricular guidelines and with the recent European Quality Framework for ECEC.

The paper addresses the theoretical basis of tool development, areas of assessment and relevant rationale behind these choices. A roadmap for the empirical phase of the validation study is also sketched.

What these different essays offer is a theoretical overview and some fresh data concerning issues falling within the range of character and citizenship education. As it once used to be when foreign lands were discovered, some time might pass before we realize that they belong to the same continent. The same goes for most of these issues, whose strict connection still has to be recognized and made sense of. We would be happy to have moved a few steps in the right direction, reinforcing the rather shaky grasp the social sciences so often have of the educational processes that take place in global society.