Vidmantas Tūtlys, Lina Vaitkutė and Christof Nägele (Editors)

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Editorial

This collection of conference papers presents the Proceedings of the 5th Crossing Boundaries Conference in Vocational Education and Training taking place from 25 to 26 May 2023 in Kaunas, Lithuania. The current proceedings continue the tradition that started in Bremen 2015, followed by Rostock 2017, Valencia 2019, Muttenz and Bern in 2021. Like the conference itself, the publication of proceedings follows open access principle in order to facilitate open sharing of knowledge and research ideas in the community of VET researchers.

The Crossing Boundary is a free-of-charge conference of VET research aiming to promote open, multidisciplinary and future-oriented VET research agenda worldwide**.** The special focus of this conference is on the vocational education and training transformations for digital, sustainable and socially fair future. The proceedings of the 5th conference include 56 papers written by more 115 scholars according to the three thematic strands: systems and policy of VET and lifelong learning, educational institutions and institutional settings in the VET and skill formation, VET actors and stakeholders. The topics of conference papers are very diverse and provide insights on the VET development in the conditions of digitalization, changing roles of the VET providers, teachers and learners, sustainability of the VET provision, challenges of the VET provision in the developing economies, empowering effects of VET, changing roles and work of VET teaching staff and many other issues.

Participants were selected based on submitting a proposal for the conference, which went through a double-blind review process. If accepted, a short full paper had to be handed in before the conference to be published in the book of proceedings. Submitting a paper is necessary condition for participation in the conference. Although the conference papers are edited, the responsibility for the papers resides with the authors, as well as the copyright.

We want to thank our VETNET colleagues for their support in the review process, without which the proceedings would not have been ready before the conference. Of course, authors and co-authors are the most important contributors to this volume and, therefore, need to be thanked for their effort.

You will find all papers for download on www.vetnetsite.org. A printed book can be ordered through amazon.com.

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Promoting Citizenship Competence in Italian Vocational Education and Training through Assessment

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Abstract

European VET is becoming increasingly important in promoting inclusiveness, social justice, and democratic citizenship. “Citizenship competence”, which has been recently introduced in Italian initial VET (iVET), can contribute to the pursuit of these objectives.
Based on the assumption that assessment can be formative and thus can help to improve learning processes, this research aims to develop an *ad hoc* assessment tool for Citizenship competence in Italian iVET inspired by formative assessment principles.
The research methodology adopts a mixed methods perspective. The first qualitative phase aimed at understanding iVET institution’s characteristics, needs, and objectives and teaching strategies related to Citizenship competence. Next, based on these data, the quantitative phase aimed to develop and validate a set of standardized assessment instruments.
Despite data from the quantitative instruments still being analyzed, the exploratory phase provided meaningful data on how iVET teachers are promoting Citizenship competence and the role of citizenship education in Italian iVET.

Keywords

civic and citizenship education, vocational education and training, competency-based assessment, soft skills, measuring instrument

1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing assignment of non-vocational objectives to European VET, such as promoting inclusiveness, equal opportunities, social justice, and democratic citizenship (Council of the European Union, 2020a; 2020b). The introduction of "Citizenship competence" in the Italian initial VET (iVET) curriculum represents a significant change toward these outcomes. Assuming that assessment can be formative (Black & Wiliam, 1998), the present research aims to support the iVET capacity to promote active and democratic citizenship through the development of a Citizenship competence assessment tool. The research question is*: is it possible to develop a Citizenship competence assessment tool that can consider both iVET institutions’ regulations and needs as well as pedagogical principles such as formative assessment?*

The research design adopts a mixed methods perspective: an exploratory design with sequential steps (Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015). The first exploratory-qualitative phase aimed to lay out the object of research and the variables to be inquired. The second step, mostly

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quantitative, consisted in designing an assessment tool for Citizenship competence validated through the administration to a sample of $n \approx 500$ students in 2 iVET institutions in Italy.

The exploratory phase's results suggest that iVET institutions have always been attentive to the issue of civic education. The introduction of Citizenship competences did not have a strong impact on teachers' teaching strategies, except for the assessment which has been reported as problematic.

Moreover, teachers' efforts focus mainly on promoting the principles and values of the national Constitution and this is done through classroom debate, which is considered engaging and promotes dialogue between different points of view on political, social, and cultural issues.

The assessment tool validation will provide data on the Citizenship competences of Italian iVET students and possible correlations between competence levels and background variables.

Although data from the quantitative step of the research are still being analyzed, the exploratory phase highlighted some interesting aspects of how iVET teachers are promoting Citizenship competence in their teaching and the role of citizenship education in Italian iVET.

2 The role of Vocational Education and Training in the education of citizens

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is defined as all education and training which aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills, and competences required in a certain job or, more broadly, in the labor market (CEDEFOP, 2014). Despite this explicit purpose of VET, in recent years many policy guidelines also assigned to VET a role in fostering inclusiveness, equal opportunities, resilience, and social fairness (Council of the European Union, 2020a) as well as strengthening democratic citizenship (Council of the European Union, 2020b). This has been considered important according to VET stakeholders and experts as well, as highlighted by a CEDEFOP questionnaire in which respondents stated that the most desirable characteristic of VET in 2035 should be the capacity to prepare students to fully participate in society and to become active citizens. (CEDEFOP, 2020).

In the field of the European key competences for lifelong learning, Citizenship competence is the most closely connected to the idea of active and democratic citizenship, being also considered a prerequisite for social transformation, as it is defined as the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, to develop a more democratic, sustainable, and inclusive society (Council of the European Union, 2018).

Developing Citizenship competence in VET learners appears urgent considering that citizenship education is less developed in the VET curriculum than in the general education curriculum in most European countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

In such a scenario, the introduction of "Citizenship competence" in Italian initial VET (iVET) in 2019 represents a significant change in terms of promoting a more democratic and sustainable society. iVET paths in Italy primarily aim to equip students from grade 9 to grade 12 with skills for the labor market, but also to develop basic competences that enable the fulfillment of mandatory education. Since 2019, Citizenship competence is part of such basic competences.

In iVET teaching is organized into subjects and each subject plays a role in developing one or more competences. Having a certain amount of autonomy, institutions can decide if Citizenship competence must be developed within subjects with a similar knowledge domain (like first language, history, etc.) or if it has to be taught through a dedicated discipline.

Italian iVET also presents some characteristics that make the introduction of Citizenship competence not only appropriate but also urgent: 14.7 percent of pupils have a migratory background (against national data of 7.3 percent for upper secondary school) and 7.6 percent have disabilities (against a national figure of 2.6 percent) (MIUR, 2019a; 2019b). In addition, iVET is more attractive to students at risk of dropping out of school and with failures in previous school paths (ISFOL, 2014).

These data raise the urgency for reflection and the development of teaching practices focused on citizenship, inclusion, and diversities in VET. The introduction of Citizenship competence is worthy but, given the issues related to competence assessment that will be explored, call for the support of educational research.

3 The assessment of citizenship competences

3.1 Citizenship competences

The concept of citizenship competences has only recently spread in academic literature. However, despite a growing debate on these competences, there is no agreement on a common definition of them (Torney-Purta et al., 2015).

Another problem with citizenship competences is their overlapping with the concept of key competences (Losito, 2015), sometimes defined as soft skills or transversal competences. Regardless of how they are defined, the distinctive feature of key competences is that they do not refer to specific tasks and are useful in any professional or life context (Pellerey, 2017). Another feature that characterizes such competences is that they are usually identified in institutional frameworks (Curtis, 2010). Since soft skills are useful in any life context, all of them could be considered citizenship competences, given that "to be a citizen" is something related to all areas of an individual's life. A possibility to overcome this problematic overlap is the identification – among soft skills – of competences more directly definable as citizenship competencies (Losito, 2009, p. 107) and which can be defined as citizenship-specific competencies (Losito, 2014, p. 67). It is also notable that some works that focus on soft skills encompass citizenship competences as well, identifying them as a specific competence sub-domain (Binkley et al., 2012; Kechagias, 2011).

There are also various frameworks developed by international organizations that aim to define learning objectives related to the specific area of citizenship education. These objectives are defined as sets of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values related to participation in civic and social life in democratic societies (Council of Europe, 2018; OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2015). It is noteworthy that some of these international institutions have also developed frameworks for transversal competences, but they have developed specific frameworks for citizenship competencies anyhow, in line with the perspective that considers them as a sub-domain of transversal competences.

3.2 Assessment of transversal and citizenship competences

Considering citizenship competences as transversal ones helps in addressing their assessment. Even if there is a small number of principles recognized for the assessment of transversal competences (Binkley et al. 2012), this can help to broaden the tools used to assess citizenship competences, which would benefit from an expansion in instruments' scope and modes of assessment (Daas et al., 2016).

It is recognized that transversal competences assessment should be tackled through an integrated and holistic approach, meaning that different tools pertaining to different assessment paradigms must be employed (Kechagias, 2011; Luppi & Bolzani, 2019). What is crucial is not the simple application of standardized assessment methods, but rather the definition of the learning objectives and the adoption of multiple methods for their assessment (Curtis, 2010).

This "holistic" approach must integrate with some of the principles considered effective in the more general field of competence assessment, such as the principle of triangulation (Pellerey, 2004), which involves, given the impossibility of observing a competency as a whole and only being able to infer its presence through the observation of a few manifest elements, also the integration of different points of view: subjective point of view (self-assessment);

intersubjective point of view (e.g., peer assessment); and objective point of view (performance assessment). This principle is well suitable for citizenship education (Castoldi, 2022).

Moreover, citizenship competences assessment methods should converge toward a formative perspective (Gibb, 2014), which implies engaging the concept of formative assessment. Formative assessment can be broadly defined as using assessment as a tool to gain evidence that teachers can use to improve their teaching (Black & Wiliam, 2009). It is recognized that the use of formative assessment strategies (such as providing feedback or activating students as owners of their learning) can have a positive impact on learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998) making assessment an integral part of the teaching-learning processes. This means that, in the context of Italian iVET, the innovation of Citizenship competence assessment in a formative perspective could strengthen the ability of iVET institutions to promote active and democratic citizenship among their students.

4 Strengthening citizenship education in VET through assessment: an empirical research

4.1 Research design

As part of a doctoral program in Education studies, the research presented here aims to develop a set of assessment tools for Citizenship competence in Italian iVET.

The research design follows a mixed methods perspective. This perspective does not only refer to the combined use of tools pertaining to different traditional research paradigms (positivism/post-positivism and constructivism) but in recent years has reached the status of a specific approach to research inspired by pragmatism (Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism's essential principle in methodology consists in adopting, from time to time, the most appropriate tool (the one "that works") for investigating single aspects of the research object without establishing in advance a rigid methodological design (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The present research design is an *exploratory design using sequential phases*, consisting of an exploratory phase characterized by the prevalent use of qualitative tools followed by a deepening phase in which quantitative methods prevail (Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015).

The first phase is aimed at reconstructing the experience of people who work in the contexts have in relation to the phenomenon under examination. The data analysis then provides the cues needed to formulate the operational definition of the constructs and build quantitative tools aimed to detect them (Trinchero & Robasto, 2019).

Since Citizenship Competence is a policy novelty that needs to be translated into educational practice, it was decided to start with professionals who operate in training institutions and to investigate their awareness, perspectives, and needs regarding this competence.

The exploratory phase was then carried out with the administration of interviews with two key actors belonging to two different training institutions selected with a non-probabilistic random sampling. Two figures (one per institution) who cover both roles of teaching and coordination were identified. Interviews analysis was done through deductive – or *a priori* – analysis (Bingham & Witkowksy, 2022) which revealed the need to deepen the assessment of Citizenship competence.

The exploratory phase of the study continued with a second series of interviews involving two teachers of the same iVET institutions to gain information on the teaching and assessment practices currently in use and to identify what is considered more important and pursued with greater awareness by the institutions concerning the promotion of citizenship competence. This was done because, although official guidelines state attitudes, skills, and knowledge related to citizenship competence, it is not necessarily the case that all these objectives are actively

pursued in practice. Moreover, information about teaching can help to develop assessment strategies that could better suit the classroom routine.

Based on the results of the exploratory phase interviews, it was decided to develop an assessment tool for Citizenship competence. Specifically, the tool aims to combine, on one hand, teachers' needs and normative guidelines' educational objectives, and on the other hand, some principles recognized as necessary for the assessment of soft skills. The research questions the feasibility of an assessment tool able to address all the previously mentioned issues.

An assessment framework has been developed (see Table 1). The framework includes two dimensions of competence (attitudes and skills/competences) paired with the tools to be used to assess them and a content domain that specifies the subject matter to be assessed. As teachers stated that Constitution's values and principles are the main educational objectives, the first part of the Italian Constitution has been analyzed through thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2014); this process led to identify three main themes, which constitute the three dimensions of the content domain: "democracy and equality"; "freedom and fundamental rights"; "civic-mindedness and solidarity".

Table 1
Assessment framework for Citizenship competence in Italian iVET

Competence dimension	**Assessment tool**	**Content domain**		
		Democracy and equality	Freedom and fundamental rights	Civic-mindedness and solidarity
Attitudes	Questionnaire (n. of items)	7	6	7
Skill / Competence	Rubric (holistic) (n. of criteria)	1	1	1

The first competence dimension is attitudes. To address this dimension a student self-assessment questionnaire has been developed, with 20 items covering the three content domain's dimensions: 7 items for "democracy and equality", 6 items for "freedom and fundamental rights" and 7 items for "civic-mindedness and solidarity". The questionnaire aims to measure students' attitudes toward Constitution's principles and values and allow to address the subjective point of view of assessment triangulation.

The second competence dimension to be assessed focuses on the coherence between students' behavior and the values they expressed in the three dimensions of the content domain and thus it can be assessed by teachers' observations. This dimension is conceptualized as in between skill and competence because it can be considered as a skill due to its observability and its being representative of a "being able to", however, it is impossible to cut off the mere ability from the whole competence: to behave consistently with Constitution's values and principles involve multiple meta-cognitive and affective subject's resources. The assessment tool is a holistic rubric (Brookhart, 2013) with a single criterion for each content domain and it can be filled by teachers referring to observed students' behaviors during classroom spontaneous or organized debates.

The tryout of the tools has been carried out by administering them in two classes of both iVET institutions. After the tryout, meetings with teachers were held to check the comprehensibility of the tools, suitability, and practicability in the context, as well as to gather any opinions from the teachers. To respond to some issues raised by teachers after the tryout, the questionnaire's items were simplified in their wording and a box has been added to the rubric so teachers can signal to the researcher when a student does not have sufficient language proficiency to properly understand the questionnaire, while still allowing him or her the

freedom to fill in order to avoid the occurrence of stigmatizing situations. After the tryout, a user manual containing guidance on assessment, competences assessment, formative assessment, and tools administration guidelines has been prepared, delivered, and explained to teachers before administration.

The administration began in January 2023 and is expected to be completed by the end of February 2023. In the first institution, where Citizenship competence is developed within other subjects, the administration is carried out by 10 teachers in 12 classes. In the second institution, where Citizenship competence is developed by a dedicated subject called “citizenship”, the administration is carried out by a single teacher in 12 classes. Classes from all years of study and vocational paths are participating in the study and the total number of students involved is expected to be approximately 500.

Data from the questionnaire will be subjected to item analysis. Overall internal consistency will be tested, as well as the correctness of hypothesized content domain dimensions through exploratory factorial analysis. Additional analysis will consist in measuring the possible correlation between the questionnaire and rubric results. Finally, possible correlations between results and background variables such as age, gender, year of course, and the professional path will be considered.

4.2 First results

The exploratory-qualitative phase has been completed. In particular, the analysis of the first series of interviews brought out two main issues.

The first is that key actors claim to be aware of the centrality of citizenship education in their working contexts. They said that students who enroll in iVET courses failed in other school paths, distrust educational institutions, oppose the rules, present heterogeneous ethnic-cultural backgrounds, and are in conditions of socioeconomic fragility. In this context, trainers always – even before the introduction of Citizenship competence – paid great attention to personal, social, and civic education.

The second key element is that, even if the new normative guidelines involved some adjustment in teaching practices, the issue perceived as problematic is about “how to assess” Citizenship competence. Adequate assessment strategies have not been introduced, on the one hand, because teachers are in a phase of transition, so a reflection and practice on the assessment of Citizenship competence have not yet been undertaken, and on the other hand, because there is a certain skepticism about the very possibility of assessing a construct with such blurred contours.

Regarding the educational objectives that teachers claim to be most important, the analysis of the second series of interviews suggested the “capacity to behave accordingly to national Constitution’s values and principles” (as stated in guidelines for Citizenship competence). This is considered the starting point for all the other Citizenship education learning goals, claimed as “too ambitious” for the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of most of the students enrolled in the courses. Teachers claimed that they not only want their students to know these values and principles, but they want to ensure students to “embrace” them. The educational activity perceived as most effective in this regard is the "classroom debate": it often arises spontaneously starting from the topics considered important by the students, it is engaging and allows different points of view to dialogue on political, social, and cultural issues.

As data emerged from the tryout, it is possible to report that, while filling out the questionnaire, many students asked for clarification of some concepts and some moments of debate occurred. This is interesting because carries out some formative functions of the assessment: on the one hand, it makes teachers reflect on topics they take for granted (e.g., equality), and on the other hand, stimulates debate and reflection among students on citizenship issues.

5 Further developments

Once the standardized tools are validated, they will be enriched with other assessment strategies based on the teaching activities that use the results of the questionnaires and rubrics as a starting stimulus, thus integrating quantitative and qualitative assessment tools. Consistently with the teaching activities already in use, one could, for example, propose debate-based assessment strategies (Council of Europe, 2021).

Finally, once all the tools are validated, they will form a single assessment device that will be delivered by the teachers who participated in the study and that can be used by them to improve assessment and consequently the promotion of Citizenship Competence in their iVET institutions.

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