



EDUCATION AND COVID-19: THE IMPERATIVE OF GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

*By Get up and Goals team!*¹

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The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the examples of discontinuity in social life which are usually the object of study for historians. Even without the benefit of historical hindsight, it is already possible to observe some changes in our way of thinking, living and teaching. As in any crisis situation, as well as the evident suffering, it is also possible to imagine some of the opportunities which big social changes can potentially bring.

The current public health emergency is reminding us, consistent with the 2030 U.N. Agenda, that only one habitable planet exists, that interdependency between nations, human beings and ecosystems cannot be ignored without consequence, and credible solutions to global problems cannot be based exclusively on national or nationalistic perspectives.

Values of the GCE

In this context, we cannot fail to mention the values which are foundational to Global Citizenship Education (GCE), essential for the achievement of Agenda, target 4.7 (Ensuring a qualitative – inclusive and equitable – education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all) and pre-condition for the achievement of all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

If GCE is a “... *framing paradigm which encapsulates how education can develop the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes learners need for securing a world which is more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable*” (UNESCO, 2014, page 9), there is a strong connection between this educational approach

¹ <https://getupandgoalsproject.pt/>.

² [CISP - Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli.](#)

and the choices that the humanity will make at social, cultural, political and economic levels in order to overcome this crisis and prevent the development of others.

It might be useful to consider some concepts and competences which are characteristic of GCE so we can analyse the situation from an overall perspective and imagine future scenarios and possible actions.

1. Historical discontinuity

The **first concept** is **historical discontinuity**. This is not a category that people are used to dealing with, and the spread of COVID-19 has confirmed such unpreparedness. For decades, in the 'Global North', we have thought that life expectancy would increase and healthcare systems would become a cost that could be limited – in a context of a generally health care situation that was destined to improve – and big epidemics would belong to history or to fiction stories that happened in past centuries or in territories far away from us. In reality, **past events still resonate and belie the idea of linear and constant progress**. As a species, we have not learned from the beginning of the twentieth century, when the First World War interrupted the idea that civil rights were improving inexorably – at least in the part of the world that later would be called “Western World”. Neither have we learned from 1929, 1973 and 2008 when unexpected economic crisis stopped the average wealth growth, which seemed to be guaranteed by the very nature of capitalism.

2. Interconnection

The **second concept** is **interconnection**. We all know that social and environmental realities are interconnected, and that the flap of a butterfly's wings may cause a tornado in far places. However, it is a concept that can be difficult to understand and it could be effective to think of it in terms of concrete examples. If we link COVID-19 with three big themes – (1) the relationship between human beings and nature, (2) (international and gender) inequalities, and (3) migrations – we find that each of these connections offer a helpful lens through which overview and understand current events and, hopefully, to react with positive solutions.

An example of the impact of the relationship between humans, nature and COVID-19 is available on a video, by the European Spatial Agency, at *YouTube*³. The video evidences the impact of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂), a polluting gas known for the damage it causes to the human respiratory system. It shows a drop in NO₂ in Northern Italy during the weeks of limited mobility, and more shockingly, shows that Northern Italy and places like greater Madrid, where NO₂ levels were at the highest in January, were the European areas most impacted by COVID-19. This does not represent evidence of a cause-effect relationship, but it is one of the many connections between pollution and epidemic effects – interconnections that researchers are continuing to examine and to induce public opinion to reflect upon.

A second interconnection involving the socio-economic effects of the virus involves the concept of **inequalities**. **If COVID-19 is equal in its nature to all of us, it is not in its consequences**. Inequalities in social classes and in the social reference network produce enormous differences in the ability to prevent the disease, to cure it and, concerning many people who have not been infected, to avoid serious income and

³ [Coronavirus: nitrogen dioxide emissions drop over Italy.](#)

livelihoods consequences. If you are living in a Brazilian favela or in an Indian or South-African slum it is very difficult to avoid social contacts and almost impossible to keep the confinement when you depend on informal economy to assure your livelihood security. Similar situations occur, as well, in areas or territories where financial security and social and health protection systems are more fragile. However, **even for people who do not fall ill, whose jobs are secure, and can allow themselves to stay at home, inequality is evident.** Consider families with children who are obliged to stay at home, sometimes in small houses, with no access to the outdoors, poor or no broadband and/or access to digital devices. Think about these conditions and consider in particular the situation of women and girls, statistically more exposed than men to the discomforts of the family ménage, not to mention domestic violence, exacerbated by the claustrophobic discomfort of a forced extended cohabitation.

3. Capacity of decentralization

A third interconnection, between COVID-19 and migratory dynamics, can help to develop the **capacity of critical thinking**, the ability to observe simultaneously several aspects of a situation. Migration is a phenomenon usually linked with the arrival of people from less economically developed countries (or nations experiencing war) to more economically developed and socially stable countries. Human movement is a complex phenomenon which combines opportunities like possible mutual enrichment, and challenges for both: migrants and host population. COVID-19 has led to the movement of people, particularly from Eastern European nations, firstly escaping from Italy as it became obvious that the pandemic represented an increasing health threat and rather than an economic opportunity. One of the results of this exodus is the depletion of the workforce and consequent risk to the Italian agricultural economy which may in turn threaten food production essential for our existence.

4. From the global to the national systems

Besides highlighting the importance of interconnections, the previous paragraphs have led our reflection-thought on different scales through which the consequences of COVID-19 may be analysed. From the global scale, where migratory phenomena or suffering in favelas and slums are happening, to the national scale where agricultural challenges are examined, up to the private scale of single households with consequences for everyday living. Examining phenomena through **system thinking** is another way of exercising our minds **to think about complexities, breaking up and re-arranging concepts and events in order to find new ways to analyse them:** this is a much loved exercise for those involved in the Global Citizenship Education world and it was one of the objects of the writings of the philosopher and sociologist, Edgar Morin...⁴

The role of the school

Within all the observations in this article lays the question about the role of schools. Education and learning institutions are in general suffering as much as other environments in this period. On the one hand, schools remain the only places in society where competences, capabilities, ways of thinking – those suggested in the

⁴ MORIN E. (2001) - *I sette saperi necessari all'educazione del futuro*, Raffaello Cortina editore, Milano.

previous paragraphs – can not only be developed in a permanent and intentional way, but also become the object of reflection and metacognition. **What am I learning from COVID-19 and especially how am I learning it?** Through which paths and tools are our minds reading what is happening and how can we connect these paths with those forms of knowledge organization that are school subjects? These are certainly difficult questions, however their essence may help to involve teachers, students and the school as a whole to proactively respond to the current pandemic situation.

Undeniably COVID-19 is causing change – a change never seen before – of pedagogic methods and didactics through which teaching is developed. **But the school shutdown is depriving teachers and learners from personal relationships - fundamental to the teaching-learning process.**

Distance learning: risks and opportunities

Distance learning (DL) presents both risks and opportunities. In a country such as Italy, where lectures are the most common pedagogical tool, DL is risking a further decrease of students' active participation as well as promoting the exclusion of an important number of students. In this context, content and methodologies of GCE, together with the digital competences, can, as usual, help to mitigate such risk, responding to students' reasonable questions and **connecting their lives and environments to critical global challenges**, stimulating the active participation and citizenship competences. Citizenship competences have been highlighted in recent weeks as one of the essential tools for the resolution of this crisis (e.g., respect for common rules in order to public health and the community aiming at decreasing the number of infections).

Nevertheless, **distance learning is creating a set of – often surprising and unthinkable – solutions. Abandoning the competences which are necessarily emerging right now**, once we go back to classroom teaching, **would be a mistake.**

Aside from strengthened digital competencies, these new methodologies, can become tools which can stimulate the research of further learning tools – for instance, developing the capacity to employ, using a correct didactic method, visual devices (e.g., maps, infographics, tables, charts, links...). **The association between verbal and visual tools can offer a further didactic opportunity**, allowing the combination of the linear, analytical method with subsequent in-depth analysis – which is typical of the pre-digital culture of many teachers – with the associative, horizontal and synthetic method – which is typical of the digital culture where students belong. Hence, both the possibility to meet the variety of methods of in-depth analysis and the possibility to integrate, in a productive manner, different ways of thinking are increasing and, as a result, they can both produce a possible global enrichment of learning methods to a true inclusion.

The present and the past require interdisciplinary competences, critical thinking, capacity for imaginA(C)TION, the ability to look at things from different perspectives and to understand interconnections. Now more than ever, the GCE approach (together with improvement of basic competences) is essential and proves itself to be one of the pivotal ingredients in what Enrico Giovannini, Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASviS)'s spokesman, defines as the transformative resilience: “the capacity not only to go back as “we were”, after a shock, but also to bounce forward to transform ourselves in our better version”. **[Índice](#)**