

The Institutional Logics of Citizenship Education in Contemporary Democracies: Insights from the Italian Experience Since 1958

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ABSTRACT

Driven by globalization, migration, and digital transformation, the concept of citizenship has undergone significant reconfiguration, prompting education systems to shift from knowledge transmission toward the cultivation of democratic competences and social integration. This study aims to examine the institutional evolution and underlying logics of citizenship education in Italy since 1958, and to explain how policy reforms have responded to changing political and social pressures. Using Italy as a single case study, the research adopts a historical-institutionalist approach and integrates insights from institutional change theory, multicultural education theory, and citizenship theory. The analysis is structured around three analytical dimensions: policy drivers, curriculum structures, and governance logics. Drawing on legislative documents, ministerial guidelines, and secondary historical analyses, the study reconstructs a five-stage developmental trajectory of citizenship education. The findings identify a pattern characterized by both path dependence and episodic institutional recalibration. Citizenship education evolved from postwar moral reconstruction and “defensive democracy,” through phases of depoliticization and curricular marginalization in the 1980s and 1990s, to gradual Europeanization and formal curricular consolidation under Law No. 169 of 30 October 2008. A more explicit phase of state re-centralization emerged following Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019, marking a shift toward a competence-oriented and nationally coordinated framework. The study concludes that citizenship education in Italy has transformed from a loosely defined normative subject into a structured governance instrument aimed at reinforcing democratic cohesion amid pluralism and political distrust. The Italian case offers comparative insights into how contemporary democracies recalibrate citizenship education to address identity tensions, social diversity, and democratic fragility.

Keywords: Citizenship education, Italy, institutional logics, Europeanization, curriculum reform

INTRODUCTION

Research Background

Ongoing globalization and sustained transnational migration have increased the complexity of citizenship acquisition and legal status mobility across European countries, highlighting the institutional and policy dimensions of citizenship in contemporary societies (Schuster, 2005; Paparusso, 2019). In Europe, citizenship education is no longer confined to the transmission of democratic values but is increasingly expected to address cultural diversity and support social integration (Council of Europe, 2018).

Italy offers a particularly instructive case. Italy has experienced increased immigration in recent decades, and scholars have noted limitations and gaps in the country’s integration policies, particularly in the social and cultural domains relevant to education (Caneva, 2014). Previous research has examined how Italian citizenship education is addressed in teachers’ classroom practices and school textbooks, revealing varied approaches to diversity and civic engagement (Dusi et al., 2012; Albanesi, 2018). This literature consistently points to tensions between institutional frameworks and classroom implementation, particularly following the policy shift from “multicultural education” to “intercultural education” (Bussotti, 2017). Recent scholarship has emphasized the role of citizenship education in addressing the needs of students with migrant and refugee backgrounds (Acikalin et al., 2021). In this context, Italy provides a particularly illustrative case, given its long-standing commitment to intercultural education and its evolving approach to civic inclusion.

Analytical Rationale for the Italian Case

The evolution of citizenship education policy in Italy provides a particularly useful case for examining how states seek to reconcile national identity with cultural diversity through institutional design. On the one hand, Italy has experienced a rapid structural shift from a country of emigration to one of immigration. In this context, citizenship education has increasingly been framed as an instrument for social integration, and has gradually acquired greater institutional visibility within national policy debates (Allievi, 2010; Santagati, 2016; Donnalaja, 2025).

On the other hand, in contrast to Italy's fragmented trajectory, other European systems have long-standing institutional foundations for citizenship education. In France, the republican tradition and centralized governance have historically shaped citizenship education as a core part of national formation, while in Germany, federal structures and distinct educational traditions have influenced how citizenship is articulated in schooling. Comparative research on citizenship education in these two contexts highlights their differentiated historical and institutional paths, including how each system conceptualizes and integrates civic formation within national education frameworks (Yelkenci, 2022). Institutional differences are also reflected in how teacher education for history and civic subjects is organized across Europe, suggesting that national education systems provide distinct structural contexts for citizenship education (Ecker, 2018; Albanesi, 2018; Bussotti, 2017). This pattern makes Italy a particularly informative case for analyzing processes of late institutionalization in citizenship education.

Furthermore, the challenges Italy faces, including migrant integration, declining trust in democratic institutions, and persistent regional disparities, are not unique but reflect broader dynamics observed in many societies undergoing social and cultural change. Recent research has paid greater attention to the school experiences and inclusion challenges faced by second-generation migrants, shedding light on dimensions of schooling that are relevant for assessing the broader aims of citizenship education in practice (Chiappelli, 2021). From this perspective, systematic analysis of the Italian case yields comparative insights that extend beyond a single-country context.

Research Gaps

Although existing scholarship has generated substantial insights into citizenship education in Italy, several analytical limitations remain. Much of the literature has concentrated on school-level developments, including curriculum evolution and instructional practices, producing rich descriptive accounts but relatively limited system-level analysis (Angelini, 2023; Bussotti, 2017). Other studies have highlighted discrepancies between intended curriculum and students' opportunity to learn, pointing to gaps between policy prescriptions and educational implementation (Losito, 2003). In international comparative research, analyses of the Italian case have frequently centered on student learning outcomes and regional disparities, particularly within large-scale assessment frameworks, while offering less sustained examination of the institutional logics and policy development processes underlying these patterns (Palmerio et al., 2021).

At the theoretical level, existing research on citizenship education and migration in Italy has tended to emphasize distinct analytical dimensions. Curriculum-oriented studies have examined instructional content and pedagogical change, while migration scholarship has explored the policy construction of immigrant incorporation and membership boundaries (Zincone, 2006). In parallel, education policy research has focused on governance arrangements and institutional reform processes (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2012). Although each strand offers valuable insights, their analytical separation has made it more difficult to capture how institutional change, multicultural pressures, and evolving conceptions of citizenship interact within a single explanatory framework.

To address these gaps, this study shifts the focus to the national policy level, analyzing key legislation and curricular frameworks through a policy trajectory perspective (Gale, 1999; Ball, 1994). Drawing on institutional change theory, multicultural education theory, and citizenship theory (North, 1990; Banks, 2014; Marshall, 1950), it develops an integrated analytical framework. The study argues that citizenship education in Italy has evolved through successive phases of institutional adjustment rather than along a linear path, shaped by the interplay of internal ideological tensions and external social pressures. Thus, it conceptualizes the evolution of citizenship education as a form of state governance in response to broader transformations in social structure. While existing scholarship has examined incremental reform and intercultural pedagogy separately, this article proposes the concept of inclusive adaptation to synthesize these dynamics at the meso-institutional level.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

This study offers a systematic analysis of the historical development of citizenship education policy in Italy.

It pursues three objectives. First, it traces the main phases of policy development and identifies key turning points in Italian citizenship education since the mid-twentieth century. Second, it examines the political, social, and institutional forces driving policy change across different periods, with the aim of clarifying the governance logics shaping these shifts. Third, it evaluates both the institutional achievements and the limitations of Italy's approach to redefining citizenship and managing cultural diversity.

Based on these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How has Italian citizenship education policy evolved in response to migration and growing social diversity?
- (2) What criteria, historical contexts, and policy rationales have underpinned the different phases of this evolution?
- (3) What comparative insights does this process of institutionalization offer for other societies undergoing sociocultural transformation?

Theoretical Concerns and Analytical Perspective

This study draws on institutional change theory (North, 1990), multicultural education theory (Banks, 2014), and citizenship theory (Marshall, 1950) to construct an integrated analytical framework for examining the links between policy evolution, social structural change, and state governance objectives. The analysis adopts a historical institutionalist lens, focusing on policy path dependence and critical junctures (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007), while also examining the expansion of citizenship education at legislative and curricular levels and the strategies through which states attempt to foster social integration in culturally diverse contexts. The following section outlines this framework by defining its key concepts and explaining how these three theoretical perspectives shed light on the institutional, cultural, and political dynamics shaping changes in citizenship education policy.

This study argues that the long-term trajectory of Italian citizenship education can be interpreted as a process of inclusive adaptation, a patterned form of institutional recalibration that accommodates new social claims without systemic rupture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study brings together institutional change theory (North, 1990), multicultural education theory (Banks, 2014), and citizenship theory (Marshall, 1950) to examine the interaction between institutional structures, social transformation, and state governance objectives in the development of citizenship education policy. Rather than offering a chronological account of policy developments, with empirical analysis presented in later sections, this chapter focuses on clarifying key concepts and on the complementary application of these three perspectives across three analytical dimensions, namely institutional structure, cultural tension, and political function.

The purpose of this chapter is to construct a multi-level analytical framework that explains how Italian citizenship education policy has been repeatedly redefined in response to changing social conditions, and how it has gradually moved from fragmented arrangements toward more institutionalized and systematic forms of governance. Accordingly, the emphasis is on analytical explanation rather than on a step-by-step reconstruction of historical developments.

Defining Core Concepts: Distinguishing Moral Education, Political Education, and Citizenship education

Drawing on sociological approaches, particularly T. H. Marshall's seminal work, this study adopts a dynamic understanding of citizenship as a composite of rights, duties, and public participation, the meaning of which is continually reshaped by changes in social structure and modes of governance (Marshall, 1950). From this perspective, citizenship is not only a legal status but also a form of social practice and public identification that

must be cultivated through education, reflecting an ongoing process through which individuals learn to participate in democratic life (Biesta, 2011).

This conceptualization provides a foundation for analyzing citizenship education policy, where education is understood not merely as knowledge transmission but as a central institutional mechanism for shaping patterns of participation, senses of responsibility, and value orientations. Citizenship education is thus closely linked to state expectations regarding democratic functioning and conceptions of the “good citizen” (Galston, 2001). To maintain conceptual clarity, this study analytically distinguishes moral education, political education, and citizenship education. Moral education primarily concerns the cultivation of individual ethical dispositions and shared social norms to sustain social order and public morality. Political education, by contrast, focuses on state power, political institutions, and ideological orientations, often involving the explicit transmission of political knowledge and, in some contexts, the shaping of political attitudes (Galston, 2001).

Citizenship education represents a more integrative concept, typically encompassing constitutional principles, public responsibility, social participation, intercultural understanding, and competencies in environmental and digital citizenship. This breadth enables its integration into interdisciplinary curricula and cross-sectoral policy frameworks, positioning it as an important instrument of governance. It also reflects a broader contemporary shift away from narrowly defined political instruction toward the development of multidimensional civic capacities (Schulz et al., 2018). In light of this conceptual expansion, the development of citizenship education policy in Italy cannot be reduced to a linear accumulation of curricular content. Instead, it reflects recurring processes of adjustment, recombination, and rearticulation among different educational priorities across historical periods.

Applicable Theoretical Perspectives

To explain the institutional trajectory of citizenship education policy in Italy, moving from fragmented arrangements toward more systematic forms of governance, this study develops an analytical framework comprising three complementary theoretical perspectives. Each perspective addresses a distinct explanatory level, namely institutional mechanisms, policy content adjustments, and normative objectives, and together they provide interconnected lenses for understanding policy evolution. By integrating these approaches, the analysis moves beyond descriptive accounts to identify the structural drivers and governance rationalities underlying the transformation of citizenship education policy.

To clarify the division of analytical labor and the complementarities among the three theoretical approaches, Table 1 presents the relational architecture of the integrated theoretical framework, illustrating how the three perspectives operate as interrelated analytical layers rather than parallel explanatory tools. By clarifying their complementary roles and potential tensions, the framework enables systematic connections to be drawn among institutional structures, curricular reconfiguration, and normative orientations, thereby providing a coherent analytical foundation for the subsequent empirical analysis.

Table 1: Relational Structure of the Integrated Theoretical Framework

Analytical Dimension	Institutional Change Theory (North, 1990; Pierson, 2000; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007)	Multicultural Education Theory (Banks, 2014)	Citizenship Theory (Marshall, 1950; Soysal, 1994)
Primary Analytical Focus	Explains structural evolution and governance transformation over time	Examines curricular adaptation to increasing social and cultural diversity	Interrogates the normative construction of the “ideal citizen”
Complementarity with Other Perspectives	Provides macro-structural conditions within which curricular and normative shifts occur	Mediates between institutional structures and normative ideals through content integration	Supplies the value framework informing both institutional design and curriculum

Potential Tensions	Path dependency may constrain multicultural reform and normative redefinition	Inclusion-assimilation dilemmas; diversity pressures may challenge institutional stability	National citizenship models may conflict with post-national or humanrights paradigms
Policy Dimension Illuminated	Legal status, governance arrangements, implementation authority	Curriculum themes, intercultural and global orientation	Policy goals, civic competencies, evolving citizenship paradigms

Note. The table visualizes how complementarities and tensions across institutional, curricular, and normative dimensions jointly shape the policy trajectory.

Institutional Change Theory: Explaining Policy Mechanisms and Non-linear Trajectories

Institutional change theory, rooted in new institutional economics and historical institutionalism, provides a robust lens for examining how formal rules, informal norms, and organizational structures are maintained or reconfigured. Rather than merely identifying the timing of change, this perspective, most prominently associated with North (1990), emphasizes the underlying mechanisms of change by highlighting the tension between institutional stability and incremental adaptation within established legal and social constraints (North, 1990).

Within this tradition, policy evolution is elucidated through three interrelated concepts. First, path dependence explains how early institutional choices constrain subsequent trajectories, as organizational inertia and entrenched cognitive frameworks often perpetuate suboptimal arrangements (Pierson, 2000; Ongaro et al., 2023). Second, critical junctures represent pivotal moments where exogenous shocks or internal tensions open windows for significant deviation from established paths, enabling policy innovation (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Third, the role of actors and agency underscores that institutional outcomes are not deterministic but emerge from strategic interactions shaped by power asymmetries and institutional ambiguities (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

This study applies this framework to the evolution of Italian citizenship education, a domain that has historically been characterized by weak institutionalization. While the theory has been critiqued for underemphasizing gradual endogenous transformation, its application here illuminates why this policy area remained marginal for decades despite periodic reform attempts. Specifically, the framework reveals how Italy’s deeply entrenched legalistic administrative tradition initially hindered post-war reforms but subsequently facilitated institutional reintegration at key historical junctures (Ongaro et al., 2023). Consequently, the following analysis prioritizes the institutional conditions and mechanisms that sustain or disrupt policy inertia, focusing on the establishment of new equilibria rather than the mere substantive content of policy documents.

Multicultural Education Theory: Explaining Policy Content Expansion and Value Reorientation

Multicultural education theory, most prominently articulated by Banks (2014), provides a framework for examining how educational systems mediate social diversity across cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious dimensions. At its core, this perspective critiques assimilationist models that privilege a dominant culture, advocating instead for transformative curriculum integration and knowledge reconstruction to address structural inequalities (Banks, 2014). At the level of political theory, multiculturalism further reorients attention toward the relationship between cultural pluralism and social cohesion within liberal democracies (Kymlicka, 2012). Within educational systems, these debates translate into questions concerning how curricula and institutional practices respond to increasing diversity.

In Italy, this reorientation has taken the form of “interculturalism,” emphasizing dialogue and interaction rather than the mere recognition of difference (Bussotti, 2017). As Davies (2020) observes, within the European context of free movement, the absence of integrative mechanisms risks social segmentation. Against this broader European backdrop, the growing emphasis on intercultural understanding in Italian citizenship education can be interpreted as a policy response to the tensions between pluralization and social integration.

Citizenship Theory: Articulating Normative Policy Goals and Civic Visions

Citizenship theory constitutes a foundational analytical tradition in political science and sociology, conceptualizing citizenship not merely as a static legal status, but as a dynamic institutional practice encompassing rights, obligations, participation, and modes of identification. While Marshall’s (1950) tripartite framework of civil, political, and social rights remains the seminal lens for analyzing how states structure citizenship, subsequent scholarship has broadened this scope. Contemporary perspectives emphasize that citizenship is actively constructed through educational curricula, public engagement, and everyday social practices. In pluralistic societies, the normative essence of citizenship has evolved to address the complexities of identity formation, belonging, and the delicate equilibrium between the recognition of difference and the preservation of social cohesion.

In this study, citizenship theory is used to examine the normative objectives embedded in Italian citizenship education policy, specifically the conception of the “ideal citizen” that the state seeks to cultivate. From this vantage point, the analysis examines how divergent policy designs articulate civic responsibilities and value orientations. This approach reveals the functional role of citizenship education as a mechanism of state governance, illustrating how the education system serves to mediate social integration and redefine the boundaries of political belonging in a changing society.

Table 2: Five-Stage Evolution & Theory Application

Stage	Period	Institutional Change	Multicultural Shift	Citizenship Vision	Social Trigger
1: Establishment	1958-1978	Path set (enlightenment curriculum)	unified national moral order	National loyalty	Post-WWII legitimacy
2: Fragmentation	1979-1992	Depoliticization (teacher-led)	European Alignment	Order maintenance	Political polarization
3: Realignment	1993-2007	Critical juncture (Mani Pulite)	Immigration intro	EU rights	EU frameworks
4: Systematization	2008-2018	Constitutional course	Intercultural dialogue	Active participation	Globalization
5: Consolidation	2019-2024	Rigid standards (33h mandatory)	Global and digital citizenship	Responsible global citizenship	Populism and digital risks

Note. This table presents a five-stage model of the evolution of citizenship education in Italy, outlining key periods, institutional changes, multicultural shifts, citizenship visions, and underlying social triggers. Elaborated by the author based on historical policy analysis and synthesis of existing literature (Angelini, 2023; Bombardelli & Codato, 2017).

Analytical Logic and Applicability of the Integrated Framework

This study synthesizes institutional change theory (North, 1990), multicultural education theory (Banks, 2014), and citizenship theory (Marshall, 1950) into a coherent, multi-dimensional analytical framework. Each perspective addresses a distinct yet interconnected facet of citizenship education policy: institutional change theory elucidates the mechanisms and trajectories of policy shifts under specific historical conditions; multicultural education theory accounts for the structural reconfiguration of curricular content in response to evolving social and cultural diversity; and citizenship theory interrogates the normative objectives of policy, specifically, the "ideal citizen" envisioned by the state.

By integrating these three layers, the framework facilitates a systematic examination of the nexus between institutional structures, policy content, and value orientations. In doing so, it directly addresses the analytical fragmentation identified in Section 1.3, where institutional, curricular, and migration-related analyses have often remained conceptually separated. This holistic approach moves beyond treating citizenship education as a series of fragmented reforms or a reactive response to isolated social pressures. Consequently, the subsequent stagebased analysis of Italian citizenship education prioritizes the evolving governance logic and institutional reconfigurations, transcending a purely chronological or descriptive account of policy developments.

Research Methods and Data Selection

This study employs policy trajectory analysis (Ball, 1994; Gale, 1999) as its primary methodological framework, integrated with a quasi-systematic policy text review (Pham et al., 2014). Drawing on the synthesized theoretical framework of institutional change, multicultural education, and citizenship theories, the analysis interrogates the evolution of Italian citizenship education from 1958 to the present across three analytical dimensions: institutional drivers, curricular structures, and governance logics.

The empirical corpus comprises foundational legislative acts, national curriculum frameworks, and policy guidelines promulgated between 1958 and 2020. Primary sources were systematically retrieved from the Italian Official Gazette (*Gazzetta Ufficiale*), the archives of the Italian Ministry of Education¹, and parliamentary legislative databases. Document selection was governed by three rigorous criteria: (1) legislation instigating structural or governance shifts; (2) policy texts redefining curricular positioning, learning objectives, or jurisdictional responsibilities; and (3) documents with nationwide applicability. To ensure a focused macro-level analysis and avoid overlap with existing school-level or pedagogical case studies (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017; Angelini, 2023), this study deliberately delimits its scope to authoritative national policy texts.

To ensure analytical rigor, the final dataset consists of 11 core national-level policy documents that comprehensively capture the key texts meeting the selection criteria (see Appendix A). The analysis involved a systematic coding process to identify period-specific policy drivers, curricular configurations, and civic formation objectives. The credibility of the findings is strengthened through triangulation (Denzin, 1978), including: (1) data triangulation, achieved by cross-referencing legislation, curriculum frameworks, and ministerial decrees; and (2) theoretical triangulation, whereby findings are interpreted through the combined lenses of institutional, multicultural, and citizenship theories. This triangulation strategy enhances analytical depth and interpretive credibility in tracing the policy trajectory.

Literature Basis and Methodological Rationale for the Periodization of Italian Citizenship education Policy

The stage-based analysis of Italian citizenship education policy adopted in this study transcends a mere chronological division of historical breakpoints. Instead, it is grounded in a rigorous assessment of the continuity and transformation of institutional logics, governance objectives, and curricular structures. While previous scholarship has documented the development of citizenship education in Italy from diverse perspectives (Angelini, 2023; Bombardelli & Codato, 2017), much of this work has focused on descriptive historical accounts or specific empirical strands, rather than on analytically structured periodization. Accordingly, the present study

¹ The Italian Ministry of Education was formerly known as the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). The name MI is used for documents issued after 2020.

utilizes periodization as a strategic analytical tool to illuminate broader patterns of institutional change, rather than as a purely narrative historical sequence.

Specifically, the delineation of these stages is anchored in three analytical dimensions: (1) Institutional reconfiguration, encompassing shifts in legal status and governance arrangements; (2) Curricular restructuring, involving subject positioning, implementation modalities, and assessment mechanisms; and (3) Socio-political dynamics, including political restructuring, escalating social diversity, and the imperatives of supranational governance. By employing this framework, the subsequent analysis systematically interrogates how Italian citizenship education has been re-institutionalized under varying historical conditions, thereby illuminating its transition from fragmented policy arrangements toward a more integrated and systematic governance regime.

The Five-Stage Evolution of Citizenship Education Policy in Italy

Stage One: Moral Advocacy and Initial Institutionalization (1958–1978)

This study identifies 1958 as the starting point of the formal institutionalization of citizenship education in Italy. This is attributable not only to Presidential Decree No. 585 of 13 June 1958, which formally introduced *educazione civica* into the national education system (Cornali, 2025), but also to the policy's broader role in post-war Italy's efforts to consolidate democratic legitimacy and civic consensus through education. During this stage, citizenship education primarily functioned as an instrument of democratic consolidation and civic integration, reflecting the close relationship between schooling and republican reconstruction in the post-war period (Angelini, 2023).

In the 1950s, Italy was in the early phase of the Cold War, characterized by a highly polarized domestic political landscape. The Christian Democratic Party (DC) maintained long-term control of the central government, while the Italian Communist Party (PCI) exercised significant influence at the local level through political mobilization and cultural networks. This configuration generated enduring ideological divisions within Italian society (Forlenza, 2010). Against this backdrop, education assumed a crucial governance function in stabilizing democratic institutions and mitigating social conflict.

This orientation may be characterized as the formation of a “moral–constitutional citizen.” As Minister of Education, Aldo Moro viewed education as a foundational pillar for consolidating democratic institutions. He emphasized civic responsibility and moral formation grounded in constitutional values, while underscoring teachers' central role in transmitting democratic principles (Caligiuri, 2019). Citizenship education was thus conceived primarily as a politico-moral project of social integration rather than as a vehicle for developing participatory political competencies.

Influenced by this vision, Presidential Decree No. 585 (1958) introduced citizenship education into lower and upper secondary schools. The decree required history teachers to allocate approximately two hours per month to civic instruction, without establishing independent curricular status or formal assessment mechanisms. Existing scholarship commonly regards this decree as a foundational moment in the institutionalization of citizenship education in Italy (Angelini, 2023; Caligiuri, 2019). However, the absence of a clearly defined curriculum framework, dedicated teaching materials, and systematic professional support rendered citizenship education structurally subordinate within the curriculum, limiting the depth of its institutionalization (Angelini, 2023).

From an institutional perspective, this period can be interpreted as an initial phase of institutionalization. Although citizenship education gained formal recognition, the policy design lacked stable self-reinforcing mechanisms. The comprehensive lower secondary school reform of the 1960s reinforced ethical-civic ideals but did not substantially alter the structurally subordinate position of citizenship education within the curriculum (Gabusi, 2023; Angelini, 2023). Consequently, its development remained dependent on a relatively stable political environment and displayed structural fragility in institutional continuity and implementation.

From the standpoint of citizenship theory, particularly Marshall's (1950) conception of nationally bounded social citizenship, this stage reflected a relatively homogeneous model of civic identity. Citizenship was primarily defined in relation to the nation-state and republican constitutional values, emphasizing loyalty, civic responsibility, and adherence to normative standards. Cultural and social diversity were not central components

of the institutional conception of citizenship. This orientation later provided a sharp contrast to the emergence of multicultural and participatory models of citizenship education.

By the 1970s, mounting pressures associated with political terrorism, economic crisis, and fiscal austerity intensified governance challenges in Italy, particularly during the “Years of Lead” (Foot, 2023; Hof, 2013). In this context, and lacking strong legal guarantees or independent curricular status, citizenship education gradually lost policy salience. Implementation became increasingly fragmented, and the subject entered a period of relative stagnation within the national curriculum (Losito, 2003; Angelini, 2023; Bianchini & Morandini, 2017).

The moral-integrative orientation of Italian citizenship education during its initial institutional phase (1958–1978) can be traced to the specific conditions of post-war state transformation and governance needs. In a context of fragile political order and ideological polarization, the consolidation of democratic legitimacy and minimal civic consensus constituted a central state concern. Accordingly, citizenship education functioned primarily as a stabilizing instrument of civic integration rather than as a vehicle for expanding participatory engagement (Losito, 2003).

This functional positioning influenced its institutional configuration. Citizenship education was embedded within existing subjects, featuring limited instructional time and low institutional visibility. Rather than establishing an autonomous curricular field, it remained dependent on history, law, or moral education (Bianchini & Morandini, 2017; Losito, 2003). This arrangement reduced its political salience and limited the potential for curricular politicization, but it also constrained institutional autonomy and long-term policy resilience (Angelini, 2023).

From the perspective of institutional change, citizenship education in this phase is best understood as a contextdependent arrangement rather than a self-reinforcing policy path sustained by cumulative investment and consolidation. Its legitimacy was closely tied to the governance imperatives of a particular historical moment. As social conflicts and governance crises intensified in the 1970s, its integrative function was gradually marginalized, contributing to erosion of curricular status and implementation capacity (Losito, 2003; Bianchini & Morandini, 2017). These structural constraints help explain why citizenship education assumed a moralintegrative and weakly institutionalized form during this stage, while also creating conditions for subsequent institutional restructuring (Angelini, 2023).

Stage Two: Depoliticization and Institutional Marginalization (1979–1992)

In the late 1970s, amid political violence, intensified social movements, and a crisis of institutional trust, education in Italy was reframed as a vital tool for alleviating social tensions and restoring democratic order. In 1979, under Education Minister Pedini, the Ministry of Education issued Ministerial Circular No. 177(1979), reintroducing citizenship education as a distinct subject in the lower secondary curriculum, with implementation delegated to class councils. Existing studies suggest that the reform emerged in a context marked by rising student politicization, the erosion of shared social values, and mounting pressure on the education system during democratic transition (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017).

Unlike the 1958 arrangement, which focused on national moral integration, these reforms emphasized social practice and values education. The curriculum addressed human rights, constitutional principles, democratic participation, and social responsibility, shifting citizenship education from mere transmission of institutional knowledge toward fostering social awareness and democratic competence. This reorientation is often termed the “second revival” of citizenship education in Italy, marking a broader policy shift from state-centered political integration to one rooted in social civic practice.

Subsequent reforms were fragmented and incremental. In 1985, Minister Falcucci introduced citizenship education into the primary curriculum under the banner of “social learning” (Law No. 104 of 12 February 1985), stressing its importance alongside history and geography. In 1991, Law No. 176 of 27 May 1991 ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, marking the first systematic integration of children as rights-bearing subjects into school education. This encouraged curricular focus on human rights, diversity, and social justice. These developments reflected engagement with international human rights norms and provided a normative foundation for the later Citizenship and the Constitution framework.

From an institutional change perspective, however, these reforms failed to achieve stable consolidation. Citizenship education relied primarily on ministerial circulars, curricular guidelines, and pilot initiatives, lacking clear legal guarantees or a unified national framework. Consequently, reforms can be interpreted as following a pattern of gradualism and path dependence, in which existing institutional arrangements, which were characterized by low levels of compulsion and a subordinate curricular status, were largely reproduced rather than fundamentally reconfigured (Pierson, 2000; Greener, 2005).

Through the lens of citizenship theory, particularly in contrast to Soysal's (1994) account of post-national citizenship, policies in this phase remained firmly anchored in a nationally bounded model of citizenship centered on legal norms and constitutional rights. Emphasis fell on understanding the constitutional order and citizens' rights and duties, while references to European identity and local cultural contexts were limited and selective. Although cultural diversity received nominal recognition in curricular discourse, this remained largely normative and symbolic, falling short of the more substantive recognition of cultural difference emphasized in theories of multiculturalism (Meer & Modood, 2011).

Overall, citizenship education reforms from 1979 to 1992 did not achieve institutional consolidation. Instead, amid state restructuring and rising supranational norms, it increasingly displayed depoliticization and institutional marginalization. While its importance was affirmed in policy rhetoric, it remained unstable and peripheral within the education system's institutional architecture.

The fragmented nature of citizenship education reforms in Italy during the 1979–1992 period cannot be reduced to the shortcomings of individual policy initiatives. Instead, it stemmed from the interplay of several structural constraints. First, the progressive decentralization of educational governance and the expansion of school autonomy from the 1980s onward significantly diminished the central state's capacity to impose uniform curricular content and implementation. While this devolution enhanced local responsiveness and flexibility, it also dispersed authority, eroded normative coherence, and left citizenship education reliant on regional governments and individual schools for interpretation and delivery. Without a unified legal framework or binding national standards, stable institutionalization proved elusive, a pattern exacerbated by Italy's entrenched regional disparities and uneven social capital (OECD, 1998; Fornari & Giancola, 2011; Putnam et al., 1993).

Second, the advancing process of European integration and the diffusion of international human rights norms introduced new discursive resources and value orientations into citizenship education. However, these influences arrived primarily via soft-law instruments, policy recommendations, and transnational projects rather than through enforceable institutional mechanisms. As a result, the normative expansion of citizenship education occurred without sufficient integration into existing curricular structures or governance arrangements, contributing to further policy dispersion rather than consolidation (OECD, 1998; Colombo & Desideri, 2019).

More fundamentally, in a socio-political environment still marked by residual ideological polarization and fragile democratic legitimacy, policymakers tended to depoliticize citizenship education. By maintaining low political visibility and limited institutional commitment, the state avoided turning education into a renewed arena for ideological contestation. This deliberate functional suspension, while mitigating short-term political risks, ultimately hindered the development of robust institutional integration (Putnam et al., 1993; Colombo & Desideri, 2019).

In combination, these factors, including decentralization, normative diffusion through soft mechanisms, and political caution, precluded the emergence of coherent institutional trajectories. Citizenship education thus persisted in fragmented, depoliticized, and weakly institutionalized forms throughout the period. This structural configuration not only explains the limited progress from rhetorical advocacy to stable implementation but also set the stage for the subsequent phase of partial re-centralization around constitutional and citizenship-focused education (OECD, 1998; Colombo & Desideri, 2019).

Phase Three: Prelude to Europeanization and Institutional Turning Point (1993–2007)

Between 1993 and 2007, citizenship education in Italy entered a phase of significant reorientation, shaped by domestic political restructuring and increasing Europeanization pressures (Angelini, 2023). During this period, citizenship education repeatedly featured in curriculum reform agendas. The 1996 primary school reform cautiously reintroduced related content, while Law No. 53 of 28 March 2003 (the Moratti Reform) proposed

establishing “Cittadinanza e Costituzione” (Citizenship and the Constitution) at the lower secondary level. Yet these initiatives did not result in a stable and fully institutionalized nationwide framework (Losito, 2003). These efforts unfolded against the backdrop of the Maastricht Treaty’s implementation, the restructuring of the party system following the Mani Pulite investigations, and rising immigration, which introduced early signs of social diversification.

Overall, citizenship education did not attain the status of an independent subject. It persisted in permeative and experimental forms within existing disciplines and localized projects. Its content increasingly incorporated European dimensions, human rights discourse, and constitutional foundations in a more systematic way, gradually moving beyond the earlier moral-educational orientation toward a more competence- and rights-based framing (Albanesi, 2018; Bombardelli & Codato, 2017). However, this thematic expansion was not matched by corresponding institutional restructuring, resulting in continued instability and fragmentation in national implementation (Angelini, 2023; Palmerio et al., 2021).

From a policy process perspective, this phase can be understood as one of ongoing adjustment between external normative inputs and internal institutional inertia. The European Union, particularly through competence-based frameworks and soft coordination mechanisms, provided normative resources centered on civic competences, rights awareness, and intercultural understanding. In Italy, however, these resources entered primarily through policy discourse and soft coordination rather than binding requirements. Meanwhile, a governance structure still largely organized around the nation-state encountered difficulties in systematically integrating these agendas amid administrative fragmentation and frequent political turnover (Losito & D’Apice, 2003; Cornali, 2025).

At the level of citizenship imaginaries, the period witnessed a discernible yet incomplete shift. The gradual incorporation of European identity, human rights language, and constitutional principles into curricula signaled a departure from an exclusively nation-centered “ideal citizen” model toward a more composite figure attuned to rights and responsibilities within a European political space (McCann & Finn, 2006). Policymakers drew on Europeanized value frameworks to address domestic challenges stemming from social diversification and political legitimacy crises, using supranational normative references to ease national-level integration difficulties (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice Network, 2017).

Nevertheless, this reorientation remained largely confined to the level of policy discourse and curricular themes. In practice, citizenship education adopted a more competence-oriented and issue-expanding approach, with greater emphasis on human rights, intercultural understanding, and social participation. Implementation, however, depended heavily on local authorities and individual schools. This combination of normative advancement and weak institutional consolidation meant that reform during this phase amounted primarily to symbolic adjustment rather than structural transformation (Angelini, 2023).

As a result, citizenship education in Italy during this period neither returned to a traditional nation-centered model nor completed a transition toward a fully Europeanized framework. Instead, it assumed an unstable intermediate form. This configuration exposed the limitations of existing institutional arrangements in accommodating supranational norms, while simultaneously generating policy experience and problem awareness that would later inform re-centralizing reforms focused on constitutional education.

During the 1993–2007 phase, Europeanization in Italian citizenship education functioned more as a prelude than as a driver of institutional consolidation. This limited impact stemmed not from inadequate policy efforts but from a structural misalignment between external normative pressures and the state's capacity to authoritatively define and institutionalize educational values.

On the one hand, EU engagement in citizenship education relied predominantly on soft governance instruments, including the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), competence frameworks, and policy recommendations. These mechanisms lacked direct legal enforceability and therefore had limited capacity to independently secure curriculum institutionalization (Alexiadou, 2007; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023). Under Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, education remains primarily a national competence, with the EU playing a supportive role. Its influence operates mainly through agenda-setting, the dissemination of best practices, and project funding rather than binding legislation (Grimonprez, 2014). Consequently, Europeanization entered national agendas largely through discursive framing and ideational alignment, without automatically translating into structural curricular change.

On the other hand, more binding constraints originated at the domestic level. From the 1990s onward, Italy experienced party system transformation, declining democratic trust, and increasing social diversification linked to immigration. In this context, the core challenge increasingly concerned questions of institutional authority and normative definition within public schooling. Citizenship education retained its marginal and non-autonomous curricular status, and despite sustained advocacy from European and international actors, it did not secure a clearly defined institutional position (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017). This persistence may indicate that political conditions and symbolic legitimacy were insufficient to fully reposition Europeanized norms as the primary framework for citizenship education.

Faced with these constraints, reforms reflected a pattern of selective normative borrowing rather than full institutional transfer. European dimensions, human rights discourse, and competence-based approaches were incorporated to broaden the interpretive scope of citizenship education, while the nation-centered narrative remained structurally intact (Alexiadou, 2007; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023). This approach alleviated immediate legitimacy pressures but limited the emergence of a unified institutional trajectory.

As a consequence, citizenship education assumed an adaptive rather than transformative role. Europeanization functioned less as an endpoint of institutional construction than as a transitional grammar supplying alternative interpretive resources for national governance. In the absence of consolidated normative consensus or stable institutional closure, Europeanization unfolded primarily through ideational renewal and policy experimentation rather than comprehensive institutional consolidation (Grimonprez, 2014; Bombardelli & Codato, 2017).

Phase Four: Systematization Efforts, Institutional Consolidation, and the Constitution-Centred Move toward Mandatory Provision (2008–2018)

Between 2008 and 2018, citizenship education in Italy entered a critical phase marked by institutional consolidation and renewed state centralization. Law No. 169 of 30 October 2008 formally introduced “Cittadinanza e Costituzione”, representing the first nationwide attempt to redefine citizenship education within a unified regulatory framework. This reform responded to multiple pressures, including deepening European integration, rising immigration, youth political disengagement, and declining trust in democratic institutions, and signaled a renewed recognition of citizenship education as a core instrument of governance. In a departure from previous experimental or permeative approaches, Citizenship and the Constitution was formally integrated across all educational levels as a mandatory cross-curricular component. While centered on constitutional principles, its content also addressed European citizenship, environmental responsibility, public safety, health, and food education, aiming to strengthen students’ civic awareness and social responsibility through interdisciplinary integration. From the 2010/11 school year onwards, the reform was implemented nationwide, marking a shift from fragmented practices to coordinated institutional provision.

From the perspective of institutional change, this reform constitutes a clear critical juncture (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). By establishing a common value anchor through legislation, the state sought to overcome the long-standing fragmentation and low institutional intensity that had characterized citizenship education, thereby endowing it with a clearer governance function (Minello & Raffaghelli, 2015; Mincu & Allasia, 2012). Although shortcomings remained in terms of instructional time, teacher training, and assessment mechanisms (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017; Caligiuri, 2019), the reform significantly increased the visibility and policy salience of citizenship education.

At the pedagogical level, this phase marked a shift from a predominantly constitutional-knowledge orientation toward an emphasis on responsibility and participation. Citizenship education was no longer confined to familiarity with legal norms, but increasingly stressed practical competences, public responsibility, and critical judgement in complex social contexts (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This shift also reflected a redefinition of the citizen ideal: from a rights-aware legal subject to an active agent capable of acting responsibly within a plural society.

The comprehensive school reform introduced by Law No. 107 of 13 July 2015 (La Buona Scuola) further reinforced this trajectory. By emphasizing school autonomy, social responsibility, and service learning, it linked citizenship education to project-based learning, community engagement, and digital competences, encouraging a move from classroom-based knowledge to action-oriented learning. The cumulative effect of these reforms

laid the groundwork for the more comprehensive and compulsory citizenship education framework introduced after 2019.

Overall, the reforms of 2008–2018 did not represent the endpoint of citizenship education institutionalization, but rather a constitution-centered phase of systematization. While strengthening national normative authority, they preserved cross-curricular flexibility, functioning as a transitional stage toward the subsequent phase of full mandatory provision.

The growing centrality of the Constitution in Italian citizenship education between 2008 and 2018 can be interpreted as an institutional consolidation of an already existing normative framework. As a legally binding and symbolically central document within the Italian constitutional tradition, the Constitution provided a stable reference point that could be formally incorporated into curricular regulations (Chistolini, 2019; Fabbrini & Pollicino, 2017). Anchoring citizenship education in constitutional principles enabled policymakers to reinforce its normative foundation without introducing a new policy paradigm. As reflected in the 2020 *Linee guida per l'educazione civica* (Guidelines for the Teaching of Civic Education) issued by the Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito and in the country review of the Council of Europe, constitutional principles are embedded through cross-curricular implementation rather than as a stand-alone subject, thereby maintaining continuity with Italy's broader curricular structure.

The constitutional turn also signaled a redefinition of the institutional status of citizenship education. Rather than remaining a supplementary or loosely structured curricular component, citizenship education was increasingly anchored in constitutional principles, thereby reinforcing its normative foundation within democratic education (Chistolini, 2019).

At the level of institutional operation, this arrangement may be described as a “strong norm–weak structure” model: while national normative guidance was strengthened through a shared constitutional reference, implementation continued to rely on cross-curricular integration rather than the establishment of a fully autonomous subject (Council of Europe, 2023).

In this sense, the 2008 introduction of *Cittadinanza e Costituzione* can be interpreted as a phase of institutional consolidation that provided a relatively stable reference framework within a historically fragmented policy field. Although it did not fully resolve structural ambiguities in curriculum governance, it created the conditions for the subsequent formal strengthening of citizenship education at the national level, as reflected in Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019 and the 2020 *Linee guida per l'educazione civica* issued by the Ministry of Education.

Stage Five: Full Institutionalisation and the Instrumentalisation of Citizenship education for State Governance (2019–2024)

In 2019, Italy adopted Law No. 92 (Legge 20 agosto 2019, n.92), marking the transition of citizenship education into a phase of full institutionalization and establishing the core of the current policy framework. From the 2020/21 school year onward, citizenship education has been mandated as a compulsory subject at all levels of schooling, with a minimum of 33 hours per year, supported by nationally defined learning objectives, assessment criteria, and mechanisms for teacher coordination. The curriculum is structured around three pillars: constitutional and institutional education, sustainable development and environmental education, and digital citizenship. These components are delivered through a cross-curricular approach embedded in subjects such as history, geography, philosophy, and law.

In terms of learning objectives, citizenship education follows a clearly articulated developmental progression. At the primary level, it focuses on social rules and cooperative behavior; at lower secondary level, it emphasizes legal awareness and democratic participation; and at upper secondary level, it deepens students' understanding of constitutional principles, social responsibility, and global citizenship issues. The curriculum also incorporates topics such as civic economics, fiscal and consumer literacy, digital ethics, and online safety, reflecting a systematic response to the competencies required for contemporary public life.

From an institutional development perspective, the 2019 legislation marked a significant phase of formal consolidation in the evolution of citizenship education in Italy. By specifying minimum instructional time, assessment procedures, and institutional responsibilities, the reform sought to reduce long-standing

fragmentation and clarify governance arrangements (Damiani et al., 2024). Citizenship education thus became more firmly embedded within a nationally regulated framework, while implementation continued to involve school-level mediation. While updated guidelines were issued in 2024 (Eurydice, 2024), the legal foundations and core curricular architecture remain those established by Law No. 92/2019 and the 2020 ministerial decree.

From the perspective of multicultural and intercultural education theory, the revised curriculum places less emphasis on cultural difference as an isolated category and instead integrates themes such as digital citizenship, sustainability, and social diversity within broader shared public challenges (Portera, 2021). This orientation may be interpreted as aligning with competence-based and dialogical approaches to citizenship education.

From a citizenship theory perspective, the reform can be understood as moving beyond a predominantly knowledge-based conception of the “constitutional citizen” toward a more participation-oriented model emphasizing civic responsibility and engagement in complex pluralistic societies.

The institutionalization of citizenship education in 2019 can be interpreted within the broader context of socioeconomic and political transformations affecting contemporary democracies. Prolonged economic uncertainty, migration-related debates, and the rapid expansion of digital communication environments have contributed to renewed concerns about democratic trust and social cohesion (White et al., 2023). Comparative scholarship indicates that in such contexts, citizenship education often gains increased policy salience as governments seek to strengthen civic competencies and reinforce shared democratic frameworks. Rather than constituting a purely pedagogical reform, the 2019 legislation formalized citizenship education within a compulsory national curriculum, specifying instructional time, assessment procedures, and institutional responsibilities (Italy, 2019; Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2020).

By integrating constitutional principles, sustainability, and digital citizenship into a structured curricular framework, the reform signaled a move toward greater institutional consolidation. Citizenship education thus became more centrally embedded within Italy’s educational governance architecture, while continuing to operate within broader European discussions on democracy, diversity, and civic resilience.

Table 3: Structural Mechanisms and Governance Functions Across the Five Phases (elaborated from empirical analysis).

Phase	Period	Core Structural Mechanism	Key Governance Function	Transition Trigger
1: Moral Initiative	1958–1978	Contingent moral integration for minimal consensus	Stability in ideological confrontation	1970s terrorism and crises
2: Depoliticization	1979–1992	Institutional drift under decentralization	Functional suspension to avoid conflict	Europeanization and political restructuring
3: European Adaptation	1993–2007	Norm borrowing amid dual legitimacy tensions	Transitional adaptation without closure	Rising immigration and trust deficit
4: Constitutional Reanchoring	2008–2018	Transitional stabilizer via strong norm-weak structure	Legitimacy reproduction through constitutional anchor	Compounded crises (economic, refugee, digital)

5: Strategic Consolidation	2019–Present	Full institutionalization as governance device	Social cohesion in complex crises	Ongoing implementation and new risks
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Note. This table delineates the core structural mechanisms, key governance functions, and transition triggers across the five phases of citizenship education development in Italy, as elaborated by the author from empirical policy analysis and historical documentation.

Drivers And Internal Logic of Citizenship Education Policy Evolution In Italy

The Internal Logic of Policy Evolution: The Incremental Structure of the Institutionalization Path

The evolution of citizenship education policy in Italy has not taken the form of abrupt or discontinuous reform. Rather, it reflects an institutionalization path characterized by internal continuity. A combined examination of four dimensions, namely curricular status, curricular content, policy drivers, and modes of implementation, shows how citizenship education gradually shifted from a marginal policy initiative to a stable component of the national curriculum. This trajectory illustrates a typical transition from non-institutionalized practice to a systematized public policy arrangement.

Curricular Status: From Ancillary Content to a Statutory Compulsory Subject

At the institutional level, the legal status of citizenship education in Italy has evolved through a gradual process of formalization. The 1958 reform promoted by Aldo Moro (D.P.R. no. 585/1958) introduced citizenship education into lower and upper secondary schooling. However, it did not establish citizenship education as an autonomous subject, nor did it define structured assessment procedures, leaving implementation largely dependent on school-level practices (Caligiuri, 2019).

A further institutional development occurred with the 2008 “Citizenship and Constitution” reform (Law no. 169/2008), which provided a unified policy label and clearer national framing. This trajectory culminated in Law No. 92/2019, which formally incorporated citizenship education into the national curriculum through statutory compulsory status and explicit time requirements (Panizza, 2019). Through this legal codification, citizenship education acquired a more stable institutional position within the national education system.

Empirical research further indicates that the formal organization of civic-related content influences students’ opportunity to learn. Drawing on data from the IEA Civic Education Study, Losito (2003) shows that variations in curricular structuring significantly shaped student exposure to civic knowledge and engagement, highlighting the role of institutional design in shaping educational outcomes.

Curricular Content: From Normative Instruction to a Comprehensive Competency-Oriented Approach

Changes in curricular content reflect evolving interpretations of citizenship. Early citizenship education initiatives, particularly those associated with the 1958 reform promoted by Aldo Moro, were closely linked to post-war objectives of moral reconstruction and social integration, emphasizing constitutional values and civic duties (Caligiuri, 2019). Although civic-related themes were later incorporated into subjects such as history and geography, their presence remained dispersed and lacked systematic coordination.

The 2008 “Citizenship and Constitution” reform placed constitutional principles at the center of the curriculum and broadened thematic areas to include environmental protection and public safety, signaling a move toward greater thematic integration (Ferro Allodola, 2021). Building on this foundation, Law No. 92/2019, which was further specified in the 2020 ministerial guidelines, adopted a more explicitly competence-oriented curriculum framework. According to the Ministero dell’Istruzione (2020), citizenship education is defined as a comprehensive set of civic competencies encompassing constitutional literacy, digital citizenship, and sustainable development.

As a result, curricular objectives shifted from a moral orientation centered on behavioral norms to a model aimed at cultivating “active citizens” through the integration of knowledge, skills, and values. This shift represents the curricular institutionalization of key insights from contemporary theories of citizenship.

Policy Drivers: From Problem-Driven Responses to Long-Term Institutional Design

Changes in policy drivers reflect the evolving status of citizenship education within the national policy agenda. Early reforms were often closely associated with specific political initiatives and were not embedded within a stable institutional framework (Gabusi, 2023). For an extended period, subsequent adjustments frequently took the form of targeted responses to emerging social issues rather than components of a sustained long-term strategy.

The 2008 reform represented an effort to provide greater curricular coherence, while Law No. 92/2019 formally reintroduced citizenship education as a compulsory subject with defined instructional time and assessment provisions (Panizza, 2019). This institutional consolidation occurred within a broader context of social and political transformations associated with globalization, migration, and digital communication.

Analyses drawing on data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) report changes in student civic knowledge and participation patterns during the period of renewed institutionalization (Damiani et al., 2024). Although causal relationships cannot be directly established, these findings are consistent with the view that more structured curricular frameworks may influence students’ opportunities for civic learning.

Modes of Implementation: From Local Fragmentation to Institutionalized Coordination

Changes in modes of implementation reflect evolving efforts to operationalize citizenship education within the school system. In the early period, the absence of detailed regulatory provisions was associated with uneven implementation across schools and a fragmented integration of civic-related content (Ferro Allodola, 2021). Under conditions of administrative decentralization, these variations were further shaped by regional governance differences.

The 2008 reform introduced a national curricular reference framework, yet its limited provisions regarding instructional time and assessment left considerable discretion at the school level. By contrast, Law No. 92/2019 and the subsequent ministerial guidelines (Ministero dell’Istruzione, 2020) specified minimum instructional hours, cross-curricular coordination responsibilities, and assessable learning objectives, thereby strengthening the formal coherence of implementation arrangements.

International comparative analyses drawing on ICCS data report changes in student exposure to civic learning during the period of renewed institutional consolidation (Damiani et al., 2024). While these findings do not establish direct causality, they are consistent with the view that clearer institutional frameworks may facilitate more systematic policy enactment.

Taken together, these four dimensions show that Italian citizenship education policy has evolved from symbolic initiatives and fragmented practices toward systemic integration and comprehensive institutionalization. This process has not followed a linear trajectory but reflects a gradual strengthening of institutional coherence in response to changing social conditions. On this basis, the present study re-periodizes policy developments since 1958 to examine how citizenship education has shifted from a marginal policy instrument to a national educational practice with a stable institutional foundation.

Italy’s Citizenship education in Comparative Perspective: An Accelerated Path of “Pressure–Response” Integration

When situated within a broader European comparative perspective, research shows that civic and citizenship education systems vary substantially across countries in terms of institutional frameworks and teacher education approaches. For example, studies of teacher preparation across 33 European countries highlight divergent structures and professional profiles for history and civic educators (Ecker, 2018). Additionally, comparative analyses of France and Germany reveal distinct historical and philosophical roots in their citizenship education systems (Yelkenci, 2022). In contrast, Italy’s citizenship education has long been characterized by fragmented

policies and limited institutionalization, only beginning to consolidate more substantive frameworks in the early twenty-first century (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017).

Core Features of a “Pressure–Response” Pattern of Institutional Change

In contrast to France’s centralized republican model and Germany’s federal structure rooted in the principle of *Kulturhoheit* (Yelkenci, 2022), Italy has historically lacked a stable and unified institutional framework for citizenship education. Country-level analyses describe Italian citizenship education as fragmented and weakly institutionalized for much of the postwar period (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017).

At the European level, processes of integration, increased migration, and concerns about democratic participation have intensified policy coordination and reform debates (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021). Within this broader context, Italy experienced renewed legislative interventions in 2008 and 2019, which aimed to strengthen the institutional status of citizenship education (Devitt, 2023). Rather than following a continuous normative blueprint, these reforms suggest a pattern of incremental consolidation in response to accumulating societal pressures. Some historical analyses further note that longstanding cultural and political tensions within Italian society, particularly between Catholic traditions and secular currents, have shaped educational debates and may have constrained the emergence of a single ideologically dominant model (Angelini, 2023).

The Role of Constitutional References in Institutional Integration

Building on existing scholarship, this study suggests that Italy’s approach to citizenship education reflects an institutional logic of mediation rather than a pursuit of cultural homogeneity. Research highlights the central role of constitutional principles in framing citizenship education (Chistolini, 2019; Bombardelli & Codato, 2017), while also emphasizing the longstanding focus on active citizenship and democratic participation (Besozzi, 2014; Tarozzi & Torres, 2016).

Compared to more liberal and community-oriented models often associated with the United Kingdom, and to the French republican framework centered on *laïcité* (Szukala, 2023), Italy relies more heavily on legislative intervention to provide normative guidance, particularly following the 2019 reform that strengthened the constitutional dimension of citizenship education. Broader research on migration governance further suggests that Italy’s Catholic heritage and its position at the Mediterranean frontline of migration have encouraged policy approaches oriented toward intercultural dialogue and negotiated accommodation rather than strict assimilation (Caponio & Donatiello, 2017).

Taken together, these elements point to a mediating institutional orientation situated between rigid assimilation and fully decentralized multiculturalism.

Comparative Significance and the Explanatory Value of the Periodization

From the perspective of institutional change and citizenship theory, the multi-stage development of citizenship education in Italy does not follow a linear trajectory of expansion. Existing scholarship documents successive reform phases shaped by shifting political and social contexts (Angelini, 2023; Albanesi, 2018; Santagati, 2016). Building on these findings, this study interprets these phases as instances of institutional adjustment under multiple social pressures. Each stage reflects responses to specific challenges while also revealing how the state has renegotiated the boundaries of citizenship across historical contexts.

Under conditions of increased immigration and social diversification, tensions between citizenship and integration goals have become more visible, as highlighted in broader research on migration governance and education policy (Finotelli et al., 2025; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025). In this sense, the periodization proposed here is not merely descriptive but analytically revealing. It highlights a core feature of the Italian trajectory: delayed institutionalization followed by accelerated consolidation through key legislative moments. This interpretation suggests an incremental and strategic pattern of institutional design in response to social pressures (cf. Gathmann & Garbers, 2023).

The Italian path differs both from the “strong integration” models associated with countries such as the United Kingdom and France and from fully decentralized, fragmented arrangements. Instead, Italy’s institutional

trajectory appears to reflect a pattern of state-mediated adjustment under accumulating social pressures, rather than the implementation of a coherent and pre-defined citizenship model. Accordingly, this trajectory invites further comparative inquiry.

Core Drivers of Policy Development

The five-stage evolution of Italian citizenship education is not a series of isolated policy events, but a process of gradual institutional adjustment driven by external structural pressures, internal governance needs, and a paradigm shift in educational philosophy. Institutional Change Theory, Citizenship Theory, and Multicultural Education Theory provide complementary lenses through which this multi-dimensional mechanism can be understood.

First, external structural pressures have expanded the scope of citizenship education. Scholarship highlights how sustained migration and European policy coordination have required education systems to address cultural diversity more systematically (Biscaldi & Chinazzi, 2025). In Italy, this led to a gradual shift from limited engagement with diversity toward its formal institutional recognition in later reform stages.

Second, internal governance challenges contributed to institutional reform. Across Europe, declining democratic participation and political disengagement have prompted renewed attention to citizenship education (Bargel et al., 2025). In Italy, these concerns coincided with legislative efforts culminating in Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019, which granted citizenship education statutory status. From the perspective of citizenship theory (Daher, 2019), this development reflects tensions between traditional compliance-oriented citizenship and more participatory models.

Finally, shifts in educational philosophy provided a normative foundation for integration. The transition toward competency-based approaches in citizenship education has been documented in Italian scholarship (Losito, 2003). This orientation is institutionalized in the interdisciplinary model codified in the 2019 legislation and subsequent ministerial guidelines (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2020).

In summary, the evolution of Italian citizenship education results from the interplay of three forces: external pressures triggered thematic expansion, internal needs drove institutional integration, and philosophical shifts provided normative support for innovation. Institutional Change Theory explains how these pressures translated into policy adjustments at specific historical junctures; Citizenship Theory reveals the underlying issues of social identity; and Multicultural Education Theory illustrates how cultural diversity continues to reshape curricular goals. The five-stage framework represents the temporal manifestation of this dynamic mechanism.

Meaning and Substance of Policy Development: An Integrated Three-Dimensional Analysis

The gradual incorporation of multicultural concerns into Italian education policy reflects how increasing immigration and social diversification have prompted institutional adjustments within the school system (Santagati & Bertozzi, 2023). What initially emerged as fragmented and reactive measures gradually evolved into more structured policy responses, leading to the curricular integration of intercultural education themes. Drawing on previous analyses of Italian integration and multicultural governance (Armillei, 2015; Santagati & Bertozzi, 2023), this development can be broadly divided into several phases. In the earlier period, citizenship education was framed primarily around a state-centered model of moral formation, within which cultural diversity was largely addressed through assimilationist logics. During the subsequent phase, diversity received limited recognition but remained weakly institutionalized in curricular terms. From the 1990s onward, issues of intercultural dialogue, human rights, and social cohesion gradually entered policy discourse and educational guidelines.

The adoption of Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019 marked a further step toward institutional consolidation, positioning cultural diversity alongside digital citizenship and sustainable development as core components of the national citizenship education framework.

This policy trajectory indicates that multiculturalism has shifted from a supplementary concern to a central component of contemporary civic competence in Italy, reflecting formal educational and legal recognition by the state of social diversity.

At the same time, changes in the aims of citizenship education reflect a broader redefinition of citizenship itself. The 2019 reform promotes an understanding of citizenship that emphasizes participation, responsibility, and civic engagement, which has been interpreted as aligning with an “active citizenship” model (Di Genova & Fredella, 2022). Rather than focusing primarily on the transmission of civic knowledge, the reform highlights the development of competences related to sustainable development, digital responsibility, and intercultural coexistence.

This orientation corresponds to broader European frameworks, such as the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (Council of the European Union, 2018) and the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018/2023), both of which emphasize competence-based and participatory approaches to citizenship education.

Analyses of Italian policy development indicate that citizenship education has evolved from fragmented and unstable initiatives into a framework consolidated through national legislation (Bartolomei, 2019). Sociological studies further highlight how citizenship education functions as a mechanism through which the state negotiates collective identity under conditions of increasing diversity (Besozzi, 2014). Research on intercultural education points to a gradual shift from assimilation-oriented approaches toward the institutional incorporation of diversity within the statutory curriculum (Albanesi, 2018).

Taken together, these developments suggest that Italy’s citizenship education trajectory reflects a broader process through which the nation-state, facing pressures of globalization and diversification, has rearticulated the substance of citizenship through institutionalized curricular reform.

CONCLUSION

Answering the Research Questions: Institutional Evolution under Diversity Pressures

Drawing on a three-dimensional analytical framework, this study has addressed the evolution of Italian citizenship education through the lens of institutional change under conditions of growing social diversity. First, in response to Research Question (1), the findings show that Italian citizenship education evolved not through abrupt transformation but through successive phases of institutional adjustment. Migration and increasing cultural pluralism functioned as external pressures that gradually expanded the scope and objectives of citizenship education, while institutional continuity constrained the pace and direction of reform.

Second, regarding Research Question (2), the analysis demonstrates that different phases of development were shaped by distinct policy rationales and governance logics. Early initiatives were characterized by fragmented implementation and limited institutional consolidation, whereas later reforms—particularly the establishment of a unified legislative framework—marked a critical juncture that enhanced policy coherence and formal visibility.

Third, in relation to Research Question (3), the Italian case provides broader comparative insights into how late-institutionalizing systems respond to diversity pressures. Rather than adopting comprehensive structural redesign, Italy illustrates a pattern of gradual recalibration in which inclusion is negotiated within pre-existing governance structures.

Relation to Existing Literature: The Added Value of a Macro-Institutional Perspective

A significant strand of research on education policy and practice in Italy has concentrated on school-level implementation and teachers’ practices (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017; Ianes et al., 2020). In contrast, this study shifts the analytical focus toward the institutional conditions and governance logics underlying policy evolution. By adopting an analytical framework that traces the trajectory from institutional establishment and fragmented implementation to critical junctures and systemic governance, this article seeks to account for recurrent patterns observed in school-level practices across different phases.

The findings suggest that classroom practices are embedded within broader national institutional arrangements rather than being solely the result of individual pedagogical choices. The unified framework established by Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019 provided a clearer legal basis and greater policy coherence for schools, whereas the difficulties observed in earlier phases reflect the structural consequences of limited macro-institutional

consolidation. Rather than replacing micro-level studies of practice, this research complements them by situating classroom dynamics within their institutional and political context, an approach consistent with broader scholarship on policy-practice relations (Liddicoat & Díaz, 2008). By foregrounding historically layered governance arrangements, this macro-institutional perspective helps explain why recurrent tensions at the school level persist across reform cycles.

Strengthening the Conceptual Contribution: Inclusive Adaptation

The primary theoretical contribution of this article lies in conceptualizing inclusive adaptation as a meso-level mode of institutional change in citizenship education, offering an analytical framework for understanding the internal logic of Italy's long-term development in this field. Rather than reflecting a single, comprehensive institutional design, this trajectory can be interpreted as a gradual process through which the education system has expanded its institutional scope to accommodate new social groups, including immigrants and cultural minorities. This interpretation builds on existing analyses of incremental reform, institutional resistance, and pedagogical innovation within Italian intercultural and citizenship education (Bianchi, 2011; Bussotti, 2017; Guarda, 2025).

Inclusive adaptation is defined in this study as a patterned process of institutional recalibration through which a citizenship education system incrementally incorporates new social claims, identities, and participation expectations without undergoing a wholesale structural rupture. It differs from transformative reform, which entails systemic redesign, and from mere symbolic inclusion, which lacks institutional embedding. Instead, inclusive adaptation operates through gradual adjustments that expand the scope of recognition while preserving core governance structures.

Analytically, inclusive adaptation consists of three interrelated components: (1) institutional recalibration, referring to incremental adjustments in legal status and governance arrangements; (2) curricular rearticulation, involving the integration of diversity-oriented content and competencies within existing subject frameworks; and (3) normative reframing, whereby the conception of the "ideal citizen" is progressively broadened to accommodate plural identities and forms of participation. Together, these components capture how inclusion is negotiated within, rather than outside, established institutional pathways.

The mechanism underlying inclusive adaptation can be understood as a process of negotiated layering (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), in which new inclusion-oriented policy elements are added onto pre-existing institutional arrangements. Rather than displacing earlier normative frameworks, these additions coexist with and gradually reshape them. This layered dynamic explains why Italian citizenship education exhibits both continuity and gradual diversification across historical phases.

Beyond the Italian case, inclusive adaptation may serve as a heuristic framework for analyzing citizenship education in other multiethnic societies characterized by strong institutional continuity and incremental policy reform. It is particularly applicable in contexts where diversity pressures emerge gradually and are mediated through established governance structures rather than abrupt regime transformation. First, institutional alignment between citizenship law and education policy emerges as an important enabling condition for reducing the risk of long-term marginalization among immigrant-background populations. Second, existing research indicates that multicultural objectives articulated at the policy level do not automatically translate into classroom practice, as their effects are often mediated by institutional inertia and persistent assimilationist assumptions (Bussotti, 2017). At the micro level, bottom-up forms of adaptation, which occur through teachers' interpretive work and pedagogical innovation, constitute an important mechanism for maintaining a dynamic balance between uniformity and diversity within a unified citizenship education framework (Guarda, 2025). Inclusive adaptation therefore captures a distinct governance pattern in which states reconcile institutional continuity with expanding claims for recognition, without resorting to systemic rupture or symbolic accommodation.

Research Limitations and Directions for Future Study

This study examines, at the macro-policy level, how Italy has embedded principles of inclusion within national education governance through legislation and curriculum reform. Previous scholarship on inclusive education highlights the broader policy commitment to inclusion within the Italian education system (Ianes et al., 2020).

However, inclusive institutional design does not necessarily translate into students' lived experiences of inclusion. Research on citizenship and intercultural education in Italy suggests that while policy frameworks often display coherence at the discursive level, challenges remain in fostering student participation, sense of belonging, and civic identity formation (Albanesi, 2018; Chiappelli, 2021). Comparative evidence further indicates that inclusive policy architectures do not automatically ensure inclusive outcomes in everyday school life (OECD, 2025).

Moreover, teachers' practices appear to function as an important mediating mechanism between macro-level institutional arrangements and students' experiences. Prior studies suggest that institutionalized multicultural objectives become meaningful educational experiences only when teachers actively reinterpret and enact them within specific classroom contexts (Guarda, 2025).

Future research should therefore conduct systematic investigations in concrete school settings to examine the practical translatability of institutionalized citizenship education and how this process is jointly shaped by institutional conditions, school culture, and teachers' professional judgment. By attending simultaneously to macro-level institutional structures and students' subjective experiences, research on citizenship education can more effectively address the sustainability of inclusive policies in everyday educational contexts (Ball, 2003; Osler & Starkey, 2003).

By illuminating the layered and negotiated character of inclusion within Italian citizenship education, this study contributes to broader debates on how contemporary democracies manage diversity through education policy. The Italian experience demonstrates that institutional continuity and pluralistic expansion are not necessarily contradictory, but can coexist within a patterned process of inclusive adaptation. In this sense, inclusive adaptation may represent a characteristic pathway of policy evolution in late-modern democracies facing sustained socio-cultural transformation.

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Appendix A List of Core Policy Documents Included in the Analysis

No.	Year	Document Title (Original Italian)	English Translation	Issuing Authority	Type	Key Relevance
1	1958	Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica 13 giugno 1958, n. 585	Decree of the President of the Republic No. 585 of 13 June 1958	President of the Italian Republic	Decree of the President of the Republic	Establishment of moral education foundation
2	1962	Legge 31 dicembre 1962, n. 1859	Law No. 1859 of 31 December 1962	Italian Parliament	Ordinary Law	Depoliticization and decentralization
3	1979	Decreto Ministeriale 9 febbraio 1979	Ministerial Decree of 9 February 1979	Italian Ministry of Education	Ministerial Decree	Depoliticization through cross-curricular integration
4	1985	Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica 12 febbraio 1985, n. 104	Decree of the President of the Republic No. 104 of 12 February 1985	President of the Italian Republic	Decree of the President of the Republic	Implicit moral socialization replacing formal citizenship education
5	1997	Legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59	Law No. 59 of 15 March 1997	Italian Parliament	Ordinary Law	Decentralization through school autonomy

6	1999	Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica 8 marzo 1999, n. 275	Decree of the President of the Republic No. 275 of 8 March 1999	President of the Italian Republic	Decree of the President of the Republic	Uneven implementation through institutional autonomy
7	2008	Legge 30 ottobre 2008, n. 169	Law No. 169 of 30 October 2008	Italian Parliament	Ordinary Law	Curricular systematization through legal formalization
8	2012	Decreto Ministeriale 16 novembre 2012, n. 254	Ministerial Decree No. 254 of 16 November 2012	Italian Ministry of Education	Ministerial Decree	Implementation tensions under curricular formalization
9	2015	Legge 13 luglio 2015, n. 107	Law No. 107 of 13 July 2015	Italian Parliament	Ordinary Law	Instrumentalization linking citizenship education to evaluation
10	2019	Legge 20 agosto 2019, n. 92	Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019	Italian Parliament	Ordinary Law	Reinstitutionalization through compulsory governance
11	2020	Linee guida per l'insegnamento dell'educazione civica	Guidelines for the Teaching of Civic Education	Italian Ministry of Education	Ministerial Guidelines (adopted via Ministerial Decree)	Operationalization of governance-oriented citizenship education