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SUMMARY – DOCTORAL THESIS

**SHAPING CIVIC BEHAVIOR IN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS
THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING.
APPLICATIONS IN *EDUCATION FOR
DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP (7TH GRADE)***

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Keywords: democratic citizenship, education for democratic citizenship, civic behavior, civic knowledge, civic skills, civic attitudes, civic involvement, civic identity.

Argument

The doctoral thesis entitled *Shaping civic behavior in middle school students through project-based learning. Applications in education for Democratic citizenship (7th grade)* analyzes the impact of the project-based learning method on the development of civic behavior in 7th grade students. In a society marked by rapid changes and complex social problems, the formation of civic behavior to create informed and engaged citizens becomes a necessity. Education for democratic citizenship aims not only to transmit information, but also to develop the ability to understand the administrative structures of a democratic state, the rights and obligations of citizenship. The discipline contributes to the development of students' civic competences through project-based learning, providing rich educational experiences based on collaboration and informed dialogue.

The research is structured in two parts: the theoretical foundation of the concepts of democratic citizenship and education for democratic citizenship, and the experimental part. The first part clarifies basic terminology and examines the various dimensions of citizenship, including political, legal, social, cultural, religious, economic and environmental aspects. The objectives of education for democratic citizenship are discussed, highlighting the importance of civic education in the formation of citizens capable of being involved responsibly in society's problems.

The motivation of the thesis derives from the need to improve teaching methods in social education and the desire to overcome the possible limitations of the current educational system in promoting civic behavior. Traditional teaching methods always fail to foster the social engagement and responsibility essential to a functioning and effective democratic citizenship. The project-based learning method, with its interactive approach and emphasis on participation, promises to address these shortcomings by engaging students in authentic and relevant activities, reflecting the real challenges of the community and society.

The aim of the thesis is to investigate the impact of the experimental intervention program on the formation of the civic behavior of the 7th grade students by using the project-based learning method. The research aims to demonstrate the effectiveness of this method in the development of civic skills necessary for the formation of informed and responsible citizens. The intervention

program was designed to evaluate and demonstrate the effectiveness of the project-based learning method in Education for Democratic Citizenship, presenting it as an interactive alternative to traditional teaching methods.

The research methodology adopts quantitative approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention program. The research aims to develop and implement an intervention program focused on the formation of civic behavior through project-based learning. A main objective is the analysis of the changes in the civic behavior of the students, making comparisons between the experimental group and the control group at different evaluation moments: pre-test, post-test and re-test. Other objectives include determining the increase in the level of civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes of students, identifying the school environment (urban vs. rural) favorable to the development of civic behavior and exploring the long-term effects of the method.

The research applies statistical methods such as the t-test for independent and paired samples, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and measuring the internal consistency of the scales, ensuring a rigorous evaluation of the data collected and the validation of the formulated hypotheses. The research instruments include a questionnaire based on a five-point Likert Scale, used to collect data on civic behavior variables, and the convenience sample includes 147 7th grade students, divided into experimental and control groups, ensuring a diverse representation of the target population.

The research establishes a conceptual basis in Chapter I, entitled *Democratic Citizenship and Education for Democratic Citizenship*, in which he explains the two concepts, along with other similar terms. Citizenship in Romania is regulated by the Constitution of Romania (2003), which defines citizenship and the rights of citizens in a national, sovereign and indivisible state. The constitution includes rights and freedoms, promotes justice, political pluralism and ensures equality before the law. Romania's accession to the European Union expanded the rights of Romanian citizens, including free movement and participation in European elections. European citizenship promotes non-discrimination and representative democracy.

Global citizenship is based on human rights education and intercultural dialogue, while digital citizenship involves the responsible use of technology, respecting human rights and cultural

diversity. Implementing digital citizenship requires access to technology, digital education and knowledge of online rights and responsibilities.

The research also analyzed democratic values, starting from the idea of civic competence, considered of major importance in a democracy, being linked to fundamental human rights and participation in civic life. The rule of law ensures equality before the law, promoting equity. Citizen power lies in active participation in democratic processes, holding officials accountable and defending rights through various civic means.

In a democracy, citizen power and the rule of law are complementary, preventing abuses and ensuring governance in the public interest. Education for democratic citizenship emphasizes the protection of fundamental rights and promotes tolerance and respect for diversity. Civic responsibility involves participating in democratic processes and contributing to the well-being of the community. Citizens also treat each other with respect, promoting a culture of mutual respect, including by combating discrimination. Supporting diversity and inclusion through dialogue contributes to a better understanding and appreciation of different perspectives.

The research analyzed some of the dimensions of citizenship, relevant to the concept of democratic citizenship and its development. Democratic citizenship involves rights, responsibilities and obligations. Active participation in civic and political matters is essential (Boje, 2015). The political dimension includes fundamental rights (the right to vote, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, the right to petition) and political responsibilities (voting, political information, engaging in civic discourse, holding officials accountable) (Annette, 2009; Mouffe, 2010). Citizens influence decisions through active participation, holding authorities accountable (Houtzager & Acharya, 2011).

The legal dimension protects civil rights and liberties through the Constitution and laws, ensuring equality and a fair justice system (Devins & Fisher, 2015). School education, focused on democratic values, helps students understand these dimensions and perceive civic obligations as elements that strengthen rights and freedoms (Perveen & Awan, 2017). Democratic citizenship includes participation in community life, regardless of social, economic or cultural background (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Access to education, health and political decisions form the skills for active citizenship. Social cohesion creates a sense of belonging, respecting cultural diversity (Parker, 2003; Saloojee, 2005).

Social capital, which includes relationships between citizens, supports the functioning of society (Hooghe & Stolle, 2003). Volunteering and involvement in civil society (NGOs, social movements, community groups) promotes civic engagement and participation (Enslin & White, 2003; McLaverty, 2002). Independent and ethical media support democratic principles and political accountability (Fenton, 2014).

The religious dimension influences individual and societal values, integrating into the political, legal and cultural sphere. Religious moral values support democracy by promoting social justice, human dignity, and the common good (Jackson, 2007). Religion can influence civic engagement through religious communities, which serve as a social and political binder (Hervieu-Léger, 2006).

The economic and ecological dimension supports civic behavior by ensuring long-term well-being and creating opportunities for future generations. A strong economy provides the necessary resources for the active participation of citizens in society (Wolfe, 1944). Sustainable development protects natural resources, promoting the involvement of citizens in their management (Stoll-Kleemann & Welp, 2006). Environmental education improves understanding of environmental issues and promotes environmental activism (Melo-Escrihuela, 2008). Economic education helps citizens understand the workings of the economy and influence public economic policies (Parker, 2010).

Democratic citizenship is a complex concept, integrated into the educational system, based on actions at the national and European level. Civic education in Romania is based on the international legislation of the Council of Europe, the UN and the OSCE, which covers the right to education, the rights of the child and the fight against discrimination. The Romanian Constitution reflects these rights and gives priority to international regulations (Velea et al., 2013). National Education Law no. 1/2011, Law no. 272/2004 and Law no. 116/2002 provides the legal framework for democratic citizenship education, promoting civic and moral values and protecting children's rights (Velea et al., 2013). Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) is integrated into all educational levels and extended to the workplace and communities, promoting lifelong civic knowledge (Albulescu & Albulescu, 2018). EDC contributes to the formation of students to become informed and active citizens, applying the principles learned in school throughout life (Gaventa, 1995; Starkey, 2002).

Civil society, including social movements, voluntary organizations and NGOs, contributes to maintaining an effective democratic system (Cohen & Arato, 2016). The Council of Europe has recognized the importance of education for democratic citizenship and human rights since 1997, emphasizing the role of NGOs in shaping civic behavior (Forum on "Civic Partnerships for Citizenship and Humana Rights Education", 2009).

Civic partnerships, including ministries, regional authorities, educational institutions and the media, promote democratic citizenship and solve problems that the state cannot address alone (Dunn & Hann, 2004). These partnerships increase trust in institutions and promote community stability (Raiker et al., 2019). Education for democratic citizenship combines democratic theories and concepts of citizenship to equip citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary for active participation in democratic life (Veldhuis, 1997). The two types of education are priorities for European democracies, among other things because they promote active participation and protect civil rights (Crick, 2010).

The Council of Europe Charter on EDC and HRE emphasizes the importance of education in defending democracy and the rule of law, focusing on rights, responsibilities and active participation (Council of Europe Charter, 2017). Education influences political attitudes, and the family plays a significant role in shaping children's political understanding (Sue & Marilyn, 2016). At the EU level, the implementation of EDC and HRE in the school curriculum, from preschool to university, contributes to the formation of active citizens (Felisa, 2015). Collaboration between civil society and the state is of practical importance for the success of EDC and HRE, providing innovative and practical solutions (Raiker et al., 2019).

Education for democratic citizenship develops political, social, cultural and economic competences. Political skills include an understanding of democracy, citizenship, political structures and decision-making processes. Cultural competence focuses on information technology, intercultural experiences and anti-discrimination. Social competences are aimed at combating social exclusion, collaboration between groups and national security. Economic competences deal with the market economy, economic cooperation and consumer rights. Veldhuis emphasizes that education must address the needs of citizens and social issues, adapting teaching methods for the active involvement of students.

Civic participation requires critical thinking and responsible action. Students need to develop sound knowledge and democratic skills through hands-on experiences (Sibbett, 2016). Planning

for civic participation is critical to managing failures and interacting effectively with all stakeholders (Giroux & McLaren, 2011). Critical thinking is a useful component for effective participation in society, educational environments being able to promote responsibility and a sense of belonging to the community (ten Dam & Volman, 2004).

Active citizenship involves citizens' participation in communities and respect for human dignity (Council of Europe). Quality education for democratic citizenship develops democratic and intercultural competences. Correct information and civic engagement are fundamental to strengthening democracy. Important factors are education, media and civic organizations (Zembylas, 2022). Critical education of citizens helps to filter information sources and avoid the negative effects of mass media (Çakmaklı, 2016).

Understanding and respecting human rights begins in the educational setting, influenced by the education received in the family and community. Through education, students learn to appreciate democratic values and develop moral principles (Sibbett, 2016). In Romania, these values are taught through Education for Democratic Citizenship (School Program for Social Education, Grades V-VIII, 2017). Human rights are integrated into everyday life, which is a determining aspect for democracy (Kirchschlaeger, 2014). Respect for rights depends on each individual, and education helps to fight discrimination and promote a fair justice system. Students are encouraged to be active in the community, developing skills and perspectives on civic rights and responsibilities (Spaiser et al., 2014). Voting, respect for the law and participation in community life are essential for strengthening citizenship rights (Waghid, 2007).

The national curriculum of 1998/1999 is the main tool for teaching EDC/HRE in Romania, including formal and non-formal education, from pre-school to post-secondary. At the European level, the concept of citizenship covers European identity, education for EU countries and citizenship of the European Union. European citizenship, promoted by the Council of Europe and the European Association of Teaching Staff, has been strengthened through various treaties and initiatives, culminating in the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, which promoted citizen participation and decision-making transparency.

The Social Education discipline, part of the school curriculum for grades V-VIII, develops civic skills through topics such as critical thinking, children's rights, intercultural education and economic-financial education. The curriculum is structured around general and specific skills, teaching methods, learning activities and content, using project-based learning to encourage

student engagement and real-life application of knowledge. Relevant documents include the National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights and the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights.

The 2008 preschool curriculum and subsequent programs emphasized the importance of early education. The UNICEF principles for Romania include the interests of the child, dignity, equality, physical and mental development, protecting the family and the quality of education. Preschool education forms moral and social values, and civic goals for preschoolers include observing norms of behavior and recognizing diversity. The curriculum for the primary cycle introduces civic education in the 3rd and 4th grades, focusing on community integration skills and moral-civic development. Assessment is continuous and formative, through projects, portfolios and self-assessments, focusing on applying knowledge to real-life situations.

In **Chapter II. *The development of the civic behavior of students in a school context***, the constitutive elements of civic behavior, formed in a school context, are outlined. Civic behavior underlies how students conceptualize active participation in a democratic society. The research emphasizes the role of the school in forming the civic behavior of students, preparing them for conscious and responsible involvement in society.

Civic and social education are interconnected, emphasizing the functioning of government structures and the promotion of the common good. The school prepares students for active participation in society, studying the rights and obligations of citizenship and forming skills necessary for involvement in the community (Boulding, 1990; Lisman, 2012). Social education draws information from the social sciences to address the needs of students and the community, emphasizing social relationships and empathy (Camicia, 2023; Moss & Petrie, 2019). Civic behavior, the active dimension of citizenship, is manifested through participation and responsibility, being formed in school through deliberate education in a democratic system (Villareal et al., 2023).

Civic competences include knowledge, skills and attitudes, divided into affective and cognitive dimensions (Hoskins et al., 2008). These skills enable active participation and understanding of the concepts of democracy, justice and citizenship. The skills required include critical thinking, respect for human rights and the ability to collaborate in multicultural environments (European Union, 2006). Social competences focus on personal and social well-

being, effective communication and empathy, supporting civic culture and active participation (Nunez Cubero & Perez, 2013).

The Social Theory of Learning (STL) developed by Albert Bandura emphasizes the importance of social contexts in learning. Students develop behaviors by observing adults and the consequences of their actions. Essential cognitive processes include attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Shodiqin & Junaidi, 2022). Civic behavior can be developed through models of social engagement provided by teachers and the community. Jean Piaget, in the Theory of Cognitive Development (TCD), claims that the development of children's knowledge is achieved through interaction with the surrounding world, structured on distinct stages: sensory - motor, preoperational, concrete operations and formal operations (Saragih, 2022). The stages of cognitive development contribute to the formation of civic behavior by developing critical thinking and empathy. Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explain the influence of group membership on behavior. Key concepts include social identity, in- group and out- group, and positive social identity (Trepte & Loy, 2017). SIT emphasizes the power of group membership and its influence on social order, group loyalty, and involvement in civic activities.

The integrated curriculum combines diverse areas of study to provide students with a real-life perspective, promoting critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving (Mara, 2017). Key components include interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinarity, organizing learning around topics of interest to students (Clark & Wallace, 2015). Implementing this curriculum can be challenging for teachers, requiring cooperation and additional training (Moreira dos Santos et al., 2020). The "service-learning" (SL) model integrates educational goals with community involvement, offering students pragmatic experiences through collaboration with local organizations, applying theory in practical activities such as volunteering (Smith et al., 2013).

Extracurricular activities provide hands-on educational opportunities essential for active involvement in school and community. Participating in the care of green spaces, organizing playgrounds and monitoring community policies develops civic skills and a sense of belonging (Levin -Goldberg, 2009). The involvement of students in the decision-making process at the school level allows them to understand the functioning of educational institutions and perceive democratic structures. The student school council, elected by secret ballot, has a consultative role and represents the interests of students, promoting democratic behavior (Order no. 4742 of August 10, 2016).

School-family-community partnerships are essential to the formation of civic behavior and community responsibility. They contribute to the involvement of community members in common actions, strengthening the sense of belonging and promoting diversity, tolerance and responsibility (Stefanski et al., 2016). School-planned civic projects supported by community and organizations help students address real-world issues through volunteering and community service (Hands, 2008). Community members become mentors for students, developing their sense of worth and belonging (Bryan & Henry, 2008).

Collaboration in these partnerships strengthens relationships and contributes to the formation of social capital, essential for active involvement in the community (Lowe, 2021). Joint actions supported by institutions strengthen community cohesion and resilience (Sanders & Epstein, 1998). Partnerships promote democratic principles, connecting the school to community life and using resources to strengthen democratic relationships and values (Nicotera, 2008). Involvement of students in solving community problems strengthens the sense of belonging to the community.

Project-based learning (PBL) is a constructivist method in which students construct knowledge through social activities, including curriculum-integrated tasks, investigations, and realistic student-centered projects. PBL stimulates motivation, develops teamwork skills, critical thinking and interest in the subjects studied. The principles of PBL include the central question, learning objectives, scientific practices, collaboration, the use of technology and the creation of a final product (Walker et al., 2015; Diffily, 2002; Alacapinar, 2008; Krajcik, 2015).

Principles of democratic citizenship, such as equality, active participation, rule of law, respect for human rights, tolerance and critical thinking, can be integrated into PBL by: promoting civic/social rights and responsibilities so that students learn to analyze information and evaluate public policies, developing empathy and social responsibility (Battistoni, 1997); social problem solving, whereby students investigate real problems in their community, stimulating active citizenship and collaboration for the common good (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2006); collaboration and involvement in democratic processes that teach them to negotiate and accept compromises, finding common ground (Howe & Covell, 2009) and organizing and following democratic rules, which create clear rules for communication and conflict resolution, learning the importance of democratic procedures (Johnson & Johnson, 2016).

Limited time for Social Education negatively affects the development of civic behavior, leading to superficial understanding of civic rights and obligations and limiting critical thinking

and problem solving (Morrison et al., 2019; Ersoy, 2014). Insufficient exposure to democratic values reduces students' ability to deal with community issues and actively engage (Naval et al., 2002; Robertson, 2008). Insufficient teacher training and traditional teaching methods negatively affect the development of civic behavior. Students will not develop the critical thinking and practical skills needed for active engagement (Hinchey & Konkol, 2021). Continuing education programs for teachers and collaboration with experts can remedy these deficiencies (Rosenblum, 2020).

An unfavorable school climate, characterized by violence, bullying and exclusion, negatively affects the civic behavior of students (Dipaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Lack of trust and injustice reduce collaboration and sense of belonging, weakening democratic ideals (Eckstein & Noack, 2014). Family problems, such as parental death, violent divorce, and abuse, negatively affect child development and civic behavior. Neglect and abuse lead to a distorted self-image and lack of confidence in one's own abilities, reducing involvement in civic activities (Gimpel et al., 2003; Higgins & McCabe, 2003). The involvement of specialized institutions and organizations can provide resources to correct these dysfunctions (Ochoa -Becker, 2006).

In *Chapter III. The educational valences of project-based learning*, the optimization of project-based learning (PBL) is explained, which is achieved through effective strategies: involvement in relevant projects, multidisciplinary integration, promotion of collaboration, involvement in social causes and the cultivation of a democratic school climate. These approaches shape civic behavior and prepare students for participation in society.

Relevant projects connect the classroom with the community, turning education into meaningful action. Students become active participants, developing responsibility and empathy by initiating, executing and controlling research and implementation actions (Boss & Larmer, 2018). PBL prepares students for systemic and holistic thinking. Complex social problems require knowledge from science, history, politics, and economics, encouraging finding the root of problems and proposing varied solutions (Drake & Burns, 2004).

PBL develops collaborative skills, transforming the classroom into a small-scale democratic system. Students negotiate roles, manage tasks, and resolve conflicts, preparing for real civic participation. Projects involve students in social causes, developing civic identity and responsibility. Students identify civic problems, formulate solutions, and collaborate with

community members and state institutions, developing skills in navigating the public space and understanding the dynamics of political power. Implementing a democratic classroom system allows students to understand and actively engage in their communities. Open discussions in a safe environment facilitate free expression and consensus building, developing effective communication and collaboration skills.

Project-based learning forms active and engaged citizens in solving social problems. Students develop skills, beliefs and behaviors necessary to approach complex problems through responsibility and initiative. Civic engagement focuses on concrete actions and positive impact (Farmer et al., 2019). Educational projects develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students learn to define problems, analyze relevant information, generate solutions and implement the most effective solution, following the evaluation of the results (Pratiwi & Wuryandani, 2020).

Project: Citizen includes final assessment focused on values, attitudes, skills and critical understanding. The guide suggests three assessment methods: student behaviors during the project, product assessment and reflective self-assessment. The evaluation of citizenship skills is carried out in the stages of the project: design and planning, implementation and presentation. Assessment of project tools involves performance rubrics, reflection journals and peer feedback. Product assessment includes awareness campaigns, proposed solutions and communication with local authorities, focusing on students' ability to write and disseminate information and think critically. Self-assessment and peer assessment help students identify strengths and weaknesses, reinforce positive behaviors and improve negative ones, encouraging dialogue and the development of long-term citizenship skills.

In ***Chapter IV. Research design*** the current context of education and the development of society are presented, the review and adaptation of methods of teaching concepts related to civic behavior and democratic citizenship become a useful practice. These concepts require not only a theoretical basis but also a proper practical application that resonates with the values and challenges of today's society. *The research starts from the premise that the family and the community are not prepared to provide the necessary information for the formation and development of civic behavior, which suggests the need for well-structured educational interventions.*

Designing and implementing an intervention program to determine the civic behavior of 7th grade students is a viable option, given the contemporary challenges of democratic society. In a world characterized by rapid, complex and often unpredictable changes, it is desirable that young people are not only informed, but also trained to become active, responsible and involved citizens in the life of their community. Studies show that traditional teaching methods do not always succeed in developing these essential skills, which is why innovative approaches such as project-based learning present themselves as relevant options. This intervention program aims to provide students with authentic opportunities to develop their civic knowledge, skills and attitudes in a practical and relevant way, encouraging active participation and critical reflection on real societal issues.

The aim of the thesis is to investigate the formative impact of an experimental intervention program aimed at forming the civic behavior of students, by using the project-based learning method applicable to students in the 7th grade.

The general objective of the experimental research entitled *Shaping civic behavior in middle school students through project-based learning. Applications in education for Democratic citizenship (7th grade)* is to design, develop, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention program intended for Grade VII students . This program aims to promote the formation of civic behavior in schools and in the communities from which the students come. In order to achieve this general objective, the research focuses on the following specific objectives:

- O1. The development and implementation of the experimental intervention program, which favors the formation of the civic behavior of students.
- O2. Analysis of the changes obtained following the implementation of the intervention program on the formation of students' civic behavior, comparing the results of the experimental group with those of the control group and determining the significant differences between the averages of these groups at the moments of pre-test, post-test and re-test evaluation.
- O3. Determining the increase in the level of civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes after the implementation of the intervention program (post-test) compared to the initial level (pre-test), highlighting the effectiveness of the teaching method through projects.

- O4. Identifying the school environment (urban vs. rural) in which students develop to the greatest extent civic knowledge, civic engagement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes, as a result of the implementation of project-based learning.
- O5. Identifying the long-term effects of project-based learning on the level of civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes of students (post-test and re-test).
- O6. The formulation of practical methodological solutions through the implementation of project-based learning to support the growth of students' knowledge, skills, attitudes and civic identity, thus improving educational practice within the discipline of *Education for Democratic Citizenship*.

In accordance with this research, the investigative approaches are guided by the following research questions, aimed at clarifying and facilitating the understanding of the impact of the intervention program on the formation of the civic behavior of students:

1. How can one intervene to form the civic behavior of 7th grade students, measured by civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes?
2. To what extent is the project-based learning method effective in forming civic behavior in 7th grade students?
3. To what extent does project-based learning contribute to the maintenance of long-term civic behavior compared to traditional teaching methods?

In order to achieve the proposed objectives and to answer the research questions, the thesis aims to test the following hypotheses:

General hypothesis: Using project-based learning in subject teaching *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, for 7th grade students, contributes significantly to the formation of students' civic behavior.

Specific hypothesis 1: The use of project-based learning in the teaching of the subject *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, for students in the 7th grade, contributes significantly to increasing their level of civic knowledge.

Specific hypothesis 2: The use of project-based learning in the teaching of the subject *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, for students in the 7th grade, contributes significantly to increasing their level of civic involvement.

Specific hypothesis 3: The use of project-based learning in the teaching of the subject *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, for students in the 7th grade, contributes significantly to increasing their level of civic identity.

Specific hypothesis 4: The use of project-based learning in the teaching of the subject *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, for students in the 7th grade, contributes significantly to the increase in the level of development of their civic skills.

Specific hypothesis 5: The use of project-based learning in the teaching of the subject *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, for students of the 7th grade, contributes significantly to the increase in the level of development of their civic attitudes.

Independent variable: the systematic implementation of project-based learning in the educational process, as a central element of the intervention program.

Dependent variables: civic behavior, which manifests itself through:

- the level of civic knowledge;
- the level of civic involvement;
- the level of civic identity;
- the level of civic skills;
- the level of civic attitudes.

The research involved a sample of 147 7th grade students, divided into two distinct groups: the experimental group and the control group. This sample was selected using the convenience sampling method, due to the accessibility and availability of the students within the temporal and logistical framework imposed by the school calendar and the research schedule. The selection of students took into account ensuring a representative diversity in terms of the school environment, including students from urban and rural areas. The sample consisted of 75 students in the experimental group and 72 students in the control group. This assignment was made to allow for a rigorous comparison of the impact of the project-based learning (PBL) intervention program on students' civic behavior.

Table IV.1. Description of the subject pool

The research batch Environment school	Experimental classes	Control classes	Total number of classes	Total number of students
Environment urban	29 students	29 students	4 classes	108 students
	23 students	27 students		
Environment rural	21 students	18 students	2 classes	39 students
TOTAL	73 students	74 students	6 classes	147 students

The experimental research on the formation of civic behavior in 7th grade students was carried out during the 2022/2023 school year, in two educational institutions in Bihor county: Onisifor Ghibu High School in Oradea, in the urban environment, and Oșorhei High School, in rural environment. The choice of these locations was motivated by the need to compare the effects of the educational intervention in different socio-economic contexts, thus providing a comprehensive perspective on the influences of the school environment on the development of civic behavior. The research started in September 2022, with the presentation of the doctoral project and the experimental stages to the decision-making forums of the two schools. Between October 3-7, 2022, the teaching staff selected the experimental group and the control group of students included in the research and designed an intervention program to improve the civic behavior of students. Between October 10-14, 2022, the pre-test stage was implemented in the experimental and control classes and the work calendar was presented to the teaching staff. Between October 17-21, 2022, the training activities of the student groups took place. During the period October 31, 2022 - April 6, 2023, the design, implementation and monitoring of the lessons were implemented, and at the end of this period the post-test stage was carried out in the experimental and control classes. The re-testing stage took place between September 11-22, 2023, against the background of the teachers' strike at the end of the 2022/2023 school year, with the re-testing being carried out at the beginning of the next school year 2023/2024. These periods and locations were essential to ensure a rigorous implementation and detailed evaluation of the

intervention program, allowing for a detailed analysis of contextual influences on the formation of civic behavior in students.

The main goal of the intervention program was to develop and strengthen the civic behavior of 7th grade students, by using the project-based learning method. This program was designed to facilitate the active involvement of students in authentic educational processes that reflect the real challenges and problems of the community, thus contributing to the formation of responsible and active citizens.

The objectives of the intervention program included:

1. The development and implementation of the intervention program that favors the formation of the civic behavior of students, composed of the level of civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes.
2. Analysis of the changes obtained following the implementation of the intervention program on the formation of the students' civic behavior, comparing the results of the experimental group with those of the control group.
3. Determining the increase in the level of civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes following the implementation of the intervention program (post-test) compared to the initial level (pre-test).
4. Evaluation of the long-term improvement in the level of civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes of students after the implementation of the intervention program.

Stages of the intervention program

1. **Presentation of the project and selection of lots.** The program started with the presentation of the doctoral project and the experimental stages to the decision-making bodies of the two schools involved in the research. Later, the teaching staff selected the experimental group and the control group of students included in the research.
2. **The pre-experimental stage.** In this stage, the initial evaluation of the level of knowledge, involvement, identity, skills and civic attitudes of the students from both groups was carried out, using the validated questionnaire. This data provided a baseline for evaluating the impact of the intervention program.

3. **Implementation of the intervention program.** The program was conducted between October 31, 2022 and April 6, 2023 and included project-based learning activities, monitored and guided by teachers. The students in the experimental group participated in projects aimed at solving real problems in their communities, while the students in the control group followed the traditional curriculum.
4. **The post-experimental stage.** At the end of the implementation period of the program, a new assessment of the level of civic behavior training was carried out among students from both groups, in order to identify the changes produced by the intervention.
5. **Re-test stage.** In order to evaluate the persistence of the effects of the intervention program, a re-testing of the students was carried out between September 11-22, 2023. This stage allowed the analysis of the long-term impact of the PBL method on the civic behavior of the students.

The intervention program was designed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing teachers to integrate the projects into the existing curriculum and adapt them to the specific needs and interests of the students. Thus, an effective and relevant implementation was ensured, which significantly contributed to the achievement of the proposed objectives.

The research methods identified and selected, together with the instruments used, were adapted and customized to allow the documentation and collection of relevant data from the samples involved in the research. The main tools used in this research were the questionnaire, the school curriculum for the social education discipline V and VIII, the student's guide from *Project: The Citizen*, the teacher's guide from *Project: The Citizen*, statistical programs, statistical groupings and graphic groupings. Regarding the research methods used, we mention: the analysis of school documents, the survey method based on a questionnaire and the experimental method.

Table IV.2. The research methods and tools applied to measure the dependent variables of the research

Dependent variables (VD)	Research methods	Research tools	Analysis methods and techniques
Civic behavior manifested by: VD1. civic knowledge VD2. civic involvement VD3. civic identity VD4. civic skills VD5. civic attitudes	Analysis of school documents	The school curriculum for the Social Education discipline, grades V and VIII Student's Guide to <i>the Citizen Project</i> <i>The Citizen Project</i> Teacher's Guide	Content analysis Structural analysis Benchmarking
	Questionnaire-based survey method	The questionnaire created by the researcher based on the school curriculum and specialized literature. * <i>Formation of civic behavior in Education for Democratic Citizenship, through project-based learning</i>	IBM SPSS Statistics 26 program Statistical program Jamovi V 2.3.28.0 Statistical groupings: synthetic tables Graphical Representations: Structure Charts and comparison charts Mean parameters and synthetic parameters of variation
	The experimental method	Pre-Test, Post-Test and Re-test Questionnaires Scaling observable behavior	

The research was structured in four distinct stages: pre-experimental, experimental, post-experimental and the re-test stage. Each stage had its specific role in evaluating the impact of the project-based learning method on the formation of civic behavior in 7th grade students.

The pre-experimental stage represented the foundation of the research and included several preliminary activities essential for the success of the experiment. At this stage, focus

groups were organized with the members involved in *the Project: Citizen*, including teaching staff and experts in civic education. The purpose of these focus groups was to identify the main problems and challenges in the field of civic education and to discuss effective intervention strategies.

Another important aspect of the pre-experimental stage was the validation of the research questionnaire. The questionnaire, which measures the dependent variables (civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes), was initially applied to a pilot group of 30 students. The feedback obtained allowed the identification and correction of problematic items, ensuring the clarity and relevance of the questions.

Pre-testing was carried out to measure the initial level of the dependent variables in all students involved in the study. This initial evaluation provided a baseline for subsequent comparisons and evaluation of the impact of the intervention program.

The experimental stage consisted in the actual implementation of the intervention program based on the project-based learning method (PBL). This program was conducted between October 31, 2022 and April 6, 2023. During this period, students in the experimental classes participated in lessons and project-based educational activities designed to develop civic skills.

The program included information sessions, interactive discussions, and hands-on activities where students identified issues in their communities, developed public policy proposals, and actively participated in decision-making processes. The implementation was constantly monitored to ensure the coherence and efficiency of the activities and to make necessary adjustments according to the feedback received.

The post-experimental stage took place on April 6, 2023 and included the application of the post-test. This aimed to evaluate the progress made by the students following the participation in the intervention program. The post-test measured the same dependent variables as the pre-test, thus allowing direct comparison of results and assessment of the immediate impact of the PBL method.

The data collected at this stage provided valuable information about the effectiveness of the intervention program and highlighted the changes produced in the level of civic knowledge, involvement, identity, skills and civic attitudes of the students.

The re-test phase was of particular importance for assessing the persistence of the effects of the intervention program in the long term. The re-testing took place between September 11 and 22, 2023, approximately six months after the end of the experimental phase.

This included applying a new set of tests to measure the dependent variables again, aiming to see if the positive effects of the PBL method were maintained over time. The results of the re-test were compared with those of the post-test and pre-test to identify long-term trends and to validate the sustainability of the educational impact of the intervention program. During all these stages, the researchers respected methodological rigor and research ethics, ensuring the confidentiality of data and voluntary participation of the subjects, and minimizing the risks associated with participation in the study.

In *Chapter V. Results of experimental research* the pre-experimental stage is presented in which the identification of the initial level of civic behavior and the establishment of the degree of statistical comparability between the experimental classes and the control classes, respectively the classes from the urban environment and those from the rural environment, were sought. Thus, between October 10-14, 2022, a questionnaire was applied to both the experimental and the control classes to monitor the formation of civic behavior in education for democratic citizenship. The items of the *Forming civic behavior in Education for Democratic Citizenship through project-based learning* questionnaire were divided into five subscales, and the internal consistency of each subscale was assessed using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient to ensure the internal consistency of the measurements.

The instrument showed good internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.87. This value indicates the reliability of the questionnaire in evaluating the civic behavior of 7th grade students. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for subscales

- **Civic Knowledge: democratic principles, civic responsibilities (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.775$),**
- **Civic Involvement: activity and desire for involvement (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.691$),**
- **Civic Identity: belonging to the community (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.734$),**
- **Civic Skills: efficiency in solving problems (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.745$),**
- **Civic Attitudes: perceptions of democratic values (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.675$).**

All subscales, except subscales I and A (average internal consistency), show good internal consistency, indicating significant agreement between items and suggesting that they measure the respective concepts with satisfactory precision.

The first stage of the research, namely the pre-experiment stage, aimed to measure the initial level of the civic behavior of the 7th grade students before the implementation of the intervention program. In this step, five dependent variables were assessed: civic knowledge, civic engagement, civic identity, civic skills, and civic attitudes.

These variables are fundamental to understanding and developing civic behavior and provide a solid basis for comparing intervention program outcomes.

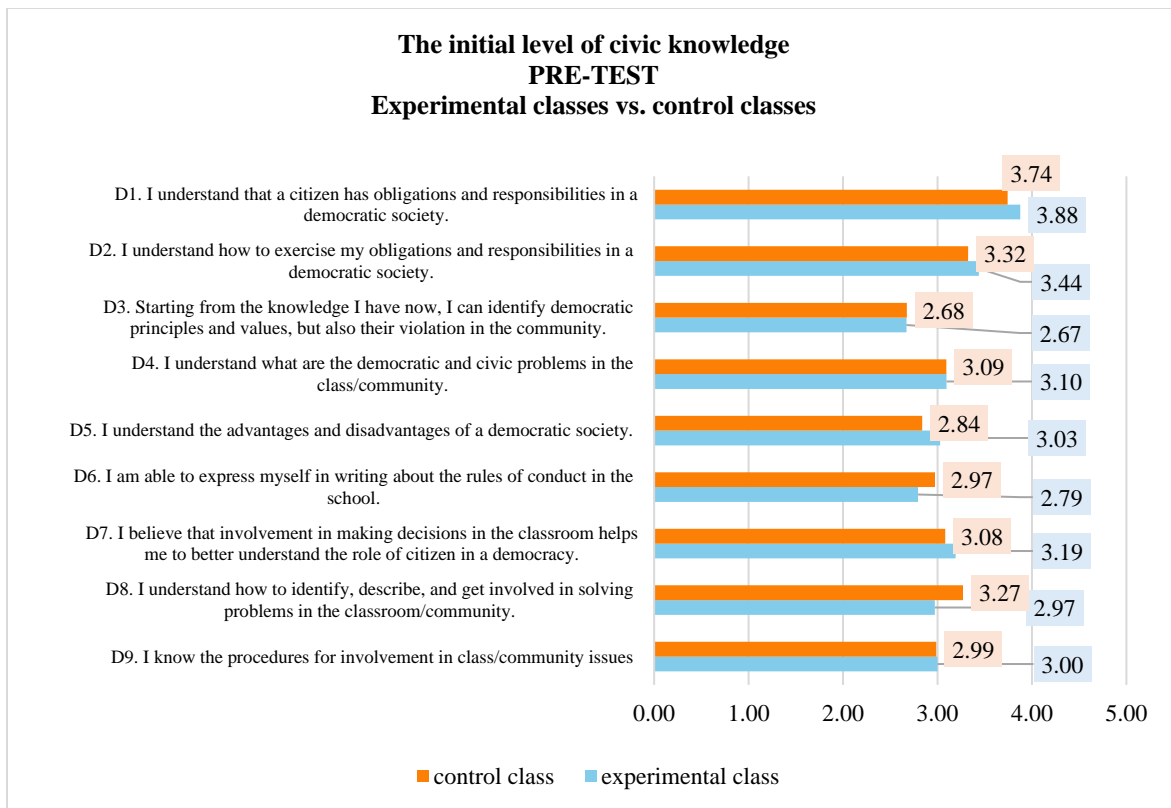


Figure no. V.1. Comparisons between groups of subjects regarding the initial level of *Civic knowledge* in the Pre-test (average values)

At the pre-test, the assessment of *civic knowledge* showed that students from both experimental and control groups had similar average scores, indicating a comparable initial level

of understanding of concepts such as civic responsibilities, civic participation and democratic principles. Mean scores ranged from 2.67 to 3.88, with the majority of scores falling into *the somewhat to a great extent category*. Some differences between the two batches were also identified. Thus, we observe that the students in the experimental classes obtained significantly higher average scores for the following statements: D2. *I understand how to exercise my obligations and responsibilities in a democratic society* (3.44 vs. 3.32), D1. *I understand that a citizen has obligations and responsibilities in a democratic society* (3.88 vs. 3.74). This suggests that students in the experimental classes have a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. On the other hand, students in the control classes obtained a significantly higher mean score on the following statement: D8. *I understand how to identify, describe and engage in classroom/community problem solving.* (3.27 vs. 2.97), which suggests that students in the control classes feel more prepared to get involved in solving problems in their community.

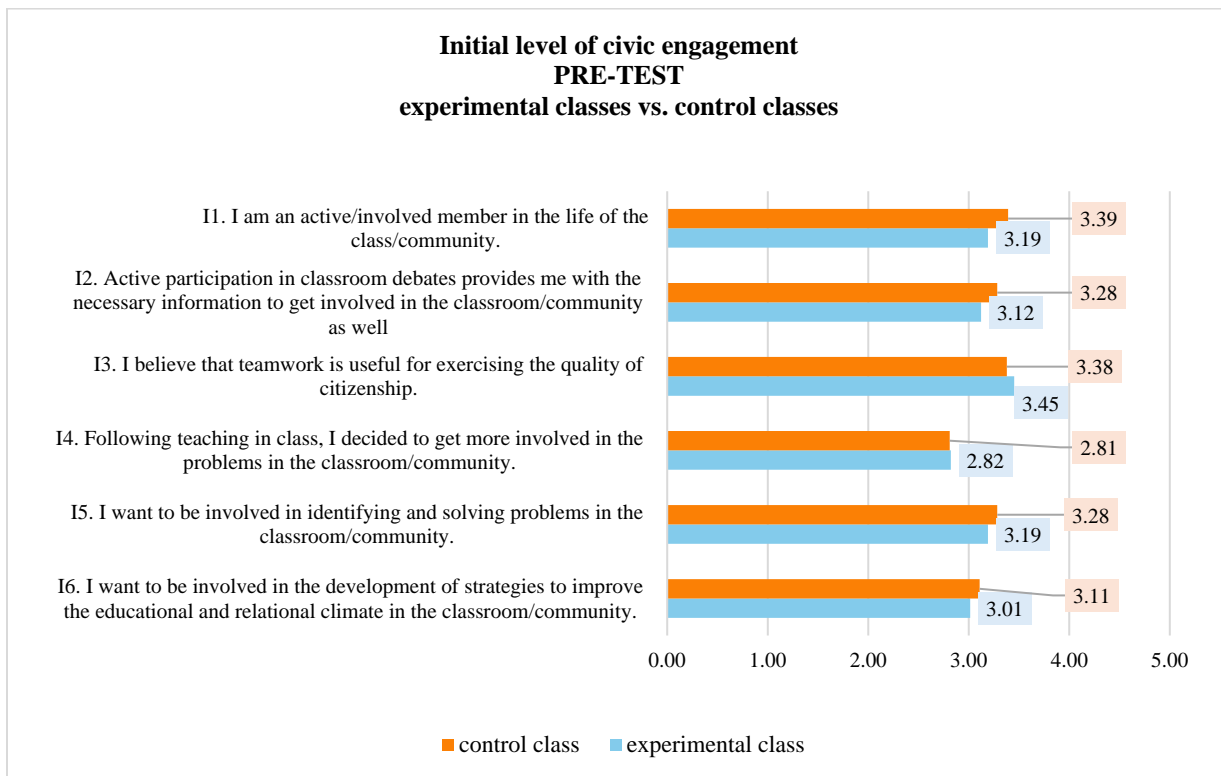


Figure no. V.2. Comparisons between groups of subjects regarding the initial level of *civic involvement* in the Pre-test (average values)

Pre-test ratings for *civic engagement* revealed comparable baseline levels between the experimental and control groups. The mean scores indicated that students in both groups showed similar involvement in community activities and civic decision-making processes, suggesting that initially both experimental and control students had an equivalent level of involvement in community life.

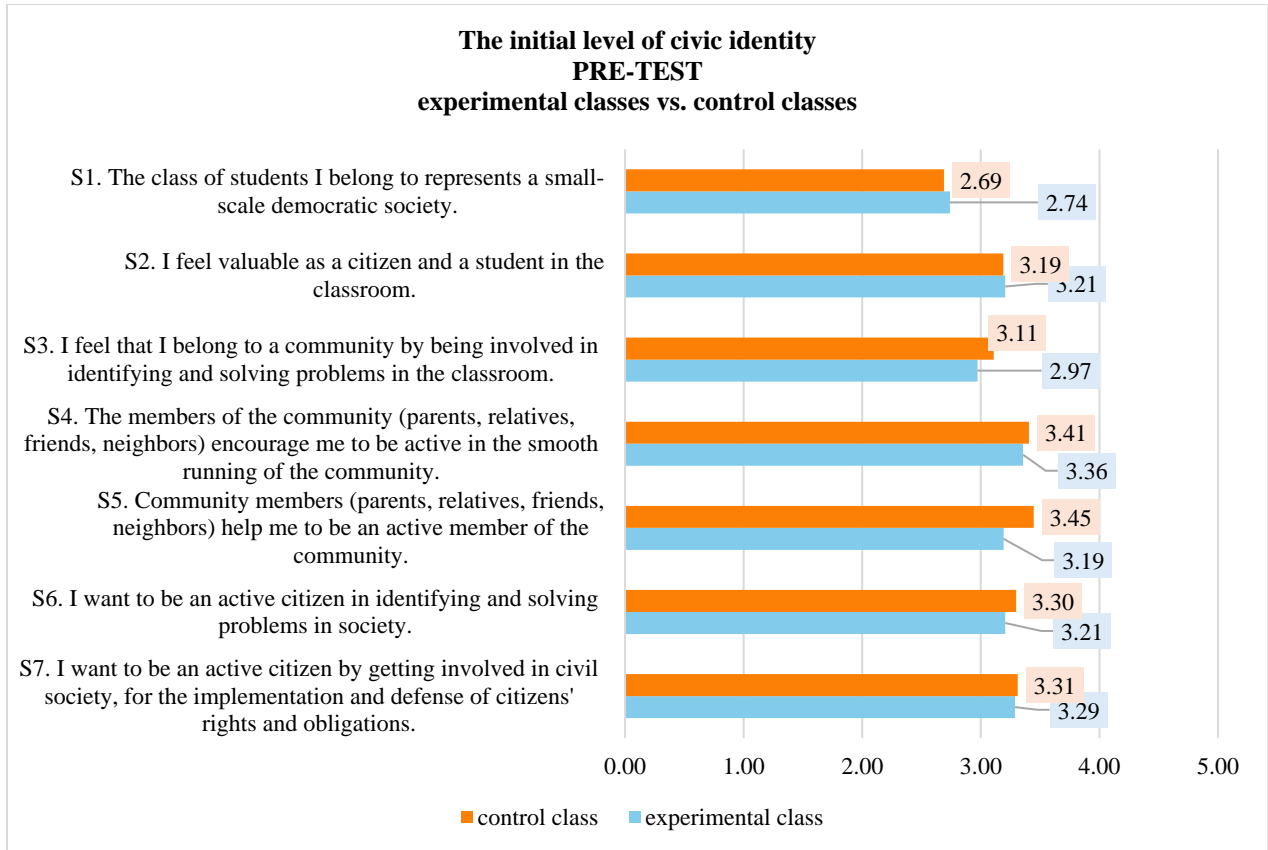


Figure no. V.3. Comparisons between groups of subjects regarding the initial level of *Civic identity* in Pre-test (average values)

Civic identity was assessed by mean scores that indicated a similar perception between the experimental and control groups. Both groups of students demonstrated an equivalent sense of belonging and identification with democratic values, suggesting a comparable foundation of civic identity prior to implementation of the intervention program.

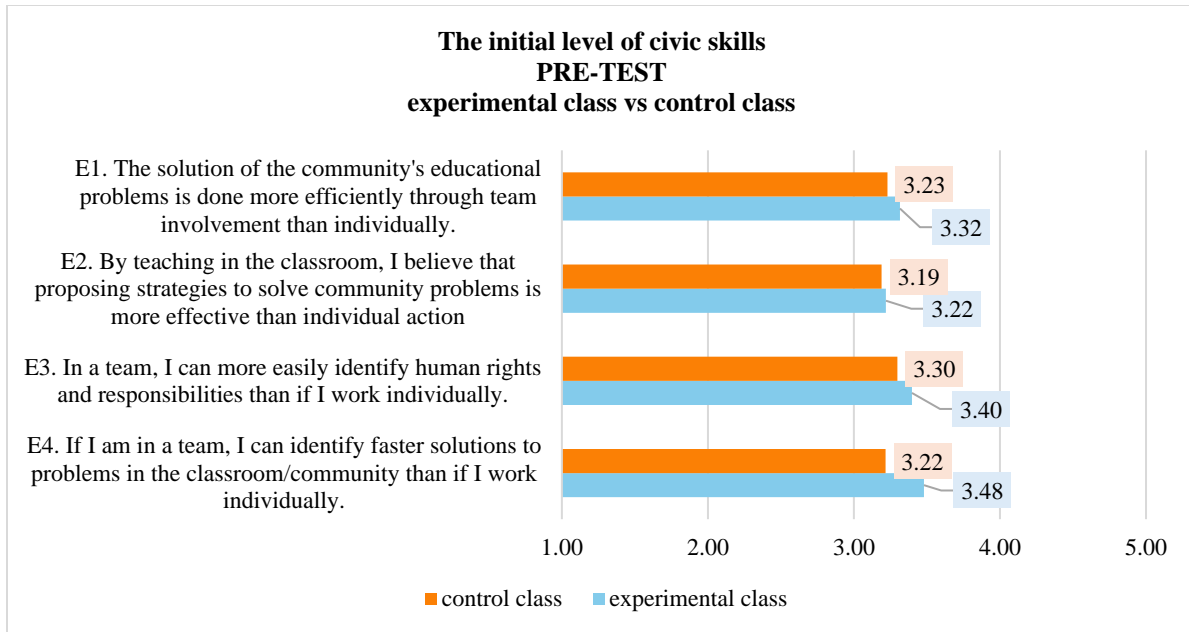


Figure no. V.4. Comparisons between groups of subjects regarding the initial level of *Civic skills* in the Pre-test (average values)

In the pre-test, we observe considerable variation in average scores within each class, which could suggest that *civic skills* are influenced by a number of individual factors, such as learning style, personal preferences and previous experiences. The results show that students in the experimental classes perceive teamwork to be generally more effective compared to those in the control classes. Specifically, the students in the experimental classes evaluated teamwork as more effective in quickly identifying solutions to problems (E4 – 3.48 vs 3.22), in identifying human rights and responsibilities (E3 – 3.40 vs 3.30), and in proposing strategies for solving community problems (E2 – 3.22 vs 3.19), as well as in solving community educational problems (E1 – 3.32 vs 3.23). These findings suggest that students in the experimental groups may have an initial predisposition or positive prior experience with teamwork, which could influence the effectiveness of educational interventions that rely on collaboration and group work. The differences observed between the experimental and control groups underscore the importance of incorporating collaborative strategies into the curriculum to improve student engagement and promote active citizenship skills.

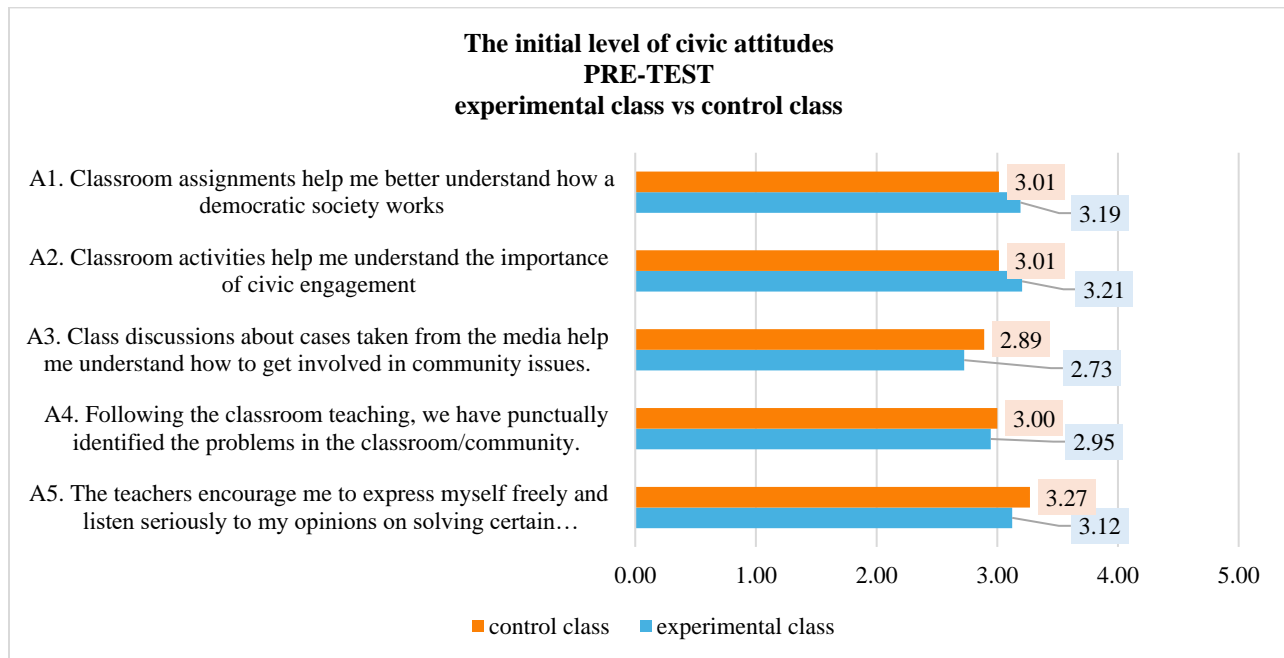


Figure no. V.5. Comparisons between groups of subjects regarding the initial level of *Civic attitudes* in the Pre-test (average values)

Pre-testing of *civic attitudes* suggests that students in the experimental and control classes have a similar initial level regarding classroom activities and discussions at the pre-test, except for items A2 and A5. Students in the experimental classes gave higher mean scores to items A2 (the importance of civic engagement) and A1 (the functioning of a democratic society) at the pre-test. This could suggest that students in the experimental classes perceived a greater relevance of classroom activities in terms of civic engagement at pre-test.

The results obtained in the pre-experimental stage indicate that the 7th grade students demonstrated a solid initial level of civic behavior. High baseline scores on civics (range 2.98 - 4.29) suggest a strong foundation in civics. Regarding civic engagement, students obtained the highest initial scores (3.11 - 4.33), indicating a strong predisposition for active participation. Civic identity also had a high initial level (2.94 - 4.00), reflecting good identification with democratic values. Baseline civics scores (3.10 - 3.90) showed strong competencies in collaboration and strategy. However, the lowest initial scores were recorded for civic attitudes (2.90 - 3.62),

indicating a basic appreciation for democracy and civic engagement, but with potential for improvement.

The organization and conduct of the experiment was based on the synthesis of the previously stated theoretical premises, which allowed the formulation of the general and specific hypotheses. Obtaining the results in **the post-experimental stage** involved the administration during the week of April 3-6, 2023 of the questionnaire *Training civic behavior in education for democratic citizenship through project-based learning*, as well as the processing of the obtained data. The results obtained in the post-test phase are presented by comparisons between the experimental classes and the control classes, respectively by comparisons between the classes in the urban environment and the classes in the rural environment. Also, the results obtained in the experimental classes, respectively in the control classes, following some comparisons between pre-test and post-test, are presented.

Centralizing table of post-test results regarding comparisons between groups of subjects regarding civic behavior (**Tables V.12 – V.16**)

The dependent variable (post-test)	Experimental batch	Control lot
	Average value min - max	
Civic knowledge	3.14 - 4.29	3.42 - 4.23
Civic engagement	3.33 - 3.92	3.47 - 3.81
Civic identity	3.14 - 3.82	3.34 - 3.88
Civic skills	3.77 - 3.99	3.81 - 4.09
Civic attitudes	3.32 - 3.58	3.47 - 3.76

Likert Scale was used (1 – to a very small extent, 2 – to a small extent, 3 – to some extent, 4 – to a large extent, 5 – to a very large extent).

The comparative analysis of the two groups in terms of civic behavior variables highlights significant differences between the experimental group and the control group. For civic knowledge, the experimental group demonstrated greater maintenance and improvement in

knowledge, with scores ranging from 3.14 to 4.29, while the control group showed declines over time, with scores ranging from 3.42 to 4.23. This suggests that the project-based learning method has a positive impact on the retention of civic information. Regarding civic engagement, both groups showed increases, but the control group started with higher initial scores (3.47 – 3.81) and showed greater engagement compared to the experimental group (3.33 – 3.92). This aspect indicates that the experimental group could benefit from additional motivational methods to increase the level of civic involvement. The assessment of civic identity showed that the control group had higher mean scores (3.34 – 3.88) in most items, but the experimental group showed a strong sense of belonging, encouraged by community activities, with scores between 3.14 and 3.82. Scores for civic skills were similar between the two groups, with the control group slightly higher (3.81 – 4.09), suggesting that traditional methods can contribute to the development of practical skills. Finally, civic attitudes were more favorable in the control group (3.47 – 3.76), but the experimental group presented a more positive attitude in identifying civic problems after the educational intervention, with scores between 3.32 and 3.58.

Summary table. Descriptive statistics for level measurement

the formation of the civic behavior of students depending on the batch and the school environment in the post-test (**Tables V.17. - V.21**)

Dependent variable	School environment	Batch	Mean Min	Mean Max
Civic knowledge	Urban	Experimental	2.981	4.29
		Control	3.375	4.268
	Rural	Experimental	3.619	4.286
		Control	2.833	4.111
Civic engagement	Urban	Experimental	3.077	3.75
		Control	3.589	4.018
	Rural	Experimental	3.619	4.333
		Control	3.111	3.964
Civic identity	Urban	Experimental	2.981	3.692

Dependent variable	School environment	Batch	Mean Min	Mean Max	
Civic skills	Rural	Control	3.222	3.982	
		Experimental	3.524	4.143	
	Urban	Control	3.111	3.389	
		Experimental	3.692	3.923	
	Rural	Control	3.964	4.232	
		Experimental	3.952	4.143	
	Civic attitudes	Urban	Control	3.167	3.667
			Experimental	3.135	3.481
Rural		Control	3.714	4.107	
		Experimental	3.524	4	
		Control	2.833	3.821	

The experimental batch obtained higher scores in the rural environment compared to the urban environment, which suggests that the project-based learning method has a more significant impact in rural environments. On the other hand, the control group showed higher average scores in the urban environment, indicating a potential greater effectiveness of traditional teaching methods in this context. These results emphasize the importance of adapting teaching methodologies according to the school environment to maximize educational effectiveness.

The comparative analysis of the level of training of civic behavior in the pre-test and post-test on the experimental group presents the results obtained following the application of the t-test for paired samples within an experimental group. In the context of our research, the test was used to compare the level of civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes of 7th grade students, measured at two different times: pre-test and post-test. The analysis focuses on the students in the experimental group, where the teaching was carried out by the method of project-based learning.

Summary table. *Pre-test - post-test mean* level comparisons

the formation of the civic behavior of students from the experimental group (Table V.22. – V.26)

Dependent variable	Items	t	p-value	d Cohen	Cohen effect Min	Max Cohen effect	Mean Min	Mean Max	The difference
Civic knowledge	D1	-3.01	0.002	-0.353					
	D2	-1.93	0.029	-0.226					
	D3	-3.64	<0.001	-0.427					
	D4	-3.37	<0.001	-0.394					
	D5	-3.02	0.002	-0.353	-0.226	-0.427	2.67	4.29	+0.47 - +0.51
	D6	-2.10	0.002	-0.245					
	D7	-2.14	0.018	-0.250					
	D8	-2.79	0.003	-0.327					
	D9	-2.96	0.002	-0.346					
Civic involvement	I1	-1.78	0.039	-0.209					
	I2	-2.22	0.015	-0.260					
	I3	-2.77	0.004	-0.325	-0.156	-0.361	2.82	3.92	+0.23 - +0.51
	I4	-3.08	0.001	-0.361					
	I5	-1.33	0.094	-0.156					
	I6	-2.75	0.004	-0.321					
Civic identity	S1	-2.57	0.006	-0.301					
	S2	-1.70	0.046	-0.199					
	S3	-2.54	0.007	-0.298					
	S4	-2.37	0.010	-0.278	-0.199	-0.301	2.74	3.82	+0.28 - +0.46
	S5	-1.92	0.029	-0.225					
	S6	-2.38	0.010	-0.278					
	S7	-2.23	0.014	-0.261					
Civic skills	E1	-3.59	<0.001	-0.421					
	E2	-2.52	0.007	-0.295	-0.270	-0.421	3.22	3.99	+0.29 - +0.59
	E3	-3.15	0.001	-0.369					
	E4	-2.31	0.012	-0.270					
Civic attitudes	A1	-1.97	0.026	-0.231					
	A2	-2.23	0.015	-0.261					
	A3	-3.56	<0.001	-0.417	-0.129	-0.432	2.73	3.58	+0.24 - +0.59
	A4	-3.69	<0.001	-0.432					
	A5	-1.10	0.137	-0.129					

The results of the t-test and Cohen's d effect size for the five subscales reveal several essential aspects regarding the impact of the project-based learning method on students' civic behavior. The civic knowledge subscale shows significant improvement across all items, with p values below 0.05 and Cohen effect sizes ranging from -0.226 to -0.427. This indicates a robust growth in civic knowledge, with an improved understanding of civic responsibilities and democratic principles evident. The lowest mean was 2.67 and the highest was 4.29, with a maximum difference of +0.51. In the case of civic engagement, all items showed significant improvements, with smaller variations in the Cohen effect size ranging from -0.156 to -0.361. This suggests an increase in civic engagement and involvement in community activities, with a minimum mean of 2.82 and a maximum of 3.92, with a maximum difference of +0.51.

The results for civic identity indicate a significant strengthening of the sense of belonging and identification with community values. The p-value for all items is below 0.05 and the Cohen effect size ranges from -0.199 to -0.301. The minimum mean in this subscale is 2.74 and the maximum is 3.82, with a maximum difference of +0.46.

The civic skills subscale shows significant improvements across all items, with Cohen effect sizes between -0.270 and -0.421, indicating robust development of collaborative and civic problem-solving skills. The minimum mean in this subscale is 3.22 and the maximum is 3.99, with a maximum difference of +0.59.

For civic attitudes, all items showed improvement, although effect sizes ranged more widely, between -0.129 and -0.432. This suggests an improvement in students' perceptions of the importance of civic engagement and the valuing of active classroom dialogue. The minimum average is 2.73 and the maximum is 3.58 with a maximum difference of +0.59.

Therefore, it can be stated that the project-based learning method had a significant and positive impact on the formation of students' civic behavior, highlighting improvements in civic knowledge, involvement, identity, skills and attitudes.

Summary table. *Pre-test - post-test mean* level comparisons

the formation of the civic behavior of the students in the control group (Table V.27. – V.31)

Dependent variable	Item	t	p-value	d Cohen	Cohen effect Min	Max Cohen effect	Mean Min	Mean Max	The difference
Civic knowledge	D1	-4.52	< 0.001	-0.526					
	D2	-5.93	< 0.001	-0.689					
	D3	-5.06	< 0.001	-0.589					
	D4	-5.07	< 0.001	-0.59					
	D5	-4.33	< 0.001	-0.503	-0.503	-0.689	2.68	4.23	1.55
	D6	-4.53	< 0.001	-0.526					
	D7	-4.65	< 0.001	-0.54					
	D8	-2.82	0.003	-0.328					
	D9	-2.70	0.004	-0.314					
Civic engagement	I1	-3.21	< 0.001	-0.373					
	I2	-3.31	< 0.001	-0.384					
	I3	-3.08	0.001	-0.358	-0.205	-0.564	2.81	3.81	1.00
	I4	-4.85	< 0.001	-0.564					
	I5	-1.77	0.041	-0.205					
	I6	-3.47	< 0.001	-0.403					
Civic identity	S1	-5.44	< 0.001	-0.632					
	S2	-3.60	< 0.001	-0.419					
	S3	-3.63	< 0.001	-0.422					
	S4	-2.59	0.006	-0.301	-0.285	-0.632	2.69	3.88	1.19
	S5	-2.45	0.008	-0.285					
	S6	-3.65	< 0.001	-0.425					
	S7	-3.47	< 0.001	-0.404					
Civic skills	E1	-4.31	< 0.001	-0.501					
	E2	-4.33	< 0.001	-0.503					
	E3	-5.18	< 0.001	-0.602	-0.46	-0.602	3.19	4.09	0.90
	E4	-3.96	< 0.001	-0.46					
Civic attitudes	A1	-5.46	< 0.001	-0.634					
	A2	-4.94	< 0.001	-0.575					
	A3	-5.96	< 0.001	-0.692	-0.285	-0.692	3.00	3.76	0.76
	A4	-4.14	< 0.001	-0.481					
	A5	-2.45	0.008	-0.285					

The t-test and Cohen's d coefficient results for the control group show significant improvements in all subscales of civic behavior between pre-test and post-test. In terms of civic knowledge, students demonstrated a clear increase in their understanding of civic obligations and responsibilities ($t = -4.52$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.526$), their exercise ($t = -5.93$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.689$),

identification of democratic principles ($t = -5.06$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.589$), and civic issues ($t = -5.07$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.590$). For the civic engagement subscale, all items have p-values less than the significance threshold of 0.05, reflecting a significant increase in civic engagement, with Cohen's d values ranging between -0.205 and -0.564 and means between 2.81 and 3.81, showing increased involvement in community activities. In the civic identity subscale, all items have p-values lower than the significance threshold of 0.05, indicating a significant improvement in civic identity, with Cohen's d values between -0.285 and -0.632 and means between 2.69 and 3.88, highlighting an increased sense of belonging and identification with community values. For civic skills, all items showed significant t-test results, indicating a significant increase in civic skills, with Cohen's d coefficient values ranging from -0.460 to -0.602 and means ranging from 3.19 to 4.09. This suggests an improvement in practical skills such as teamwork and problem solving. Regarding civic attitudes, all items showed significant t-test results, reflecting a positive change in democratic values and appreciation of civic roles, with Cohen's d coefficient values between -0.285 and -0.692 and means between 3.00 and 3.76. These results highlight a strengthening of positive attitudes towards civic participation.

The results of the research confirm that the implementation of project-based learning has a positive and significant impact on the formation of the civic behavior of 7th grade students. The formulated hypotheses were validated by analyzing the obtained data, demonstrating that the students who participated in the intervention program registered substantial improvements in all dimensions of civic behavior evaluated: civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes.

For the experimental group, there was a significant increase in the level of civic knowledge between pre-test and post-test, reflected in the effect sizes that vary between -0.427 and -0.226. The students in the experimental group demonstrated a significant increase in civic knowledge after participating in the intervention program, ***validating the specific hypothesis 1***. This improvement highlights the effectiveness of project-based learning in deepening students' understanding of the concepts and workings of democratic citizenship.

The intervention program stimulated a more active involvement of students in civic and community life, ***validating the specific hypothesis 2***. The significant increase in the level of civic engagement suggests that the project-based learning method promotes better awareness and participation in social and civic activities.

Regarding students' sense of belonging and civic identity, they were also improved by using the project-based learning method, *validating the specific hypothesis 3*. Students developed a clearer civic identity and a stronger connection to community values and norms.

The intervention program contributed to the development of civic skills such as collaboration, problem solving and critical thinking. These skills are important for active and effective participation in democratic society, *validating the specific hypothesis 4*.

Students showed significant improvements in civic attitudes, demonstrating an increased appreciation for the values of democracy and civic engagement. This aspect emphasizes the role of the project-based learning method in cultivating positive attitudes towards active citizenship, *validating the specific hypothesis 5*.

These results highlight the potential of project-based learning as an effective methodology for improving civic education in secondary schools. The results indicate that project-based learning not only improves students' theoretical knowledge of citizenship, but also stimulates active engagement, the development of civic identity and skills, and the formation of positive attitudes towards participation in democratic society. Integrating project-based learning into the *Education for Democratic Citizenship curriculum* can provide a more hands-on educational experience that better reflects the challenges and complexities of civic life. Also, active community involvement in educational projects can amplify the positive effects of project-based learning by providing students with authentic contexts to apply acquired knowledge and skills.

Re-testing was applied at an interval of 17 weeks after the post-test. After the administration of the post-test, the experimental classes were not intervened at all, the teachers returning to traditional teaching methods. Due to the teacher strike at the end of the 2022/2023 school year, the re-testing was postponed until after the summer vacation.

The re-test consisted of the application of the questionnaire *Formation of civic behavior in education for democratic citizenship through project-based learning*. In the first part, the results were presented at the level of each item, followed by the differences between the level recorded at the re-test and the one recorded at the post-test for each of the five dependent variables analyzed at the level of the experimental group.

Summary table. The results of the re-test regarding the level of *formation of civic behavior* of the students in the re-test (Tables V.32. – V.36)

Dependent variable	Item	t	P value	Mean Min	Mean Max	Max Difference (Item)
Civic knowledge	D1	9,089	<0.001	2,459	4,192	1,213 (D7)
	D2	8.01	<0.001			
	D3	6,849	<0.001			
	D4	8,451	<0.001			
	D5	7,079	<0.001			
	D6	6,971	<0.001			
	D7	8.2	<0.001			
	D8	5,581	<0.001			
	D9	7,689	<0.001			
Civic engagement	I1	5,494	<0.001	2,514	3,945	1,188 (I3)
	I2	5,497	<0.001			
	I3	7,939	<0.001			
	I4	6,833	<0.001			
	I5	6.56	<0.001			
	I6	8,059	<0.001			
Civic identity	S1	8,229	<0.001	2,189	3,767	1,208 (S1)
	S2	7,051	<0.001			
	S3	6,978	<0.001			
	S4	5,616	<0.001			
	S5	5,368	<0.001			
	S6	6,248	<0.001			
	S7	6,602	<0.001			
Abilities CIVIC	E1	8,087	<0.001	2,662	3.89	1,201 (E4)
	E2	6,704	<0.001			
	E3	5,515	<0.001			
	E4	7,129	<0.001			
attitude CIVIC	A1	7,042	<0.001	2,432	3,671	1,212 (A4)
	A2	7,059	<0.001			
	A3	5,322	<0.001			
	A4	8,892	<0.001			
	A5	5.5	<0.001			

The results show statistically significant improvements in all subscales of civic behavior between the re-test and the post-test. Regarding the level of **civic knowledge**, all items have significant t-test values with $p < 0.001$, indicating a significant improvement in students' knowledge, with the greatest difference observed in item D7 - *I believe that involvement in making decisions in the classroom helps me to better understand the role of a citizen in a democracy.*

subscale of **civic involvement** also demonstrated a significant increase in civic engagement, with item I3 - *I believe teamwork is useful for exercising citizenship* showing the greatest difference. In the subscale of **civic identity**, item S1 - *The class of students I belong to represents a democratic society on a small scale* had the biggest difference, reflecting a strong increase in the sense of belonging. **Civic skills** showed significant improvements in collaboration and problem solving, with item E4 - *If I am in a team, I can identify faster solutions to classroom/community problems than if I work individually* making the biggest difference. In **civic attitudes**, all items showed significant improvement, with item A4 - *Following classroom teaching, I pinpointed classroom/community issues* demonstrating the greatest difference.

Summary table. *Post-test - re-test* mean comparisons in terms of level
the formation of the civic behavior of students from the experimental group
(Table V.37. – V.41)

Dependent variable	Item	t	p-value	d Cohen	Mean Post-test	Mean Re-test	The difference re-test – post-test
Civic knowledge	D1	0.881	0.381	0.103	4,288	4,192	-0.096
	D2	-1	0.321	-0.117	3,726	3,849	0.123
	D3	-1.404	0.165	-0.164	3,164	3,329	0.165
	D4	0.225	0.823	0.026	3,658	3.63	-0.028
	D5	-0.177	0.86	-0.021	3,548	3,575	0.027
	D6	-2.515	0.014	-0.294	3,137	3,562	0.425
	D7	-1.278	0.205	-0.15	3,562	3,781	0.219
	D8	-0.191	0.849	-0.022	3,438	3,466	0.028
	D9	-0.504	0.615	-0.059	3,493	3,575	0.082
Civic involvement	I1	-0.687	0.494	-0.08	3,479	3,575	0.096
	I2	1,355	0.18	0.159	3,548	3,356	-0.192
	I3	-0.183	0.855	-0.021	3,918	3,945	0.027
	I4	-1.109	0.271	-0.13	3,329	3,521	0.192
	I5	-1.63	0.108	-0.191	3,425	3,699	0.274
	I6	-0.953	0.344	-0.112	3,493	3.63	0.137
Civic identity	S1	-2.034	0.046	-0.238	3,137	3,397	0.260
	S2	-0.988	0.327	-0.116	3,521	3,644	0.123
	S3	-1.085	0.281	-0.127	3,411	3,562	0.151
	S4	1,737	0.087	0.203	3,822	3,562	-0.260
	S5	0.089	0.929	0.01	3,534	3,521	-0.013

Dependent variable	Item	t	p-value	d Cohen	Mean Post-test	Mean Re-test	The difference re-test – post-test
	S6	0.225	0.822	0.026	3.63	3,589	-0.041
	S7	-0.6	0.551	-0.07	3,671	3,767	0.096
Abilities CIVIC	E1	-0.402	0.689	-0.047	3,836	3.89	0.054
	E2	0.158	0.875	0.018	3,767	3.74	-0.027
	E3	1,052	0.296	0.123	3,986	3,808	-0.178
	E4	0.249	0.804	0.029	3,904	3,863	-0.041
Civic attitudes	A1	-0.323	0.747	-0.038	3,534	3,575	0.041
	A2	-0.656	0.514	-0.077	3,575	3,671	0.096
	A3	-0.343	0.732	-0.04	3,315	3.37	0.055
	A4	-1.017	0.312	-0.119	3,493	3,644	0.151
	A5	-1.259	0.212	-0.147	3,356	3,562	0.206

Note: $H_a: \mu_{\text{post-test}} \neq \mu_{\text{re-test}}$.

The analysis of the post-test and re-test results for the experimental group reveals some important findings regarding the effectiveness of the project-based learning method in the formation of students' civic behavior. In the subscale *civic knowledge*, the mean values of the nine items indicate a general improvement in knowledge, with notable differences in mean scores, for example in item D6 where the mean increased significantly from 3.137 to 3.562 ($t = -2.515$, $p = 0.014$). This suggests that students better retained and applied civic knowledge in practice. In the subscale *civic engagement*, the data show significant increases in students' level of engagement, for example in item I5, where the mean increased from 3.425 to 3.699 ($t = -1.630$, $p = 0.108$), indicating an improvement in students' willingness to engage in community issues. However, the decrease observed in item I2 ($t = 1.355$, $p = 0.180$) suggests the need for increased attention in maintaining engagement in classroom debates. In the subscale *civic identity*, improvements are evidenced by the increase in the mean on item S1 from 3.137 to 3.397 ($t = -2.034$, $p = 0.046$), reflecting a better appreciation of the role of the class as a small-scale democratic society. However, the decrease observed in item S4 requires additional interventions to strengthen community support. For *civic skills*, the results show an increase in collaboration skills, such as in item E1, where the mean increased from 3.836 to 3.890 ($t = -0.402$, $p = 0.689$). This indicates a consistent perception of teamwork effectiveness. Finally, the analysis of the civic attitude subscale shows improvements in students' attitudes towards civic participation, for example in item A5,

where the mean increased from 3.356 to 3.562 ($t = -1.259$, $p = 0.212$), suggesting a strengthening of teacher support for free expression of students.

In this research I have also carried out a comparative analysis of the results obtained for the two groups of students, highlighting the impact of the school environment on the evolution of civic skills. The analysis includes three distinct moments of assessment: *pre-test*, *post-test* and *re-test*, providing a clear perspective on student progress.

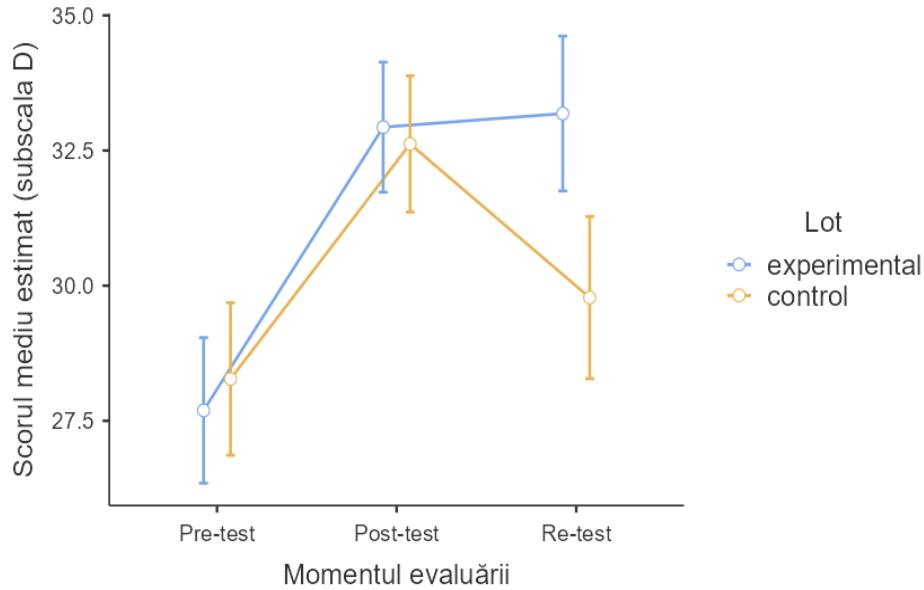


Figure no. V.16. The evolution of the mean scores of *subscale D* according to the time of assessment and batch

In the experimental group, the average scores for civic knowledge increased significantly from pre-test to post-test, maintaining and even slightly improving at the re-test. This indicates that project-based learning contributed to a robust and sustainable development of civic knowledge. In contrast, the control group increased from pre-test to post-test but showed a significant decrease at re-test, suggesting poorer retention of knowledge acquired through traditional teaching methods. Therefore, in the long run, the project-based learning method proves to be more effective in strengthening civic knowledge.

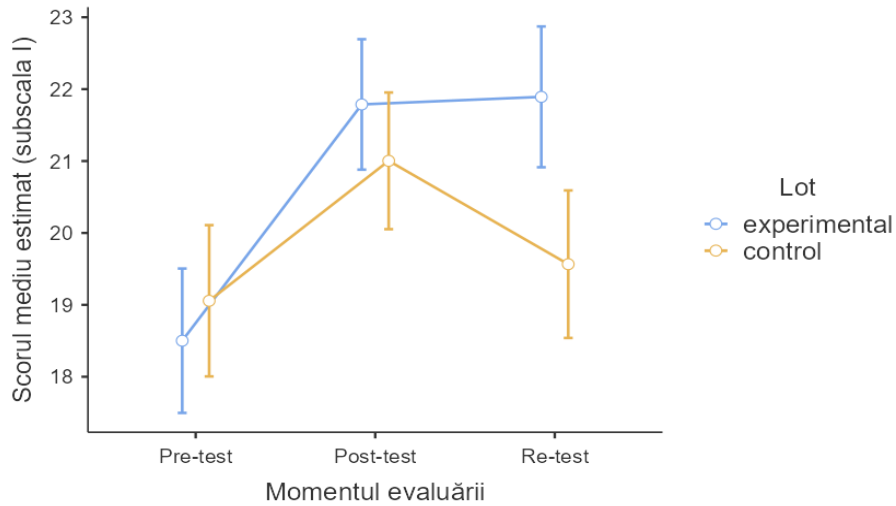


Figure no. V.18. The evolution of the mean scores of *subscale I* according to the time of assessment and batch

The results for civic engagement show that both project-based and traditional methods resulted in an increase in engagement from pre-test to post-test. However, in the experimental group, this increase was maintained or even improved at re-test, in contrast to the control group, where engagement decreased at re-test. It emphasizes that project-based learning ensures a more sustainable and active civic engagement.

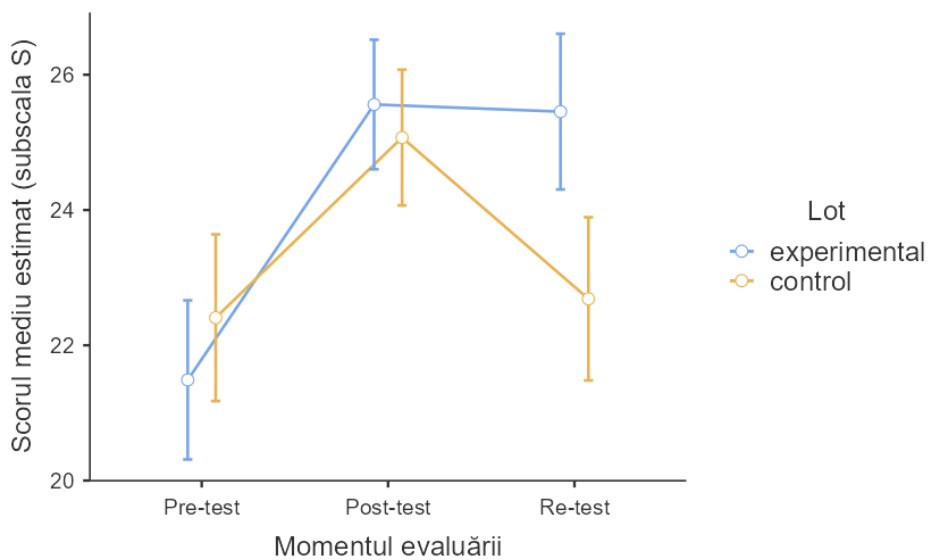


Figure no. V.20. The evolution of mean scores of the *S subscale* according to the time of assessment and batch

The experimental group showed a significant increase in mean civic identity scores from pre-test to post-test, with a maintenance of these scores at re-test. This indicates a stronger and more durable sense of belonging and identification with democratic values. The control group showed a similar increase at post-test but a notable decrease at re-test, suggesting that the traditional method does not support long-term civic identity development as well.

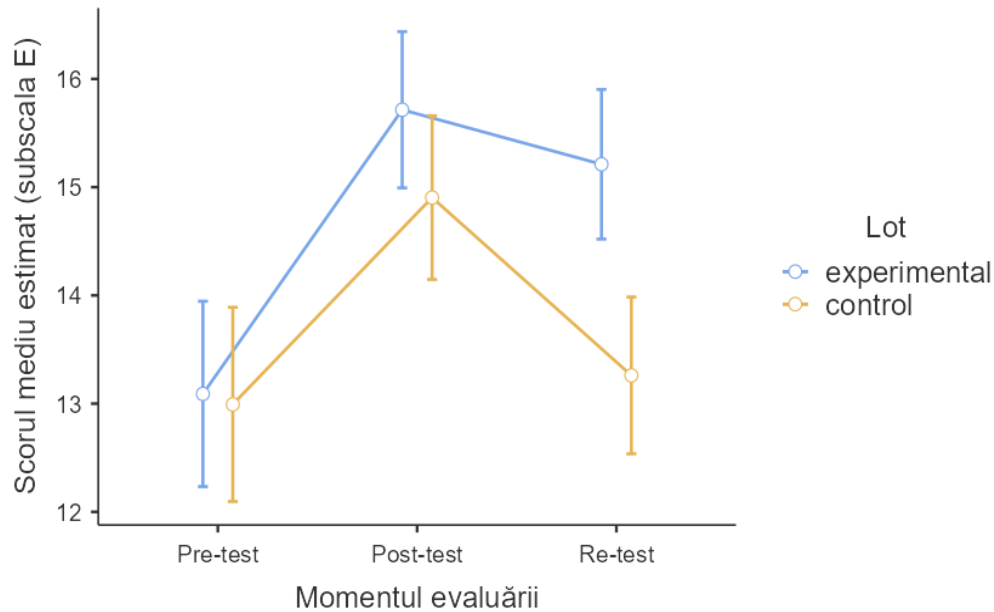


Figure no. V.22. The evolution of the mean scores of *subscale E* according to the time of assessment and batch

The results regarding civic skills show that the experimental group experienced an increase in these skills from pre-test to post-test, maintaining them at re-test. This suggests that project-based learning facilitates the sustainable development of the skills needed for collaboration and civic problem-solving. The control group demonstrated initial improvements at post-test but a decline at re-test, indicating a lessening of the impact of the traditional method.

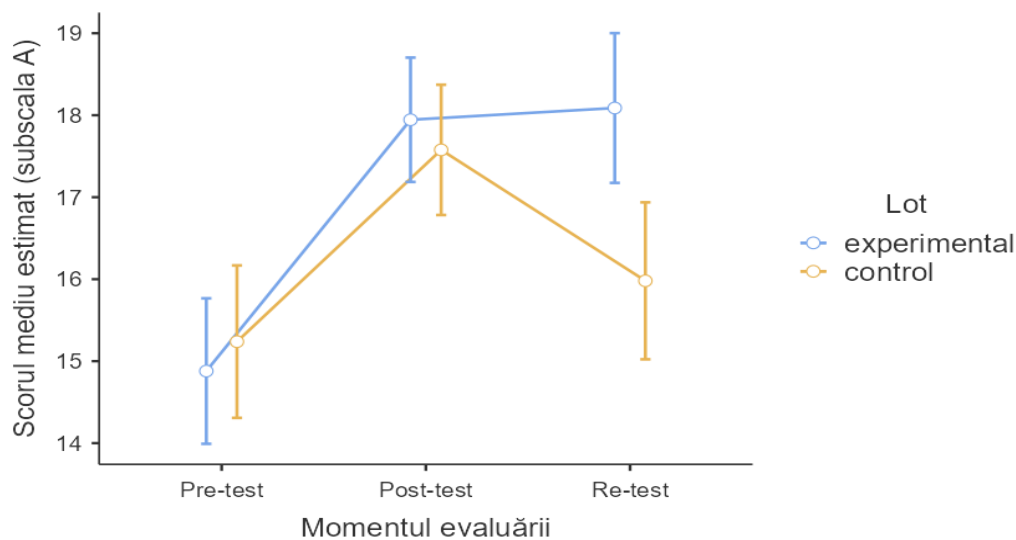


Figure no. V.24. The evolution of the mean scores of *subscale A* according to the time of assessment and batch

In the experimental group, mean scores for civic attitudes increased from pre-test to post-test and were maintained or even slightly increased at re-test. This suggests a more consistent appreciation and valorization of civic engagement and democracy. In contrast, the control group showed an increase on the post-test but a decrease on the re-test, indicating that traditional methods do not sustain positive civic attitudes in the long term.

The general implications of the study highlight several significant aspects. First, in all the subscales analyzed, the experimental group recorded a more constant and sustainable progress over time, suggesting that the project-based learning method is more effective in forming students' civic behavior, compared to the traditional method. Secondly, in the control group, we observe a decrease at the re-test in all subscales, signaling that the traditional method may initially have a positive effect, but it diminishes over time, indicating the need for consolidation or adaptation to ensure a development constant. Thus, we find that the positive effects of project-based learning seem to be more sustainable over time, suggesting that innovative approaches in education can bring long-term benefits in terms of shaping students' civic behavior.

The conclusions of the research

The doctoral thesis entitled *Shaping civic behavior in middle school students through project-based learning. Applications in education for Democratic citizenship (7th grade)* examined the effects of project-based learning on the development of students' civic behavior. In the current context, education for democratic citizenship is a useful discipline for preparing students as citizens of a democratic system. The research investigated how the project-based learning method improves knowledge, engagement, identity, skills and civic attitudes of 7th grade students.

The research was motivated by the need to improve traditional educational methods, which do not always succeed in stimulating civic engagement. The project-based learning method was proposed as an effective alternative, able to provide students with applied and participatory learning that reflects the real challenges of the community and society, thus facilitating the formation of citizens. The work was organized into two major parts. The first part, Theoretical Grounding, addressed the concepts and values of democratic citizenship, as well as their integration in education for democratic citizenship. This included terminological clarifications, exploration of the dimensions of democratic citizenship and analysis of the school curriculum. The second part, Experimental Investigation, detailed the research design, methodology and experimental results, evaluating the impact of the project-based learning method in the experimental stage, the post-experimental stage and the re-testing stage, providing a comprehensive picture of the influence of the intervention program on the behavior students' civics.

The results of the research present the impact of the intervention program on the formation of the civic behavior of 7th grade students. By measuring and interpreting the values recorded for the dependent variables, such as civic knowledge, civic involvement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes, the obtained results entitle us to identify eloquent answers to the research questions formulated in the experimental approach. The implementation of the intervention program demonstrated a positive and significant impact on the civic behavior of 7th grade students, analyzed through the three evaluation moments: pre-test, post-test and re-test. Comparing the results between the experimental group and the control group revealed improvements in the experimental group, especially in rural areas, where students showed significantly greater progress in all dependent variables.

The results for the civic knowledge variable show that students in the experimental group demonstrated a significant increase in civic knowledge between the pre-test and post-test assessment moments, maintaining these improvements in the re-test. The data show a better understanding of civic responsibilities, civic participation and democratic principles, with higher mean scores in all these domains at post-test compared to pre-test and re-test (eg: D1: 4.29 urban and 4.29 rural at post-test, maintaining high values at re-test). This indicates not only the immediate improvement, but also the persistence of the civic knowledge acquired through the intervention program. The results validate the specific hypothesis 1, confirming the effectiveness of the project-based learning method in the development and maintenance of long-term civic knowledge.

Regarding civic involvement, students in the experimental group showed a significant increase between pre-test and post-test, with a maintenance of these results in the re-test. The results indicate increased engagement in community activities and civic decision-making processes (eg: I3: 4.33 experimental vs. 3.17 control at post-test), suggesting a more active and effective civic involvement in the experimental group. The data reflects that the intervention had an immediate and sustained impact on student community engagement, validating specific hypothesis 2 and highlighting the importance of project-based learning in promoting active civic engagement.

The evaluations for the civic identity variable indicate a significant development of civic identity in the experimental group, evidenced by an increased sense of belonging and identification with democratic values. The increase in the mean scores from the pre-test to the post-test and the maintenance of these scores at the re-test (for example: I5: 3.62 experimental vs. 2.94 control at the post-test) shows that the students in the experimental group acquired a stronger civic identity. These results validate specific hypothesis 3, demonstrating that the intervention program facilitated the integration of civic values into students' personal identity in the long term.

Analysis of civic skills shows a significant increase in the experimental group from pre-test to post-test, maintained at re-test. Students in the experimental group obtained higher mean scores on the skills of collaboration, strategy development and identification of civic solutions (eg: E1: 3.84 experimental vs. 3.10 control at post-test), indicating more robust development of these skills. This result confirms specific hypothesis 4, underlining that the project-based educational intervention was effective in strengthening the civic skills necessary for active and effective participation in civic life.

Students in the experimental group demonstrated a significant improvement in civic attitudes compared to the control group, with higher scores on the appreciation of democracy and the valuing of civic involvement (for example: A3: 3.62 experimental vs. 3.00 control at post-test). This suggests a strengthening of positive attitudes towards civic participation and social responsibility, with a maintenance of these attitudes at re-test. The results validate specific hypothesis 5, indicating that the educational projects positively influenced students' attitudes towards democratic citizenship and democratic values.

The implementation of the intervention program proved that project-based learning is significantly more beneficial than traditional teaching methods in developing and maintaining students' civic behavior. Pre-test, post-test and re-test assessments showed that students in the experimental group showed substantial and lasting improvements in civic knowledge, civic engagement, civic identity, civic skills and civic attitudes. These results suggest that expanding the use of project-based learning can optimize educational practice, contributing to the formation of citizens with a high degree of civic responsibility and a deep awareness of active involvement for a democratic society to function in optimal parameters.

The results of the research suggest that project-based learning has a significant positive impact on the formation of civic behavior of 7th grade students, indicating the need to use this method in the school curriculum for several subjects. The current curriculum, even if not centered on traditional teaching methods, can benefit from restructuring to include project-based learning as a central approach in Education for Democratic Citizenship. The method promotes active, collaborative learning where students are directly involved in solving real-world problems of their community or school, which allows them to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. Implementing project-based learning in the school curriculum can foster critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and active community involvement. Students learn to collaborate effectively, communicate clearly and engage in activities that reflect democratic processes.

For project-based learning to be effectively implemented, adequate teacher training becomes a necessity. Teachers need to be familiar not only with the methodology of project-based learning, but also with the ways in which it can be integrated into daily teaching and learning activities. Teacher training should include training in project design and management, encouraging team collaboration and facilitating critical reflection. The local community plays an important role in supporting citizenship education through project-based learning. Within the community,

students can be given authentic opportunities to interact with various local institutions and organizations, to understand real community problems and contribute to their solution. Active community imprinting can enrich students' educational experiences by giving them new perspectives and context for applying their knowledge.

Limits of research

The research used a convenience sample selected from the population of 7th grade students from two school settings (urban and rural), which facilitates quick access to participants, but introduces a selection bias. This type of sampling may limit the diversity and representativeness of the results, not being fully representative of the entire population of 7th grade students. Thus, the results cannot be generalized without reservations, and future studies should include a wider variety of schools and regions to explore whether the observed effects hold in other educational and cultural contexts.

The implementation of project-based learning can vary significantly depending on the educational context, available resources, teacher training, and the level of support from the school administration. Differences in the application of the educational method between different schools and classes can influence the results obtained and make it difficult to directly compare the impact of the method between different educational contexts. Also, the duration of the intervention program was a significant limitation, as the determined implementation period may be insufficient to capture all of the long-term effects of project-based learning on students' civic behavior.

Suggestions for future research

Expanding the study to larger and more diverse samples that include students from a greater variety of school and socio-economic backgrounds is essential to validate the generalizability of the results and to identify contextual variables that may influence the effectiveness of project-based learning. Future research should develop more advanced and accurate evaluation tools to measure the effects of project-based learning, including a combination of qualitative and quantitative assessments such as detailed case studies, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and analysis of portfolios of projects made by students. In terms of curriculum innovations, future research should explore the wider integration of project-based learning into national curriculum and teaching strategies.

Contributions to the field of educational sciences

The research contributes to the field of educational sciences by demonstrating the effectiveness of the project-based learning method in the formation of students' civic behavior. The thesis provides empirical evidence that this educational method is viable for the development of civic competences, preparing students to become active and responsible citizens. The study emphasizes the need for an educational reform that includes project-based learning as a central method in teaching social education, highlighting the importance of continuous teacher training and the development of appropriate pedagogical resources.

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