

Education for Citizenship and democratic participation: im/possibilities of articulation between Civil Society Organizations and Schools

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Received January 03, 2023; Revised May 23, 2023; Accepted July 25, 2023

Abstract Engaging Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and schools in implementing Citizenship Education (CE) are one of the guidelines included in the Portuguese National Strategy for Citizenship Education (NSCE), launched in 2017. It calls for building partnerships between schools and external institutions, considered strategic because of their ability to generate training and communication opportunities and optimize access to local resources necessary for learning and exercising citizenship. We studied a set of projects promoted by CSOs regarding school contexts. These projects share the common goal of strengthening civil society and active citizenship. We systematize some of the dimensions associated with the effects of the projects, in terms of strengthening civic awareness and democratic participation and reflect on the potential and difficulties inherent to the articulation between CSOs and Schools. The study was conducted through interviews with CSO technicians and teachers from partner schools, and focus group discussions with the students involved. These data, collected between January and July 2022, were subjected to content analysis. There is a common belief amongst the various participants in the positive results of the interventions in terms of strengthening civic awareness and empowering the educational community for greater involvement and participation. Still, participants struggle to articulate the effects of the projects concerning the domains of values, attitudes, and behaviors of the beneficiaries. And it's also difficult to identify the contributions of these interventions to the transformation of Schools into more participatory, collaborative, and democratic organizations. This dimension leads us to discuss the importance of building intervention and evaluation models for social and school partnerships that take into account the effects on the individual level, but also focus on the institutional level, i.e. on the structures that ensure the production of change.

Keywords: *Citizenship Education, Civil Society Organizations, Participation, Education, Democracy*

Cite This Article: Ana Isabel Teixeira, Mariana Fonseca, Moisés Cruz and Pedro Daniel Ferreira, "Education for Citizenship and democratic participation: im/possibilities of articulation between Civil Society Organizations and Schools." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 11, no. 8 (2023): 509-515. doi: 10.12691/education-11-8-5.

1. Introduction

Strengthening democratic participation and promoting active citizenship are often used to characterise both the problems that plague contemporary Western societies and the solutions that need to be cultivated. The population in general, but young people in particular, are seen as affected by these issues. Compared to other historical periods and/or other social groups, young people are seen as apathetic and uninterested in the issues that emanate from the political sphere [1,2,3]. In particular, they are criticised for their progressive alienation from more conventional forms of democratic participation [4,5,6]. In this scenario, education emerges as one of the central spheres of intervention from which this situation should be addressed. In other words, it is argued that issues

related to citizenship should be part of the educational mission of the school and should therefore be integrated into the formal educational pathways of children and young people. The first argument finds ample historical support in the theoretical proposals that have defended the importance of education in shaping societies guided by values of equality, governed by principles of social justice, and based on structures that promote the proper functioning of democracy [7]. However, how best to integrate these issues at the level of curricula, educational policies, practices and discourses is still a matter of debate and contention [8,9,10].

In recent decades and in the context of the European Union, Citizenship Education (CE) has been understood as a priority area for the education systems of the different Member States. The call for CE is based on the conviction that the construction of the European project is based on democratic values and the search for social cohesion [11].

For both, it is essential to promote the participation and civic engagement of European citizens, especially young people of school age. In this scenario, CE is fundamentally understood as a means to acquire national and European, civic and citizenship knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and dispositions [12,13]. Portugal has welcomed this macro-political orientation and has tried to respond to the social, political and economic concerns of the European dimension by integrating CE into formal education [14]. However, CE has had a journey marked by fluctuating nomenclatures (Personal and Social Development, Civic Training, etc.), by varying degrees of centrality in the curriculum, and by competition with other forms of "education for" (entrepreneurship, consumerism, media, risk, etc.). This uncertain and inconsistent path of CE in the Portuguese educational system can be explained by the instrumental motivation related to compliance with EU guidelines, combined with a misguided and uncritical interpretation of the construction of contexts and devices for learning [15]. Currently, and since 2017, the document that guides and establishes how this area should be present in the school context is the National Strategy for Citizenship Education (NSCE) [16]. CE combines different approaches for each educational cycle¹ and has to be considered along the compulsory school curriculum. In the 1st cycle of Basic Education, CE is a cross-curricular theme and therefore the objectives, content, and learning outcomes are described as transversal across the curriculum. In the 2nd and 3rd cycle, the objectives, content, or learning outcomes of CE are included in 'Citizenship and Development', a specific school subject primarily dedicated to citizenship. During Secondary Education, CE is included in the curriculum documents of broader subjects or learning areas, often in connection to the humanities/social sciences. Among other issues, the NSCE defines the thematic scope of CE; the modalities of teacher involvement and training; and how CE can be operationalized in each school context [16].

As a principle for operationalizing CE, the NSCE postulates the establishment of partnerships between schools and external entities [16]. Among the external entities identified as potential educational partners are Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Despite the diversity that characterizes the sector of organized civil society (both in terms of the types of organizations that make it up, as well as the principles they espouse and the activities they develop) [17], when looking at these organizations it becomes clear that, on the one hand, some of these organizations share a history of intervention in areas covered by CE and, on the other hand, some organizations identify education (in a broad sense) as one of their organizational missions [18,19]. It is therefore understandable that some funding programs aimed at CSOs encourage the development of projects and interventions acting in the domain of CE, in articulation with different school contexts. One of these support and

funding programmes for CSOs working in this field is the Active Citizens Fund. As part of the European Economic Area Grants, from 2018 to 2024, the fund is managed in Portugal by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Bissaya Barreto Foundation. The Active Citizens Fund aims to strengthen Portuguese civil society by promoting democratic values, citizenship and human rights. In the Portuguese context, this type of programme is very important to support both the activities and the development of CSOs. A survey of the CSO sector in Portugal identified funding and resource allocation, governance and management practices, and advocacy skills as major weaknesses [18]. The Active Citizens Fund therefore seeks to address these weaknesses by supporting projects in the areas of democracy, active citizenship, human rights and capacity building of CSOs. The aim of the programme is to support the development and long-term sustainability of civil society organisations, while strengthening their role in promoting democratic participation, active citizenship and human rights.

The study we present here focuses on the projects supported by this Fund and developed by CSOs that provided their specialized contribution in actions that rehearsed different forms of partnership with schools, and involved schools in their activities.

In this context, when looking at this nexus of dialogue and articulation between CSOs and schools, one of the first questions that arises is how the promoted CE activities affect the development of citizenship knowledge, skills, and behaviors in children and young people. This question, however, does not point us directly and exclusively to the question of evaluation instruments, but rather to the contexts and processes involved. If the advocacy of partnership relationships between schools and external agencies, namely CSOs, in the operationalisation of CE assumes that this articulation can be an added value, then it is also necessary to consider the challenges and opportunities for educational administration, leadership, policy and practice that arise from this relationship.

2. Methodology

We studied a set of projects funded between 2018 and 2021 by a Programme designed to support Civic Society Organizations (CSOs). These CSOs promote projects in school contexts aimed at strengthening civil society and active citizenship, and empowering vulnerable social groups. We used a mixed-methods approach based on project documentation and reports, interviews with CSO managers and professionals, teachers, and focus groups with students from partner schools. This data was subjected to document and content analysis, ensuring that analytical procedures were always cross-validated.

The 24 projects analysed are diverse in terms of their objectives, duration, geographical area of implementation and thematic focus. We conducted 17 individual interviews, 10 with CSO professionals or managers and/or project leaders (80% female) and 7 with teachers from partner schools (57.1% female). We also conducted 4 focus group discussions (FGDs) with children and young people from the schools that were beneficiaries of the projects. A total of 16 young people participated in the 4

¹ Portuguese compulsory education consists of Basic Education (1st cycle, between year 1 to 4 of schooling, 2nd cycle, year 5 and 6, and 3rd cycle, between year 7 and 9) and Secondary Education (year 10 to 12 of schooling).

FGDs, 31.25% male and 68.75% female, aged between 10 and 18 years. In the final phase of the study, we carried out 4 field visits, during which we held 7 meetings (4 with CSOs and 3 with schools). These visits allowed us to get to know some of the institutions and areas better and to promote additional moments of discussion on the preliminary conclusions of the study.

In this paper, we will focus on four thematic dimensions that were present in the interviews: the professional background and experience of the interviewees; the contexts and development processes of the projects; the relationship of the projects to citizenship education; and the role of CSOs in strengthening civil society.

FGDs were conducted to understand the students' perspective on the projects they were involved in. We asked how the projects asked for students' participation, what kind of goals and expectations they had, and to what extent the project met these. Other questions included the benefits of working with organisations and people from outside the school and their contribution to young people's mobilisation, engagement and civic awareness.

3. Results and discussion

The projects were implemented between 2019 and 2022 and lasted a minimum of 12 months and a maximum of 36 months. Schools were the primary intervention contexts, but some also identified other contexts or referred more generally to interventions in the community. The projects primarily targeted 'young people', with 'children' and 'adults' less frequently mentioned as participants. Adult participants in the interventions were typically identified as professionals, such as teachers or educators, or as family members of others (e.g. children and young people) targeted by the intervention. Schools are one of the preferred contexts for the development of projects focusing on children and young people. This is encouraged by the guidelines defined by the funding programme, which specifically mention the valorisation of this type of intervention and the articulation between civil society organisations and schools.

3.1. The role of the National Strategy for Citizenship Education

Since 2017, Citizenship Education has been organised according to the guidelines set out in the National Strategy for Citizenship Education (NSCE) [14]. The NSCE encourages schools to develop partnerships with external institutions, such as civil society organisations, in order to develop their local citizenship education strategies. The implementation of the projects under study coincided with the adoption of the new NSCE by schools. This condition allows us to question the centrality of the NSCE for the establishment of partnerships between schools and external entities, namely CSOs. The data seem to indicate a positive response. The NSCE is seen as an opportunity for institutional articulation. It brings schools and CSOs closer together and enables them to build effective partnerships and deepen their joint work. As one CSO professional put it, "these projects are only possible

because schools have been under more pressure to develop projects within the school and for the community. There has been more openness and flexibility on the part of the schools towards us, the CSOs" (Interview | CSO-5).

One of the proposals contained in the NSCE is that Citizenship Education (CE) should be framed according to the aims and objectives of the local School Strategies for Citizenship Education (SSCE). Teachers' positions on this document vary. In some cases, the monitoring of the themes and external partners involved in CE is recognised as central and this has an impact on the organisation and functioning of the school itself: "We have a coordinator and we monitor CE quarterly. We know what topics are being addressed within the classes, who are the local partners involved" (Project Visit | School - 16). There are others who clearly either ignore the document or see it as irrelevant: "The SSCE is just another strategy... now there is a strategy for everything..." (Interview | School-5).

CE is integrated in different ways (transversal curricular integration, autonomous subject and transdisciplinary) in the different educational levels. This offers opportunities for concrete cooperation in the form of project activities in the field of citizenship with all teachers responsible for the subject: "this activity is carried out in secondary school classes, as CE is a cross-curricular area, it's included in the curriculum of these classes" (Interview | School-1). The CSOs also value this characteristic, "we approach citizenship classes by using the curricular flexibility offered by NSCE, which allows us to adapt the themes of the NSCE to the class. The teacher is also present in the classroom during these activities" (Interview | CSO-3). According to a teacher: "the aim is to adapt practices to the specific needs identified at the school level and to use the NSCE as a guiding principle" (Interview | School-5).

The link between schools and external agencies has a practical function in that it makes it easier for schools and teachers to seek external support in solving difficulties arising from the implementation of the NSCE. One CSO staff member is optimistic about these partnerships:

"This project brought a significant change in the way the school viewed and interacted with CSO-16. Before the project, CSO-16 was mostly invited to the school to do activities (...). But it was mainly seen as a resource. With this project, however, the school began to see CSO-16 as an entity that builds on and is aligned with the curriculum and content of the school" (Project Visit | CSO-16).

The NSCE has provided guidance to schools on CE and encouraged partnerships between schools and CSOs. Despite mixed opinions about the local SSCE, the integration of CE into different subjects has led to a deeper collaboration between teachers, schools and CSOs. These partnerships have a practical function in that they provide teachers with specialist support in the implementation of SSCE [19]. In this sense, the cooperation between CSOs and schools takes on a narrower and more instrumental character - meeting the more immediate needs of teachers faced with the demands of the NSCE. As CSOs acknowledge, the existence of a broader partnership depends on a proper alignment with the CE curriculum and the proposed work and school content [20].

3.2. Project Topics and Methodology

The most common themes addressed by projects are active citizenship and participation, and human and children's rights. However, a wide range of different themes are also addressed, such as environmental education and sustainability, media literacy, violence and gender equality. Although each project focuses on a central thematic area, it is possible to identify the coexistence of different themes within a single project: "we talk about LGBT issues, we talk about racism, we talk about the Roma community, we talk about political participation and civic participation, we talk about women's rights, gender equality" (Interview | CSO-14).

CSOs select themes for projects on the basis of previous studies or needs assessments that identify priority issues to be addressed by each project, often already included in the grant applications submitted by CSOs. As one project leader explained, 'the issues we were going to work on, (...) were already identified, so we identified them right in the application' (Interview | CSO-5). This gives the students the impression that the implementation follows a plan that has already been decided, as one student said:

"It was the ladies who said, because there was already a plan even, that they had already shown at the beginning of the year when it was to explain what they were doing (...). There was a plan there that said, more or less, what we were going to work on" (Students FGC-2).

However, CSO professionals admit that these same themes changed during the implementation of the actions/activities, mainly due to the participation and intervention of students or in response to significant events that occurred during the implementation of the projects. The beneficiaries' openness to intervention placed them in a central position in terms of proposing themes and signalled the existence of negotiation spaces between some CSOs and the children and young people involved in the projects. A CSO staff member said:

"The issues were often raised by young people themselves. That is, we divided our work into two types of activities: the activities themselves, which are punctual, weekly in this case; and the processes. The processes are sets of activities, and the processes derive from the choices of the young people (...). The themes were always a combination of what the young people thought was more pertinent to work on and what we thought was pertinent to work on with the young people" (Interview | CSO-2).

The cooperation between schools and CSOs under the NSCE has thematic commonalities, as the central themes of the projects are closely aligned with those outlined in NSCE and funded by the Program. This alignment allows for seamless integration of the CSO's work into the school's existing curriculum. As one teacher explained, "these themes came to fit like a cherry on what we had programmed" (Project Visit | School-16) and another teacher added "the CSO knew (...) what were the themes to be dealt with, we also knew that the themes went along with them [those of NSCE], so there was no difficulty" (Interview | School-2).

The concern for the active and participatory dimension of these projects also extends to the methodological aspect. Despite the use of multiple and diverse approaches, it is

possible to note an emphasis on active and participatory methodologies, the use of non-formal education strategies and the articulation with community agents. Interventions often included a combination of direct and indirect intervention strategies. The projects used a combination of workshops and training, campaigns and awareness-raising activities, and multimedia products (games, videos, radio programmes, magazines, etc.). Other means mentioned, but not as frequently, were seminars, assemblies and digital platforms.

These activities are linked to non-formal education strategies and aim to create a space, inside and outside school, where citizenship skills and knowledge can be experienced. This is illustrated by the different actions related to "cultural events, through artistic demonstrations" (Interview | OSC-2) to strengthen community relations, and the creation of experiential and reflexive spaces, such as "a citizenship laboratory to experiment and understand how we can use digital media to promote activism" (Interview | OSC-5).

The students recognize and acknowledge that the activities and actions undertaken introduced several subjects that are not usually addressed during school time: "the fact that they have made us aware of these subjects that we sometimes put aside a little" (Students FGD-1). They appreciate the methods used, how his awareness is raised, sometimes by interviewing others, participating in discussions - "my group did several interviews with people from different countries (...) and we learned a lot about other countries" (Students FGD-3) - or using group work and collaboration with other entities. Students appreciated how this contributed to strengthen their relationship with the different realities in their surrounding contexts, and it allowed them to reach out to others:

"I also want to talk about the cooperation part, that without it there is nothing. That's also a little bit why they always led us all to work together, not only to make the projects but also afterward to implement these projects, it would have to be with a team of volunteers, all trying and non-profit... That is, the cooperation part is always essential, in everything" (Students FGD-1).

The projects seem to be particularly valued for their ability to address issues that, although included in the CE framework, are not usually addressed by schools. In this process, they also stand out for the differentiation of the activities on which their intervention is based. However, rather than proposing new activities, their main challenge is to reflect on the projects and activities already carried out in the school, while encouraging investment in teacher training and collaboration: "to take stock of the projects that are already working on citizenship issues and to improve the work of these projects within the framework of citizenship through the collaborative work of teachers" (Interview | OSC-5).

The projects are perceived as valuable resources for improving students' civic engagement and awareness. The issues addressed by the projects are regarded as relevant, and the active and participatory methods used to engage students are considered effective. The integration of the work of CSOs into the existing school curriculum is a key strength of the projects, emphasizing hands-on experience and addressing issues not usually tackled in school. However, the positive impact of the school-CSO

relationship seems to depend on the alignment of the project with the school curriculum and content on CE. It is worth pointing out the tension that can arise between the positive evaluation of projects based on their distinction from what the school offers (in terms of themes and methodological approaches and principles) and their suitability and ability to meet the school's needs as defined by the NSCE, potentially becoming more school-like. As Monteiro & Ferreira say, the school seems to have a Midas touch: "everything the school touches becomes school-like and it is not possible to add anything to the school that cannot be reduced to the school itself" [21, p.6].

3.3. Project outcomes and recognized impacts

According to the various stakeholders, the projects have had a very positive impact on students' civic awareness and on their greater involvement in the educational community. Among these positive effects, some examples stand out: i) the creation of associations; ii) the revitalisation of student associations and regular participatory assemblies; iii) the increase in the amount and quality of participation of parents in parents' associations; iv) the implementation of projects designed by young people during the programme; v) and the promotion of greater awareness of the importance of critical thinking and everyone's civic and political participation in building more equal and just societies.

In the interviews with the CSO professionals, one aspect is highlighted: the recognition that the projects addressed relevant social and political issues. Students also appreciated the increased opportunities for reflection on the issues raised (many of which had not previously merited their attention). This, they said, led to a growing civic awareness that affected their daily lives. In some cases, this was reflected in the information they had on the issues that CSOs brought to school, in the change of some attitudes and habits, or in a more critical attitude towards everyday situations and a different way of seeing the world.

"There was already an idea of what sustainability was, but when the project was presented, I at least had an idea that I already knew more, but throughout the project, I became aware that perhaps there was much that I didn't know... And in this way, it helped, even for behaviors now, it made it possible to be much more critical of daily life... Of course, we did not change our lives 360 degrees, but there are many decisions that we now make, at least I do, that we maybe did not do before, which also is a lot due to this project" (Student FGD-4).

Teachers see an increase in student participation as a result of their involvement in the design and development of the projects. They also point out that students seem to have a greater awareness of what citizenship is or can be: "we clearly see that there are many children with very different attitudes compared to three years ago, in terms of participation, attitude, how they analyse some situations and even how they share and ask for help" (Interview | School-4).

Nevertheless, the awareness of the impact on the students is not present in all the projects, which may indicate the difficulty that the professionals of the CSOs

have in taking ownership of the changes that have taken place and in linking them to the actions that have been carried out. Although evaluation processes were included in the projects, the findings of these evaluation processes do not seem to have been integrated into the discourse produced about the projects. The interviews show that there is some reflection and attention to this dimension, but in a more informal and unstructured way about the expected and actual impact on the beneficiaries:

"Young people like it, get involved and connect with the work we are doing, and also because there are different activities, more experiential, more active, the evaluation is positive. But I don't know to what extent those themes we are discussing have an impact, in fact, I think they don't have an impact, that's why we call them awareness workshops" (Interview | CSO-5).

The projects share a common concern for stimulating peer dialogue, promoting critical thinking and encouraging participation. Creating spaces and opportunities for student participation within schools has the potential to lead to both individual and organisational change. This is due to the opportunities it provides for involvement and self-expression, as well as the experiences and emotions it can generate. One particularly interesting example illustrates how holding participatory assemblies led to the creation of a student association and left a lasting impact:

"The school organized participatory assemblies and we presented the ideas that we wanted to change, to have a better school, we presented them right in front of the principal, in a courtyard that we have in our school. The school principal talked about each one, but most of them were rejected. When he rejected it, it made me a little angry (...) Then I went to summer school with some friends and a cousin, further on we started to see what was needed to create the student association, make some phone calls, I started to see what the social bodies [of the association] were, I talked to some friends to see if they were interested, I explained, we made some phone calls, we talked to a lady (...) who helped us to create the student association, we talked to the teachers, we sent e-mails to the school management to see if they accepted the student association, they accepted, we chose names, statutes, we did all the work and that was an experience that marked me" (Student FGD-3).

The projects share a common concern to encourage dialogue, critical thinking, and participation. They have been praised for enabling students to deepen their understanding of relevant social and political issues and for encouraging them to become involved in their communities [22]. However, participants don't always find the evidence of the link between these changes and project activities. This contributes to an understanding that it is often unclear if and how different forms of citizenship education are effective [23], and the importance of considering alternative forms of evaluation for this type of educational project [24]. To illustrate the positive outcomes of the projects, participants mention the revitalisation of participatory assemblies and pupil and parent associations. Despite these powerful and memorable examples of more collective and contextual changes, most of the activities and projects focused on individual students. We can conclude that although we

have a new NSCE, Menezes' reflections on the tensions that permeated the field in the late 1990s remain relevant. EC's operationalisation strategy tends to privilege a person- or subject-centred model of educational intervention, as opposed to the need to transform the school as a space where students play an active and constructive role in promoting their development and social transformation [14].

3.4. Possibilities and Difficulties in linking Schools and CSOs

Several participants see the opening of the school space to the community as an important aspect of the National Strategy for Citizenship Education (NSCE). The intervention of civil society organisations in the field of CE stands out and is positively characterised by its transversal and experiential concept of citizenship. This favours the development of work that is more integrated, more practical and extends to the various dimensions of the school context in its relationship with the surrounding community. According to a teacher:

"I think it's really an added value (...). In this case, the two people who presented the sessions are people who have life experiences in terms of volunteer work, and who have an impact. (...) The whole opening of the school to the outside world, to society, to universities or even to companies, I think it is very enriching for both parties" (Interview | School-1).

This contribution of CSOs is also reflected in the perceived benefits of opening up teaching-learning processes to new alternatives based on differentiated methodological proposals. The focus on non-formal education methods is seen as a clear added value, allowing "a more interactive approach to the content, more appealing, using more participatory methods and better adapted to the interests of this population" (Interview | OSC-16). Students agree that the intervention of CSOs in schools benefits the teaching-learning processes by making them more innovative and dynamic: "when someone from outside comes into a class, it always brings a different dynamic, it's always different" (Student FGD-4). They value the increased curiosity and motivation that comes from breaking routines and reconfiguring traditional school roles:

"I think they made us feel very comfortable. They really talked to us as if we were all the same age, respecting each other of course. But it even felt like we had known each other for a while and we were all very close, so I think they created a good and dynamic environment" (Student FGD-4).

The centrality of the schools to the development of the CSOs' projects justifies the importance of further understanding and identifying the critical points in the process of setting up these partnerships. In the initial stages of contact and project preparation, there is some resistance due to the devaluation of CE. As one of the interviewees put it, "although there is this idea that it is important to bring the community, there are also a series of priorities that the school has, namely academic objectives, that sometimes hinder this entry into the school" (Interview | CSO-3).

Defining the conditions and resources for developing projects in schools are important aspects of a negotiation process. The allocation of school time to the activities carried out by the projects is one of the most frequently mentioned constraints: "Okay, there was a management here that was not easy for the schools. And we know that the times were a bit difficult, but it was more an internal management of the schools, we were not involved" (Interview | CSO-10). The more the methodologies involve approaches that disrupt the conventional school logic, the greater the challenge. These dimensions illustrate some of the tensions that can arise when developing projects in school contexts.

"The difficulties often have to do with the formal aspect, with an approach that is strange to the formal education system, and at first people thought that what we did during the sessions was weird. We mess up the room and make noise..." (Interview | CSO-9).

Relevant lessons learned highlighted by participants were the importance of building partnerships, valuing training, improving communication strategies and gaining access to resources for social intervention. It is unclear whether the CSO intervention can be replicated by teachers or other school professionals, or whether there has been any intentional capacity building of the schools themselves in relation to the approaches and ways of working of partner CSOs. If replication and capacity building are relevant objectives, they should be made explicit in the project requirements. This should be considered as a dimension for future evaluations, together with the systematic collection of indicators and evidence of change that can further inform and shape the intervention practices of projects.

School-community integration appears to be a valuable NSCE contribution. The involvement of civil society organisations in citizenship education is seen as positive, as it often brings a transversal and experiential approach to citizenship education, which can broaden the relationship between the school and the surrounding community. The contribution of CSOs is valued by both teachers and students as it leads to improved teaching-learning practices that are more interactive and participatory [25].

However, the centrality of schools in CSO projects raises challenges that need to be addressed, such as those posed by clashes with school priorities, by their reliance on school time, and the school's constraints in terms of resource and time management, and school's resistance to change. Differences in terms of methods and approaches between schools and CSOs can also lead to tensions. To overcome these challenges and to ensure replicability and capacity building for schools in future collaborative projects, it is crucial to build partnerships that provide training, improve communication strategies and ensure access to resources for social action.

4. Conclusion

The feedback on the NSCE brings us back to the importance of public policy in shaping education. However, there may be a gap between what is advocated in policy and what is practised, an issue that is critically

noted in different areas of government action in Portugal. It is necessary to consider not only the objectives defined in these documents, but also the objective conditions necessary for their effective pursuit. These are, on the one hand, the capacity of civil society organisations to ensure the sustainability of their intervention and, on the other hand, the capacity of schools to effectively incorporate into their functioning the conditions for the integration and participation of other entities in order to enhance their educational opportunities. If the first aspect points to a structural deficiency in the functioning of organised civil society - the chronic lack of financial resources and of conditions to retain its trained staff - the second dimension underlines the importance of raising awareness and engagement/preparation of school leaders and teachers.

The main contributions of CSO projects are related to diversifying teaching and learning processes, opening the school to community life, and facilitating students' contact with and engagement with important issues that otherwise seem to be mostly absent from schools. The benefits for students seem to be linked to the opportunities offered by the projects to be involved in different types of activities and to make connections with concrete issues that are present in their lives. However, it seems that the work of civil society organisations can aspire to go further and challenge schools to promote contextual and organisational changes and internal dynamics and spaces for dialogue and collaborative work with the potential to further transform the way they operate.

Acknowledgements

This work was co-funded by the Bissaya Barreto Foundation and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, under the Interim Evaluation Study on the Results of the Active Citizens Programme. This work was also supported by the European Union, through the European Social Fund, and by national funds, through the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, IP (FCT), under the doctoral research grant no. SFRH/BD/128591/2017; and by the FCT, under the strategic funding awarded to CIIE [grants no. UIDB/00167/2020; and UIDP/00167/2020].

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