

DISCUSSING CIVIC EDUCATION

Handout on Different Understandings of the Term and Common Solutions

The Authors and their Organisations:

Dominik Ahlers | Jugendakademie Walberberg | Germany
Lucia Andreatta | IBB e.V. | Germany

Katarzyna Błasińska | Foundation Institute for Socio-Economic Balance | Poland
Laura del Valle | Càlam | Spain

Marion Gronstedt | Pedagogical Institute München | Germany
Kuldar Lilleõis | MTÜ Noored Toredate Mõtetega | Estonia

D. Ahlers, L. Andreatta, K. Błasińska, L. del Valle, M. Gronstedt, K. Lilleõis: Discussing Civic Education. Handout on Different Understandings of the Term and Common Solutions

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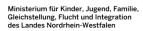
Contact: generationeurope@ibb-d.de

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Abstract

Civic Education plays an important role in empowering young people to become active and engaged citizens. However, within the Generation Europe - The Academy network of 42 youth organisations across 14 European countries, there were different understandings of the term Civic Education. This made collaboration more challenging at times. This handout documents the network's efforts to build a common understanding by surveying participants, analysing their responses, and facilitating dialogue among the network partners.

The process revealed diverse interpretations influenced by historical backgrounds, local contexts, and current issues that matter to the local participants. Discussions highlighted how practical experiences shape understandings in ways that go beyond academic research alone. Word choice and phrasing is important, especially in multilingual contexts, as meanings and connotations can shift through translation. To avoid misunderstandings and to enable discussions on eye-level, this must be taken into account and actively addressed. While a single, universal definition remained elusive, the process showed the different approaches to Civic Education within the network based on a common ground.

Rather than final answers, this handout marks the start of an ongoing process to build shared understanding among European youth workers around Civic Education. It recognizes the complexities involved and highlights the need to adapt to changing contexts. After all, there is a broad consensus in the network that a robust framework for Civic Education is vital for promoting and empowering responsible, engaged citizens and fostering strong democratic societies.

Content

1.	Introduction	5
	1.1. Who We Are	5
	1.2 Our Pedagogical Approach	6
	1.3 Common Values and Definitions	6
	1.4. Handout Structure	7
2.	Background: The European Youth Work Agenda and the Bonn Process	9
3.	Concepts of Civic Education	11
4.	Practical Part	13
	4.1. Our Survey	13
	4.2 Survey Data	15
	4.2. Discussing the Survey Answers	20
5.	Conclusion	23
6.	Resources	25

1. Introduction

1.1. Who We Are

We are the Competence Group Methods, a group of professionals working in the field of international youth work and part of the Generation Europe – The Academy network. Generation Europe – The Academy (GenE-A) is dedicated to empowering youth in their local communities and across Europe through increased social participation. Utilising a non-formal education framework, the project collaborates with experts to develop effective tools, researches, training models and know-how to increase the understanding and spreading of Civic Education. We share the principles of non-formal education and the common values we have raised through our network: democracy, equality, human rights and respect.

Our primary focus is on disadvantaged youth in various European countries, youth with fewer opportunities due to physical and psychological special needs, social, geographical, religious, gender and other specific backgrounds. Considering the specific target, we questioned ourselves if they need special educational environments, special treatment, and specific pedagogical tools. Our collective experience in the network suggests otherwise.

We are diverse but we have one common goal. Our areas of expertise span a variety of fields, including sustainability, theatre, art, humanitarian work with ethnic minorities, refugees and persons with disabilities. Despite our diversity, we are unified in our commitment to empowering young individuals across European countries to become active citizens. What does that mean? The members of our network, hailing from 14 countries, will certainly give different answers to this question, shaped by national working conditions for youth workers, or individual experiences in collaborating with local stakeholders. Active citizens vote, protest, advocate, protect the rights of disadvantaged groups or raise awareness in their neighbourhood about local issues. All in all, active citizens are those who wish to make changes for the better, a goal that resonates throughout our projects with youngsters.

1.2 Our Pedagogical Approach

Drawing on the long experience of our network partners, we have concluded that annual youth encounters, each time with new participants, enhance the intercultural competencies of young people, but provide limited sustainability to youth work.

In response, we've developed a pedagogical concept that facilitates regular exchanges among youngsters from different countries, enabling them to continue the project work on both local and international levels. During a five-year project phase, each partnership comprising three European organisations, has three years to organise one youth encounter per year. This structure allows young people from each partnership to meet face-to-face three times. Between these encounters, youngsters are involved in local project activities which they conceptualise and design themselves. Youth leaders support the young people's initiatives and facilitate their activities, enabling young people to share their project experiences and first attempts at advocacy and lobbying during the second or third youth encounter.

Our pedagogical concepts incorporate various experiential learning methods, such as simulations, debates, and community projects. These hands-on experiences deepen understanding and encourage active participation, leading to the benefits of Civic Education. Given the international scope of our work, these questions arise: What constitutes a shared understanding of Civic Education? What values and perspectives guide Civic Education in Europe?

In general, Civic Education involves raising awareness about rights and responsibilities, together with empowering participatory skills, essential for individuals to engage responsibly in society. In an era defined by complex global challenges and diverse perspectives, Civic Education becomes a cornerstone for fostering democratic values, social cohesion, and civic engagement. But what are the concrete shapes in the network of Generation Europe – The Academy?

1.3 Common Values and Definitions

In the Generation Europe Methodbox (2021, p. 14) an initial attempt was made to identify common values within the network and draft a definition specifically tailored to active European citizenship for our programme.

This effort underscores the ongoing commitment to align the network's values with the principles of active European citizenship. Engaged in international partnerships, we are often confronted with varying definitions of Civic Education, given that different perspectives bring different demands to the concept. This challenge prompted the idea of creating a handout on Civic Education. The aim is to foster a shared understanding of Civic Education within the network, enhancing advocacy and lobbying efforts in youth work in order to promote non-formal European education activities and their value for democratic culture on local, national and European levels.

With this handout we want to explore if it is possible to harmonise the different manifestations of Civic Education or value-based education and try to figure out which understandings are prevalent in our network.

1.4. Handout Structure

As Kerry J. Kennedy highlights, Civic Education is connected to specific definitions of a "good citizen" (Kennedy, 2021, p. 5). These definitions reflect distinct systems of values and viewpoints, such as the justice-oriented citizen outlined by Westheimer (Westheimer, 2004, p. 240-245). This citizen "critically assesses social, political and economic structures to see beyond surface causes" (Westheimer, 2004, p. 240). Establishing such a critical mindset akin to Critical Youth Citizenship is both an objective of Civic Education and a focus of this handout as it tries to interconnect European values with non-formal education. To achieve this goal, specific (European) values represented in this network require clarification (Methodbox, 2021, p. 17).

In this paper we documenting our discussion process. We are summarising different understandings of the terms "Civic Education", "value-based education" and "politische Bildung" (political/policy-related education in German). To facilitate and promote the debate, we conducted a survey among the various organisations and levels within Generation Europe – The Academy. The survey aims to help us in understanding and compiling the various embedded systems and structures of values associated with the term Civic Education. By better understanding these foundations, we can further discuss the impact on local youth work, providing valuable insights for our collective endeavours.

The subsequent stages of our efforts make it necessary to consolidate the obtained results and reflect thoroughly on our survey. This reflection includes specifically the

question of neutrality of non-formal education and explores the connection between individual and international perspectives. Our aim is to check if there is a common understanding of Civic Education from the perspective of Generation Europe – The Academy. As a work of practice for practical purposes, the results of this handout signify an ongoing process. The outcomes will show the varied perspectives as they are applied within the diverse local groups of our network. By navigating through these diverse perspectives, we aim to identify common ground and foster a shared understanding that can guide our collective efforts in the realm of Civic Education.

2. Background: The European Youth Work Agenda and the Bonn Process

The Bonn Process, initiated in 2019 during the German presidency of the Council of the European Union by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens Women and Youth, stands as a comprehensive European-wide initiative that aims to strengthen the role of youth work in addressing social and political challenges. The process brings together stakeholders from across Europe to discuss and develop new approaches to youth work.

Routed in the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA), adopted by the Council of Europe in 2015, the Bonn Process provides a structured framework for the development of youth work policies and practices across Europe. Its overarching aims include promoting the recognition and quality of youth work, as well as fostering the active participation and social inclusion of young people in society.

The Bonn Process takes a more focused approach, placing particular emphasis on the quality and effectiveness of youth work. It aims to promote the professionalisation of youth work, to increase the involvement of young people in decision-making processes, and to establish stronger connections between youth work and other policy areas, such as education, employment, and social inclusion.

One of the key features of the Bonn Process is the inclusive engagement of a wide range of stakeholders, including youth organisations, youth workers, policymakers, researchers and funders. Through a series of conferences and consultations, these stakeholders have been able to share their experiences and ideas for improving the quality and effectiveness of youth work.

Another important aspect of the Bonn Process is its focus on the development of evidence-based approaches to youth work. The initiative aims to promote research and evaluation in this field, in order to identify best practices and ensure that youth

work is highly effective in addressing the diverse needs and aspirations of young people. With this handout we want to contribute to the Bonn Process by:

- providing practical examples of Civic Education (ongoing process);
- using this handout as a starting point for further reflections, and as a lobby tool.

It provides a starting point for informed discussions about Civic Education, extending the conversation beyond the youth work community of practice.

3. Concepts of Civic Education

There are several existing concepts of Civic Education. Some of them are briefly described below.

Education of Democratic Citizenship (EDC):

The concept of EDC focuses on information, learning, and the cultivation of awareness regarding knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. Its primary goal is to empower people to exercise and defend democratic rights, value diversity and play an active role in the democratic process (Grimonprez, 2020, p. 79).

Human Rights Education (HRE):

HRE shares similarities with EDC but places a specific emphasis on implementing and defending a universal human rights culture within society. This is linked to the concept of freedom (Grimonprez, 2020, p. 79).

Different Understandings of EDC Across National Strategies:

In Europe, diverse interpretations of EDC are influenced by national perspectives on Civic Education. As shown in the All-European Study on Education for Democratic Citizenship Policies, the varied understandings fall along a spectrum between authorised decision-makers and subordinates implementing policy, as well as a focus on stakeholders or practitioners. The different forms of Civic Education are the result of negotiations between these poles (Council of Europe, 2004, p. 25).

Defining Active European Citizenship (AEC) within GenE-A Network

In addition to these concepts of Civic Education, discussions about the definition of Civic Education have been ongoing in the network of Generation Europe – The Academy. During the preparation of the Methodbox, attention was drawn to the fact that human qualities, skills and competencies are variably described as values (Methodbox, 2021. p. 9), posing challenges in reaching a consensus on individual values.

To establish a network-specific understanding of Active European Citizenship (AEC), a two-step process involving network professionals and young people was initiated.

In the first step, network professionals compiled a list of 26 values, and young people were then invited to vote on their top 5. The resulting core values shaped Generation Europe's definition of Active European Citizenship:

"AEC, as a part of Global Citizenship, is an attitude of taking action in society in everyday life, on a local and international level, based on common values. The youth workers and youths of the network agreed on the following values as most important: human rights, respect, equality, democracy and education/learning. Active European citizens contribute to positive change in society, towards true respect and implementation of Human Rights for everyone, while taking global responsibility. Knowledge and a set of specific skills are required to reach this aim" (Methodbox, 2021, p. 20).

In addition to these core values, young people's votes also prioritised the following values: freedom of speech, peace, responsibility, solidarity, tolerance, justice, creativity, inclusion, community, participation, cooperation, youth participation, sustainability, security/safety, courage, commitment, human dignity, accessibility, resilience, and rule of law. These values collectively form the foundation for Generation Europe's commitment to fostering active, engaged, and responsible youth within their communities and beyond (Methodbox, 2021, p. 21).

The identified values, together with skills and knowledge, make up the competences that empower young people to take meaningful action.

Although certain values have been identified as common, the understanding of the term Civic Education remained diverse. It became clear that different interpretations and expectations were associated with the term. Therefore, the next logical step was to find out what Civic Education means to the network partners, which values it describes and which aspects of Civic Education are central to the organisations in the network.

4. Practical Part

4.1. Our Survey

Within the network of Generation Europe – The Academy, comprising 42 youth organisations from 14 European countries, a recurring challenge has been encountered during the extensive work together: a lack of a common understanding of the term Civic Education. This issue is particularly problematic given the significant role Civic Education plays in both local and international activities. Without a shared understanding, effective collaboration within international groups becomes challenging, hindering the provision of adequate support to local organisations. To address this issue, the network decided to try to find a common understanding of Civic Education.

Six youth work professionals from network organisations initiated this process, drawing upon the core values and the definition of Active European Citizenship, jointly defined in the previous phase of the programme (Generation Europe – Young Democracy in Action, 2018–2020). They also conducted an extensive research review of numerous papers and treatises on Civic Education in Europe. In this context, they developed a set of 14 questions/statements, focusing also on foundational values that encompass critical and creative thinking, European citizenship competence, communication competence, collaboration competence, cross-cultural awareness and expression, and staff competence. These statements are designed to elicit responses that can be answered with a simple "Yes" or "No".

The survey engaged approximately 135 active participants of the programme, including project managers, youth leaders and ambassadors¹. The questions were addressed to the participants of the three major network events of Generation Europe - The Academy, namely the Project Planning Conference (04-09 February 2023),

¹ In the concept of Generation Europe – The Academy, **ambassadors** are former participants of international youth encounters, who are very active and interested. In the framework of our network, they are trained to take responsibilities on all levels of the programme. They become mentors in their local groups, a link between the youth leaders and the local youth, and important advocates for the needs of young people in Europe.

the Ambassador Conference (14-19 May 2023) and the Youth Leader Training (27-31 May 2023), which all took place in Hattingen, Germany.

It is important to understand that this survey makes no claim to academic precision or representativeness, nor is it based on detailed methods of social science. It was primarily intended to create an opportunity for dialogue between the participants and to serve as a starting point for our joint efforts to develop a common understanding of Civic Education. However, an important part of Generation Europe – The Academy's approach is to make its own methods and experiences transparent, so that they can be utilised by the entire community of practice. We are therefore documenting the process and the associated discussions in this handout.

Statements of our survey for which "yes"/"no" responses were requested:

Civic Education is...

- always democratic.
- based on Human Rights.
- about solidarity.
- political.
- integrating identity and diversity (personal and in society).
- inclusive, representative and relevant.
- respecting democratic values and diversity.
- contributing to the development and well-being of society.
- not about promoting a particular point of view but creating a space to share. different opinions and discuss them.
- empowering to be an active citizen on a local, European and international level.
- leading to share responsibilities in each aspect of life.
- giving practical tools needed to become an active citizen.
- sharing knowledge about concepts of democracy, equality, institutions, identity and politics.
- using non-formal methods of education.

4.2 Survey Data

The raw data of the survey, which also shows the breakdown of responses by country of origin, can be downloaded as a spreadsheet.² To give an impression, we will here just summarise how the individual actor levels in our network responded. At the same time, we refer to the following chapter when it comes to the scope and limitations of the conclusions that can be drawn from the figures.

Civic Education is always democratic:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	37 (82,22%)	11 (24,44%)	22 (48,88%)
No	3 (6,66%)	7 (15,55%)	6 (13,33%)
Both	1(2,22%)	5 (11,11%)	3 (6,66%)
No answer	4 (8,88%)	22 (48,88%)	14 (31,11%)

Civic Education is based on Human Rights:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	37 (82,22%)	19 (42,22%)	31 (68,88%)
No	3 (6,66%)	2 (4,44%)	0 (0%)
Both	1(2,22%)	2 (4,44%)	0 (0%)
No answer	4 (8,88%)	22 (48,88%)	14 (31,11%)

² https://generationeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CivicEducationSurvey.xlsx

Civic Education is about solidarity:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	29 (64,44%)	20 (44,44%)	22 (48,99%)
No	6 (13,33%)	2 (4,44%)	7 (15,55%)
Both	2 (4,44%)	1 (2,22%)	2 (4,44%)
No answer	8 (17,77%)	21 (46,66%)	14 (31,11%)

Civic Education is political:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	31 (68,88%)	10 (22,22%)	15 (33,33%)
No	7 (15,55%)	13 (28,88%)	12 (26,66%)
Both	1(2,22%)	0 (0%)	4 (8,88%)
No answer	6 (13,33%)	22 (48,88%)	14 (31,11%)

Civic Education is integrating identity and diversity (personal and in society):

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	32 (71,11%)	20 (44,44%)	25 (55,55%)
No	5 (11,11%)	2 (4,44%)	3 (6,66%)
Both	1(2,22%)	1 (2,22%)	2 (4,44%)
No answer	7 (15,55%)	22 (48,99%)	15 (33,33%)

Civic Education is inclusive, representative and relevant:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	27 (60%)	17 (37,77%)	26 (57,77%)
No	7 (15,55%)	5 (11,11%)	5 (11,11%)
Both	3 (6,66%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
No answer	8 (17,77%)	23 (51,11%)	14 (31,11%)

Civic Education is respecting democratic values and diversity:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	32 (71,11%)	22 (48,99%)	26 (57,77%)
No	5 (11,11%)	0 (0%)	2 (4,44%)
Both	1 (2,22%)	1 (2,22%)	1 (2,22%)
No answer	7 (15,55%)	22 (48,99%)	16 (35,55%)

Civic Education is contributing to the development and well-being of society?

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	32 (71,11%)	22 (48,99%)	29 (64,44%)
No	5 (11,11%)	1 (2,22%)	0 (0%)
Both	2 (4,44%)	0 (0%)	1 (2,22%)
No answer	6 (13,33%)	22 (48,99%)	15 (33,33%)

Civic Education is not about promoting particular point of view, but creating a space to share different opinions and discuss them?

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	34 (75,55%)	21 (46,66%)	27 (60%)
No	5 (11,11%)	2 (4,44%)	3 (6,66%)
Both	1 (2,22%)	0 (0%)	1 (2,22%)
No answer	5 (11,11%)	22 (48,99)	14 (31,11%)

Civic Education is empowering to be an active citizen on a local, european and international level:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	32 (71,11%)	17 (37,77%)	26 (57,77%)
No	8 (17,77%)	6 (13,33%)	3 (6,66%)
Both	1 (2,22%)	0 (0%)	2 (4,44%)
No answer	4 (8,88%)	22 (48,99)	14 (31,11%)

Civic Education is leading to share responsibilities in each aspect of life:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	16 (35,55%)	19 (42,22%)	20 (44,44%)
No	22 (48,99%)	4 (8,88%)	7 (15,55%)
Both	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (4,44%)
No answer	7 (15,55%)	22 (48,99%)	16 (35,55%)

Civic Education is giving the practical tools, needed to become an active citizen:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	37 (82,22%)	19 (42,22%)	24 (53,33%)
No	3 (6,66%)	4 (8,88%)	5 (11,11%)
Both	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (4,44%)
No answer	5 (11,11%)	22 (48,99%)	14 (31,11%)

Civic Education is sharing knowledge about concepts of democracy, equality, institutions, identity and politics:

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	35 (77,77%)	21 (46,66%)	25 (55,55%)
No	4 (8,88%)	2 (4,44%)	4 (8,88%)
Both	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
No answer	6 (13,33%)	22 (48,99%)	16 (35,55%)

Civic Education is using non formal methods of education?

	Project Manager	Ambassadors	Youth Leaders
Yes	22 (48,99%)	20 (44,44%)	26 (57,77%)
No	16 (35,55%)	3 (6,66%)	2 (4,44%)
Both	1(2,22%)	0 (0%)	1 (2,22%)
No answer	6 (13,33%)	22 (48,99%)	16 (35,55%)

4.2. Discussing the Survey Answers

Following the survey, a transnational meeting took place in Budapest, gathering 20 network partners from Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden. The focus of the meeting centred on discussing the survey answers and on Civic Education and its various aspects. Different groups explored topics such as values, participation, decision-making, human rights, and the challenges of democracy. They also delved into the role of diversity, representation, respect, and the connection between local and global perspectives.

A first result of the discussion was the realisation of how important the choice of certain expressions is, especially in international and multilingual contexts. A good example of this is the understanding of the term "political". While German-speaking participants use the term as a translation of the German word "politisch" (which can mean both "political" as well as "policy-driven" or "policy-based"), many partners from other countries use it in the much narrower sense of the English term.

To enable an appropriate debate in a multilingual context, such risks of misunder-standing must first be overcome. It can therefore be assumed that the responses to the fourth statement would have been significantly different if it had read "Civic Education is policy-based" or "Civic Education is policy-related" instead of "Civic Education is political". This would have excluded the understanding of "political" in the sense of "based on the beliefs of a political group/party/ideology", as it is not normally meant when the term "politische Bildung" is used in German-speaking contexts. The question of whether Civic Education is "policy-based", on the other hand, would have focussed the perspective on the aims of the concept (for example promoting and securing democratic participation) and would have most likely led to other answers.

Another risk of misunderstanding identified was that in the debate you should specify whether you are talking about Civic Education as a concept or a practice. Depending on which of the two is understood, the answer to the question of whether Civic Education is always democratic, for example, may turn out differently. (Even if someone is of the opinion that the concept of Civic Education is always democratic, the person doesn't have to believe it is always carried out democratically). Because of this openness in the question, some participants interpreted the "is" as "should

be", because they were referring more to the concept of Civic Education, while others took the "is" literally in relation to the implementation of the process. Overall, it can be said that the survey contributed to clarification of these questions, because these risks of misunderstanding became clear and can be avoided as soon as you are aware of them.

Also other **disagreements and differing opinions** arose during the discussion, that were not solely related to the wording and understanding of terms. Some participants emphasised the importance of empowering young people and encouraging them to take action, while others highlighted the need for facilitators to remain neutral and collect diverse opinions. The issue of defining Civic Education in simpler terms for youngsters was also raised.

Despite these differences, agreements were reached on several key points. The participants agreed that Civic Education should aim to empower young people, promote critical thinking, and have a positive impact on society. They recognized the importance of sharing power, being aware of privileges, and advocating for rights. The participants also acknowledged the need for a diverse network and the significance of addressing cultural needs within active citizenship.

The participants discussed the tension between local and global perspectives and the European identity within Civic Education. They debated the use of the term "European" and the expectation of European funders. However, they also recognized the value of considering global perspectives and involving participants from different parts of the world.

During the survey response analysis, discussions unfolded in front of our panel regarding the implementation of those diverse concepts. Opinions differed widely, ranging from the belief that the statements of the survey must already have been implemented to answer 'Yes', to considering the statements as ideals or utopias to aspire to. Differences in understanding and use of modal verbs led to a broad spectrum of interpretations, regardless of the internal meaning of the specific value.

Regarding values, participants agreed that **Civic Education should be based on values but should also focus on action**. They discussed the challenges of defining and implementing these values, as well as the need for open and safe conversations about differing values within the network.

In summary, the discussion emphasised the crucial role of Civic Education in empowering young people, promoting critical thinking, and creating positive change in society. The participants recognized the complexities and challenges involved in defining and implementing Civic education, emphasising the need for inclusivity, diverse perspectives, and cultural competence within the field.

5. Conclusion

The quest to understand Civic Education has led to a plethora of questions, ideas, and uncertainties. It all started with examining existing definitions and reports. One thing we noticed early on was that Civic Education is often framed within formal contexts.

A significant observation was the limited research on Civic Education outside traditional school settings. This made us wonder if Civic Education depends on factors such as location, age, background, and more. Despite these uncertainties, we all agreed on the importance of shared values within our network organisations. These values are our guiding principles, so we decided to dig deeper into them to see where we stand.

To gain a comprehensive understanding, we conducted an in-person survey and engaged in face-to-face discussions to understand each other better. The survey revealed the diversity in our network regarding the practice and understanding of Civic Education, influenced by different historical backgrounds, local environments, and current issues that matter to us.

One of the significant findings was the pivotal role of practitioners in shaping our understanding of Civic Education. Their practical experiences and direct work with young people provided valuable insights beyond what academic research alone could capture, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

The results raised questions about whether it's even possible to find a single, one-size-fits-all definition of Civic Education. Although we initially set out to find definitive answers, it turns out that our journey marks the beginning of continuous exploration. It's our first step in building a shared understanding among European youth workers about Civic Education. We plan to further explore the praxis and work of organisations in the project, acknowledging the plurality of approaches. Our survey showcased diverse forms of Civic Education even within our network, providing an opportunity for discussions on varied understandings and practices. There seems to be more than only one way to practise and understand Civic Education.

Civic Education is indispensable for cultivating the next generation of responsible and engaged citizens. By addressing challenges, incorporating innovative methodologies, and adapting to the evolving landscape, Civic Education can contribute significantly to building resilient, democratic societies. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, a robust Civic Education framework remains fundamental to the prosperity and stability of nations worldwide.

6. Resources

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