

Experiential reflections of online citizenship education: A qualitative research on project citizen

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Abstract

As an experiential model of civic learning, Project Citizen represents a contemporary approach to strengthening democratic citizenship. Despite its emphasis on participatory engagement, limited research has examined how pre-service teachers experience and interpret this model within higher education contexts, particularly in online settings. Addressing this gap, the present study explores participants' experiences, perceptions, and recommendations regarding the implementation of Project Citizen. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 70 pre-service teachers enrolled in a Human Rights and Citizenship Education course through reflective responses to open-ended questions. Content analysis was conducted using MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. The findings indicate that participation in the project fostered personal growth, enhanced social awareness, and strengthened collaboration skills. Participants reported a strong sense of achievement grounded in collective reasoning and group solidarity, while identifying challenges related to engagement with public policy processes and bureaucratic structures. The study concludes that Project Citizen effectively activates the experiential, critical, and participatory dimensions of civic education, contributing significantly to the pedagogical and social competencies of future educators.

Keywords: civic education; democratic participation; experiential learning; pre-service teachers; Project Citizen.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the concept of citizenship has begun to take on a new form due to the dynamics of digitalization, globalization, and social change. While the traditional understanding of citizenship offers a limited framework for voting and living by fulfilling passive responsibilities, today's democratic societies need a more active, participatory, and critical thinking individual profile (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). However, despite this need, both nationally and internationally, civic apathy is on the rise, especially among young people (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009). Declining levels of participation in governance and apathy towards public policies weaken democratic structures and threaten social cohesion. Recent research also shows that digital technologies simultaneously offer new avenues for civic engagement and pose challenges that must be integrated into civic education frameworks to maintain meaningful youth participation (Webster, 2025).

In this context, civic education is not only a subject but also a strategic area for sustaining democracy. The aim of civic education is not only to raise awareness of rights and obligations in individuals, but also to develop sensitivity to public problems, critical thinking, and solution-generating skills (Kerr, 1999; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). However, in practice, these goals often remain at the cognitive level, and students' experiential engagement with social issues is limited (Wood et al., 2018). Empirical reviews highlight that active, project-based, and participatory pedagogies in civic education significantly strengthen students' civic knowledge and dispositions more than traditional instruction alone (Inguaggiato et al., 2025).

At this point, alternative pedagogical models for citizenship education gain importance. Project Citizen, one of these models, is a participatory citizenship education program that involves students identifying public problems they observe in their environment, developing public policy proposals by conducting research on these problems, and presenting their proposals to relevant institutions (Center for Civic Education, 2003). This program offers a learning process in which not only theoretical knowledge but also democratic forms of agency are experienced. With its research and advocacy-based approach, it facilitates students' transition from "learning citizens" to "influencing citizens" (Levinson, 2012).

In the context of Turkiye, although there is an emphasis on "active citizenship" in citizenship education curricula, it is seen that there are limited examples that structure this goal in practice (Kuş & Mert, 2023). In particular, pre-service teachers' attitudes towards citizenship education are shaped by practice-based experiences, which empower them as future citizen educators (Biesta, 2011). However, it is often criticized that there is not enough space for such practices in teacher education programs (Hoskins & Kerr, 2012). Studies of students' perspectives on citizenship education reveal persistent gaps between formal curriculum intentions and students' real opportunities for active civic engagement, underscoring the need for richer practice-based experiences (Andreouli et al., 2025).

This study focuses on the experiences of university students within the scope of a course in which the "Project Citizen" application is conducted online; it aims to analyze what kind of contributions the application offers to students at individual, cognitive, affective, and social levels. The effects of the Project Citizen application were evaluated with a qualitative research approach through students' perceptions of the process, the difficulties they experienced, their definitions of success, and their suggestions. In this direction, the main question of the research is structured as follows: "What are the experiences, perceptions, and suggestions of university students participating in Project Citizen?"

1.1. Theoretical background

The concept of citizenship has evolved over the course of history and has become not only a form of political belonging but also a multi-layered structure that determines the depth and quality of the individual's relationship with public life. While Marshall & Bottomore (1987) defined citizenship in three basic dimensions: civil, political, and social, today this definition has been expanded with more inclusive and dynamic elements such as digital rights, environmental sensitivity, social equality, and public participation (Isin & Turner, 2007). This expanding meaning of citizenship has necessitated the restructuring of education systems.

Modern civic education is not limited to teaching the rights and obligations of the individual, but also aims to internalize democratic values, think critically, develop social justice sensitivity, and assume responsibility for social issues (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Osler & Starkey, 2006). However, these goals cannot be fully realized through traditional classroom-based, rote learning and exam-oriented practices (Jerome et al., 2024; Pérez-Rodríguez & Navarro-Medina, 2024). At this point, models that center on experiential and participatory learning come to the fore.

One of these models, Project Citizen, represents an innovative and action-based approach to civic education. This program, developed by the Center for Civic Education (2003), aims to enable students to identify public problems in their environment, develop public policies that can solve these problems, and present these proposals to the relevant authorities. Throughout the process, students have the opportunity to conduct research, negotiate, share responsibility in groups, and develop democratic debate skills. In this respect, Project Citizen offers a model of citizenship education that is not only knowledge-based but also attitude and behavior-based (Levinson, 2012).

The theoretical framework on which the project is based is closely related to John Dewey's (1930) experiential learning theory. According to Dewey (1930), democracy is learned through individuals' participation in the process of finding solutions to common problems; therefore, education should be a rehearsal of democratic life (Lind, 2023). In line with this understanding, Project Citizen provides a structured learning environment for students to recognize the problems in their environment, discuss these problems at the public policy level, and make suggestions. In addition, Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy approach strengthens the pedagogical infrastructure of this model. According to Freire (1970), students are not passive recipients of knowledge, but subjects who reproduce knowledge and contribute to social transformation.

Recent studies have shown that Project Citizen positively affects students' critical thinking, social responsibility, public consciousness, and ownership of democratic values (Torney-Purta et al, 2001; Chiodo & Martin, 2005; Owen, 2015), increased voting propensity (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2024; Morgan, 2016), significantly improved intellectual and participatory skills (Adha et al., 2018), and increased confidence in civic responsibility (Fry & Bentahar, 2013). Moreover, this practice enhances students' problem-solving and policy-making competencies even in different socio-cultural contexts, giving them the practice of being "influential" citizens.

1.2. Purpose of study

In the Turkish context, it is noteworthy that there are limited examples of this citizenship education program, and such action-based models have not yet become widespread, especially in the education of pre-service teachers. However, current social needs necessitate the dissemination of more participatory, multifaceted, and transformative models for citizenship education. In this context, especially with the

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interruption of face-to-face education during the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become imperative to adapt applications such as Project Citizen to the online environment, even though it does not directly overlap with the purpose of its emergence, and this has created a new learning experience area. The participation of pre-service teachers in these online experiential processes allowed them to test not only their pedagogical approaches in the context of civic education, but also their skills of collaboration, problem solving, and public policy making in a digital environment. The systematic collection of student opinions in this process provided an important data source for both evaluating the effectiveness of the online practice and understanding how action-based learning models are shaped in the digital context. At this point, it is extremely valuable for pre-service teachers to be introduced to such experiential practices at an early stage, even under extraordinary conditions, both for their personal development and for them to grow as competent individuals who will provide citizenship education in the future.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

This study was structured in the case study design, one of the qualitative research approaches. A case study is a design that aims to examine a specific phenomenon in depth within its context and seeks answers to the questions of “what”, “how,” and “why” (Yin, 2018). In this study, the realization of the citizenship education practice called “Project Citizen” online with university students and the reflections of this process on the participants' experiences are discussed. As the project was carried out within a structured course over a period of time, it constitutes an example of a holistic single case study in which contextual features are at the forefront.

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 70 pre-service teachers studying in different departments who took the “Elective: Human Rights and Citizenship Education” course offered at the faculty of education of a state university in Turkiye in the 2020-2021 academic year. No special sampling method was followed to ensure maximum diversity in the selection of participants; voluntary participation was ensured within the scope of the course. The data collection process was carried out after the course grades were entered, and the students were assured that it would not have any effect on the grade evaluation.

2.2. Data collection tool

In this study, a reflective form consisting of open-ended questions developed by the researchers and structured to obtain qualitative data was used to collect data. The form was designed to enable students who participated in Project Citizen to evaluate their experiences in a multidimensional way. The questions included in the form cover the students' individual reflections on the implementation process, the successes and challenges they encountered, their feedback to the project coordinator, and the suggestions they can offer to students who will take part in similar implementations in the future. In this way, not only the pedagogical effects of the process, but also the difficulties and areas for improvement in the context of implementation were tried to be revealed comprehensively.

In the development process of the data collection tool, a multi-stage method was followed to ensure content validity. In the first stage, the form was drafted and presented to three academicians who are experts in their fields. These experts were selected from the fields of social studies education, citizenship education, and qualitative research methods. The experts assessed the content validity of the form and provided detailed feedback on the relevance, clarity of wording, and relevance of each question to the research questions.

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In the second stage, a linguistic expert linguistically reviewed the form to ensure linguistic clarity and comprehensibility. This linguistic check aimed to support students' understanding of the questions and their ability to give coherent answers to the questions. In line with the suggestions of the linguist, some questions were modified in order to simplify and clarify the meaning.

In the last stage, a pilot study was conducted. In this regard, the reflective form was applied to a small group of students with similar characteristics to the study group, and one-to-one interviews were conducted with the students on what they understood from each item. This practice was carried out in order to evaluate the comprehensibility of the items at the student level and whether they produced the expected types of responses. In line with the findings obtained, necessary corrections were made to the form, and some questions were restructured or clarified by exemplifying them.

The final reflective form obtained at the end of this holistic process was made ready for use in the research as a qualitative data collection tool whose validity and reliability were supported in terms of content, language, and application. After the completion of the Project Citizen implementation, the forms were presented to the students online, digitally, and responses were collected voluntarily.

2.3. Procedure

The implementation process of this study was carried out entirely online using the university's Distance Education Center infrastructure due to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the start of the course semester, the content adapted to the Project Citizen program was prepared by us as researchers and uploaded to the university's digital learning management system. The implementation was planned to cover a total of 14 weeks during the spring semester.

In the first weeks, students were introduced to the basic conceptual framework, purpose, and implementation of the Project Citizen citizenship education program. In the following weeks, the four main stages of the model, namely (1) identifying social problems, (2) exploring policy alternatives, (3) developing a public policy proposal, and (4) developing an action plan, were addressed sequentially. Each stage was structured as a separate assignment, and students were asked to complete these assignments as individual or group work and upload them to the system within the specified deadline.

In order to increase the effectiveness of the process and support collaborative learning, students were asked to keep peer assessment diaries to monitor each other's contributions and provide feedback. At the end of the semester, students were asked to prepare a presentation file summarizing their work throughout the Project Citizen process and present it to the jury online. After the presentations were completed, students also uploaded their project files digitally to the system.

During the evaluation phase, a three-person jury was invited online. The jury members examined and scored the student presentations and the files containing the project outputs in line with the rubrics previously created by the researchers. After the implementation, students were asked to fill in a reflective evaluation form to gain a deeper understanding of their individual reflections. The analysis we present in this study is based on the qualitative analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions in these forms.

2.4. Data analysis technique

The collected data were analyzed with the content analysis technique using the qualitative data analysis program MaxQDA. Student responses were first categorized through open coding, and then similar themes were grouped under meta-themes. The coding process was carried out independently by two researchers, and the agreement between the codes was over 90%. The themes were supported by the students' statements and presented interpretatively.

The study was conducted after obtaining the necessary ethics committee permission. Participants were informed that they participated voluntarily, their identities were kept confidential, and the data were used only within the scope of this study. When participants' responses were directly quoted, they were indicated with code names (P12, P34).

3. RESULTS

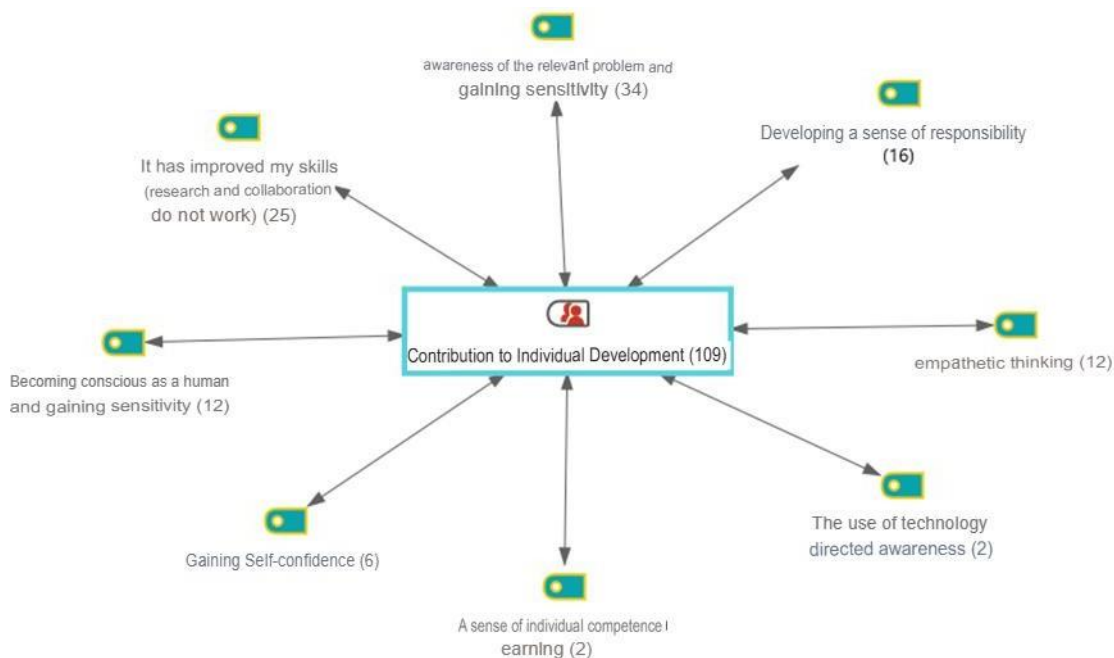
In this section, the meta-themes that emerged as a result of the analysis are supported by participant opinions and visual elements and presented as headings with academic comments.

3.1. Opinions on contribution to individual development

The majority of the participants stated that the project contributed significantly to their personal development (Figure 1). In the content analysis, the data collected under this theme were clustered around high-frequency codes, and sub- dimensions such as raising awareness, gaining self-confidence, social awareness, taking responsibility, and gaining research skills came to the fore.

Figure 1

Opinions on contribution to individual development



Most of the participants stated that the project process offered them a transformative experience, not only academically, but also by raising awareness of their social roles. One of the students expressed this situation in the following words: *“Thanks to the project, I realized that I am not only a citizen but also an individual who can produce solutions.”*

Similarly, many participants expressed that they became more sensitive to social problems and gained a more critical perspective on the effects of public policies on the lives of individuals. Accordingly, students not only acquired knowledge but also gained a sense of civic responsibility by actively participating in the process of developing policy proposals on a public issue. This is in line with the goals of active civic education as emphasized in the literature (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Another participant stated that the project improved her both personally and professionally as follows: *“In this process, both my self-confidence increased and I better understood how I can guide my students when I become a teacher.”* In addition, some students also pointed out that the group work carried out within the scope of the project developed skills such as sharing ideas and producing joint solutions. Especially in democratic discussion environments, it was emphasized that skills such as taking the floor, expressing opinions, and making compromises were developed.

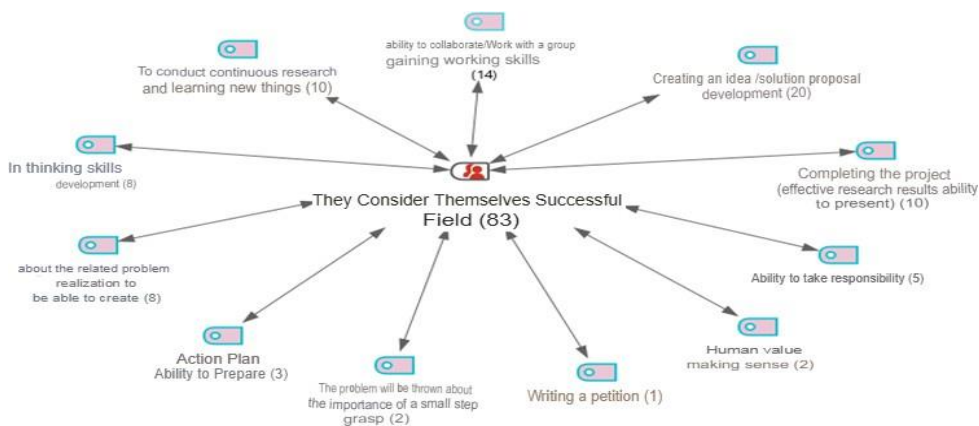
These findings reveal that the Project Citizen application contributed not only to cognitive but also to affective and social development. As a matter of fact, these achievements in the field of individual development play an important role in achieving the conscious, critical, and participatory individual profile targeted by citizenship education.

3.2. Opinions about their achievements

When the areas in which the participants felt most successful during the implementation process were analyzed, collaboration, idea development, solution proposal generation, and presentation skills came to the fore. In the analysis, these dimensions were coded with high frequencies; it was understood that students’ perceptions of success were shaped especially by in-group dynamics and creative solution processes (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Opinions about their success



Many students stated that they were most successful when collaborating during the project process, which demonstrated the importance attached to collective success rather than individual success. One of the participants summarized this situation with the following words: *“I felt really successful when we were able to listen to different ideas and find common ground.”*

In addition, the participants emphasized that they took an active role in the process of developing original ideas for the public problem identified within the scope of the project and that they used their analytical thinking skills effectively while producing solutions. This shows that students developed not only critical thinking skills but also an awareness of democratic participation. One student expressed it as follows: *“Creating our own suggestions for a solution after defining the problem was the most satisfying part of the process.”*

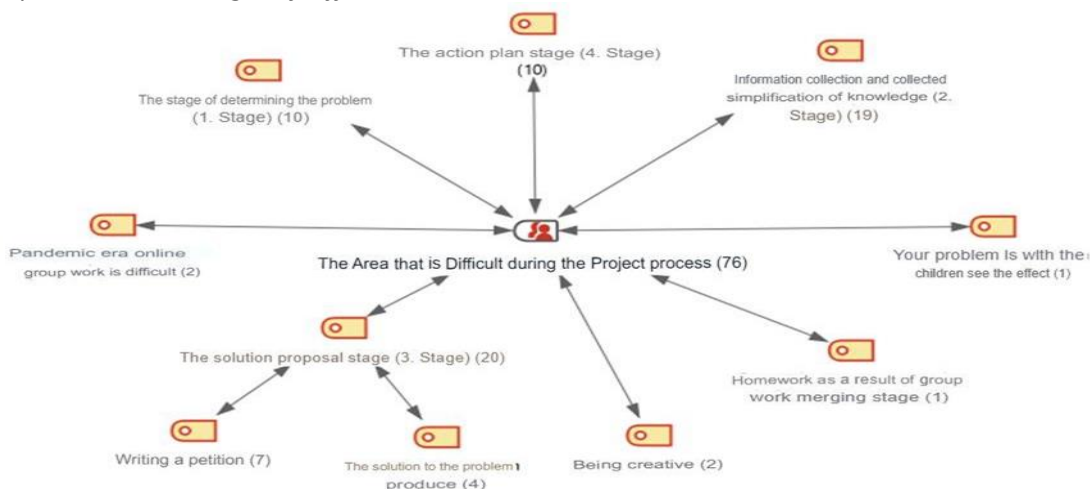
Some participants described the presentation phase as a success in terms of effectively conveying the knowledge they gained in the project. In particular, it was stated that their oral expression skills improved and they gained confidence in public speaking.

Overall, these findings suggest that Project Citizen was effective in helping students develop not only content knowledge but also process-oriented skills. The fact that the participants’ perceptions of success were shaped by a participatory-democratic approach rather than an individualistic one is in line with the values expected in effective citizenship education (Kerr, 1999; Hahn, 2010).

3.3. Opinions on the stages of difficulties

The data obtained from the participants within the scope of the implementation reveals that students experienced various difficulties at certain stages of the process (Figure 3). According to the content analysis, the most prominent areas of difficulty are centered around themes such as compiling existing information, formulating public policy proposals, ensuring coordination within the group, and communicating with official institutions.

Figure 3
Opinions on the stages of difficulties



In particular, gathering information and compiling existing data in a reliable manner is one of the challenges that students often face. Some of the participants emphasized that obtaining reliable and up-to-date data from publicly available sources is challenging. One student expressed this situation as follows: *“It was really difficult*

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to find data at the local level about the topic we chose. It took a lot of time to reach the sources.” Similarly, the process of public policy-making was considered an abstract and complex area for students. Participants stated that they did not feel sufficiently equipped to transform their solution proposals into concrete and implementable policies. In this context, another student stated the following: *“It was easy to find a solution to the issue, but it was difficult for us to put it into a public policy format.”*

This finding is in line with the findings of Öztürk et al. (2021). Öztürk et al. (2021) reported that, according to the participants, the most challenging conceptual part of the Project Citizen process was grasping the multicomponent nature of public policy. This supports previous research findings that emphasize the importance of developing critical thinking skills associated with understanding public policies (Fitzgerald, 2020). While observing the participants’ project preparations and presentations, it was observed that students mostly relied on their own life experiences when developing solutions and action plans. Reflecting these individual experiences in decision-making processes is considered a very valuable achievement in terms of citizenship education. In this context, it can be said that students rehearsed the skill of “self-governance” through Project Citizen and started to internalize responsible citizenship behaviors.

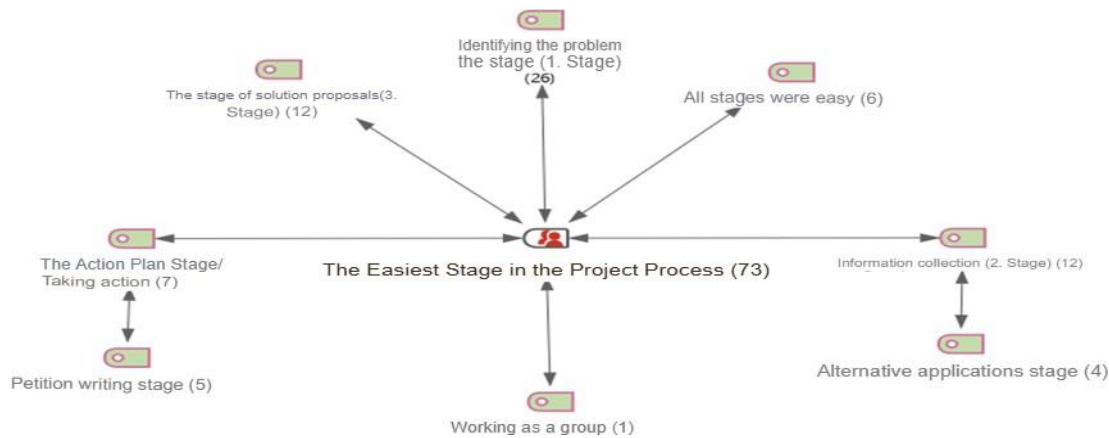
Some students also identified communication problems, conflicts of opinion, and unfair sharing of responsibilities as important challenges. This shows that democratic work habits are still in the developmental stage. In addition, certain student groups stated that they encountered bureaucratic obstacles and communication deficiencies in the process of presenting their proposed solution to the relevant public institutions or receiving information. This underlines the importance of real-life experiences that students encounter in practice in the context of citizenship education.

Overall, these findings suggest that Project Citizen tries to position students not only as information consumers but also as policy makers; however, this process requires pedagogical support and guidance at certain stages (Levinson, 2012; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

3.4. Opinions on easily completed stages

When the stages in the Project Citizen process in which the participants felt most comfortable and progressed the process smoothly are analyzed, especially the steps of problem identification, exchange of ideas within the group, and portfolio preparation come to the fore. Content analysis revealed that these stages were defined as “easy” with a high frequency.

Figure 4
Opinions on easily completed stages



Most of the students stated that they were already sensitive to the problems they observed in their environment, and therefore, they did not have difficulties at the beginning of the project process, i.e., in the problem identification part. This indicates that students’ ability to relate the problems they see in their environment to the public policy process has improved. One of the participants stated as follows: *“The problem identification phase was very easy because there were already things that bothered us in our environment.”*

Similarly, in-group interaction processes were also described as positive experiences by the students. In particular, it was frequently emphasized that the stages of exchanging ideas, brainstorming, and discussing issues were both enjoyable and motivating. One participant expressed this situation as follows: *“Encountering different ideas and forming a common idea was the easiest and most fun part of the job for me.”*

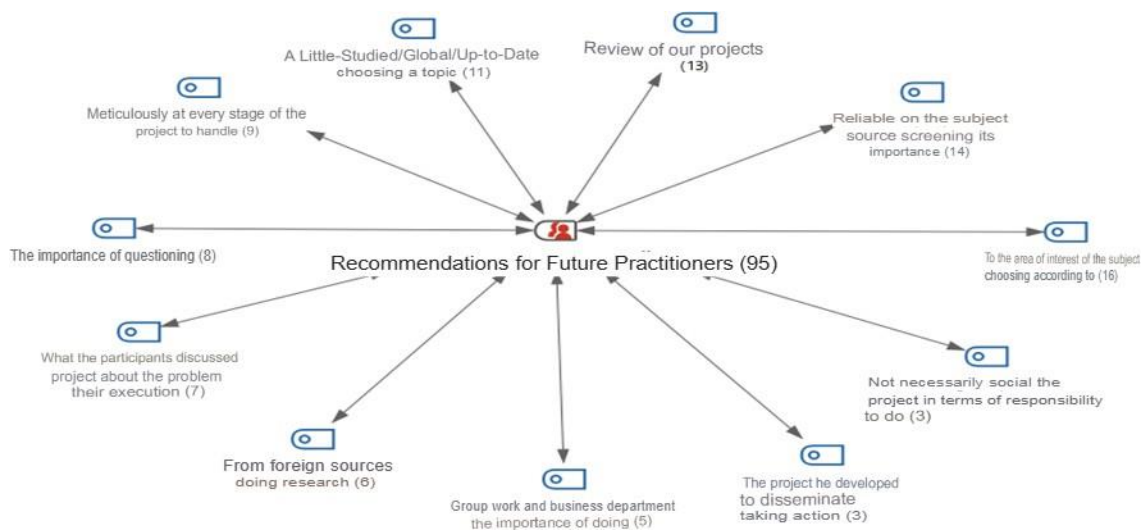
Some students also found the portfolio preparation process to be a constructive experience rather than a challenging one. The tangible product that emerged at the end of the process created a sense of satisfaction in the students and allowed them to review the process holistically.

These findings suggest that Project Citizen enabled the participants to be actively involved in the problem-solving cycle and that students were highly motivated, especially in the early stages of the project. At the same time, stages such as problem identification and idea development were found to be less challenging, suggesting that students’ level of environmental awareness and social sensitivity had improved (Galston, 2001).

3.5. Recommendations for future project implementers

When the participants’ suggestions for future practitioners regarding the Project Citizen process are analyzed, it is seen that topics such as determining a topic according to the area of interest, paying attention to group harmony, planning work, preliminary preparation, and fair sharing of responsibilities come to the fore. These suggestions of the students include both reflections of their experiences and efforts to make the process more efficient (Figure 5).

Figure 5
Recommendations for future project practitioners



The majority of the participants stated that working on a topic of interest made the process more meaningful and motivating. In this direction, one student made the following suggestion: *“The subject of the project should be something that the person really cares about and is interested in. This keeps the motivation high.”* (P5). Many students stated that one of the most important factors determining the success of group work was team cohesion. In order to prevent conflicts within the group and to ensure efficient cooperation, it was emphasized that the communication between members and the distribution of tasks should be determined in advance. In this context, another student gave the following advice: *“Choose your friends well; things go much easier when you complement each other.”*

Another frequently mentioned point among the recommendations is that each stage of the project should be carried out in a planned and systematic manner. Students stated that preliminary preparation at the beginning of the process would reduce uncertainties in the later stages. In addition, it was stated that sharing the workload fairly within the group would increase both project quality and participant satisfaction. This suggestion also shows that students internalized the principle of equality and justice, which is one of the fundamental values of citizenship education.

These findings reveal that students have developed a consciousness that can guide them not only as project coordinators but also as individuals who will participate in this process in the future. The points emphasized in the recommendations show that the participants developed critical awareness of the process and contributed to democratic knowledge sharing within the community by sharing their experiences (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Biesta, 2011).

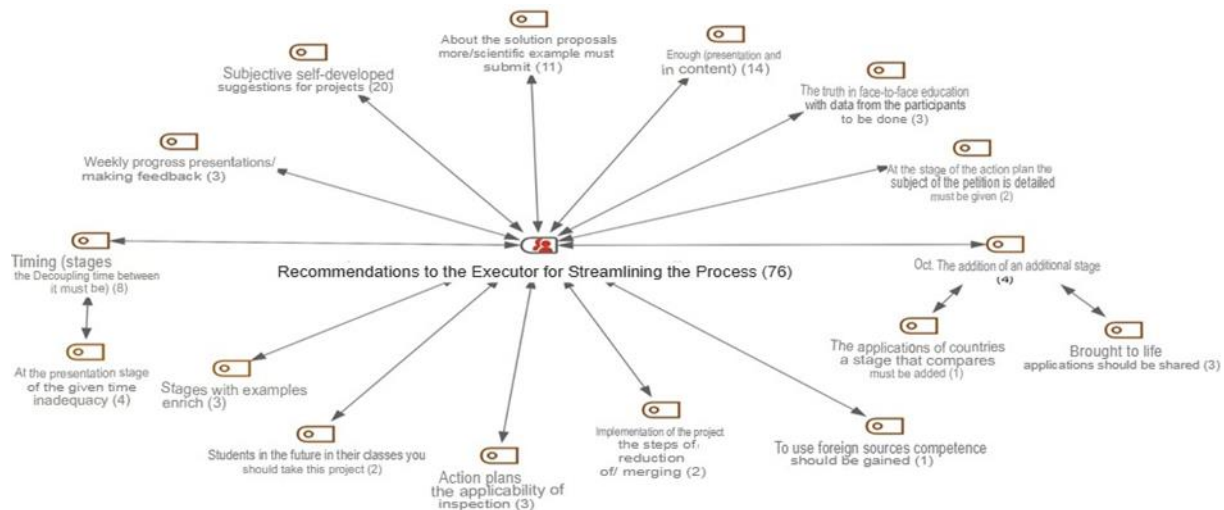
3.6. Suggestions for improvement to the project coordinator

When the participants’ suggestions for the faculty member conducting the Project Citizen implementation were analyzed, various expectations were expressed for structuring the project process in a more effective and supportive way. These suggestions center around themes such as making the guidance process more

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visible and directive, clarifying the process with sample projects, designing time management more flexibly, and providing more frequent and qualified feedback.

Figure 6
Suggestions for improvement to the project coordinator



Many students suggested that the project coordinator should provide more concrete guidance from the beginning of the process and make the subject more understandable with examples. One participant stated this situation with the following statements: *“If we had the chance to examine a sample study at the beginning of the project, we could better understand how to proceed.”*

A significant number of students also stated that they expected support in time management and that establishing clear calendars for certain stages would make the process more organized. At the same time, it was emphasized that the number of interim assessments should be increased and the feedback received from the lecturer at these points should be more structured.

Some students, on the other hand, stated that the resources used in the process were insufficient and that examples, especially related to public policies, should be increased. These suggestions indicate a clear need to strengthen learner support systems during the project process.

The suggestions from the students reveal that the role of the instructor in a participatory-based curriculum such as Project Citizen should be shaped as “facilitator”, “advisor”, and “guide”. In this context, the sustainability of democratic education is directly related to the quality of student-faculty interaction (Levine, 2007; Biesta, 2011).

4. DISCUSSION

This study reveals the transformations of the Project Citizen program implemented at the university level at the individual, social, and pedagogical levels of the participating pre-service teachers in a multidimensional way. The findings show that students internalized the concept of citizenship not only as a theoretical field of knowledge but also as a concrete experience and responsibility. The majority of the participants defined this practice as a learning process that directly contributed to their personal development. In particular, outputs such as increased self- confidence, social sensitivity, problem-solving skills, and the capacity to engage with

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public issues point to an experience in which citizenship is reproduced in a pedagogical context. This is in line with theoretical approaches suggesting that civic education is not only a cognitive transfer, but also a process that allows the individual to construct his/her “public self” (Biesta, 2011; Hoskins & Kerr, 2012).

The fact that activities involving collective action, such as group work, generating ideas, and developing solutions, were among the areas where participants felt most successful in the process shows that democratic participation is experienced at the micro level. This finding directly corresponds to the “participatory citizen” model in Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) citizenship typology. Students’ interaction with different opinions, negotiation of ideas, and involvement in joint decision-making processes are important not only for civic education but also for the internalization of democratic values. Indeed, John Dewey’s (1930) definition of democracy should be seen not only as a form of government but also as a way of life, and this practice of life can only be learned through education.

However, it was also observed that students had difficulties in gathering information, formulating public policy, and communicating with bureaucratic institutions. These challenges should be considered pedagogically as conflictual spaces where learning takes place. Levinson (2012) argues that civic education should provide individuals not only with knowledge but also with the ability to cope with public challenges, while Boyte (2007) argues that the challenges faced by young people play a decisive role in the construction of their civic capacities. In this context, such structural and contextual obstacles faced by the students became part of the learning process and transformed into experiential gains of high pedagogical value.

The stages that students reported to have completed with ease were mostly practice-based steps such as problem identification, exchange of ideas, and portfolio preparation. This ease is often because their awareness of the environment they live in overlaps with the project topics. As Torney-Purta et al. (2001) have shown, students have a high potential to analyze and find solutions to problems they observe in the local context. This clearly demonstrates the power of education’s connection with life and the impact of meaningful learning. According to Dewey’s (1930) experiential learning approach, knowledge can only be transformed into learning when the individual establishes a meaningful relationship with it; the participants of this study were able to establish this relationship directly with problems based on social realities.

Another noteworthy finding of the study is that the participants, after completing the process, made various suggestions to the students who will carry out this project in the future. These suggestions reveal that the students became not only learners but also subjectivized citizens who shared their experiences and contributed to public memory. Suggestions such as topic selection according to interest, team cohesion, and planned progress reflect the pedagogical gains of the process constructively. In this respect, the study can be considered as a reflection of the “active citizen” model defined by Hoskins and Mascherini (2009). Active citizenship is possible not only by participating but also by sharing the experience and making collective learning sustainable.

The suggestions for improvement presented to the project coordinator reveal the dialogic structure inherent in education. Students’ expectations for strengthening guidance processes, sharing exemplary projects, clarifying time planning, and providing more qualified feedback are not only pedagogical feedback but also a form of democratic intervention in the learning environment. This can be seen as a practical reflection of Freire’s (1970) conception of “dialogic learning”. The student is the subject not only of what is learned but also of the learning process.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study reveals that the Project Citizen implementation created an effective learning process at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. It was observed that the participants developed their civic knowledge, values, and skills in a multidimensional way and gained both individual awareness and social responsibility awareness in this process. These findings show that citizenship education gains meaning not only in the classroom but also through experiential relationships with real-life contexts. For this reason, it is essential to include more action-based, participatory, and problem-based learning practices in teacher training programs, not only theoretical ones. Because citizenship is a field of skills based not only on knowledge but also on action, interaction, and co-production.

In line with the findings of this study, it is clear that civic education should be structured in more participatory, experiential, and transformative ways. Especially in teacher training programs, practice models that not only provide students with knowledge but also allow them to experience democratic practices should be expanded. Programs like Project Citizen support pre-service teachers to develop sensitivity to social problems, participate in public policy-making processes, and internalize democratic cooperation skills. Accordingly, problem-based, group-based, and locally relevant content should be prioritized in civic education courses at universities.

The online implementation of the Project Citizen program has some significant advantages and disadvantages, both pedagogically and technologically. The first advantage is increased accessibility. Thanks to the online implementation, students from different geographical regions, especially those living in rural or remote areas, have the opportunity to participate in the program on equal terms. This is an important development that supports equal opportunity in education. In addition, this process, which is realized through digital platforms, contributes to the development of students' skills such as conducting online research, preparing digital presentations, and sharing ideas in virtual meetings. In this respect, online practice also helps students to acquire 21st-century skills. At the same time, the flexibility offered by online environments allows students to progress according to their own learning pace and offers the opportunity to work independently of time and space.

However, online applications also have some disadvantages. First of all, the limited face-to-face interaction may negatively affect the social interaction and collaboration that students experience during group work. This may weaken the naturalness and vitality of democratic discussion environments. In addition, inequalities in access to technology may prevent some students from fully participating in the process. Lack of technical infrastructure, connectivity problems, and differences in digital proficiency levels can hinder the process. Students' difficulty in maintaining their motivation and limited teacher guidance are among the other factors that reduce the effectiveness of the online application. Thus, the online Project Citizen implementation offers opportunities but also pedagogical and technological risks that need to be carefully planned.

A more structured guidance process by the project implementers, providing students with case studies, resources on public policy writing, and feedback mechanisms, would increase the effectiveness of the process. In addition, pedagogical adjustments such as interest-based topic selection and group cohesion should be encouraged to sustain students' active participation in the project process. Education policy makers should ensure that citizenship education is supported by holistic models that include not only cognitive but also behavioral and affective dimensions. In this context, environments where prospective teachers can analyze

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public problems, propose solutions, and experience democratic participation practices should be the primary goal of educational policies.

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