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## DEMOCRATIC CULTURE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND THE POTENTIAL OF PLAY-BASED ACTIVITIES IN CURRICULAR AND EXTRACURRICULAR CONTEXTS

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**Abstract.** Democratic culture is grounded in citizens' active participation, while in schools it develops through dialogue, tolerance, cooperation, and problem solving. This study aimed to assess the extent of students' attitudes toward democratic culture and identify play-based activities that could enhance it in curricular and extracurricular settings. A specially designed questionnaire with 10 statements, based on the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, was used. Results show that students highly value their abilities and personal rights but perceive limited respect for diverse opinions and few opportunities for participation in school life. The most notable differences appeared across school years, while demographic factors and elective courses showed no significant effect. The discussion emphasizes that play-based activities significantly contribute to building competences for democratic culture. Continuous teacher training, mentorship, and sharing of good practices are essential for sustaining these initiatives and empowering students' democratic engagement. Findings highlight the importance of developing strategies that promote participation, inclusion and tolerance in school communities, as well as further exploration of factors influencing students' democratic attitudes.

**Key words:** democratic culture, competences for democratic culture, students' attitudes toward democratic culture, play-based activities, civic education

### 1. Introduction

Democratic culture presents one of the key pillars of the contemporary society, while school, as a primary educational institution, plays an indispensable role in its nourishment and impact on the future generations. Besides formal education and the acquisition of factual knowledge, students are expected to develop a set of attitudes, values and behaviours which will enable them to actively participate in community life (Council of Europe, 2016). The process of learning democracy does not only occur through curricular content, but also through everyday classroom practices, decision making processes, interpersonal interactions, and the acceptance of diverse opinions.

In the educational context, democratic culture is reflected in students' readiness for dialogue, tolerance, cooperation and collaborative problem-solving. When students have a

chance to participate in decision making that affects them, their sense of responsibility increases, and with it, the trust in democratic processes and institutions (Torney-Purta, 2002). On the contrary, situations in which students' voices are undermined can lead to apathy and a reduces interest in participation and engagement in social issues (Hoskins et al., 2012). Dewey (1916; 2004) emphasizes that education in the democratic spirit entails the active involvement of students in the shared life of the school, through which theoretical values are translated into practical competences and behaviours. In the Serbian educational system, similar to most of European ones, schools have an obligation to motivate both academic knowledge and civic competences in youth. However, research (Pantić & Čekić Marković, 2012; Stanković, 2018) indicates that there is a discrepancy between declarative commitment to democracy and its consistent application in practice. Moreover, as one of the cross-curricular competences that appropriately prepares students for active participation in society and lifelong learning is "Responsible participation in a democratic society" (Standardi opštih međupredmetnih kompetencija za kraj srednjeg obrazovanja, 2013). This competence clearly presents the importance of implementing democratic culture in the school community in order to enhance the community as a whole.

Democracy implies the rule of the people and it is encompassed on institutions that ensure free and fair elections, the rule of the majority and the accountability of those in power. However, institutions on their own are not sufficient if the citizens do not cultivate democratic culture and do not practice democratic values. Active civic participation, respect for diverse opinions, and intercultural dialogue are key factors for the functioning of a democratic society.

In culturally diverse communities, intercultural dialogue presents a foundation for mutual understanding and the equal participation of all citizens in decision-making processes. It enables different perspectives and experiences to be acknowledged by preserving human dignity, equality, and the rights of every individual to be preserved. Respecting the interlocutors is the key to this process - without it, communication is easily transformed into imposition of attitudes or confrontation, instead of open and constructive opinion exchange (Council of Europe, 2018). Democracy, for this reason, needs to guarantee the role of the institutions that protect the rights and freedoms of both the majority and the minority because the viewpoint of the minority enriches public debate and enhance the quality of the collective decisions.

Education plays a particularly important role in the development of democratic and intercultural competences. They are not innate, but are acquired through learning, practical activities and everyday interactions. Through the educational process, students develop the ability to become active citizens, to recognize and respect human rights, dignity and the diversity of different people, as well as to participate in democratic processes with self-confidence and responsibility (Council of Europe, 2018).

The core values of democracy, which should be nourished and reinforced through education, encompass public decision-making, expressing and listening to diverse opinions, peaceful conflict resolution, respect for majority decisions while protecting the rights of the minority, limiting the potential excessive influence of the majority through constitutions and laws and continual adherence to the rule of law. These values do not only strengthen democracy in society, but also shape students into citizens capable of actively and thoughtfully contributing to their society (Council of Europe, 2018).

## **2. The Role of Schools and the Teaching Process in the Development of Democratic Culture**

The development of democratic culture in the educational system represents one of the key challenges in contemporary society. The school as an institution is not only a place for the transmission of knowledge, but also a place where values, attitudes and skills necessary for active and responsible participation in the social life are developed. As Biesta (2011) points out, democracy in schools is transmitted in two ways: through the formal curriculum, which includes topics about democratic institutions and rights; and through "hidden" curriculum, reflected in the ways in which everyday communication and conflict resolution are held. Civic education is directly taught to the active citizens, while religious education can help moral foundations and a value framework which supports democratic principles being developed (Keating & Janmaat, 2016). However, if participatory teaching methods are not applied, there is a risk that knowledge stays on the theoretical level without advancing in practical skills (Hoskins et al., 2012).

An additional framework for understanding school's role in the development of democratic culture is viewed through general cross-curricular competences, defined as a set of key knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students develop throughout the whole educational process. "Responsible participation in a Democratic Society" is a particularly important competence. It implies the students' readiness to participate in decision-making, to critically engage with and reflect upon social processes, to respect diversity, and actively contribute to the society (Zavod za vrednovanje kvaliteta obrazovanja i vaspitanja, 2013). Moreover, it links academic knowledge with practical real-life situations and helps empower the youth for active civic duties and lifelong learning. In this way, cross-curricular competences do not remain merely an abstract concept but become a framework for action in fostering democratic culture within school context.

The joint program of the European Union and The Council of Europe: Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye III (2023–2026) in Serbia, is being implemented as the national project "Quality Education for All". The aim of this project is improving the quality of education by fostering democratic culture, combating discrimination, and encouraging implementing inclusions at schools. This project is carried out with the support of the Ministry of Education, The Institute for the Improvement of Education, The Institute for the Evaluation of Education Quality and other educational institutions.

The schools, which are directly involved in the implementation of this project, have a special role in this process. One of them is the Medical High School "7th April" in Novi Sad. This school has been participating in the project for four consecutive school years, and for the 2023/2024 academic year chose four priority competences: 1 Openness to other cultures, beliefs, and practices; 2 Autonomous learning skills; 3 Knowledge and critical understanding of oneself; and 4 Self-efficacy Sadu .

Medical school "7 April" is distinguished by its multicultural character because it is unique in Novi Sad for its lessons being held in three languages: Serbian, Hungarian and Slovakian. This fact does not only enable the perseveration of cultural diversity but also actively fosters dialogues, tolerance, and cooperation among students of different cultural and linguistic identities. The specific objectives implemented within school activities are: enhancing an intercultural and humane school climate, empowering students and teachers for autonomous and lifelong learning, developing skills for the assessment of one's own work and actions, as well as improving the cooperation between teachers, students, school administration, parents, and the local community, with an emphasis on mental health preservation as a shared responsibility.

The school's participation in the project presents a way in which the teaching process may become a space for the development of democratic culture. Teachers, by implementing innovative methods and intercultural approaches, empower students to engage in critical thinking, active participation in society and the development of personal responsibility.

Students, on the other hand, gain experiences which make them more open to diversity and better prepared for cooperation within the community.

National and international projects like "Quality Education for All" and Horizontal Facility III, can be more than formal initiatives and have the potential to foster concrete changes within schools.

### **3. Play-based Activities in Democratic Education**

Games that serve as a method of working with students and experiential activities that foster creative thinking, cooperation, and critical thinking have a particular value in democratic education. Simulations, role-playing, team tasks, and educational games put students in a position to actively negotiate, make decisions, and respect diverse perspectives (Gee, 2003; Hahn, 1998). In this way, democracy stops being an abstract idea and becomes a personal experience (Brougère, 1999). This study investigates the ways in which different play-based activities help develop elements of democratic culture in students, relying on the theoretical foundations of democracy in education (Dewey, 1916; 2004; Hahn, 1998) and the concept of "democracy through play" (Brougère, 1999). In the line with this, the work of Nino Jojue (2022) about non-formal education emphasizes the importance of activities that stand out of the classical teaching framework and which fosters the development of democratic culture and intercultural competences among students. When we define play in the teaching process as a form, technique or a method of work, it can become a key tool for non-formal learning. The author Jojua (2022) provides practical examples such as film discussions, group projects, simulations and debates, free choice of topics for work, and creative workshops; which enable students to engage actively, exercise freedom of choice, and collaborate with one another. Through these activities, students learn how to express their opinions, listen to others, develop empathy and tolerance, which directly contributes to the creation of a democratic surrounding in the classroom. These examples show how play and non-formal education can become an integral part of teaching, transforming the classroom into a space where students, through active experimenting and creativity, develop skills for life in a democratic society (Jojua, 2022).

Experiential learning through interactive methods, such as: forum theatre, role-playing, simulations, cooperative tasks and joint decision-making projects, is shown as an especially effective approach for the development of civic competences. This approach does not only bring the opportunity to learn about democratic values, but also to directly experience them and to examine them through personal engagement and reflexion. Forum theatre, part of Boal's (1993) concept of the Theatre of the Oppressed, enables students to present a situation where discrimination or peer violence is set, while the audience can suggest a change in the outcome thereby fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a sense of personal responsibility in problem solving (Prentki & Preston, 2009). Role-playing games (Livingston, 2004a) enable students to take different social perspectives, fostering an understanding of the complexity of social relationships and the ability to respect someone else's point of view. Election simulations and debates, based on current school or social issues, develop argumentation skills, decision-making, and constructive disagreement (Torney-Purta et al., 2001); while cooperative tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) strengthen solidarity, mutual respect, and a sense of shared responsibility. Activities such as the "Class Constitution" or "Class contract" strengthen a culture of agreement and fairness (Avery, 2002), while the simulation of "Democratic Country" (Print & Lange, 2012) provides students with a realistic insight into the functioning of social systems, resource management, and collective decision-making.

Besides the abovementioned methods, a special place in education is given to play-based activities which integrate elements of learning and fun allowing students to actively

explore social processes and develop civic action skills. Games with rules and educational simulations enable students to experiment with different scenarios and decision-making in a safe environment, by which motivation, engagement and ability to reflect on personal actions increase (Gee, 2003; Kafai & Burke, 2015). Role-playing games and drama activities, including sociodrama techniques, help students develop empathy, social sensitivity, and the ability to understand perspectives (Hahn, 1998; Moreno, 1946). Moreover, structured games and team activities enable students to learn about collective decision-making, respect for diversity, and conflict resolution, which are key elements of democratic culture (Livingston, 2004b; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

Nino Jojue's work (2022) additionally emphasises the importance of non-formal education and activities which stand out of the classical teaching framework, such as film discussions, group projects, simulations, debates, free choice of topics, and creative workshops. Through these activities, students develop skills in expressing their opinions, listening to others, empathy and tolerance, by which the classroom transforms into a space for active experimentation, creative engagement, as well as practical learning of democratic values; which directly contributes to shaping competent, critically minded, and socially engaged citizens.

All the aforementioned methods confirm that experiential learning and play-based activities present a significant contribution to the development of democratic culture in the educational context. Such approaches enable students not only to theoretically adopt democratic values but also to practically test them in controlled and safe conditions. In this way, the development of empathy, critical thinking, social sensitivity, and responsible participation in collective decision-making are fostered, which are key competences of active citizenship. The results of this paper indicate that the integration of experiential and play-based methods into teaching contributes to forming students into conscious and engaged members of a democratic society.

#### **4. Methodology**

In order to determine attitudes toward democratic culture, and consequently, the influences of play-based activities that foster it, a study in the Medical school "7 April" in Novi Sad was conducted as an activity of the project "Quality Education for All".

The general aim of the study was to determine the extent to which the students express attitudes toward democratic culture and to examine which play-based activities can be implemented in curricular and extracurricular activities in order to additionally foster democratic culture in schools. The research tasks were: (1) To examine students' attitudes toward the fundamental democratic values (freedom, equality, rights, dignity); (2) To determine the extent to which students observe the respect for diverse opinions in school and family contexts; (3) To assess how students estimate their own involvement in collective activities and their willingness to cooperate; (4) To analyse the extent to which students believe in their own abilities and independently take action to fulfil their goals; (5) To examine students' attitudes toward peaceful conflict resolution and effective communication and (6) To identify if there are any differences in students' attitudes toward democratic culture in relation to the school year that they are in, the place they come from, and the elective course (civic education or religious education).

For this purpose, a special questionnaire was designed based on the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018)*.

In the Medical school "7 April" in Novi Sad, Serbia, total of 686 students (201 first grade, 193 second grade, 133 third grade and 157 fourth grade) participated in the study by responding to ten questions via a Google questionnaire using a 1 to 4 rating scale. The research did not involve an experimental intervention in which specific play-based activities were systematically introduced and measured. Instead, the study aimed to examine students' attitudes toward democratic culture and to explore which play-based activities could be

implemented within curricular and extracurricular contexts to further foster these competences.

Play-based activities were therefore discussed at the conceptual and practical level as recommended pedagogical approaches, rather than being implemented as a controlled intervention during the research period. The manuscript will be revised to clarify this aspect of the research design and to avoid any possible ambiguity regarding the measurement of impact.

## 5. The Results

Initially, the questionnaire responses were summed up in order to determine the total score. After this process, ANOVA analysis and independent-samples t-tests were done. This research instrument was newly constructed and used for the first time. In addition to the aforementioned analyses, frequencies for grouped variables were calculated and descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were computed for individual items, as well as for the total score in relation to the grouping variables (school year, the place students come from, and the elective course).

The sample characteristic, i.e., frequencies in relation to the variables: school year, the place students come from, and the elective course the student attends throughout the school education, are shown in the tables: Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 1. Sample characteristics in relation to the variable of school year (first/second/third/fourth year)

School year	Frequency	Percents	Valid percents
first	201	29.3	29.4
second	193	28.1	28.2
third	133	19.4	19.4
fourth	157	22.9	23.0
Total	686	99.7	100.0
Missing data	2	.3	
Total number of respondents	686	100.0	

Table 2. Sample characteristics in relation to the demographic variable- the place students come from (city/village)

The place students come from	Frequencies	Percents	Valid percents
city	377	55.0	55.4
village	304	44.3	44.6
Total	681	99.3	100
Missing data	5	.7	
Total number of respondents	686	100.0	

Table 3. Sample characteristics in relation to elective course that the student attends (civic education or religious education)

Elective course	Frequency	Percents	Valid percents
Civic education	235	34.3	34.4
Religious education	448	65.3	65.6
Total	683	99.6	100.0
Missing data	3	.4	
Total number of respondents	686	100.0	

The average total score in the questionnaire that measures students' attitudes toward democratic culture for the entire sample was 32,82, with a theoretical minimum of 10 and maximum score of 40. According to the obtained results, it can be concluded that students of the medical school "7 April" highly express attitudes toward democracy (Table 4).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics: mean and standard deviation of the scores on the questionnaire measuring attitudes toward democratic culture (for the entire sample)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Attitudes about democratic culture	10	40	32.82	6.62
Valid N				

The highest attitudes among students are the ones related to beliefs about personal development rights, thus the items “I believe in my own abilities and take the necessary steps in order to achieve specific goals” and “I consider that I exercise my right to personal development” have the highest mean scores or, in other words, students estimate these items as highly characteristic of themselves. On the other hand, the lowest mean score or the least expressed attitude has the item “I notice that in my surrounding (class, school) diverse opinions respected and everyone’s voice is heard” in which students assess the possibility for their participation in school, as well as tolerance to diversity and respect for differing viewpoints, low (Table 4a).

Table 4a descriptive statistics: mean and standard deviation for responses for individual items on the questionnaire (N=686).

	N	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I agree with the statement that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.	686	3.38	.99
2. I believe that I exercise my right to access important and complete information.	686	3.4	.89
3. I believe that I exercise my right to personal development.	686	<b>3.58</b>	.83
4. I believe that I exercise my right to choose freely in every situation.	686	3.25	1.00
5. I notice that in my surrounding (class, school) diverse opinions are respected and everyone’s voice is heard.	686	<b>2.72</b>	1.01
6. I notice that in my family diverse opinions are respected and everyone’s voice is heard.	686	3.27	.98

7. I successfully participate in joint students activities, and school tasks, and I encourage others to cooperate.	686	3.17	.92
8. I believe in my own abilities and I take the necessary steps in order to achieve specific goals.	686	<b>3.46</b>	.83
9. I try my best to resolve conflicts in a peaceful way and find the best possible solution while cooperating with the other party	686	3.26	.933
10. I effectively communicate with others and I am able to critically think through about the messages that I exchange.	686	3.33	.875
Valid N (listwise)	686		

For the purpose of assessing the differences in the level of the expression of the attitude about the democratic culture, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used, and there is a statistically significant difference in the way the students are expressing their attitudes in relation to the school year the students are attending (Table 5). In Table 6, mean of the score in the questionnaire that measures attitudes toward democratic culture is shown and it can be concluded that these attitudes are the most expressed in the first grade, while they are the least expressed in the second grade. The range of responses for all items was from 1 to 4.

Tabel 5. Descriptive statistics- mean in the level of expression of the attitudes toward democratic culture in relations to the school year that the students are attending

What School year are you in?	Mean	N	Standard deviation
<b>first</b>	<b>33.79</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>6.86</b>
<b>second</b>	<b>31.69</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>6.58</b>
third	32.64	133	6.15
fourth	33.15	157	6.58
Total	32.83	684	6.624

When the differences in the level of the expression of the attitudes toward the democratic culture in relation to the variables, the place that the students come from, and the elective course the student attends throughout the school education are considered, no statistically important differences were found (Table 8 and Table 10).

A difference is found that the youth from the urban environment exhibit lower levels of attitudes toward democratic culture (Table 7.) However, this difference is not statistically significant. Moreover, the youth that attend elective course- civic education exhibit stronger attitudes in this regard than the students that attend the elective course religious education (Table 9), still, it needs to be taken into account that this difference is also not statistically significant. Regarding the mentioned, the differences in these aspects should be further examined in the future research.

Tabel 6. Test of the important differences in the level of the expression of the attitude about the democratic culture in relations to the school year the student is attending variable (first\second\third\fourth).

The source of variability	Sums of squares	Degrees of freedom	AS squares	F	Significance level
Between groups	455.41	3	151.8	3.49	<b>.01</b>
In the groups	29520.91	680	43.41		
Total	29976.32	683			

Table 7. and table 9. Descriptive statistics- Mean scores of attitudes toward democratic culture in relation to the place the students come from (urban environment\rural environment) and Descriptive statistics- Mean scores of attitudes toward democratic culture in relation to the elective course (civic education\rreligious education).

	2. Where do you live?	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard AS	mistake
Attitudes toward the democratic culture	in urban environment	377	32.45	7.07	.364	
	in rural environment	304	33.28	6.01	.344	
	3. In school I attend:	N	Mean	Standard deviation		
Attitudes toward the democratic culture	Civic education	235	33.0936	6.64031		
	Religious education	448	32.7121	6.61465		

Table 8. and table 10. Significance test of differences in the expression of attitudes toward democratic culture in relation to the place the student comes from (urban environment\rural environment) and Significance test of differences in the expression of attitudes toward democratic culture in relation to the elective course (civic education\rreligious education)

	F	Significance level	t	Degrees of freedom	Significance level (2-way)	The difference AS
Attitudes toward the democratic culture	13.17	.10	-1.62	679	.10	-.82
		.09	-1.65	677.10	.09	-.82
	F	Degrees of freedom	Degrees of freedom	Degrees of freedom (2-way)	The difference AS	
Attitudes toward the democratic culture	.008	.927	.71	681	.47	.38
			.71	473.79	.47	.38

## 6. Discussion

In this study, a conclusion is made that participatory methods in practice have a positive influence that is measured through students' self-reported assessments of competences for democratic culture using a structured questionnaire. On the development of competences for democratic culture, and play-based activities are presented as an example of these activities.

From the completed questionnaire that measures attitudes toward democratic culture, it can be concluded that in students from the Medical school "7 April" these attitudes are highly expressed (Table 4). Moreover, the most strongly expressed attitudes in students

are the ones that are connected to the beliefs about personal development rights, thus, items 8. "I believe in my own abilities and I take the necessary steps in order to achieve specific goals." and "I believe that I exercise my right to choose freely in every situation." have the highest mean scores, or in other words, students estimate these items as highly characteristic of themselves. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that students are well informed what their democratic rights are, and that they are prepared to, through these rights, accomplish specific goals within the school community. A play-based activity such as Forum Theatre had a positive influence for the development of a sense of personal responsibility for problem-solving, while the simulation "Democratic Country" gave the students a realistic insight into the functioning of social systems, resource management, and collective decision-making, enabling them to take the necessary steps for accomplishing their goals. The impact of the play-based activities (Forum Theatre and the simulation "Democratic Country") was not measured using a formal pre-test/post-test experimental design. A baseline measurement prior to the introduction of these activities was not conducted in the form of a standardized quantitative assessment.

Instead, the influence of the activities was evaluated through students' self-reported perceptions collected via the structured questionnaire based on the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018). The conclusions regarding their positive influence were drawn from students' expressed attitudes, reflections, and perceived development of competences related to responsibility, participation, and democratic decision-making.

Therefore, the findings indicate an association between participation in play-based activities and the development of democratic competences; however, causal claims are made with caution, as the research design did not include a controlled baseline measurement. This limitation will be explicitly clarified in the revised version of the manuscript.

On the other hand, the lowest mean score, indicating the least expressed attitude, has the item "I notice that in my surrounding (class, school) diverse opinions are respected and everyone's voice is heard"; in which students estimate that the opportunities for their participation in school, as well as tolerance for diversity and respect for differing viewpoints (Table 4a). For this reason, a more frequent implementation of play-based activities that promote tolerance and empathy, such as Forum Theatre, as well as Role-playing games, through which students develop an understanding of the complexity of the social relationships and the ability to respect other's perspectives is needed. Additionally, the activity "Cooperative tasks" fosters solidarity, respect and a sense of shared responsibility through the assumption of new roles. The recommendation would be that the proposed activities become more frequently implemented within the teaching process. This construct was measured. It was assessed using a structured questionnaire based on a Likert scale (The instrument included items related to students' perceptions of: respect for diverse opinions within the classroom and school environment, opportunities for participation and expression of personal viewpoints, experiences of tolerance and acknowledgment of different perspectives and the overall climate of inclusion and mutual respect.

The lowest mean score on the item concerning recognition and respect for diverse opinions (see Table 8 and 10) indicates that students perceive limited opportunities for participation and expression of differing viewpoints. These findings are derived from the administered instrument and highlight areas for pedagogical improvement, particularly through interventions that foster tolerance, empathy, and cooperative learning.

This study also focuses on the variables: the school year that students are in, the place the students come from and the elective course that students attend throughout the school year. A statistically significant difference in students' attitudes toward democratic culture in relation to the school year the students are in is noted, while with the variables the place the students come from and elective course a statistically important difference was not found.

Classroom experience clearly demonstrates that participatory and experiential methods are not only a part of pedagogical trends, but a crucial bridge between theory and practice, or more clearly, between learning and life. Non-formal education, which presents play-based activities as teaching techniques, helps students to express their opinions, listen to others, and develop empathy and tolerance which directly helps building a democratic surrounding in the classroom by fostering civic competences, taking on responsibility and revealing the power of collective actions. "Responsible Participation in a Democratic Society" represents an interdisciplinary competence that we recognize as the readiness of the students to participate in democratic decision-making through a set of key knowledge, skills and attitudes developed throughout the entire educational process. The school needs to give the students the incentive to participate and acquire specific knowledge in order to further motivate them in democratic activities. Play-based activities represent an appropriate pedagogical tool for transforming democracy from an abstract idea into a personal experience. Forum Theatre (Theatre of the Oppressed) has presented itself as an effective method in civic education classes, class meetings and interdisciplinary topics such as violence prevention. The students in this method step into someone else's shoes, view problems from different angles and find constructive solutions, while the teacher becomes the facilitator and not the lecturer. Role-playing games enable the students to feel the freedom to act out different social roles-from councillor to migrant, and in that way learn how the theoretical knowledge intervenes with real-life situations; while the teacher is given a valuable insight into their levels of empathy and capacity for dialogue. Simulations of elections and debates, particularly in subjects such as civic education, history, and sociology, not only develop students' argumentation skills and decision-making, but they also awaken the feeling in students that their opinion really changes the course of events. Cooperative games and tasks teach them solidarity and shared responsibility, while providing the teachers with insights into team dynamics and natural leadership potential. By creating "Class Constitution" or "Class Contract", learning about rules is transformed into a process of negotiation and compromise, while the "Democratic Country" opens the door to practical insights of social systems and resource management. When these methods become a part of everyday teaching, the school becomes a place where active and responsible citizens are shaped, prepared to participate in the community.

However, it is important to emphasise pedagogical implications – it is necessary to continuously support teachers through trainings, mentorship and the exchange of best practice examples, in order to reach the full potential and be meaningful. They would feel more confident in the facilitator role and master techniques for leading a dialogue and managing group dynamics. Such support enhances their teaching practice and makes the democratic culture in the classroom become a reality rather than merely another teaching topic

## **7. Conclusion**

The results of this study indicate that play-based activities contribute a great deal to the development of democratic culture, thus making students active participants not only in school communities but also in the whole society. Democratic culture presents a foundation for the modern society, and schools, by giving students opportunities to actively participate in school processes, fosters trust in democratic processes and institutions. By actively participating in these processes, the development of empathy, critical thinking, social awareness, and responsible participation in the collective decision-making are encouraged. These are the key competences for active citizenship. Interdisciplinary competences, especially the competence of "Responsible Participation in a Democratic Society", adequately prepare students for active participation in society and lifelong learning. Through non-formal education, key competences for the development of democratic culture are significantly fostered.

In this study, it was observed that demographic characteristics, as well as the elective course attended by the students, did not have a statistically important impact on the expression of attitudes toward democratic culture; while a statistically significant difference in these attitudes was noted in relation to the school year that the students are in. It is recommended, for this reason, for the differences to be further examined in future research. This study highlights that the lowest mean score was presented for the item "I notice that in my surrounding (class, school) diverse opinions are respected and everyone's voice is heard"; in which students estimate that the opportunity for their participation in school, as well as tolerance for diversity and respect for different viewpoints is low. This indicates that more frequent implementation of the play-based activities that promote tolerance and empathy, as well as developing an understanding of the complexity of social relations and the ability to respect other people's opinions, is needed in order to work on increasing tolerance and accepting differences.

Furthermore, a pedagogical implication is for the schools to continuously encourage teachers to implement play-based activities in the teaching process, because this study has established that they present the foundation for high-quality and purposeful education. A wide range of practical approaches can meaningfully contribute to the development of competences for democratic culture. Activities such as film discussions, collaborative projects, simulations, debates, opportunities for students to choose their own topics, and participation in creative workshops create space for dialogue, perspective-taking, critical thinking, and active engagement. Similarly, diverse play-based activities offer experiential contexts in which learners can practice cooperation, negotiation, and responsible decision-making. Taken together, these forms of work illustrate how thoughtfully designed classroom experiences can foster democratic values and participatory skills in authentic and developmentally appropriate ways. These activities, through everyday classroom practice, support democratic decision-making, tolerant interpersonal behaviour, and the acceptance of diversity.

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