

Education through democracy – Civic activation of the youth

Self-reflection on program evaluation methodology

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Keywords: Democracy, political participation, political engagement, youth, evaluation methodology

- The civic activation program Youth Vote + (Młodzi Głosują +), addressed to students aged 14-19, was launched in Poland.
- The evaluation study included three dimensions of triangulation: of participants, time points and methods.
- The evaluation study documented the effectiveness of the program regarding the behavioral dimension.
- Cognitive development was insufficient relative to program goals.
- Future iterations of the program will be modified based on the findings of the study.

Purpose: The objective of the paper is to present the effects of the evaluation study of the Polish project “Youth Vote +: Social and civic activation of young people”¹ – a comprehensive education program in the field of civic engagement, based on three practical pillars: conscious electoral participation (Pillar 1), involvement in civic activities (Pillar 2) and political discussion and opinion expression (Pillar 3).

Methodology: We developed an evaluation study that was aligned with the nature of the program. To capture the change in civic competence and skills, we used quantitative (a retrospective pretest design and one-group pretest-posttest design) and qualitative (focus group interviews) methods. The former enabled us to achieve robust measurement of increases in competence, while the latter gave us better insight into participants’ perceptions of the project.

Findings: The evaluation study documented the effectiveness of the program regarding a behavioral dimension, but cognitive development was insufficient relative to goals. The study also allowed for critical evaluation of the program and its modifications.

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1 INTRODUCTION

A normative idea of democracy views unequal levels of political participation in various strata of social structures as a deficit. According to literature, passive citizens disproportionately tend to be poor, less educated and young. Youth poses perhaps the biggest challenge concerning participation and they are the principal focus of our study. Low rates of democratic activity of young people have consequences for the quality of the demand and supply side of the democratic process. Young citizens are frequently alienated from the political system. They vote in elections less than others, and if they do vote, they often support (anti-system) protest parties. As a result, young citizens are underrepresented in mainstream politics (Henn & Foard 2012, 2014; O'Toole, 2015). Political parties sometimes disregard young people and seldom propose policies to them.

There are various explanations of the low political engagement of young voters. Some researchers refer to the life cycle (Strate et al., 1989; Jankowski & Strate, 1995). Transition moments, such as leaving school, starting a first job, getting married and forming a family make political participation less meaningful at this stage of life. Others focus on effects of factors such as low levels of political knowledge and lack of political resources, which make electoral participation more difficult for newly enfranchised voters (Lau, 2003; Goerres, 2007).

Research shows that consecutive participation in elections increases political knowledge and participatory experience and leads to the development of party identification, political efficacy and the habit of voting (Franklin, 2004; Czesnik et al., 2013). Transition into adulthood and its associated events are gradually taking place at a higher average age, which also delays the process of entering into civic and political life. Early civic education and inclusion into political life seem to be solutions for this problem.

Among the factors responsible for political socialization of the youth, schools play a unique role (Glanville, 1999; Amna, 2012; Henn & Foard, 2012). Civic education programs directed at schoolchildren are becoming increasingly common as a tool of political socialization. Their effectiveness in addressing civic deficiencies at an early age with the goal of long-term improvement of the quality of democratic participation is well examined and described in the literature on mature democracies (Birdwell et al., 2013; Ghosh, 2015; Reichert, 2016; Torres-Harding et al., 2018; Heggart et al., 2019; Pontes et al., 2019).

The overall goal of our paper is meta-methodological. We discuss the methodology used to evaluate the program Youth Vote + (Młodzi Głosują +), conducted by SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities and Centre for Civic Education (Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej, CEO)². We reflect on the strong/weak points of our approach with the goal of improving evaluation tools in subsequent editions. We use the results of our evaluation study to modify future iterations of the program. Finally, we reflect on the dimensions of the utility of civic engagement programs in general.

The article is composed of three parts. Part 1 is a short description of Youth Vote +. Part 2 describes the methodology of the evaluation study undertaken after completion of the first edition of the program and presents the results of the study. Part 3 contains methodological reflection and conclusions related to the effectiveness of the program.

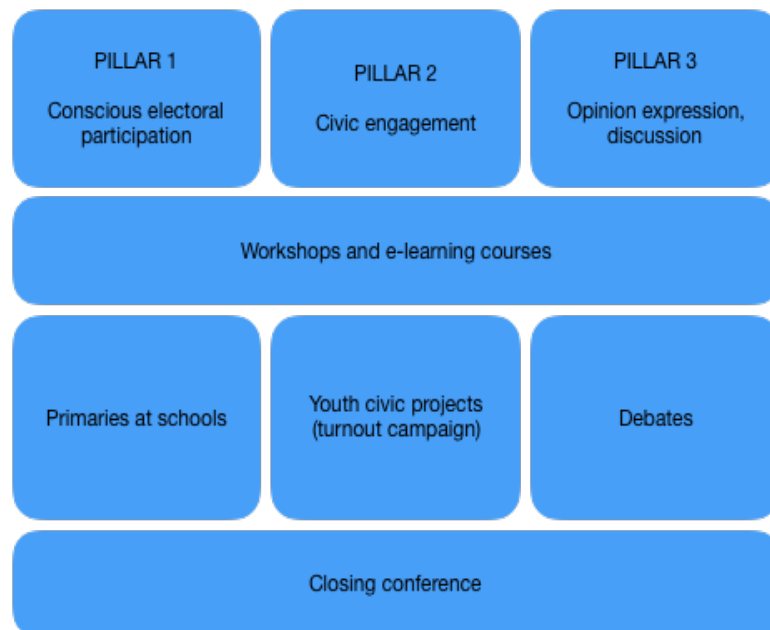
2 POLITICAL EDUCATION

Democratic participation requires interested citizens to hold certain competencies. They must understand how formal procedures and concepts translate into the practice of democracy, and they need the skills to solve conflicts and communicate in deliberative settings (Cohen et al., 2015). Participatory values and skills are typically excluded from civics courses (Palmer &

Standerfer, 2004; Levine, 2014). Thus, “civic education has three justifications. The first relates to political justice: people have a fundamental right to have say in decisions that affect them. The second addresses effectiveness: when the decision-making process includes people who are affected by an issue, the quality of the decisions and their implementation tends to be better. The third is that participation is an important element of human development, as it nurtures democratic capabilities and agency among participants. Hands-on experience with self-governance has great potential to develop democratic knowledge, attitudes, skills and practices among students. The potential is higher when students have the opportunity to connect these experiences to curricular and extracurricular activities that address democratic theories and practices.” (Cohen et al., 2015)

The Youth Vote project has been conducted by the Center for Civic Education since 1995. Cooperation with SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities has enriched the praxis with theoretical and empirical knowledge from the field of political science, sociology, psychology and management. The combination of academic knowledge and practical experience in cooperation with schools has resulted in the development and implementation of a comprehensive education program in the field of civic engagement of young people, based on three practical pillars: conscious electoral participation (Pillar 1), involvement in civic activities at school and local community level (Pillar 2) and the ability to discuss and express opinions (Pillar 3). Each of the pillars includes a number of standard and non-standard teaching activities. The logic of the project is presented in figure 1.

Figure 1: Logic of the project



The program starts with traditional learning activities: workshops and e-learning courses which prepare students for projects in schools and local communities. As the project is organized around Polish elections (European, parliamentary and presidential), the participants must organize turnout campaigns, debates and school primaries (mimicking actual electoral rules and procedures). The feedback and feed-forward on these activities are given throughout by means of an e-learning platform as well as during the closing conference. Additional activities also support networking, which can serve as a means of finding partners for future projects.

Active substantive participation of both partners at all stages is crucial for the success of the project. All workshop materials, e-learning course content and additional materials that are

available online (instructions, guides, books, lesson plans, etc.) are coauthored. Workshops have been conducted by both academics and experienced youth trainers. SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities as leader institution has also provided the infrastructure for activities in the project.

The project follows the service-learning method logic, which has proved to be successful in inculcating civic attitudes and behaviors (Billig, 2000; Hart et al., 2007; Brown, 2011; Grist & Cheetham, 2011). Service learning is defined as “an experimental approach to education that involves students in meaningful, real-world activities that can advance social, emotional, career, and academic curricula goals while benefitting communities” (Jerome, 2012, p. 60). The project intends to enable the combination of scholarly knowledge with practical experience from real social and civic activities. Despite the fact that the project is designed as an extracurricular activity, the theoretical part can be (and is) integrated with the regular school curriculum. First, participation in the project (especially the performance of practical activities, such as the organization of primaries, campaigns and debates) requires some level of knowledge about politics and society. Second, all additional materials created within the project can be used by both teachers (e.g. as lesson scenarios) and students during curricular activities. Last but not least, the educational outcomes are linked to competences described within the core curriculum of Civics for primary and secondary school (the details are described in the project syllabus, available upon request).

Participants in the project are expected to develop three kinds of competences (listed in table 1) associated with core school curricula:

Table 1: Project educational outcomes

Area	Description	Core competences
Civil competences	increase of civic engagement and social and political participation	Political knowledge on facts and procedures
		Internal and external efficacy
		Support for democracy
		Trust in democratic institutions
Cognitive competences	use of knowledge and information to make real life decisions	Analytical skills
		Logical thinking and fact analysis
		Critical thinking
		Information search and analysis
		readiness to learn new things
Interpersonal competences	communication and relationship building facilitation	Ability to work in group
		Networking skills
		Communication skills

The competences developed during the project are not only significant for the quality of political and social life; they also increase the competitiveness of participants in the labor market, as the project covers a range of transferable skills (see: Glasbeek, 2018; European Commission report, 2016).

3 EVALUATION STUDY

In this paper, we present the evaluation of the first wave of the project, organized around the 2018 European Elections (the project started in February with an e-learning course, which were followed by workshops in March and April and lasted until June when the final conference took

place). In total 251 students from primary and secondary schools (teams of 3 from 84 schools from Poland) took part in the activities. The teams applied to participate in the program on their own initiative, they were accepted in accordance with the order in which they had applied.

The evaluation study was based on the principle of triangulation or methodological pluralism. Triangulation concerned two aspects: *data triangulation* and *methodological triangulation* (Russ-Eft & Preskill 2001, p. 156). The use of several methods to investigate the problem (combining a quantitative and qualitative approach) allows for depth of meaning while maintaining objectivity and determining quantitative parameters. The study consisted of two parts: a survey and focus group interviews (FGI).

3.1 Quantitative research

The three dimensions under study were the goals of the project: broadening knowledge, encouraging activity and teaching/developing debating and information processing skills. Based on the program goals, we designed indicators to measure participant self-evaluation. In designing our indicators we were inspired by the KASP (knowledge, attitudes, skills and practice) model designed by Schugurensky (2002; 2006). However, we created and calibrated our own indicators to match our program's goals and contents.

The quantitative study combined two methods: a *retrospective pretest design* and *one-group pretest-posttest design* (Russ-Eft & Preskill p. 159-162). We aimed to measure competences both before and after participation in the program. It contained two measurements: a pre-test, containing self-assessment of competences before the start of the program, and a post-test administered after training. The post-test contained questions regarding self-assessment of competences before and after participation in the program. Many students may have an overstated opinion about their competences and being confronted with previously unknown content and activities makes them aware of what they do not know. Retrospective assessment of competence before and after the program is the answer to this problem. The pretest was conducted using the CAWI method (students completed the online survey). The posttest used mixed methodology: CAWI and PAPI. The pre-test had N=251, while the post-test had N=115 (due to logistic reasons and project timing, not all participants completed the post-test). The results were collected in the form of an electronic data set.

3.2 Qualitative study

Qualitative research methods deepen the knowledge obtained through quantitative research to better understand the way of thinking of participants. In this study, we conducted focus group interviews (FGI). This type of interview not only allowed us to understand the behaviour, attitudes and preferences of respondents, but also let us observe group dynamics and track the affective (emotional) aspects. We conducted two FGI interviews with participants of the Youth Vote + program: teachers and students. Six teachers and eight students took part in the interviews. They were recorded, transcribed and analysed. FGIs were held on 18/06/2019.

3.3 Quantitative research results

The quantitative study included questions about three dimensions of competence: civic (knowledge and skills related to the functioning of democracy), interpersonal (the ability to cooperate and organize), as well as cognitive (selection and understanding of information, ability to argue). Of course, individual indicators usually belong to several different areas, e.g. organization of a turnout campaign requires both civic and interpersonal competences. Thus, the division into three groups of indicators is simplified, but allows us to indicate which areas can be particularly effectively shaped by means of the Youth Vote + program. The goal of the program

was also to improve professional competences (which are useful in employment or in further education). They were not treated separately, on the assumption that they are derived indirectly from other areas.

As a first step, confirmatory factor analysis was performed to test the three dimensions, i.e., to determine whether the items form the predicted structure. Following our theoretical assumptions, we extracted three factors. Table 1. contains the rotated factor loadings, showing the correlation between the variables and each factor.

As is clear from the data shown below, the dimensions cannot be clearly separated because different aspects of the competences overlap. As expected, each element of the program requires both knowledge and social skills, as well as cognitive ability. This overlap between items is reflected in the factor analysis results. Importantly, various interpersonal aspects fall in one dimension (factor 3), as do items related to knowledge (factor 1). Cognitive abilities were measured with items related to information gathering and argumentation, which appear related to both activity and knowledge. Due to the overlap, in subsequent analysis items are grouped according to our theoretical assumptions.

Table 3 contains results of both measures of competence increase. The first conclusion from the data analysis can be summarized as follows: the self-assessment of competences before the program and retrospective self-assessment are very different: students achieved Socratic self-knowledge ("I know I know nothing"), they realized how much they had learned. However, in various aspects the increase in competences varied.

Each item indicated an increase in competence both in relation to the pretest and as assessed retrospectively. In every aspect, self-assessment of competence after participation in the program was very high. Responses were measured on a scale of 1 to 11, where the middle point was 6. In each case, the average score obtained was significantly higher than the neutral middle point.

The largest increases in knowledge and skills related to activities included in the program, i.e., the organization of a turnout campaign and election simulation. The smallest increase in competences was recorded in the areas identified as cognitive competences. The program had a relatively minor role in raising the ability to distinguish information from comments and subjective opinions, rational discussion and persuading others. The qualitative part of the report contains further information on this subject.

Table 2: Factor analysis (pretest). Factor loadings

Symbol	Rotated Component Matrix			
		Knowledge	Cognitive skills	Inter-personal skills
V1	I know why it is worth being an active citizen	0.493	0.583	
V2	I can organize a turnout campaign	0.648		0.374
V3	sometimes I contact the city / commune authorities t			0.813
V4	when I plan an activity, I can find partners		0.365	0.697
V5	I know how to get funds for civic activities	0.331		0.754
V6	I can plan an event together with others	0.491	0.476	0.339
V7	a lot depends on people like me		0.304	0.573

V8	I know ways to get information about other people's views	0.447	0.523	
V9	I can convince my friends that it is worth participating in the elections	0.338	0.740	
V10	I can organize a simulation of elections	0.558	0.342	0.350
V11	I know why elections are important for democracy	0.640	0.468	
V12	I know how a democratic political system works	0.827		
V13	I know why citizens do not vote in elections	0.517	0.498	
V14	I can find reliable information about politics	0.755		
V15	I know how to determine the truth of the information provided by the media	0.756		
V16	I distinguish information from comments and subjective opinions	0.613	0.513	
V17	I discuss so that conversations do not turn into quarrels		0.632	0.327
V18	I can convince others that I am right		0.798	
V19	I know how to organize, plan and implement projects	0.498	0.509	0.398
V20	I like talking about important political topics	0.684		
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.				

N=251

Table 3: Competence test (mean values, scale 1-11).

Symbol	Item	Pretest	Posttest		Competence increase: mean difference, pretest-posttest*	Competence increase: mean difference, posttest-retrospective self-evaluation*
			retro-spective	after program		
Civic competence						
VWZ1	I know why it is worth being an active citizen	9.22	7.38	10.20	0.85	2.82
VWZ2	I can organize a turnout campaign	7.68	5.30	10.10	2.23	4.80
VWZ10	I can organize a simulation of elections	8.73	5.94	10.65	1.90	4.71
VWZ11	I know why elections are important for democracy	9.77	8.29	10.41	0.50	2.12
VWZ12	I know how a democratic political system works	9.09	7.75	9.97	0.77	2.22

VWZ13	I know why citizens do not vote in elections	8.85	6.83	10.18	1.31	3.35
Interpersonal competence						
VWZ3	sometimes I contact the city / commune authorities to get something done	5.60	5.22	7.80	2.08	2.58
VWZ4	when I plan an activity, I can find partners (institutions, organizations, other people)	7.92	6.48	9.15	1.17	2.67
VWZ5	I know how to get funds for civic activities	6.66	5.59	8.47	1.96	2.88
VWZ6	I can plan an event together with others	9.00	7.47	10.00	0.90	2.53
VWZ7	a lot in my city / municipality depends on people like me	6.88	6.57	9.00	1.84	2.43
VWZ9	I can convince my friends that it is worth participating in the elections	8.66	7.14	9.84	1.19	2.70
VWZ19	I know how to organize, plan and implement projects	8.86	7.38	9.85	0.91	2.47
Cognitive competence						
VWZ8	I know ways to get information about other people's views	8.54	7.36	9.64	1.01	2.28
VWZ14	I can find reliable information about politics	8.41	7.30	9.52	1.11	2.22
VWZ15	I know how to determine the truth of the information provided by the media	8.22	7.30	9.53	1.38	2.23
VWZ16	I distinguish information from comments and subjective opinions	9.27	8.19	9.88	0.52	1.69
VWZ17	I discuss with others so that conversations do not turn into arguments	8.49	7.87	9.59	0.92	1.72
VWZ18	I can convince others that I am right	8.68	7.79	9.53	0.83	1.74
VWZ20	I like talking about important political topics	8.18	7.13	9.25	0.97	2.12

Pretest: N=251. Posttest: N=115. *All differences of means significant at $p<0.01$

Participants also evaluated the program on an analogous 11-point scale. For each dimension, the responses were well above the midpoint (6). Thus, participants indicated that the Youth Vote + program increased their knowledge about the state and the political system, made them able to better express their views and debate, improved their ability to work with others, improved their ability to organize events, taught them to search and analyse information, and would probably be useful in future work and study.

Table 4: Student evaluation of Youth Vote + program.

Participation in Youth Vote +.....	Scale 1-11. Mean values
P1 increased my knowledge of the state and political system	9.39
P2 enabled me to better express my views and debate	8.99
P3 improved my ability to work with others	9.23
P4 improved my ability to organize events	9.25
P5 taught me how to search and analyse information	8.89
P6 will be useful in future education and work	9.55

N=115.

3.4 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH RESULTS

FGIs allowed for in-depth insight into the internal dynamics of the program. We employed a two-sided perspective, approaching our analysis both from the side of teachers and students. The following analysis takes into account the results of both FGI groups. The quotations are in italics. Quotations from teachers' statements are marked with the letter T, fragments of students' statements with the letter S.

3.4.1 Civic competence

The main and most important part of the Youth Vote + was a simulation of EP elections in participating schools. The purpose of this task was to teach both civic competences (knowledge and skills related to the electoral process) and interpersonal competences (the ability to act jointly).

Students and teachers agreed on the importance of simulation. It allowed for active learning about elections, how votes are counted, how mandates are allocated, etc. Teachers tried to imitate real situations as much as possible: there were ballots, voting booths, electoral commissions. At times teachers faced difficult choices, e.g. whether to allow a student to take part who had forgotten their ID. Usually, in such situations, teachers tried to bring the situation closer to the reality in order to demonstrate the importance of procedural aspects of the electoral process.

Organizers (students active in the Youth Vote + program) are usually the most active members of the school community. They are often young people who are already strongly involved. Benefits in terms of civic competences were primarily gained by students participating in the simulation (voting, reading materials, talking about this topic). For people moderately interested in public affairs, the development of civic competence is particularly important.

Somewhat paradoxically, difficulties sometimes arose on the part of parents. They feared that the Youth Vote + program contained propaganda. Teachers had to take the burden of dispelling these doubts and fears.

“During the project, I really discovered my views and began to get more involved, outside of the project. If someone told me they had different views, I didn't insist. We exchanged our views culturally. And, as a rule, I wanted to show that politics do not divide, that we can simply share our insights.” (S)

“Everything was explained. We learned what the goals are, what we should do.” (S)

3.4.2 Interpersonal and cognitive competences

The biggest challenges of the Youth Vote + program were the same factors that generally limit the public activity of young people. They are: passivity, apathy, lack of commitment, lack of faith in the sense of the democratic process. Participants often had to put a lot of effort into encouraging colleagues to participate in the simulation of the election. However, many spoke of these challenges in a positive context: convincing the reluctant to participate in elections makes for satisfaction and a sense of achievement. Convincing colleagues to be active, discussing controversial issues so that conversations do not turn into an argument, being able to hold one's corner, these are very important skills that the participants had the opportunity to develop.

“Young people saw that it is not easy to talk about this topic, especially in a wider group, not only in school, but to go to the city and encourage voting. The first reaction of accidental people was, I'm not interested, I'm not into it.” (T)

“Our debate was a nice moment. Students who took part in the debate and represented individual parties knew the questions, prepared answers, practiced it earlier and then we invited everyone to a discussion, and it looked good.” (T)

Another challenge was organizational work. Participants learned that sometimes it is difficult to plan an event together with others: colleagues can be unreliable, lazy, they need to be motivated. Such early organizational attempts were a new experience in some people's lives.

“The organization in our school failed a bit and we had to do practically everything ourselves, with Stawek and Wiktorja. And practically to the very end, we could only rely on the three of us, because no one else would volunteer.” (S)

Cognitive competences were developed in the Youth Vote + program by developing critical media reception and the ability to debate. It was about identifying fake news, the ability to assess the accuracy of information, or distinguishing information from comments and subjective opinions, as well as identifying valuable sources of information on public matters (distinguishing information from entertainment). Overall, this section was rated critically by both teachers and students.

“The danger is that students live in this Facebook or Instagram world, browse only pages that interest them and this atomization means that they only live in the world that Facebook offers them.” (T)

3.5 OVERALL RATING

Participants gave an overall opinion on the fulfilment of the goals of Youth Vote + program. Table 4 summarizes their statements. The information value of the program did not raise much doubt: it increased students' subjective perceptions of knowledge about the state and the political system. Interpersonal skills also improved: all teachers and most students appreciated efforts to collaborate with others and to organize joint events. Some doubts appeared when assessing the effectiveness of the program as an arena for public discussion. Both teachers and students usually saw progress in this area, but expressed their opinions tentatively. Information gathering and discussion were the worst assessed areas. Both teachers and students were usually of the opinion that the program failed in this sphere.

Table 5: Evaluation of Youth Vote + (FGI). No. of participants expressing a view.

Participation in Youth Vote + ...	Students			Teachers		
	Yes	Yes/no	No	Yes	Yes/no	No
increased students' knowledge about the state and the political system	6		2	6		
made them able to better express their views and debate	5		3	4		2
improved their ability to work with others	7		1	6		
improved their ability to organize events	6		2	6		
taught them how to search and analyse information	2		6			6
will be useful in future education and professional work	5		3	4	2	

4 SUMMARY AND A LOOK FORWARD

The evaluation study gives a generally favourable picture of program implementation. The survey indicates an increase in subjective competence on each of the 20 indicators that make up three dimensions. Self-assessment after participation in the program was very high. It was by far the highest in the area of knowledge about the political system and in the sphere of activity. Students thought that they had learned a lot about democracy and how they could be active. Overall, they rated the Youth Vote + program very positively. Its strengths were the activities: workshops and simulation of elections. Learning democracy through personal involvement is not only a proven form of civic education, but also a rewarding experience.

This generally positive picture, however, contains many critical points. Some goals were met to a greater extent than others. Cognitive skills are more difficult to develop using the proposed framework. In many ways, participants are the school elite, with skills already highly developed. The program offered them little they did not already know in this area. On the other hand, higher level cognitive competences require a longer-term, more sophisticated programs to significantly rise.

4.1 What we learned: methodological and substantive reflection

Our study employed the principle of triangulation both in a narrow and in a broad sense. In the narrow sense, we employed perspectives of students from before and after the program, as well as students' and teachers' points of view. In the broad sense, triangulation governed our approach. We believe that gathering as many different and diverse types of evidence as possible is necessary to transcend the potential limitations of an evaluation study in such a sensitive sphere, even though such an approach runs the risk of arriving at contradictory results. Let us consider where the results are aligned, and where they are contradictory.

The study indicates some limitations of a pretest-posttest design that measures subjective self-evaluation. Civic education programs tend to attract highly motivated students, some of them already active, e.g. in school government. One of the reasons they enter the program is that they are already confident about their competence and skills. This accounts for relatively modest increases in subjective evaluations between the pre- and posttest.

The factor analysis indicates that subjective areas of competence are grouped into several dimensions, for a large part consistent with the initial hypotheses. While entrants into the program generally see themselves as competent, they do differ in their perceived areas of relative strength. Some are clearly 'swots', people who know a lot. Others are people of action. Statistical analysis allows for making this distinction, even if it is not always clear (many items load on more than one factor).

Retrospective pretest design makes it possible to measure the degree to which pupils themselves feel they have improved. It is a key indicator, assuming students themselves are the best judges of the program in which they had participated. We assume that participants are endowed with self-reflective skills sufficient to retrospectively assess their own progress. The scores indicate a high degree of variability of results, with students assessing the change in different dimensions and at very different levels. The differences in scores (levels of improvement) are primarily due to different retrospective evaluations of the starting points. In other words, students *ex post* recognize their ignorance on some (but not all) dimensions, but almost uniformly evaluate their post-program competence as high.

Interesting conclusions can be drawn from the comparison of pretest scores and retrospective pretest scores. Little or no difference can mean two things: accurate pre-program assessment of competence (not modified by self-reflection gained in the program), or limited effect of the program (usually in case of students who already knew so much of the program content that they learned nothing new). These two effects could be combined. Most commonly, this effect occurred in the case of knowledge, i.e. factual information about the functioning of the political system.

The other triangulation was between the vantage points of students and teachers. The results of the FGI conducted with teachers were complementary, rather than aligned with students' observations. Most teachers who organized the program had a long-term commitment to civic education and operated from a long time perspective. The interviews served to explain issues which were underreported by students. In case of FGI with students, information was sometimes hard to generalize. Students commented on the program, but did not have the ability to distinguish between regularities and odd occurrences. Interviews with teachers provided this perspective. They allowed for contextualizing knowledge about the program and drawing generalizations.

4.2 Limitations of the approach

Many of the limitations of our study were beyond our control and as such we have not discussed them here. They were related to formal constraints (requirements for program evaluation), as well as budgetary and time constraints (we could not conduct an analogous study on a random selection of non-participating schools as a control group, much as we would have liked to include such a component). Some limitations were a result of our choices, and we took mitigating measures. They were related to two groups of factors: scaling and interview method effects.

Our initial inclination was to use a well-tested scale for measurement. We were inspired by the KASP model. However, eventually we opted for an original measurement instrument closely aligned to program goals. Developing indicators is an iterative process. In subsequent editions measurement can be broadened while preserving data comparability: we can include new items if a need arises, while keeping existing ones. It allows for flexibility, while keeping a tight focus on the program goals. These opportunities would be missed if an existing scale was implemented. Our indicators were pre-tested before program implementation and re-evaluated after the first stage of the evaluation study was completed.

The other set of limitations was related to the interviewer effects and, more generally, effects of the interview situation on students. Measurement was conducted on a closely knit group, many of whom know one another. It was crucial to maintain strict confidentiality of responses. In the pretest it was assured by the CAWI methodology. In the posttest some responses were collected using PAPI method. We had to make spatial arrangements to allow students freedom to express their opinions.

4.3 Conclusions: where Youth Vote + was successful and why

The goal of the evaluation study was practical. The Youth Vote + has several editions and future iterations will be modified based on the evaluation of the benchmark edition. After completing the evaluation study, we are able to introduce changes.

The behavioural aspect of training is by far the most successful part of Youth Vote +. It is eye-opening, it socializes, it raises confidence. In Poland, as in many other new democracies, democratic deficits are reflected in the absence of behavioural patterns: participation is low, many citizens do not vote, they rarely engage in campaigning and other political activities. Developing these habits at the early age is crucial and students appreciate the transformative power of the program.

On the other hand, it appears that Youth Vote + is not the appropriate vehicle for teaching about the political system. The relatively limited time span is one of the reasons. Students need to absorb knowledge about democracy over an extended period of time and a short program is no substitute for regular learning. The other reason is the format. Students appreciate Youth Vote + because of the activities. They learn by doing, by being active. Whenever Youth Vote + contained elements of knowledge acquisition, participants became distracted, bored, disinterested. Mediating these effects would require calibrating the program to a range of different needs of students, resulting from age differences, social background etc. A short-term centrally-administered program such as Youth Vote + cannot do this.

The evaluation study indicated that skills such as debating and critical information selection (broadly subsumed in the category 'cognitive skills') were underdeveloped in Youth Vote +. It was a missed opportunity. Unlike knowledge acquisition, it is possible to adjust debating formats and information-gathering exercises to the range of needs of students participating in Youth Vote +. It is a question of allocation of resources: adjusting the program curriculum and selecting moderators. The evaluation study indicates that there is both the need and the possibility to develop this dimension. Future editions will be adjusted based on this conclusion.

Concluding, the impact of the Youth Vote + was particularly visible in the development of the skills of student elites. The school opinion leaders carried the burden of the program: they had to devote countless hours of their time in order to organize the activities, motivate passive or apathetic colleagues, deal with teachers and school authorities, handle logistics, etc. Retrospectively, many admitted that they had not expected such a workload. However, it was clear from almost all responses (quantitative and qualitative data both support this conclusion) that they became changed citizens after this experience. We believe that many of them will be future leaders.

An important point in this process of gaining efficacy was the realization of one's own deficits (what we call the 'Socratic moment'). Students not only gained skills, but also realized how much they had done, and how much more is left to learn. For many, this was the defining experience of the program.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://mlodziglosuja.pl/>

² The Youth Vote + is realized within „Social and civic activation of young people” project, co-financed by the European Union under the European Social Fund. The first wave was held since March till June 2019.