


Place as a microcosm: Community-based citizenship education approaches among schools and rural low-density communities*

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Abstract

Within the framework of current educational policies on citizenship education, which promote the appraisal of the local dimension of educational activities as a direct context for the development of situated citizenship practices (AR, 2018), this article examines community-based approaches to citizenship education in rural schools and communities located in the border regions of mainland Portugal. From a theoretical perspective, the study adopts a maximalist conception of citizenship education, emphasising its experiential nature and community orientation, and draws on place-based education approaches. These perspectives place local realities, collective action, and the involvement of community actors at the centre of citizenship formation. Methodologically, we use data from a mixed-methods study conducted in 29 schools, including documentary analysis of schools' educational projects, activity programmes and citizenship education strategies, semi-structured interviews with teachers coordinating citizenship education, and a questionnaire survey distributed to secondary education students. The results reveal a variety of initiatives and areas of community engagement led by schools, aimed at promoting well-being and valuing local cultures and realities. At the same time, the study identifies the different roles

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played by community actors – including schools, stakeholders, and young people – in fostering community well-being and social cohesion.

Keywords: citizenship education; place-based education; community participation; rural schools; students

Resum. *El lloc com a microcosmos: enfocaments d'educació per a la ciutadania comunitària a escoles i comunitats rurals*

En el marc de les polítiques educatives contemporànies relatives a l'educació per a la ciutadania, que promouen la valoració de la dimensió local de les activitats educatives com a context directe per al desenvolupament de pràctiques situades de ciutadania (AR, 2018), aquest article examina enfocaments comunitaris d'educació per a la ciutadania en escoles rurals i comunitats de les regions frontereres del Portugal continental. Des d'una perspectiva teòrica, s'adopta una concepció maximalista de l'educació per a la ciutadania, que en destaca el caràcter experiencial i l'orientació comunitària, i que s'inspira en els plantejaments de l'educació basada en el lloc. Aquests enfocaments situen al centre les realitats locals, l'acció col·lectiva i la implicació d'actors comunitaris en els processos formatius de ciutadania. Metodològicament, l'estudi es fonamenta en un enfocament de mètodes mixtos aplicat en 29 escoles, que va incloure l'anàlisi documental de projectes educatius, programes d'activitats i estratègies de ciutadania; entrevistes semiestructurades amb docents coordinadors d'educació per a la ciutadania; i un qüestionari adreçat a estudiants d'educació secundària postobligatòria. Els resultats evidencien una àmplia diversitat d'iniciatives i modalitats de participació comunitària impulsades per les escoles, orientades a promoure el benestar i a valorar les cultures locals. Així mateix, s'identifiquen els diferents rols exercits per les escoles, els agents comunitaris i els joves en la promoció del benestar col·lectiu i en l'enfortiment de la cohesió social.

Paraules clau: educació per a la ciutadania; educació basada en el lloc; participació comunitària; escola rural; estudiants

Resumen. *El lugar como microcosmos: enfoques de educación para la ciudadanía comunitaria en escuelas y comunidades rurales*

En el marco de las políticas educativas contemporáneas relativas a la educación para la ciudadanía, que promueven la valorización de la dimensión local de las actividades escolares como contexto privilegiado para el desarrollo de prácticas situadas de ciudadanía (AR, 2018), este artículo analiza los enfoques comunitarios de educación ciudadana implementados en escuelas rurales y en comunidades de las zonas fronterizas del Portugal continental. Desde una perspectiva teórica, se adopta una concepción maximalista de la educación para la ciudadanía, la cual subraya su carácter experiencial y su orientación hacia la comunidad, inspirándose en los planteamientos de la educación basada en el lugar. Dichos enfoques sitúan en el centro las realidades locales, la acción colectiva y la participación de actores comunitarios en los procesos formativos. En términos metodológicos, el estudio se fundamenta en un enfoque de métodos mixtos aplicado en 29 escuelas, que comprendió el análisis documental de proyectos educativos, programas de actividades y estrategias institucionales de ciudadanía; la realización de entrevistas semiestructuradas con docentes coordinadores de esta área; y la aplicación de un cuestionario dirigido a estudiantes de educación secundaria. Los resultados evidencian una amplia diversidad de iniciativas y modalidades de participación comunitaria promovidas por las escuelas, orientadas a fomentar el bienestar y a poner en valor las culturas locales. Asimismo, se identifican los distintos roles desempeñados por las instituciones escolares, los

agentes comunitarios y los jóvenes en la promoción del bienestar colectivo y en el fortalecimiento de la cohesión social.

Palabras clave: educación para la ciudadanía; educación basada en el lugar; participación comunitaria; escuela rural; estudiantes

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1. Introduction

National and international educational policies, alongside a substantial body of research, underscore the central role of citizenship education (CE) in cultivating democratic skills among young people (e.g., Council of Europe, 2018; DGE, 2025; Macedo & Araújo, 2013; Veugelers & de Groot, 2019). CE is also widely considered essential for developing intercultural, ecological, social, and critical thinking competences, as well as for encouraging youth participation (Henn et al., 2025; Silva & Silva, 2025). Within this field, minimalist and maximalist approaches to CE have been differentiated, with scholarship largely favouring maximalist, holistic, and experiential perspectives that integrate formal and informal learning and emphasise participatory, community-based strategies for democratic skill development (Annette, 2008; Breslin & Dufour, 2006; Jerome, 2012; McLaughlin, 1992; Westheimer & Khane, 2004; Silva & Silva, 2024).

In Portugal, CE guidelines recommend that educational practices be grounded in local assessments and aligned with students' lived experiences (AR, 2018; DGE, 2025). Research also highlights the value of context-based learning in fostering meaningful engagement by linking educational content to learners' everyday realities (e.g., Champollion & Rothenburger, 2018; Grunewald, 2003a, 2003b; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Silva, 2023). Approaches such as social pedagogy (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011), ecopedagogy (Misiaszek, 2016), and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011) also emphasise situating education within the historical, cultural, community, and environmental contexts in which individuals are embedded. In this vein, policy and research also call for the involvement of external actors, the development of networking strategies, and the assessment of CE initiatives in relation to schools' interactions with their local communities (AR, 2018; DGE, 2025). Scholars highlight that community mobilisation may follow instrumental logics, focused on resource sharing, or cultural logics, oriented towards change through collective action (Henriot-Van Zanten, 1994). Work by Champollion and Rothenburger (2018) and Correia (2012) highlights the pedagogical significance of bridging formal school knowledge with community-based knowledge.

Place, citizenship, and education intersect with particular intensity in rural contexts. In other places we have discussed how rural schools often serve as anchors of cohesion, inclusion, and local revitalisation (e.g., Silva, 2023; Silva, 2025). They strengthen identity and belonging (Cedering & Whilborg, 2020; Silva & Silva, 2022), and act as central civic agents and play key roles in community life and youth participation (Silva, 2023; Silva, 2024; Silva & Silva, 2025). Their proximity to local communities fosters favourable conditions for knowledge exchange and collaborative strategies involving external actors (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Schafft, 2016). Furthermore, rural schools frequently value local knowledge, contributing to the recognition and promotion of local cultures and realities (Beach et al., 2019; Silva, 2023; Silva, 2024). These dynamics, rooted in close social ties and strong territorial identity render rural territories particularly fertile for exploring how CE can become embedded in and shaped by place.

Context-sensitive pedagogies are considered essential for ensuring that CE contributes to the social and ecological well-being of communities, supports local development, and strengthens community ties (e.g., Gruenewald, 2003a; Jerome, 2012; Silva, 2023). If rooted in local cultures and realities, CE enhances students' understanding of global issues and their local implications, while offering concrete opportunities to practise democracy at the community level (Annette, 2008; Breslin & Dufour, 2006; Davies et al., 2014; Silva & Silva, 2025). Situated pedagogies that promote reflective engagement in community activities help consolidate knowledge and skills that are central to active citizenship, fostering youth participation, and offering emancipatory and social justice-oriented educational possibilities (Giroux, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003b; Jerome, 2012). Scholars also stress the need to develop democratic and civic competences through collective action that extends beyond the boundaries of schools in citizenship education (e.g., Essomba, 2022; Davies et al., 2014; Schugurensky & Myers, 2008), arguing that formal education alone is insufficient to meet the complex educational and training needs of contemporary citizens. Accordingly, building educational communities involves creating collaborative networks that expand the capacity of schools and local actors to address social, cultural, and educational challenges. Such networks generate spaces where diverse forms of knowledge and practice converge to support young people's civic development while reinforcing local well-being (e.g., Davies et al., 2014; Schafft, 2016; Schugurensky & Myers, 2008; Silva & Silva, 2024). In rural contexts, where schools are often key social and civic hubs, such place-based approaches can not only deepen students' civic learning but also reinforce the vitality of community life. In this sense, rural communities can function as microcosms where democratic values are shared, enacted, and where local practices can inform broader democratic processes (Annette, 2008; Davies et al., 2014; Jerome, 2012).

This article examines place as an arena for participation and community intervention within citizenship education. It adopts a multifaceted perspective that considers the pedagogical, relational, and cultural dimensions of place in

a place-based approach to CE. First, it considers place pedagogically, as a foundation for contextualised learning that values local cultures and democratic practices (e.g., Champollion & Rothenburger, 2018; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Second, it analyses how local actors mobilise around shared educational projects in which place becomes a constituent agent of CE (e.g., Champollion & Rothenburger, 2018; Essomba, 2022; Schugurensky & Myers, 2008). Finally, it explores how place shapes both school and community action, acknowledging territorial specificities (Boix et al., 2015; Schafft, 2016; Silva, 2023). Inspired by Morgado et al. (2011), this study conceptualises place as a microcosm in which situated interpretations intersect with more universal frames of meaning. Within this horizon, the principles of place-based education and place-based citizenship education are brought into alignment, as both regard place as an epistemological and relational locus for meaning-making, for the enactment of contextually grounded forms of citizenship, and for the active mobilisation of the community (e.g., Davies et al., 2014; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Tereschenko, 2010).

By integrating place-based pedagogical theory with rural education research, this article aims to offer a framework for understanding place as both context and agent in citizenship formation. Ultimately, it seeks to examine how rural schools and communities, through their CE practices, foster community intervention, strengthen local well-being and development, and promote the appreciation of local cultures and sociability.

2. Methods

This article is based on a study conducted in 29 border-area school contexts in mainland Portugal between 2020 and 2023. In most municipalities, the selected school was the only available secondary school. In the remaining cases, the school was included because it had already participated in previous work developed within the GROW.UP project, in which the doctoral project was also embedded. The study aimed to analyse and understand practices of interpretation and territorial appropriation of citizenship education and youth participation policies in secondary education, paying particular attention to the recent introduction of school-focused citizenship education policies (AR, 2018; DGE, 2025). The study, of a mixed-methods nature, adopted an exploratory sequential design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), beginning with a qualitative phase centred on school guidelines and the perceptions of teachers coordinating citizenship education. This was followed by an exploration of secondary education students' perceptions. From an epistemological standpoint, the study is situated within the interpretative paradigm, as it aims to understand how meanings are constructed by the participants (Schütz, 1994).

The qualitative data comprises the document analysis of 26 educational projects (EP), 24 annual activity plans (AAP), and 19 school citizenship education strategies (SCES). The latter type of document stems from national

educational guidelines, which stipulate that each school should define, design, and implement its own school-specific strategy. The document analysis facilitated the examination of schools' intentions and action plans, providing insight into how policies are interpreted and operationalised within educational contexts (Bowen, 2009). Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 teachers coordinating the citizenship education component. The interviews were designed to complement the document analysis, capturing coordinators' individual perceptions and experiences regarding the work carried out in their schools (Kvale, 2007).

The quantitative data resulted from a questionnaire developed based on the scientific literature and the preliminary results of the qualitative data analysis. The questionnaire included items related to the implementation and territorial appropriation of citizenship education, namely multiple-choice questions, Likert scales, and open-ended questions. In this article, we will focus on the analysis of the responses from one group of items concerning territorial appropriation (7-point Likert scale), and open-ended responses, where participants identified positive aspects and areas for improvement regarding citizenship education practices in their schools. This instrument was validated by experts, pre-tested, and subsequently distributed online. Participation depended on each school's availability, which varied across contexts. As a result, the sample was based on accessibility, constituting convenience sampling (Creswell, 2012). The descriptive characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Regarding data analysis, the qualitative data were examined using thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2011). The analysis corpus comprised data from the document analysis of school documents (educational projects, annual activity plans, and school citizenship education strategies), semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaire responses. The categories were derived through a combination of deductive and inductive categorisation processes. In this article we will focus on the category "Activities, projects, and initiatives carried out within schools' citizenship education work," focusing on the subtopics "Territorialised dynamics in citizenship education work" and "Initiatives aimed at community-level participation". Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) (Field, 2018).

The study complied with the principles of current legislation and standards in Portugal regarding General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR – Regulation (EU) 2016/679). The questionnaire survey was submitted to and approved by MIME – Monitoring of Surveys in Schools (Reference: 0566300012). Voluntary and informed participation was ensured, as well as confidentiality and pseudonymisation of the data collected (Silverman, 2013).

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the sample ($n= 344$).

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Sex	Male	118	34.3
	Female	226	65.7
Age group	13–15 years	118	34.3
	16–18 years	221	64.2
	Over 18 years	5	1.5
	Year 10	138	40.1
School year	Year 11	91	26.5
	Year 12	115	33.4
	Academic	341	99.1
Type of course	Vocational	3	0.9
	North	98	28.5
NUTS II region	Centre	41	11.9
	Alentejo	205	59.6
	Algarve	–	–

Note: “–” indicates no participants in this category.

Source: Created by the authors based on data from the present study.

3. Results

3.1. A focus shift: local realities as a foundation to develop citizenship education practices

Empirical data show that the intentions of schools, as expressed in guidance documents, and the perceptions of teachers, as gathered in semi-structured interviews, point to schools’ concerns about incorporating local realities into citizenship education. This was a cross-cutting issue identified in 20 schools based on an analysis of various guidance documents.

The design and implementation of projects rooted in the needs, resources, and potential of the local community provide students with concrete opportunities to engage in contextualised and direct experiences of participation and citizenship. (School Citizenship Education Strategy 33, North)

Schools’ concerns about the territorial appropriation of citizenship education reflect the significance of local realities and contextualised experiences in promoting citizenship and participation practices that are closer to young people’s experiences and realities. This is also a dominant position in the semi-structured interviews, having been highlighted by 19 coordinating teachers.

When we turned to local issues, such as the situation of the baby Pedro, which is a local matter, attention was directed towards volunteering—specifically, towards what students would like to do in relation to volunteering. Various institutions were mentioned, many of them even national, until we arrived at the local level. In a way, it is also a way of thinking: we should first look at what exists here in our own city and requires support. (Coordinating Teacher 13, North)

Normally, we try to focus on local problems, on things that don't work well in our municipality or region, and on opportunities that can be identified here. Then, around that, we always try to do the following: we have a problem, we try to identify its causes, and we seek to act. (Coordinating Teacher 15, Centre)

These contributions point to a shift in the way schools and individuals conceptualise the scale at which citizenship education can be cultivated, with the local level gaining prominence as a key driver of educational practices in this field. They also highlight several factors that can activate locally based citizenship education, including the identification of concrete community problems, the design of feasible practices with tangible local impact (such as volunteering), and the recognition of local opportunities.

Within this framework, schools position themselves as hubs for developing proposals and problem-solving strategies, becoming generators of action and providing opportunities for students to observe, reflect, and imagine possibilities for local engagement through the practice of civic skills based on real and local experiences of citizenship (e.g., Breslin & Dufour, 2006; Silva & Silva, 2025). In sum, the local level emerges as the privileged scale and the focal point toward which attention in citizenship education should converge.

3.2. Cultivating citizenship through community participation practices

The analysis of guiding documents and interviews highlights multiple ways in which schools may assume a role in their communities, responding to local problems or supporting local well-being. This not only reflects rhizomatic concerns around CE but also underscores the pluralistic nature of community-based citizenship education initiatives:

Analysing the focus on community-based approaches to citizenship education, we identified a greater emphasis on addressing social and environmental issues within a civic framework, oriented towards the socio-environmental well-being of communities. This suggests that social concerns assume particular relevance in rural border schools in responding to local social problems, while also being valued as a foundation for locally based citizenship education aimed at promoting democratic competences through community engagement and active citizenship (e.g., Annette, 2008; Jerome, 2012). With regard to ecological concerns, in addition to an eco-pedagogical approach as a local participatory model (Misiaszek, 2016), there is also an emphasis on the local environment insofar as it shapes local identity, reinforcing the role of schools in preserving the symbolic aspects of their communities (e.g., Beach et al., 2019; Silva, 2023). This attention to local identity is likewise evident in initiatives that engage with cultural heritage, where schools embrace their mission to conserve and sustain endogenous heritage and collective memory, whilst promoting the active participation of young people in these initiatives:

Table 2. Focus, strategies, and initiatives in community-based approaches to citizenship education

Focus	Strategies/initiatives
Responding to social and community issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solidarity campaigns, volunteering, awareness-raising activities led by young people and fundraising (10 schools) • Youth-led projects (12 schools) • School civic clubs (5 schools)
Responding to questions related to local ecology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in Municipal Assemblies addressing local issues (2 schools) • Activities in social institutions (4 schools) • Social entrepreneurship projects (1 school)
Responding to questions of a local cultural nature (valuing local cultural and identity aspects)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local afforestation, reforestation, environmental awareness activities and local heritage (8 schools) • Youth involvement in local cultural traditions and artistic practices (4 schools)

Community-based approaches to citizenship education

Source: Created by the authors based on data from the present study.

We are concerned with ensuring that students feel and value what belongs to them, their local area, their immediate environment, and that they do not forget, deep down, that there is more beyond the region, the municipality, what characterises them, their roots. (Coordinating Teacher 17, Centre)

On the one hand, these concerns illustrate that schools in rural areas are more closely connected to local and community knowledge (e.g., Beach et al., 2019; Silva, 2023). On the other hand, they reflect a conception of citizenship that extends beyond participation to include a sense of belonging and a connection to local cultures and identities – dimensions that are crucial for fostering *place-sensitive* citizenship education practices (Gruenewald, 2003a; Tere-schenko, 2010).

Regarding schools' strategies and initiatives, the assessment of active initiatives, such as social, ecological and cultural campaigns and actions, and participatory-driven initiatives, particularly youth-led projects where young people design action plans for their communities through CE, demonstrates that local realities as a foundation to citizenship education can provide place-based approaches, where place may emerge as a microcosm as young people exercise their citizenship through local experience, engagement and its effects on communities.

Young people's perceptions indicate that they view their schools as attentive not only to local cultural dimensions but also to broader social and community issues. These concerns are manifested both in initiatives undertaken within the school environment and in the potential to design community-oriented strategies grounded in the curriculum and classroom practices related to citizenship education:

Table 3. Integration of local aspects in citizenship education: means and standard deviations (1–7 Likert Scale, $n = 344$)

Item (1-7 Likert Scale)	<i>n</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation
My school values aspects of the local reality in its work on citizenship education.	344	4,46	1,79
The culture and history of this region are present in the activities developed by the school.	344	4,56	1,76
In the activities developed by the school, aspects related to social concerns identified in your region are present.	344	4,55	1,70
The work developed in citizenship classes is related to aspects of the local context.	344	4,26	1,89
There is space in citizenship classes for students to develop projects that are meaningful for the region.	344	4,12	2,04

Source: Created by the authors based on data from the present study.

Data indicate generally positive levels of agreement regarding the incorporation of local cultural and social elements into schools' citizenship education initiatives, while also providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful, context-specific projects.

The open-ended responses from young people in the questionnaire survey regarding positive aspects of their schools' work also allowed us to identify trends in students' appreciation of community-level initiatives, particularly highlighting these initiatives as valuable in the practice of citizenship education.

Improving the local community and supporting humanitarian causes, such as donations. (Young student, Year 11, Centre)

Engaging in volunteer work within our region. (Young student, Year 10, Centre)

Our school is actively involved in volunteering, including food banks and providing packages for families in need. (Young student, Year 11, Centre)

Providing support to the local population. (Young student, Year 12, North)

Triangulating these results highlights that the responses addressing context-based initiatives suggest that such considerations are not only integrated into school practices but are also recognised and valued by young people. This

indicates that the work carried out by schools is aligned with young people's experiences and what they perceive relevant. Also, it helps us understand that this appreciation not only shows a preference for more participatory and active pedagogic methodologies, with a focus on experience, but also the appreciation of the exercise of citizenship in their communities. Thus, it can be inferred that the importance of a shift in focus in citizenship education practices—emphasising the local context and community-based approaches—is shared among schools, teachers, and students, as these practices are also valued by young people for enabling them to exercise their citizenship within their local realities and communities (Silva, 2024; Silva & Silva, 2024).

3.3. Roles of community actors in community-based practices

The data allowed us, within the scope of community-based citizenship education practices, to identify roles played by different community actors in the development of initiatives and strategies focused on the local context and having a direct impact on communities, based on the experiences of rural and border schools in interpreting and appropriating the recent educational policy.

a) Schools understood as agents of local development

The results allow us to identify practices originating in schools that promote community-based citizenship education, often resulting from an analysis carried out by schools to respond, on their own initiative, to local problems, but also as a way of building bridges and creating meaningful action for the community:

The projects that the school formally has are a great bridge between the school and the community, because these projects are not only feasible in terms of activities developed at school, but they also have an impact outside, on families and the community, which is the way that students also have to show their citizenship and civic engagement. (Coordinating Teacher 10, Centre)

The findings indicate that schools frequently develop community-based practices aimed at local development and well-being through citizenship education. Such practices often originate from diagnostic processes undertaken by schools to address locally identified problems, reflecting both an autonomous capacity for initiative and a commitment to contextual responsiveness. At the same time, they function as mechanisms for building connections between schools and their surrounding communities, thereby generating opportunities for meaningful and sustainable action (Cedering & Whilborg, 2020; Silva, 2023). This is evident in the development of initiatives such as solidarity campaigns, school-based civic clubs, and locally driven projects promoted by schools to foster civic, cultural, and ecological development within their communities.

b) Local stakeholders as co-agents of local development

We could also identify dynamics of co-action between schools and wider communities, particularly through joint involvement in initiatives that were either co-created or emerged from school–community or community–school mobilisation processes:

We also work in partnership with the City Council on a project related to the park. We work hard to preserve the park, which is very important to them. They have a sense of belonging and see the park as something that must be preserved. Therefore, we try to get them to care about preserving what is such a rich, extensive park, which is, in essence, an asset for the entire region. (Coordinating Teacher 33, North)

Within these dynamics, public institutions, such as municipal councils, and non-governmental organisations (including social, cultural, and civic associations) play a pivotal role (Silva et al., 2014). In the context of networking and partnership, these institutions may act either as funding partners, particularly local government bodies, or as co-facilitating partners, such as cultural and social organisations. Their significance extends beyond the provision of resources: they also support the sharing of educational activities within a framework that connects school-based and community-based knowledge. Furthermore, they function as key spaces for collective action in local development (e.g., Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Schafft, 2016; Henriot-Van Zanten, 1994), fostering coordinated efforts aimed at both community development and civic engagement in addressing local issues (Davies et al., 2014; Jerome, 2012).

c) Young people as agents for local development

Considering that school communities, educational communities, and broader local communities are also composed of young people, it becomes evident that community-based practices in CE not only foster youth participation but also seek to strengthen their agency and influence within these contexts. This is particularly visible in citizenship education initiatives employing participatory methodologies, whereby young people design, implement, and oversee projects and initiatives aimed at addressing locally identified problems:

The class project is a volunteer project that they designed to collect food, clothing, etc., to provide for some of the needs that exist in the community. I don't know if you've heard about the problem here with our factory [name of factory]. It is one of the largest employers here in the area, it has gone through some difficult times and is still going through difficult times. (Coordinating Teacher 10, Centre)

Promoting youth agency within their communities – by recognising young people as citizens and as actors in relational and community action through

project-based methodologies – may constitute a practice that not only acknowledges their aspirations but also functions as an instrument of community intervention. Within this framework, the school extends its role by fostering youth agency, positioning itself as a space where citizenship education and participatory approaches can converge to empower young people as active citizens and to facilitate the exercise of citizenship in the community sphere (Silva & Silva, 2024; Silva & Silva, 2025).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results showed how schools and their actors engage in community intervention dynamics, with citizenship education (CE) emerging both as a guiding principle for collective action and as a context for developing responses to locally identified challenges. These findings highlight not only the extent to which place can shape educational choices and practices, an issue particularly salient in rural contexts (Beach et al., 2019; Silva, 2023), but also how local specificities can serve as a pedagogical foundation for CE and for the development of active youth citizenship and participation skills (e.g., Annette, 2008; Jerome, 2012; Gruenewald, 2003a). At this intersection, schools can adopt a civic, context-responsive role, embedding educational practices within the social, cultural, and territorial dynamics of their communities.

When focusing specifically on rural schools, the study further shows that community-based CE serves both pedagogical and social purposes. Through the implementation of maximalist and place-based approaches to CE, and initiatives that function simultaneously as democratic arenas and as mechanisms for addressing local emergencies and lived realities, schools provide students with meaningful, situated learning experiences while reinforcing collective well-being. These dynamics suggest that schools through maximalist and local-based approaches to CE can act as an important catalyst for community development, particularly in territories where public services and civic infrastructures are limited (Silva, 2024; Silva & Silva, 2025).

The data also indicate that place-based practices in citizenship education may emerge from processes of mutual mobilisation, while in other instances they possess the capacity to mobilise local actors. In this sense, and recognising the central role that schools often assume in rural settings, CE can play a pivotal role in shaping local community architectures and local mobilisation for democratic culture. This occurs both through the actions of individual institutional agents and through collective initiatives that mobilise and are mobilised to respond to locally identified needs (e.g., Breslin & Dufour, 2006; Davies et al., 2014). Such dynamics contribute significantly to the development of young people's civic competences but also strengthens broader democratic culture and resilience in the community.

At the policy level, these findings highlight the need for educational policies that recognise and support the distinct social and civic functions of rural schools. Policies that promote intersectoral collaboration, allocate resources

for locally-based initiatives, and value the community-building role of schools can strengthen their capacity to act as democratic anchors in sparsely populated areas. Such policy frameworks should also acknowledge that rural schools are not merely instructional sites but pivotal community institutions whose actions contribute to social cohesion and population well-being.

Regarding the methodological limitations of the study, the use of a non-probabilistic sampling strategy limits the generalisability of the findings. These limitations underscore the need for further research using diversified methods and broader samples to deepen and refine the insights presented here. Despite these constraints, the findings offer meaningful recommendations for rural schools and communities for community development. Schools should be encouraged to strengthen partnerships with local organisations, strengthen mechanisms for youth community participation, and embed CE within ongoing local development strategies. Ensuring sustained institutional support for community-oriented projects is also essential. Together, these measures can enable rural schools not only to enhance pupils' civic learning but also to reinforce the vitality, cohesion, and democratic capacity of their communities.

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