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## THE ROLE OF DEBATE IN COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIC AWARENESS OF YOUNG PEOPLE – A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS<sup>4</sup>

### Uloga debate u kognitivnom razvoju i razvoju građanske svesti mladih – kvalitativna analiza

*ABSTRACT: Debate as a method is increasingly being utilised in both school and out-of-school settings, aiming to develop certain cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills, while also equipping young people with the competencies to actively participate in their social and political communities. Education through debate, as a distinctive form of non-formal education, is thus becoming an integral part of young people's lives. The development of critical thinking, heightened self-esteem, improved rhetoric, organizational prowess, effective presentation, and argumentation abilities, along with the fostering of citizenship, play a pivotal role in aiding underprivileged youth to become more constructive contributors to their communities. These proficiencies and goals, demonstrated within this paper, exemplify the diverse skill set that debate fosters. This paper brings the results of a qualitative study conducted across four countries (Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, and the Netherlands) regarding the advantages of debate. It offers empirical evidence that one of the ways to have responsible, conscious, aware, vigilant, and self-confident citizens is by incorporating debate in their (non)formal education.*

**KEY WORDS:** *civic awareness, debate, education, cognitive development, youth*

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**ABSTRAKT:** *Debata kao metod se uveliko koristi u školskim i vanškolskim okruženjima sa ciljem da se razvijaju određene kognitivne, emocionalne i interpersonalne vještine, ali i da se mladi ljudi osposobe za aktivno učešće u društvenoj i političkoj zajednici. Debatno obrazovanje kao specifičan oblik neformalnog obrazovanja tako postaje sastavni deo života mladih. Kritičko razmišljanje, podizanje samopoštovanja, bolje retoričke vještine, vještine organizacije, prezentacije i argumentacije, razvoj građanstva, pomoć siromašnim mladima da postanu funkcionalniji članovi zajednica su samo neke od vještina i ciljeva koji se razvijaju u debati, kao što je prikazano u ovom radu. Ovaj rad donosi rezultate kvalitativne studije sprovedene u četiri zemlje (Hrvatska, Slovenija, Poljska i Holandija) o prednostima debate i pruža empirijski dokaz da je jedan od načina da imamo odgovorne, svesne, budne i samopouzdanе građane inkorporiranje debate u njihovo (ne)formalno obrazovanje.*

**KLJUČNE REČI:** građanska svest, debata, obrazovanje, kognitivni razvoj, mladi

## 1. Introduction

Debate (practice) is an old teaching-learning strategy dating back to Chou Dynasty (1122–255 B.C. and Ancient Greece (Huryin, 1986, 266) that presupposes an established position, either pro or con, on an issue, assertion, proposition, or solution to a problem. Originally, debate was not seen as a competitive activity or extracurricular activity. It originates from various forms of philosophical discussions in ancient Greece and Indian philosophy, and later it was integrated into educational systems. On one hand, it is used as one of methods in a classroom for achieving pedagogical goals. On the other hand, it functions as an extracurricular activity known as competitive debate (Freely and Steinberg, 2009; Huryin, 1986). Within the realm of competitive debate, the winner is determined by assessing which team adeptly presents oral arguments, swaying the audience to align with its overarching viewpoint (Fluharty and Ross, 1996). Students embark on a comprehensive exploration and research of the issue, employing reasoning, logic, and analysis to forge their perspectives. To attain this, students engage in constructive teamwork to unify their position and eliminate redundancy. This mechanism allows for taking on a position, expression of opinions/arguments while maintaining composure during analytical rebuttals.

This brief introduction shows that contemporary educational systems are compatible with the idea of debate. However, texts on benefits and the role of debate are sporadic, limited in their explanatory power as they rarely rely on empirical data, with conclusions scattered across different disciplines. In addition to this, the scarcity of research on the application of debate for civic activism or societal transformation<sup>5</sup> in Eastern Europe and European Union

5 Societal transformation is here understood as the „underlying notion of the way society and culture change in response to such factors as economic growth, war, or political upheavals“ (Castels, 2001: 15). While various countries follow distinct transformational trajectories, for the purpose of this paper the concept refers to a complex adaptation of different subsystems of society to new environmental, cultural, political, economic influences. Authors are aware of the existence of differences in the process of social transformation in various contexts. For this reason, we perceive debate as a method through which it is possible to address the challenges of social transformation that arise in different contexts.

(EU) member states has resulted in limited data for the development of debate-based methodology in youth work and non-formal education, with the existing evidence being predominantly anecdotal (Akerman and Neale, 2011). Likewise, despite an abundance of research on critical thinking in education (Buchberger et al., 2017; McPeck, 2016; Pithers and Soden, 2000), studies into the relationship between debate and critical thinking are predominantly focused on Western Europe and the US (Freely and Steinberg, 2009). Hence, despite the existence of research on the benefits of debate as a method conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom, caution must be exercised in applying the conclusions to our reality as the transferability of the research results to the European context remains unclear. Consequently, even though the efficacy of debate as a pedagogical approach has been substantiated, further research is imperative to unravel its adaptability within the European framework and to delineate the primary outcomes to be anticipated. This pursuit is vital for comprehending how debate methodology can be effectively integrated and harnessed within the European context.

The objective of this paper is to provide insights into the main outcomes of competitive debate. To achieve this objective, an in-depth analysis of the existing literature was conducted, forming the foundation for a qualitative research study carried out across four European countries, namely Croatia, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovenia. Through this approach, we seek to shed light on the complexity of competitive debate and its role in various aspects of youth development. Specifically, this paper endeavours to address the following question – how do young people and debate trainers in named countries perceive the role of debate in cognitive development and development of civic awareness of young people?

The paper is divided into two main sections. The first section provides a comprehensive summary of prior research findings concerning the diverse benefits that competitive debate can offer to young people. The second section entails an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the data acquired from the qualitative research study conducted in four European countries.

## **2. Debate practice and cognitive development of youth**

The traditional classroom setting offers limited opportunities for nurturing soft skills, such as communication skills, critical thinking, and teamwork, which have become increasingly important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century labour market and are essential across most professional environments. A study conducted by Rosero (2012) revealed that four out of ten recent graduates faced rejection during selection processes due to their lack of relevant soft skills. As a result, formal education should present an arena for developing skills and competencies needed to prepare for the ever-changing labour market (OECD, 2018). A growing body of research highlights the role of debate as a teaching method capable of enhancing the learning process and influencing educational outcomes

(Koklanaris et al., 2008; Vo and Morris, 2006; Mezuk et al., 2011). Additionally, debate serves to develop cognitive and interpersonal skills (Kennedy, 2007; Littlefield, 2001), along with contributing to various facets of individual youth development (Fisher et al., 2001; Hall, 2011).

The majority of research on debate in the educational context focuses on the advantages it possesses compared to traditional teaching methods. Interactive teaching methods, like debate, require more active student involvement and increase the level of students' responsibility for learning (Darby, 2007). These factors, in turn, exert a positive influence on students' learning outcomes (Nicol and Boyle, 2003), enhance meta-cognition and enrich the classroom environment (Jensen et al., 2009). The process of learning becomes more effective when students are actively engaged in acquiring knowledge, prompting some scholars to argue that the value of debate as an educational method lies in its ability to engage students (Snider and Schnurer, 2002). Furthermore, an expanding body of evidence suggests that participating in debate can significantly enhance academic achievement across various domains. Mezuk et al. (2011) found that students who participated in debate were more likely to finish high school, outperformed their counterparts on standardised tests assessing college readiness and demonstrated more substantial improvements in their cumulative grade point average compared to peers of similar standing. These findings underscore pivotal role that debate can have in fostering student learning and knowledge retention, even among at-risk students (Anderson and Mezuk, 2012). Munakata (2010), asserts that debate contributes to heightened motivation and interest among students towards the subject matter being taught, while Kennedy (2009) notes that students perceive the debate as an innovative and informative teaching method.

Debate also serves as a valuable tool for developing cognitive skills essential for more successful learning, including critical thinking, meta-cognition and learning strategies. However, the prevailing body of research primarily delves into the influence of debate on the enhancement of critical thinking abilities, as they are frequently recognised as one of the foremost advantages of engaging in debate (Aclan and Aziz, 2015; Darby, 2007; Kennedy, 2007; Jugdev et al., 2004), while the impact of debate on the development of other cognitive skills remains relatively unexplored. According to Burbules and Berk (1999), critical thinking includes both a disposition to seek reasons, truth and evidence for topics and arguments which are being analysed, as well as the capacity to do so. Fostering critical thinking skills in this regard is widely considered one of the most important outcomes of education. However, some teaching methods seem to be more efficient than others for achieving this goal. Evidence on the influence of debate on critical thinking stems from both qualitative and quantitative research, with qualitative studies yielding more definitive outcomes. While a meta-analysis conducted by Follert and Colbert (1983) indicated no correlation between debate participation and critical thinking gains, Allen et al. (1999), in

their own meta-analysis, discovered that participation in debate training led to improvements in critical thinking. Meanwhile, insights gleaned from student experiences, through interviews and focus groups, reveal that critical thinking and analytical skills are often perceived as among the most common benefits of partaking in debate (Littlefield, 2001; Hall, 2011). Despite a growing body of research examining the role of debate in development of critical thinking skills, there remains a need for further empirical evidence regarding its significance. This involves both conducting more rigorous experimental studies and disentangling the causal mechanisms between debate participation and critical thinking skills.

The interactive and collaborative nature of debate makes it unique in the ability to foster interpersonal skills. Indeed, communication skills have been recognised as the most substantial benefit of participating in debate in several studies (Williams et al., 2001; Littlefield, 2001; Hall, 2011). Participating in debate provides opportunities for developing students' empathy and perspective taking by considering different viewpoints and arguments, as well as defending viewpoints other than their own (Kennedy, 2007). Furthermore, debaters also report increased respect among students (Hall, 2011) and boost in confidence (Fisher et al., 2001; Aclan and Aziz, 2015) as benefits of debate. The aforementioned benefits are at the core of social and emotional development, and as such, they can contribute to building inclusive societies. It has been argued that debate can result in confrontation (Tumposky, 2004), which can lead to aggressive communication and the escalation of conflicts. This, in turn, compromises the acquisition of interpersonal competencies (De Conti, 2013). Participants also need to be able to receive corrective feedback (Aclan and Aziz, 2015), which requires listening skills and emotion regulation. While research on the role of debate in conflict management is scarce, there are indications that participating in competitive debate fosters the development of interpersonal and conflict management competencies, and does not promote dominant communication, i.e. engaging in persuasive communication or using power and self-authority to win arguments (De Conti, 2014). Additionally, Bellon (2000) and Akerman and Neale (2011) concluded that if debate is used in a non-English speaking context, it can lead to an improvement in the communication skills of students in English language.

### 3. Debate practice and development of civic awareness

There is an extensive literature examining the development of civic awareness of young people and the role that debate plays within this context. Socially wise, engaging in debate holds significant advantages for young people, given its capacity to nurture social connections and community bonds. As such, debate programs can provide a sense of belonging among young people and create opportunities for social interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds (Putnam, 2000). Moreover, debate serves as a platform through which young

people can partake in collective action and advocacy, representing a form of civic engagement that is important for social development (Putnam, 2000).

Hall (2006) and Zwarenstejn (2012) provide the most comprehensive overview of positive benefits of debate across various dimensions of citizenship competence, as crucial component for political development within democratic societies. According to research conducted by Hall (2006) debate provides a range of qualities and capacities to young people. These qualities and capacities are grouped in categories such as sense of social purpose and affiliation with society, connection between public political process and private lives, understanding of democracy and civic participation, ability to balance between support for authority and willingness to dissent, capacity for autonomous choices, tolerance towards other opinions and respect for others, and belief in the ability to make a difference. In addition, they encompass most of the aspects of citizenship competence including knowledge, skills, cognitive abilities, attitudes, emotions, values, motivation and ethics (Rychen and Salganik, 2003).

Next, Zwarenstejn (2012) argues that debate contributes to three developmental domains of political education – political knowledge, political identity and political skills. The author claims that all students experience increase in their political knowledge regardless their motivation to participate, whether driven by competitiveness or intrinsic motivation. In addition, within this domain, the author highlights that other similar activities, such as simulations or participation in student councils, do not provide the same learning experience as debate. Uniquely tied to the nature of debate, the author acknowledges the necessity for students to switch sides and gain insights into multiple sides of an argument, leading to a deeper knowledge. Other authors (Leek, 2016; Mirra et al., 2016; Wade Zorwick and Wade, 2016) also acknowledge this very advantage. Arguably, the most important improvement in political motivation and identity, as emphasised by Zwarenstejn (2012), is the potential for developing an authentic identity through processes of formation, reformation and solidification. Also, an important part of identity lies in debaters' ability to deconstruct authority and position themselves within broader political landscape, transcending mere partisanship. Finally, debaters cultivate a range of distinct skills useful in political and civic engagement, including research proficiency, strategy development and implementation, argument construction, utilization of civil discourse, and the art of compromise. These competencies prove valuable across dimensions of their political or civic engagement.

The body of literature discussing civic awareness, with a particular emphasis on citizenship competence, is closely related with the concept of critical thinking. As previously noted, development of the critical thinking skills is acknowledged as one of the outcomes of participating in debate, and it can be viewed as a cornerstone of democracy (Gainer, 2012). Authors underscore that forensic activities foster critical thinking and equip students to actively engage as full-fledged members of society. They further recognise that these activities provide students with practical skills applicable in real-world scenarios (Allen et al., 1999; Bellon, 2000, Keller et al. 2001). The main argument presented by Dam and

Volman (2004) is the assertion that critical thinking constitutes a crucial part of the citizenship competence. By promoting active learning, stimulating interaction and facilitating learning based on the real-life situations, critical thinking prepares students to contribute effectively to society and engage in critical participation within their communities. This perspective is shared by Zorwick and Wade (2016, p. 438), who claim “classroom advocacy and debate promote democratic citizenship by supporting the development of critical thinking and communication skills.” Furthermore, Darby (2007, p. 1) posits that engaging in debate not only enables students to grasp factual information, theories, and techniques but also offers them “an opportunity for applying knowledge through role-playing while demonstrating their ideas, values, and attitudes.” One of these aspects is certainly citizenship, or as Bartanen and Littlefield (2015, p. 166) point out “from the beginning of competitive speech in the late nineteenth century, enthusiasts valued debate for the training in citizenship it offered.”

Therefore, in our discussion later we focus on two aspects of the development of civic awareness. The first is societal, that is capacity to nurture social connections and community bonds, and the second is citizenship competence as presented earlier in this section.

#### 4. Method

The majority of existing research focusing on this aspect employs qualitative methodology to delve deeper into the benefits of debate for the development of citizenship competence (Mirra et al., 2016; Cridland-Hughes, 2012; Hall, 2006, Zwarenstejn, 2012). Conduction of interviews (Mirra et al., 2016) with debaters provided insight into the profound influence of debate on their political and community engagement, revealing their heightened ability to identify societal biases and respond effectively. Furthermore, discussion of the classroom debate on controversial topics and its benefits have led to the conclusions that such debates develop critical thinking, democratic values, and a readiness among students to actively engage in social matters, challenging injustice in their surroundings (Mirra et al., 2016; Cridland-Hughes, 2012; Hess, 2009). These findings underscore that participation in debate programs not only improves political knowledge of debaters, but also equips them with skills that empower them to take appropriate action within their communities.

Our research was conducted as part of the Erasmus+ project – NAME OF THE PROJECT. The focus groups were conducted in 2021 across four participating countries– Croatia, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia. The research aimed to explore the perspectives of both debate trainers and debaters, guided by the central research question: To what aspects of cognitive development and development of civic awareness does debate contribute? The focus groups in these four countries encompassed 50 participants – 24 debate trainers and 26 debaters, equally distributed in each of the four countries. All debaters who participated in the focus groups are in the age group of 15 to 19. Their experience with debate participation varies. A smaller portion of them,

six participants, has just begun their participation in debates. Others have experience ranging from one to six years. In the case of debate trainers, all of them have previous experience in debating. They work as debate coaches for a period ranging from one to fifteen years. Among them, the majority works as debate coaches for three to five years.

Morgan (1996: 130) defines “focus groups as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher.” The main goal that is intended to be achieved is an in-depth discussion through which it is possible to identify the participants’ viewpoints regarding a certain topic or specific issue. As Morgan (1996) emphasises the main strength of focus groups lies not only in discovering what participants have to say, but also in attempting to understand the underlying reasons for their behaviour. This is possible due to the mutual interaction of participants and “researcher’s ability to ask participants themselves for comparisons among their experiences and views, rather than aggregating individual data in order to speculate about whether or why the interviewees differ” (Morgan, 1996: 139). Precisely due to the potential for mutual participant interaction and gaining a deeper insight into their experiences, we decided to conduct focus groups. This method allowed us to comprehend participants’ perspectives on the learning process through participation in debate, as well as the main education outcomes in their personal development.

The focus group protocols for both groups of participants were structured into four sections: general questions, questions related to the organizational aspects of debate, questions about the benefits and drawbacks of participating in debate, and concluding with suggestions for the implementation of debate methodology. Certain questions were slightly different for each particular group in order to grasp their specific experiences and insight. This was particularly the case within general questions and questions related to organizational aspects. The focus groups were conducted in participants’ mother tongue aiming to facilitate a more fluid expression of participants’ thoughts and experiences. The sessions were recorded and subsequently transcribed and translated to English, enabling further analysis of the gathered materials.

The participants were presented with broad questions (such as “What do you think are the competencies required to be successful in debate?”, “In what way does debate influence the development of these competencies?”, “Has participating in debate had an impact on your personal life? If so, in what way?”, “Has participating in debate had any influence on your political or/community engagement? If so, in what way?”) and they were able to elaborate their answers. For the purpose of writing this paper inductive coding was carried out in a way that codes were derived from data. The selection of thematic analysis as the research method was determined based on the research question and project objectives. More specifically, we focused our analysis on two broad themes – the cognitive and civic awareness aspects of debate participation. Hence, we conducted thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and present patterns (themes) inherent within the data. This approach enables the exploration of various facets



of the research topic (Poljak Trako, 2016 according to Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each theme therefore captures a significant aspect of the data in relation to the research goal and/or patterned responses or meaning. (Poljak Trako, 2016, according to Braun and Clarke, 2006). For data processing and analysis, the qualitative analysis software NVivo 11 was employed. This computer program facilitated the systematic examination of the data, aiding in organizing and drawing insights from the collected information.

## 5. Results and discussion

The primary objective of this research was to delve into the perceptions of young people and debate trainers regarding competitive debate's impact on cognitive development and development of civic awareness of young people. The present study examines participants' responses concerning both the advantages and drawbacks they associate with their involvement in debate. Furthermore, it delves into their viewpoints on the ways in which debate activities contribute to their cognitive development and improvement of civic awareness. To this end, our analysis focuses on the participants' perspectives concerning the role that debate practice plays in these two aspects of youth development. Through this approach, we aim to provide an in-depth understanding of how debate practice can foster cognitive development and development of civic awareness among young people. In the following sections of the paper, we present the research findings clustered into the two aforementioned categories. We will first consider the responses from focus groups regarding the role of debate practice in the cognitive development, and then consider development of civic awareness.

### 5.1. Cognitive development

The literature review provided us with three different areas regarding debate and cognitive development – debate as a way of developing cognitive skills, debate as a way of developing interpersonal and communication skills, and debate as a teaching method. The first important area of cognitive development is related to the development of cognitive skills essential for more successful learning process. These skills encompass critical thinking, metacognition, and the adoption of effective learning strategies. We were interested in the competencies that the participants perceived as fundamental for achieving success in debate and how engagement in debate shapes the development of these competencies.

One of the cognitive skills recognised as important by focus group participants were critical thinking skills. Both debate coaches and debaters provided insights regarding almost all parts of the critical thinking process and comments on critical thinking in general. In that context, critical thinking skills used in debate encompass defining the problem, evaluating source credibility, identifying and challenging assumptions, identifying and addressing inconsistencies, and prioritizing the relevance and salience of diverse argument elements (Doody & Condon, 2012). The participants made clear that debate improves their ability to deliver concise and compelling arguments pertaining to

specific issues. Additionally, they pointed out that debate equips them with the aptitude to dissect problems comprehensively, considering multiple dimensions. For instance, a participant from Poland noted, *“The ability to perceive the world not in black and white, but to see different colours, because the two sides require that”* (Debate coach, Poland). Related to that, the participants mentioned that they learned to assess the source credibility, validate information, to assess the objectivity of the information and distinguish it from subjective opinions, and develop an awareness of the necessity to examine issues from diverse perspectives.

Regarding the recognition of inconsistencies, the participants mentioned the ability of following the topic holistically, maintaining awareness of ongoing developments and critically assessing the substance of presented arguments to gauge their coherence. As some of them mentioned: *“You learn to not take things at face value, even if someone sounds smarter or wiser, you learn to really look at the substance of what they are saying and to what parameters they apply.”* (Debate coach, the Netherlands). Moreover, related to the prioritizing of the relevance and salience of various points within an argument, the participants mentioned the ability to arrange information, recognise its core content, and exhibit precision to yield unambiguous conclusions. The statement captures this sentiment: *“I think that in general the thing that debate teaches us is to focus on what is important, to be as much precise as we can be regarding a certain problem. To be in medias res and to focus on important things, which leads to better conclusions.”* (Debater, Croatia)

Furthermore, the literature underscored how interactive and collaborative nature of debate makes it unique in the ability to foster interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. This encompasses aptitudes such as communication skills, empathy, perspective taking, fostering respect among peers, and bolstering self-confidence. These skills are not only necessary for participating in debate but play an important role in other contexts as well. Consequently, our inquiry delved into the potential influence of debate participation on the personal lives of the participants and, if applicable, the manner in which it manifested.

The responses garnered in the focus groups corroborate prior theoretical and empirical discoveries. Particularly prominent among the discussed themes were the development of communication skills and self-confidence. The participants explained that their public speaking skills underwent marked improvement, as they managed to surmount their fears and cultivate a newfound sense of assurance. Both debate coaches and debaters made clear that improvement in their communication skills emerged as the foremost benefit among their interpersonal skills. They recognise that they are more decisive to speak in public, to express their opinion when it is necessary, to have better communication with their peers and professors, and to articulate their own thoughts in a more concise way. Remarkably, the participants across various partner countries provided similar insights: *“They teach this openness: it is very important that a young person can, in any situation, be more open, say something, when something happens.”* (Debate coach, Poland); *“Now everything is public, you have to promote yourself constantly in public, debaters know this much better.”* (Debate coach, Slovenia).

Closely related, a boost of self-confidence is recognised. The participants point out that the structure, logical reasoning and enhanced rapid thinking that were gained through debate training provided them with higher confidence. Next to that, some participants added that they improved their English language skills, listening skills and teamwork skills. The improvement of English language skills is often an outcome of engaging in international competitions and reading the sources to prepare the cases. Listening skills are an important part of debate to follow the argumentation and prepare motions at the competition. Furthermore, teamwork skills are built within preparatory activities within debate clubs and at the competitions. The participants did not mention cases related to aggressive communication and escalation of conflicts – factors that can potentially undermine the acquisition of interpersonal competencies. However, some of them pointed out that the pressure related to competitions might have a negative effect on their confidence if they do not perform as expected. Lastly, we were interested how participants perceived the advantages of participating in debate compared to traditional teaching methods. Among the three topics of cognitive development, this topic was the least represented within the answers provided by debate coaches and debaters provided. The debate coaches highlighted that debaters are more active in comparison with other students, and that debate as a method has certain advantages in comparison with traditional learning methods: *“I think debate is a much more engaging method in nature, ...makes you think about certain things in a problem-solving way, I think is very beneficial more than just like getting information and then not knowing how to process that information.”* (Debate coach, the Netherlands). In addition, they pointed out that participation in debate activities had a positive impact on students’ Matura exams and improved their learning outcomes through development of their learning approaches. Debaters provided a similar insight. They emphasised the different approach that debate brings in comparison with traditional learning methods, along with greater student activity and benefits of active participation for their learning outcomes. For instance, a debater from Croatia highlighted – *“When we are included in a discussion, then I memorise much more easily because I am more focused.”* (Debater, Croatia).

The insights from focus groups discussions with debate coaches and debaters corroborate findings from previous research and literature – the participants recognised the benefits of debate participation in various aspects of cognitive development. More importantly, the participants stressed cognitive development as one of the most important outcomes of debate participation. This finding carries noteworthy implications for youth cognitive development, as it seems that participating in debate can improve self-image and interpersonal skills necessary for thriving in everyday life. Furthermore, debate is perceived as important for fostering critical thinking skills. These skills are crucial, not only in the educational context as a prerequisite for independent learning, but for the societal development and development of citizenship competence as well.

## 5.2. Development of civic awareness

The societal dimension of civic awareness of debate has received little attention in existing studies focusing mainly on topics such as social development during adolescence (Fine, 2004) and the empowerment of specific groups of young people, including those facing disadvantaged circumstances (Gorski, 2020). Thus, our study aimed to examine whether the participants recognise these or other aspects of societal dimension as potential benefits of engaging in debate.

The analysis of the focus group data indicates that the participants did not explicitly mention the previously identified societal aspects related to debate, such as social empowerment or the development of critical consciousness. However, the participants did highlight the importance of debate in facilitating positive social relationships and establishing meaningful connections with others, which, in turn can contribute to broader societal development. This sentiment is evident through the following quotes: *“I’ve made so many friends that I felt like I could connect with very well because we had like the same hobbies, same interests”* (Debate coach, the Netherlands); *“But even more crucial, I think, is networking. It’s something they learn to work with and make connections with people who are thinking about similar things.”* (Debate coach, Slovenia); *“When you are surrounded with debaters you will meet more eccentric people, and thus you will feel free to be eccentric. And most likely people will talk openly and therefore you will feel more accepted.”* (Debate coach, Croatia).

The quotes from debate coaches in the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Croatia emphasise the significance of debate in fostering connections with individuals who share similar interests and creating an environment where young people feel free to express themselves. Additionally, the opportunity to connect with a broader community was highlighted as a significant sociological aspect of debate. These findings suggest that while the societal dimensions of debate may not be explicitly discussed, they may nonetheless be important factors contributing to young people’s development.

Even though this research did not support the prevailing literature on societal aspect of debate as young people did not explicitly discuss societal aspect or the empowerment of marginal groups, the collected data clearly demonstrate that young people are concerned with sociability, forming friendship, and cultivating a sense of belonging. These topics are by no means foreign to academic literature focusing on youth (Maria, 2020; Riley, 2019; Hartap, 1993).

The possible explanation why the societal aspect could stem from the fact that specific cognitive skills garner more recognition by participants, whereas societal aspect tends to be more abstract and thus less apparent to individuals. However, citizenship competence as part of the civic awareness development, which we discuss in subsequent paragraphs, is vastly recognised by both debaters and debate coaches as an aspect that is improved by participation in debate. Citizenship competence and cognitive skills are a prerequisite for building a democratic and tolerant society, which is why debate practice can certainly contribute to societal aspect as well.

Regarding *citizenship competence*, we were interested whether participation in debate had any influence on participants' political or community engagement. The literature on debate provided us with an insight that citizenship competence is closely related to critical thinking. As established earlier, critical thinking is recognised as one of the key outcomes of participating in debate, priming debaters to become active participants in a democratic society (Gainer, 2012). Thus, Dam and Volman (2004) argue that critical thinking is a crucial prerequisite for development of the citizenship competence, given its role in promoting active learning, stimulating interaction, and invigorating learning based on real-life situations. Furthermore, other scholars (Mirra et al., 2016; Cridland-Hughes, 2012; Hess, 2009) also discussed the role of debate in building civic competence. They conclude that debate fosters the development of critical thinking, democratic values, and readiness of students to become socially active and to challenge injustice in their surroundings. As mentioned, Zwarenstejn (2012) provides the most systematic overview by arguing that debate contributes to three developmental domains of political education – political knowledge, political identity, and political skills.

The participants within the focus groups recognised certain elements of debate outcomes relevant to development of civic awareness of debaters. They argue that it is almost impossible to find debaters who are not politically informed, since they usually prepare motions related to different political issues and consult various sources of information. This sentiment is clearly reflected in statements such as – *“Debating really helped me with learning. I gain more knowledge about certain topics. My school never really covered politics and economics. And I research a lot about these things when I prepare my motions.”* (Debater, the Netherlands). During the process, debaters take into account the position of different social groups, which consequently broadens the range of perspectives surrounding a given political or policy-related issue.

Next, some of the participants mentioned that participation in debate leads toward more engagement in community and local politics, as can be seen from the following quotation: *“Yes, I definitely think that it [debate] strongly affects the activation of young people during and after high school. I can confirm this based on different examples – we have girls who were debaters and who engaged, very actively, in local politics. Or even European.”* (Debate coach, Croatia). Thus, besides gaining political knowledge, they realise that participation in debate improved the political skills of debaters, too. The debaters pointed out that they got many opportunities to learn first-hand about certain movements and political parties, since they are frequently invited to participate at certain events, such as: *“It was the Violence Against Women Week and we had some kind of a small conference in Rotterdam. We were the first people that the school went to, to see if we wanted to participate in it. So, we got those kinds of cool opportunities to learn more about certain movements and how they play a role in our governments.”* (Debater, the Netherlands). Furthermore, the participants raised certain arguments regarding the shaping of political identity. They explained that participation in debate provided them with a political opinion that would have certainly been different had they not been engaged in debate activities.

It is clear that debate activities have an impact on development of civic awareness of participants and their engagement in local communities. The focus group participants confirmed the findings provided through the literature review and stressed the importance of debate activities in this segment. These findings are important, especially considering the longstanding challenge of low political participation among young individuals. By participating in debate, young people become more informed about political options and shape their political opinions, which in turn encourages them to become more involved in politics.

## 6. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to synthesise and elaborate the main insights regarding perception of debaters and debate trainers on the role of debate in cognitive development and development of civic awareness of young people. Hence, the idea behind was to enrich the theoretical notions on debate by offering qualitative data that sheds the light on the role of debate in development of young people.

The literature review highlighted that debate individually, socially and politically relevant activity that can contribute to the development of young people in a multitude of ways. As seen from the paper, while debate undeniably develops political competence, its potential to serve as a platform for young people to explore complex issues and develop critical thinking skills should not be underestimated. Through debate, young people learn how to research, analyse, and synthesise information in order to construct an argument (Mead, 1934). Furthermore, as demonstrated, debate can foster the development of communication and presentation skills, which can be valuable assets in various social contexts. Thus, debate can be seen as an important activity that can contribute to the development of critical knowledge and skills that are valued in society. However, this can perpetuate social inequalities, as access to debate programs can contribute to the development of skills and knowledge that are valued in higher education and professional contexts. Thus, debates can also play a significant role in shaping the broader social landscape and perpetuating or challenging social hierarchies.

Also, we need to emphasise that participation in debate education has long-term benefits for young people. It has been established that they have a higher likelihood of completing high school and are more prepared for higher education (Mezuk et al., 2011). Moreover, the civic engagement that comes with participating in debates is associated with greater participation and involvement in the community in adulthood (Duke et al., 2009), and it is emphasised that through debating, young people acquire communication skills that are important for various careers. From this, it can be concluded that engaging in debates provides individuals with a solid foundation for future educational achievements, an active role in the community, and business opportunities.

In our research, the participants provided insight into both cognitive development and development of civic awareness as the result of the debate.

Most of the insights are in the line with conclusions drawn from the literature review. Cognitive development is characterised by the improvement of the critical thinking and various interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. In the context of development of civic awareness our participants had a slightly different perspective than the one obtained through the literature review. They pointed out the importance of the meeting new people, improved relationship with their peers and mutual support. This stands in contrast to the literature review, where the predominant findings are related to the adolescence development and empowerment of specific group of youth. In the end, the participants emphasised the improvement of political knowledge, political skills, and development of political opinion.

The focus groups with the debate coaches and debaters from Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, and the Netherlands provided us with certain insights that help us to understand the role of debate and its influence on different aspects of participants' lives. These insights provide general overview, and it would be needed to conduct quantitative research in order to gain some more concrete conclusions and differences among partner countries. However, even these general conclusions show that debate has significant role in different areas of youth development and provides participants with the important skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

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