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Compensating or reproducing?

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Creating Tomorrow

Compensating or Reproducing?

Students from Different Educational Tracks and the Role of School in Experiencing Democratic Citizenship

Hessel Nieuwelink, Geert ten Dam, & Paul Dekker

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Abstract

Studies show that adolescents that follow a higher educational track have more positive experiences than those of lower levels with aspects of democracy, such as decision-making or discussions. In our study, we focus on how adolescents from different educational tracks evaluate the various possibilities to experience democracy in daily life, and whether school is compensating for any difference therein. Data were gathered by interviewing 40 adolescents at two points in time (eighth and tenth grade). The results suggest that, especially in the later phase of secondary education, according to the experiences of adolescents it is apparent that school exacerbates instead of decreases social differences in society. Those in the higher educational track experience more often than those in the lower track having discussions and being encouraged to be socially and politically engaged. We discuss opportunities for teachers and for citizenship education to strengthen democratic socialization in both educational tracks.

Keywords: educational tracks, political socialization, equality, education, adolescents, democratic experience

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Young peoples' orientations towards society, politics, and democracy have been shown to be strongly related to their educational level (Eckstein, Noack, and Gniewosz, 2012; Munniksma, Dijkstra, Van Der Veen, Ledoux, Van De Werfhorst, and Ten Dam, 2017; Nieuwelink, Ten Dam, and Dekker, 2018; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, and Losito 2010; Torney-Purta, 2002). Those at higher levels are often more positive about democracy, are more willing to participate in politics, and display more political efficacy. Those at the lower levels, on the other hand, tend to be less interested in news and politics and to show more cynicism about politics. They have also been shown to be more critical of their own ability to make a difference. An important explanation for these differences lies in the experiences young people encounter when discussing news and politics in daily life. The opportunity structure for adolescents appears to differ by educational level. Young people with higher educational levels discuss politics more often, and their parents show more interest in politics and participate more often in civil society and politics (e.g., Nieuwelink, Ten Dam, and Dekker, 2018; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers, 2009). This disparity is problematic because it can hamper equal opportunities for participation in society and democracy (Dahl, 2006; Lijphart 1996; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011). In the perception of many policy makers and scholars, it is the task of schools to contribute to the citizenship competences of all students (Davies, 2008; Eurydice, 2012; Schulz et al., 2010). Various scholars have argued that schools should also compensate for inequalities in citizenship knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In particular, schools can broaden horizons for those who have less positive experiences with politics and democracy (Biesta, 2009; Janmaat, 2008; Veugelers, 2009; Van de Werfhorst, 2014). Some studies have shown that schools can indeed have an effect to this end, while other studies indicate that schools are actually reproducing or strengthening existing differences (Campbell, 2008; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2011; Metz and Younnis, 2005; Ichilov, 2003; Janmaat, Mostafa, and Hoskins, 2014; Nieuwelink, Dekker, Geijsel and Ten Dam, 2016b). Most of these previous studies have

a quantitative perspective, usually questioning the students once during their school career and often focusing on a single context (e.g., school, family, or peers).

This article reports on a qualitative longitudinal study of Dutch adolescents from different educational tracks. It explores the perceptions of how these young people view opportunities to develop democratic attitudes in everyday social settings. The aim of our study is to deepen our insight into the question of whether schools are providing opportunities to develop democratic attitudes for those who experience democracy less frequently in everyday life. Using a qualitative approach, we explore a more in-depth perspective on how adolescents, in their own words, perceive democracy in their daily lives. By taking into account different social contexts, we could investigate whether opportunities offered at school can compensate for society. The adolescents were interviewed twice in order to provide a more comprehensive view of the experiences that adolescents have with democracy in everyday life and indicate whether differences exist during various phases in their school career. In this study, we concentrate on everyday experiences with aspects of democracy. By doing so, we build on previous research showing that adolescents base their attitudes of democracy and politics partly on what they experience in daily life (Flanagan, 2013; Sapiro, 2004).

Developing Attitudes towards Democratic Citizenship

Citizenship is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the wish to promote the public good and to fight perceived injustices, the ability to deal with diverse interests and preferences, and the readiness to discuss with people holding opposing opinions. Citizenship is inextricably connected to democracy (Nieuwelink, Dekker, and Ten Dam, 2018; Geijsel et al., 2012; Hattam, 2016; Miller, 2000). Citizenship and democracy are connected to the political domain but, especially for adolescents, also to other spheres of life, such as the household, voluntary associations, and schools (Nieuwelink, Ten Dam, Geijsel, and Dekker, 2017; Sapiro, 2004). In

this article, we focus on three aspects of democracy and citizenship. First, we consider discussion, one of the features of democracy. Discussion entails exchanging arguments, disagreeing with and convincing others, and it helps social groups with different interests and opinions to live together in a peaceful way. The literature highlights the importance of debating political issues (Goodin, 2009; Held, 2006). Nonetheless, discussions can also involve situations where citizens form or share opinions about everyday issues, such as collective activities or organizational rules. Second, we focus on decision-making. There are different ways of coming to a decision. Democratic decisions can be made through voting, negotiation, or deliberation (Nieuwelink, Dekker, Geijsel, and Ten Dam, 2016a; Goodin, 2009; Lijphart, 1999). To clarify viewpoints or find common ground, it is important that all people concerned participate and voice their perspectives on collective problems. Therefore, social and political engagement is an important aspect of democracy, serving as a central means for people to make their voices heard and involve themselves in collective decision-making. Consequently, social and political engagement is the third aspect towards which we direct our focus (Ekman and Amnå, 2012).

People are not born with democratic DNA; they have to develop views, attitudes, and skills of democratic citizenship. To achieve this they need space and stimuli to practice and experience democracy. Adolescence is known to be a crucial period for acquiring democratic citizenship (Jennings, 2007; Sapiro, 2004; Sears and Levy, 2003). Studies show that many adolescents are positively oriented towards democracy. They prefer democracy over other forms of governing, such as oligarchy or aristocracy, and concur with underlying aspects of democracy, such as freedom of speech, equal rights for all, and free elections (Nieuwelink, et al., 2016a; Munniksma et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2010). Young people in general possess limited knowledge of politics and political institutions. Adolescent political participation is also rather limited (Elchardus, Herbots, and Spruyt, 2013; Munniksma et al., 2017).

Adolescents are, therefore, more positively oriented towards democracy and democratic values than they are towards formal political institutions (Nieuwelink, 2016a; Nieuwelink, et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2010). Furthermore, young people have different orientations towards democratic citizenship. Educational attainment is highly associated with these differences, even more so than factors such as gender or ethnicity. Students in college-bound track often possess more knowledge of democracy, citizenship, and politics than those in vocational tracks. Many studies show that those in the former track possess more positive views towards democracy than those in the latter, but some studies show the reverse relationship (Elchardus et al., 2013; Flanagan et al. 2005; Nieuwelink, et al., 2017; Nieuwelink et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2010).

That adolescents do not participate in the political domain does not mean that they do not acquire attitudes towards democracy and politics. Studies show that adolescents develop attitudes about democracy by following and discussing the news and by encountering aspects of democracy in everyday life. These experiences lay the basis for their attitudes towards democracy and politics and have been shown to have a lasting effect (Flanagan, 2013; Greenstein, 1965; Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht, 2003; Helwig and Turiel, 2002; Hess and Torney, 1967; Prior, 2012; Quintelier and Van Deth, 2014; Sapiro, 2004; Sears and Levy, 2003). For example, the views of young people about the responsiveness of politicians are partly based on their experiences with authorities in their daily lives (Gimpel et al., 2003). Interest in politics during adolescence is an important indicator of political interest in adulthood (Prior, 2012).

Adolescents can experience aspects of democracy on a daily basis—at home, with peers, in associational life, and at school. These contexts have all been shown to be of relevance to the development of democratic attitudes. Encounters with aspects of democracy in daily life, however, differ by social-cultural background and level of education (Amnå, 2012; Pfaff, 2009; Quintelier, 2015). First, the role of parents has been shown to be important for the acquirement

of democratic attitudes (Jennings, 2007). Substantial differences exist in the opportunities of adolescents to experience aspects of democracy at home. Studies show that having discussions about everyday activities and politics is positively related to democratic attitudes. Adolescents who grow up in social milieus with more highly educated parents tend to hold more of these discussions (Chan and Koo, 2011; Gniewosz, Noack, and Buhl, 2009; Hooghe and Boonen, 2015; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers, 2009; Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete, 2013; Spera, 2005). Second, peer interactions are important for adolescents to develop democratic attitudes (e.g., Biesta, Lawy, and Kelly, 2009; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Research has shown that adolescents influence attitudes within peer groups by discussing social issues and media content (Amnå, 2012; Erentaite et al., 2012; Gordon and Taft, 2010; Settle, Bond, and Levitt, 2011). Yet, these studies have not investigated the differences between social groups. Third, civil society is widely seen as important for the fostering of civic orientations (Cohen and Rogers, 1995; Fung, 2003; Putnam 1993, 2000; Warren, 2001). Participation in some types of organizations (i.e., cultural organizations or youth unions) appears to have a positive effect on democratic attitudes, while participation in other associations (i.e., sport organizations) does not seem to affect democratic attitudes (Fung, 2003; Hooghe and Quintelier, 2013; Nieuwelink et al., 2016bVan der Meer and Van Ingen, 2014). The highly educated more often take part in activities in civil society (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry, 1996) and have, therefore, more opportunities to develop democratic attitudes.

Can School Compensate for Social Inequality?

In a democracy, all citizens should have opportunities to develop democratic attitudes regardless of social-cultural background or educational level. This raises the question of whether school, as a public institution, should be able to compensate for social inequalities regarding citizenship (e.g., Eurydice, 2012; Janmaat, 2008; Schulz et al., 2010; Van de

Werfhorst, 2014). Empirical research on the effect of citizenship education shows that formal education can indeed affect adolescents' knowledge of and attitudes towards democracy (Isac et al. 2013; Geboers et al., 2013; Manning and Edwards, 2014). Citizenship attitudes can, in particular, be fostered by a democratic classroom climate where students are encouraged to discuss political issues (Campbell, 2008; Fjeldstad and Mikkelsen 2003; Torney-Purta et al. 2001), a formal curriculum that includes specific citizenship courses (Feldman et al. 2007; Galston, 2001; McDevitt and Kiousis, 2007; Yang and Chung, 2009), and extracurricular activities in combination with systematic reflection (e.g., service learning) (Metz and Younis, 2005; Van Goethem, Van Hoof, Orobio de Castro, Van Aken, and Hart, 2014).

Some studies have found that the effects schools have on citizenship competences especially hold for adolescents who have less positive experiences with democracy. They also found that school can contribute to social equality (Campbell, 2008; Castillo, Miranda, Macarena, Cox, and Bascopé, 2014; Gainous and Martens, 2012; Metz and Younnis, 2005; Langton and Jennings, 1968). However, not all studies show that school can compensate for society. Some research has found that school exacerbates existing differences in political knowledge, which is an important resource for the development of attitudes towards politics and democracy (Campbell, 2008; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2012; Persson, 2015). Furthermore, it has been shown that goals and practices in citizenship education can differ across educational tracks. In (pre-)vocational education, the focus is more often on discipline and social adjustment, while in pre-academic education, emancipation and critical citizenship are more common objectives (Ichilov, 2003; Ten Dam and Volman, 2003). By pursuing different goal orientations, schools reproduce existing differences between adolescent social groups.

We conclude from previous studies that the picture that emerges regarding the role of schools with respect to enhancing adolescents' citizenship is mixed. Schools can compensate

for the differences in opportunities that adolescents encounter outside of school to positively experience democracy, but they do not bring this into practice as a matter of course. What is missing so far is insight into how adolescents from different educational tracks experience various opportunities to learn about democracy inside and outside of school.

Current Study and the Dutch Educational Setting

The central question of the present article reads as follows: *What experiences do adolescents from different educational tracks have with democracy in everyday life, and do schools provide opportunities for those who have less experience of democracy in other social settings?* By taking a longitudinal and qualitative research approach, we intend to deepen our insight into how adolescents perceive their potential to experience democracy and which opportunities schools offer. By doing so, we hope to contribute understanding to the issue of whether school is compensating for existing social inequalities.

The study has been carried out in the Netherlands. The Dutch school system is largely externally differentiated, and education for the different tracks is generally provided at different locations. In the lowest track, there is pre-vocational education (PV). PV contains four sub-tracks. The highest track provides pre-academic education (PA). Students are selected for an educational track in the final year of primary education at the age of 12. It is rare for a student to move up from the lowest pre-vocational tracks to a higher track (Inspectorate of Education, 2013). Young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds are overrepresented in pre-academic education (PA), while young people from lower social milieus predominate in pre-vocational education (PV) (Bol, Witschge, Van de Werfhorst, and Dronkers, 2014; OECD 2014). The students selected for participation in this research were in PA or in the lowest two sub-tracks of PV.

The Dutch educational system is characterized by a large degree of school autonomy. Schools can formulate their own goals within the broad margins set by the Ministry of Education. Citizenship education is compulsory for all schools. Due to the constitutional freedom of education, however, schools are free to design citizenship education in their own manner under the condition that this is done in a systematic manner, with respect to basic democratic values, and with an underlying vision of citizenship and social integration. Goals for citizenship are usually included in civics and history classes, which are mandatory for all educational tracks and focus primarily on the cognitive aspects of citizenship.

Method

Participants

For this study, we interviewed forty Dutch adolescents twice, first when they were in their second year of secondary education (aged 13 to 15; 2011) and again two years later (2013). We chose to interview students in the eighth and tenth grades because school curricula explicitly address citizenship issues in these grades.

As to the selection of participants, we opted for a diverse sample of students from the pre-vocational and pre-academic tracks, which enabled us to find perspectives and experiences with democracy from many walks of life. We selected twenty boys and twenty girls who were equally distributed between pre-academic and pre-vocational education. Our sample represents students from different socio-economic, ethnic, and religious subgroups at each school. We selected students from four schools with diverging characteristics: an orthodox Protestant school providing both pre-vocational and pre-academic education for a homogeneous population of non-minority students in the northeast of the Netherlands, a public school that provides only pre-vocational education for a mixed urban/rural population of both migrant and non-migrant students in the middle of the country, a public school that only provides pre-

academic education for a mixed population of students in Amsterdam, and a Roman Catholic school providing both pre-vocational and pre-academic education for a predominantly non-migrant population in the northwest of the country.

Interview and Procedure

The semi-structured interviews were organized in the same way in both rounds of interviews and lasted approximately 90 minutes. First, the adolescents were asked to introduce themselves and to describe the social activities in which they were engaged in their private lives (e.g., activities with friends, sports clubs, or religious associations) as well as the activities in which they participated at school (e.g., student council, debate clubs). Second, the interviewees were invited to formulate and discuss their perspectives regarding statements such as the following: 'People should listen to each other even though their opinions differ' and 'If someone in the classroom does not agree with something, he or she should have the opportunity to explain his or her opinion.' They were given the opportunity to explain whether these situations occurred within their social contexts.

The third part of the interview was focused on comparing the adolescents' experiences with having discussions, collective decision-making, and being encouraged to be socially and politically engaged in their various social settings. The interviewees were asked not only about their experiences in the classroom, but also in the broader school context and with extracurricular activities such as community service. The interviewer started this part of the interview by asking the interviewees to compare the extent to which they discuss everyday activities in these settings. Because the concept of 'discussions' can be difficult to understand for young adolescents, they were asked whether situations exist where people can give their opinion and others respond to that opinion. Thereafter, their experiences with decision-making in various social settings were compared and discussed. Because decision-making can have formal connotations, the adolescents were asked about how choices were made in their lives

and who tended to make these choices (e.g., 'When you are going to do something together, how do you choose between activities?' and 'Who decides about the rules and regulations?'). Subsequently, the interviewees were asked to compare whether they talk about and discuss the news and politics as indications of social or political engagement. Because it can be hard to comment on such broad topics, the interviewer provided some examples of current events (such as a shooting in a shopping centre, the abdication of the queen, the Arab Spring, and elections). The interviewees were asked whether and in which setting the adolescents talked about these topics and how these discussions tended to evolve.

The final part of the interview narrowed in on the extent to which and in what ways social and political issues and democracy were being taught and discussed in classes. The interviewees were asked whether they talk about current events in educational settings and if such discussions were related to school subject matter. Thereafter, they were asked whether and in what ways they had discussed recent elections in class and through what kinds of activities (such as the watching of film clips from debates or discussing the election outcomes).

Coding and Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. With the help of ATLAS.ti, the interviews were coded and analysed on the basis of the concepts that were derived from the theoretical framework and research question (cf. Miles and Huberman 1994). The coding scheme consisted of the following categories and subcategories:

- Social contexts: household, peers, associational life, school and class;
- Experiences with discussions: experience (frequency), differences in opinion, equal opportunities to participate, and topic;
- Experiences with decision-making: experience (frequency), method used (voting, negotiation, deliberation, authority decides), and topic;

- Being encouraged to discuss social issues and politics: experience (frequency), differences in opinion, and equal opportunities to participate.

To determine the reliability of the coding, the fragments of the transcribed interviews were coded independently, resulting in a satisfactory Cohen's kappa of 0.84.

The interviews were analysed according to the categories stated above. With regard to the three central aspects of democracy, we looked for the following information in the transcripts of the interviews. First, we searched for indications of adolescent experiences with discussions, different opinions, and opportunities to voice opinions in different settings, such as when deciding joint activities or organizational rules. Second, we looked for indications of opportunities to influence or participate in decision-making procedures and of decision-making processes (e.g., voting or negotiating). Third, we sought evidence of situations where the adolescents were encouraged to be socially or politically engaged, for example through talking about the news, elections, or instances of perceived injustice.

Results

All interviewees reported participation in a variety of social settings and interaction with friends and other peers, family, teachers and school authorities, coaches and trainers, and religious authorities. We discuss below the adolescents' experiences in these various social contexts. First, we go into their experiences with democracy at home, with friends, and in associational life. Thereafter, we present our results regarding their experiences in school. This enables us to see whether school creates opportunities for those who have relatively few experiences with democracy in other aspects of society.

At Home

Daily activities at home create opportunities for interviewees to have discussions in their households and to make collective decisions. Differences exist in adolescent experiences

with discussions according to educational track. The adolescents from the higher track (PA) stated predominantly at both points in time that they often discussed everyday activities or hobbies and that there are often competing views. One boy (PA) stated for example: 'It is not a hot debate, but we all have our opinions so we share them…. These discussions are about small things like who is going to do what [in housekeeping]… It is pleasant that we can share our opinions.' On the other hand, a substantial group of students from the lower track (PV) revealed that they did not have many discussions in their households. Strong disagreement was rare, especially when the students were in tenth grade. One boy (PV) described his experience: 'Sometimes [my father and I] talk about [football]. Was it a good game or a bad game? But that's it. We don't talk that much… That's fine. Discussions are not important.'

Whether or not the adolescents have discussions, there are situations when a decision needs to be made regarding household issues, such as holidays and outings. The interviewees stated that in such situations, they try to find consensus, but that their parents have the final say. As one girl (PA) stated: 'When we make decisions together, we listen to each other, and most of the time, we find an agreement. In the end, everyone should be happy about what we are going to do.' According to the interviewees, this was the most just way to come to decisions within the household. Consensus should be sought, but parents must have the final say. This view was held by the adolescents from both educational tracks, at both points in time.

Important differences exist along the lines of educational track in the adolescents' experiences with talking about the news and politics. The dominant experience among those enrolled in the PV-track at both points in time is that news and political events are not discussed. These adolescents stated that they are not interested in the news and that they do not talk about the news with their parents. Furthermore, few of these young people talk about elections with their parents, nor about whether they would vote and for political party. These

adolescents in the PV-track prefer to avoid discussing politics because they are disinterested in the topic.

Among those from the PA-track, on the other hand, the news and political events are being discussed as a matter of course, and such discussion increased with age. In the second round of interviews, nearly all interviewees in the PA-track explained that they talked with their parents rather extensively about political events. Often, the students knew for which party their parents voted. These young people find it important to talk with their parents about politics because they want to be politically informed. The parents seem to give their children the impression that politics matters and that talking about political issues is a normal activity.

Among Peers

With regard to friends and other peers in daily life, the democratic experiences of young people also differed in terms of educational track. Those in the PA-track discussed hobbies on a semi-regular basis, talking with peers about musical preferences, football matches, and how they would spend free time. This did not change over time. In general, differences in views were debated, the opinions of friends and peers were listened to, and consensus was sought. One boy (PA) explained how his peers talk about such topics: ‘Recently we have discussed where we will go in the summer. Someone said what he wants and others respond and say that they want something else. Then we will find agreement together... It is important that everyone can voice his opinion and that we decide together.’ However, PV-track students’ experiences with discussions were different. At an older age especially, many of them barely discussed everyday topics with their friends. They explained that they have conversations with their friends, but seldom have discussions. One girl stated: ‘We don’t really discuss. It is just that someone says, ‘let’s go to the mall’, and then we all agree. … We don’t need to share our opinions all the time.’ These adolescents do not favour having discussions and sharing perspectives.

Another picture emerges when looking at societal issues. According to the interviewees from both educational tracks and at both ages, it is uncommon to discuss news, social issues, or politics among friends. No differences were found for gender of ethnicity. The interviewees viewed talking about the news or politics to be a dull activity, and those who do talk about the news with peers do so only briefly. The dominant view was that they preferred to talk about what they felt matters to teenagers: music, sports, role models, and boy/girlfriends.

In Associational Life

Nearly all the interviewed adolescents engaged in music, sport, or dance in an organized associational setting. They often perform several activities with ten to twenty others under the supervision of an adult. The boys and girls from both educational tracks and at both points in time report predominantly that there is limited room for discussion and collective decision-making in these organizations, and they do not discuss the news or political issues there. They are able to voice their opinions while engaging in these activities, but there is little room for discussion or decision-making. For example, one girl (PV) explained that in her dance group she dances with: ‘The instructor decides about choreography, but we can say whether we want something to be changed’. The adolescents do not seem to be bothered by this situation because everyone is there for the same reason and has more or less the same interests.

All twelve students from the orthodox Protestant school participate in confirmation classes at their church, and three other students participate in Koran classes at their mosque. From the perspective of these interviewees, there is much room for discussion in these settings at both fourteen and sixteen years old. They reported being asked to give their perspectives on faith-related events in their daily lives, even if these perspectives conflict with central aspects of their faith. Although all participants belong to the same religious group, there are often substantial differences in opinion. News and political events are seldom discussed, only when related to faith.

In sum, those in the academic educational track report more frequent discussions about everyday activities and social and political issues than those in the pre-vocational track; therefore, they encounter more often situations where they can develop democratic attitudes. This difference seemed to be even more apparent at a later age, among the adolescents in tenth grade. These experiences were largely in line with the preferences of the adolescents themselves. Those in the pre-academic track tend to enjoy discussions more than those in the pre-vocational track.

Table 1. Dominant experiences among adolescents

	Adolescents in pre-vocational track	*Adolescents in pre-academic track*
Household	Few discussions Decisions consensus-based, parents decide	Many discussions, including about the news and politics Decisions consensus-based, parents decide
Among friends	Few discussions Decisions consensus-based without much discussion	Many discussions Decisions consensus-based often preceded by a long discussion
Associational life	Few discussions Decisions authority-based	Few discussions Decisions authority-based
School	Few mostly uncoordinated discussions, rarely about news or politics Few collective decisions, majority-based, preceded by brief discussion	Many structured discussions, often about news and politics Few collective decisions, majority-based, preceded by structured discussion

At School

School can compensate for the differences in experiences in society, but do they actually put this into practice?

In the Classroom

Adolescents from different educational tracks experience differences in the number of opportunities to engage in discussion (for example, discussing joint activities or school rules and regulations). No differences are found along the lines of school denomination. Boys and

girls reported relatively similar experiences. Those in the PA-track stated that when they were in eighth or tenth grade, they had engaged in (semi-)regular discussions about democracy and citizenship. During these discussions, many claimed that competing views were formulated and that there was room for all classmates to explain their views. These adolescents find it important that everyone can voice his or her opinion and that everyone can respond to the statements made. One girl in a combined class comprised of regular PA-students as well as students who were also learning Latin and Greek explained that the rescheduling of a class can be difficult: 'Then [those students learning Latin and Greek] don't want to reschedule and we ask 'why not?'… The teacher listens and says that we have to take others into account… It is pleasant that we are being listened to by the teacher and other students.'

The PV-students had different experiences, especially when they were in the tenth grade. The dominant experience was that there was rarely a debate in the classroom, and if debate did take place, it did not last long. One girl stated: 'In class it is usually 'open your book and get to work'.' These students did not view this as overly problematic because they do not see school as a place to have such discussions. However, they do find it important to be listened to when they voice an opinion. This did not always seem to be the case in their classrooms. Whenever these students had discussions, they did not seem to be very well ordered. One boy explained the typical course of discussions in his classroom: 'If someone disagrees then they will yell it through the classroom… In our class you either agree or don't agree, for the rest we really don't care.' Another boy explained that not all students have equal opportunities to participate in a discussion: 'Most of the time the same persons will have it their way because they are the loud-mouths… If you're less popular you will have less of a say.'

Some classroom situations require a decision that will affect all students. Those from both educational tracks and the different denominations explained that when it comes to regulations, timetables, and the contents of lessons, the teachers or other school authorities

decide. The adolescents agreed with this state of affairs. From their perspectives, teachers should decide these topics. This did not change as the interviewees aged. However, most students in both tracks felt that their school authorities were listening to them, both in the eighth and tenth grades. One boy (PV) explained the routine in his class: 'The teachers decide the content of the class. But sometimes we as students come up with a plan and then they listen to that… For example, we asked if the teacher wants to make handouts… Most of the time they are willing to do that.' The interviewees, however, also explained that in some situations, they were able to make a decision in conjunction with their classmates. These decisions usually involved the rescheduling of a class, the screening of a movie, or a field trip. In some situations, such as when deciding to leave school at an earlier hour, students must all agree, and a decision must be made by consensus. In other situations, when students disagree about the best solution, the majority typically decides with little debate. For example, one boy (PV) explained the situation regarding the movie they would watch at the end of a day: 'That is with the majority rule… The teacher asked us what we wanted, then we voted and then we watched that movie. That's it.' The adolescents would have preferred more room for discussion. Among the boys, the dominant view was that voting is the best way of deciding. However, the girls in both educational tracks felt it important for all students to be listened to and argued that the majority should not always have it its way. Rather, the class should strive to reach consensus.

In all schools in the Netherlands, regardless of educational track, students must learn about society, social issues, politics, and democracy. The extent to which social and political issues are debated in the classroom, however, differs greatly between the interviewed students from the PA-track and PV-track. These differences were not found along the lines of the denomination of the school. In the eighth grade of both tracks, the news, politics, and elections were not often discussed in the interviewees' classrooms. Every now and then, the teachers referred to these topics, but there was little debate about them. The students did not mind that

they did not discuss these topics in class. However, in tenth grade, the experiences of the adolescents in both tracks diverged. The PV-students stated that they still did not discuss current affairs in class. One boy stated: 'Yeah, we have once talked about the news but I don't know what it was about… During the economics class, we discussed the economic crisis. They said that there is an economic crisis now.' From the perspective of the PV-students, political and democratic events are not discussed either. About three months before the second round of interviews took place, national elections for the Dutch parliament were held, but PV-interviewees said these elections were not discussed extensively in the classroom. One boy explained that they had discussed politics infrequently during the previous year, but not in tenth grade: 'Now we don't talk about politics. That was last year with civics… We didn't talk about the elections. Not at all… Now we are learning for our finals so we're busy with that.' The lack of classroom discussion about current events and elections was not problematic for these adolescents because they do not care much for talking about such topics.

The reported experiences of tenth graders in the PA-track differ substantially. This was the case for the students in all three PA-schools. These adolescents stated that they now discussed news and politics on a regular basis in their history, civics, and religion classes. One girl from the orthodox Protestant school explained how her class talked about the news and moral dilemmas: 'With civics, we talk about the news, like 'what do you think about euthanasia?' Everyone can give his or her opinion and then we talk about dilemmas like 'what would you do as a doctor when it comes to euthanasia?' I think it very interesting to hear the perspectives of other students.' The PA-students were encouraged to develop views on complicated moral issues. These students also stated that they discussed politics at school when in the tenth grade, and most had discussed the national elections of 2012. One boy (PA) explained further: 'The teacher asked us if we had seen the debates and what the strategy of the politicians was…We also discussed the outcome of the elections and that it is remarkable

that many people voted for either [leftist] labour or the [rightist] liberals, and that now they are in a coalition together.' These PA-students found it important to learn at school about current issues and politics because they perceive that citizens should be informed.

Activities Outside the Classroom

During our study, all students were able to participate in extracurricular activities that are potential venues for developing positive attitudes about democracy. In grade eight or nine, students were required to do community service, and they volunteered in hospitals, elementary schools, or sports organizations. They only had to perform thirty hours of community service; therefore, they received only simple assignments to help elderly people, patients, or children. Consequently, students had to perform activities where there was little room to experience democracy through having discussions or showing initiative.

Students are also able to experience democracy by attending extracurricular activities such as debating club or student council. Students who participated in debating clubs were positive about what they learned about debating and about their own perspectives on social and political issues. Those who participated in the student council were positive about the opportunities they had to articulate their views on school rules and regulations, and they believed that they have a real influence on school policies. However, the other students were unaware of what happens in these debating clubs or the types of decisions the student council was making. Although these clubs and councils can be good avenues for students to experience democracy, their scope seems rather limited.

Adolescents' democratic experiences primarily differ in terms of educational track; gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation turned out to play a less important role. In each of the tracks, experiences of the students seemed to be quite similar, regardless of the context they grew up in. Of course, the numbers of interviewees have been small in our research and we might have found at least statistically 'significant' differences in a larger scale study. However,

given the lack of references to gender, ethnicity and religion in the stories about democratic experiences the students told us, it seems unlikely that these factors play a major role. This holds for experiences both within and outside of the school. We would claim, therefore, that educational track is an important factor to explain differences in adolescent experiences with democratic citizenship in the Netherlands nowadays.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this research, we investigated experiences with democracy among adolescents from different educational tracks and explored whether schools provide opportunities for those who experience less democracy in daily life. We found variations in experiences with democracy between students in different educational tracks. Students' experiences did not differ systematically by gender, ethnicity, or religion. The results show that in activities outside of school, adolescents in the pre-academic track tend to experience more opportunities to develop democratic attitudes as compared to those in the pre-vocational track. Within the school, we found similar results. Especially at an older age, students in the PA-track often discuss everyday situations and political events in school, while those in the PV-track lack such experiences. Taken from the reported experiences of these young people, we conclude that school tend to reproduce or even exacerbate differences among students from different educational tracks. This is an important outcome when taking into consideration, as has been described in the introduction, that adolescents' attitudes towards politics and democracy is influenced by experiences in daily life and have been shown to have a lasting effect (Flanagan, 2013; Helwig and Turiel, 2002; Prior, 2012; Sears and Levy, 2003).

Before discussing these findings in light of previous studies, we pay attention to the limitations of our study. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with a relatively small number of adolescents in the Netherlands, which only allows for a cautious interpretation of the results. Second, we asked adolescents to reflect on their democratic experiences in recent months, and

they may have had difficulties remembering what had happened during those periods. Third, this article describes a study based on self-reporting interviews. We have not observed adolescent behaviour in everyday life. As is always the case with research based on self-reporting, there may be a difference between what adolescents reported and what actually occurred. When asked about experiences with democracy, adolescents are likely to have selected events that seemed to be relevant at that moment. These are not necessarily the experiences that will be formative for their political participation as adults. Social settings, schools in particular, can have more impact on citizenship than adolescents realize themselves. These limitations are inherent to the research design. Strengthening our study, however, we selected a diverse sample of adolescents from many walks of life, from schools with diverse characteristics (in student population and denomination), and from various geographical locations. That young people in the same school class formulated largely similar experiences of the school context is in our view indicative of a truthful reflection of their experiences. That these findings were observable in various locations indicates that they might be present in many schools in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the results are in line with studies in other countries, where relationships have also been found between social milieu and political discussions at home (e.g., Jennings et al., 2009, Schulz et al., 2010) and for different types of citizenship education for various groups of students (e.g., Ichilov, 2003). Therefore, there are good reasons to expect that the results of this study do not only hold for the forty adolescents that we interviewed.

Our study underscores the importance of citizenship education in schools. Because adolescents experience differences in opportunities to develop democratic attitudes, in our view schools as public institutions should create opportunities for all young people to experience aspects of democracy on a regular basis. This is especially important in the Netherlands, where a strong relationship exists between one's educational track and the educational level of one's

parents (Bol et al., 2014). From previous studies, we can conclude that schools are able to contribute to the students' democratic attitudes by creating an open classroom climate, by helping students learn about society through a formalized curriculum, and by providing them with opportunities to reflect on extracurricular activities (e.g., Geboers et al., 2013; Isac et al., 2013). This promise, however, is not fulfilled by the schools in our study, at least not in the perception of the adolescents we interviewed. The students in the PA-track, especially those in tenth grade, stated that they often discussed social and political issues and events such as elections, particularly in courses with related topics. Those in the PV-track reported that they rarely talked about these topics in either eighth or tenth grade. As a consequence, no objective public authority has provided these students with a framework to think about events such as national elections, which are pivotal in democratic processes and crucial for an individual's political socialization (e.g., Prior, 2012; Quintelier and Van Deth, 2014; Sears and Levy, 2003). An explanation for the difference between pre-vocational and pre-academic students at school may lie in the experiences adolescents have in other social contexts. Because PV-students are less used to having discussions than their peers in the PA-track, it can be more challenging for teachers in the PV-track to encourage students to voice their opinions. This requires highly professional teaching and pedagogical skills, and it is worth investigating whether teachers have these skills, in particular when it comes to citizenship education.

Many scholars have emphasized that adolescents develop attitudes towards democracy and civic engagement in everyday mediating institutions (Flanagan, 2013; Helwig and Turiel, 2002; Gimpel et al., 2003; Sapiro, 2004). In this regard, our research paints a pessimistic picture about what adolescents from the lower educational track learn about democracy. Their relatively limited opportunities to experience and learn about democracy can result in different views on the importance of democracy and citizenship (Elchardus et al., 2013; Janmaat, Mostafa, and Hoskins, 2014; Torney-Purta, 2002). It is important to investigate further what

kinds of views young people from different educational tracks develop of democracy, decision-making, and the necessity of civic engagement.

The variation in adolescents' experiences with democracy in school settings, along with the fact that such variation can exacerbate existing inequalities, hinders equal opportunity to participate in politics. While our study indicates that there are several opportunities for teachers in both pre-vocational and pre-academic education to pay attention to aspects of democracy, it seems that only teachers in the higher educational track discussed political or controversial issues with their students. From the students' perspective, topics related to democracy and citizenship are rarely discussed. Only when these topics are directly connected to the content of a class and/or the final exam do teachers pay attention to them. The lack of compensation for differences between students is, in our view, in part due to the rather marginal position of citizenship education in the curriculum, at least in the Netherlands. Furthermore, Dutch schools do not seem to offer many opportunities to develop critical citizenship. Students in pre-vocational education in particular do not seem to be encouraged to reflect critically on situations they find to be unjust or to learn to evaluate different perspectives, nor are they spurred to develop abilities facilitating collective action to change existing injustices. This is in line with other studies, which have shown that in pre-vocational tracks, discipline and learning how to behave are central citizenship goals, while pre-academic track students are taught about autonomy and critical reflection (Ten Dam and Volman, 2003). If this holds for other schools in the Netherlands and elsewhere, schools are reproducing social inequalities.

Our study indicates that teachers have a hard time facilitating discussion for those students who are not used to debate. Compensation for social inequalities requires teachers to be better prepared for this task. While it is often claimed that citizenship should be an integral part of the curriculum, our study underlines the importance of developing curriculum units that focus specifically on citizenship.

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