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The school as practice ground

Youth citizenship in schools as communities

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Introduction

Adults' relation to youth citizenship is generally somewhat ambivalent: on the one hand young citizens are seen as carrying the weight of the hope of a better future, on the other their efforts to question the status quo are often dismissed by their adult counterparts (Brynnner et al., 2019; Haste & Hogan, 2006; Malafaia et al., 2021). Youth show clear engagement with key civic themes, such as how to deal with the diversity of the citizenry, who has a voice in decision making, and how to work together on issues such as climate change (e.g. Honwana, 2019; Jenkins et al., 2016; MacKay et al., 2020). And yet, youth are also often accused of disengagement and apathy (Kitanova, 2020). In research and society both optimism and concern are present in relation to the current state of youth citizenship (Wood, 2022). Whichever outlook feels most suitable, both sentiments ask for reflection on the way youth citizenship can best be supported. Moreover, research indicates that adolescence represents a pivotal formative period for the development of civic and political attitudes, dispositions and capacities (e.g. Amnå et al., 2009; Quintelier, 2015). A better understanding of how youth citizenship can best be supported is thus relevant both on the societal level and on the level of individual youths themselves.

Citizenship essentially describes the relationship between individuals and the communities to which they belong. Whereas traditionally, youth citizenship was often characterized by a sense of 'not-yet-ness' (Biesta & Lawy, 2006), new conceptualizations of citizenship, described as 'lived citizenship', focus on how individuals, young and old, shape the communities they are part of (Kallio et al., 2020). Examining youth citizenship through this lens reveals that it should not only be conceptualized as a process of *becoming* citizens, but also encompasses how youth already identify themselves as citizens and practices youth engage in to express their citizenship: *being* citizens and *doing* citizenship (Wood, 2022).

When examining the socialization processes that are related to and foster youth citizenship, besides youths' direct relationship with parents and peers, schools emerge as pivotal actors. They function as so-called 'mediating institutions' between the individual and the larger society. As members of these mediating institutions, students learn from, through and about 'the foundational principles of the social system' they are part of (Flanagan, 2003, p. 259).

To capture this broad role of schools in nurturing youth citizenship, schools can be understood as communities (Furman, 2012), miniature communities (Dewey, 1916), mini polities (Flanagan, 2013) or as explored in this dissertation: as practice grounds (Veugelers, 2011). In the school as practice ground, youth do not only practice *for* citizenship in the future, they are also amidst the practice *of* citizenship. Understanding how schools function as communities is thus crucial to understand students' experience of 'within-school citizenship'.

That schools play a role in students' citizenship is widely supported by research, which shows that not only formal civics courses but many other aspects, such as school and classroom climate as well as relations with peers and teachers, are influential for a range of citizenship-related outcomes (e.g. Coopmans et al., 2020; Geboers et al., 2013; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Lenzi et al., 2014; Siegel-Stechler, 2021; Sincer et al., 2022; Wanders et al., 2020). However, these findings have not led to an increased reflection by policy makers and practitioners on how citizenship is enacted by youth *in* schools. Consequently, attention for being citizens and doing citizenship in school is lacking, resulting in a relatively narrow reflection on the role schools play in students' citizenship.

The aim of this dissertation is to get a better understanding of how to benefit most from the school environment to support students' citizenship, not just their future citizenship, but also their experiences of already being citizens and doing citizenship. In this dissertation, I use the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship to explore how the school as a community provides a context in which students' citizenship is practiced. This perspective allows to look beyond practices or curriculum specifically designed as 'citizenship education' and sheds light on how and why different members of the school community, as well as a wide range of social practices within the school are relevant for students' citizenship. The main aim of this dissertation is to further the understanding of the role schools play in students' citizenship through the perspective of school as practice grounds.

The perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship is valuable both in scientific and societal terms. Understanding how different schools provide different practice grounds for students and what that means for students' citizenship in the wider world gives a richer understanding of the civic potential of schools. Furthermore, this perspective of schools as practice grounds, that helps to see beyond formal citizenship education curricula, can support teachers and school leaders reflect on how they can profit more from what is already present within the school in terms of students experiencing citizenship. The school environment provides a unique opportunity to experience membership in a relatively malleable community. This dissertation will hopefully contribute to making more conscious use of all the opportunities for the experience of youth citizenship that this environment has to offer.

1.1 Theoretical and conceptual background

1.1.1 Citizenship education

What citizenship education exactly constitutes of remains contested, although consensus seems to exist on that it is part of the formal, informal and hidden curriculum (Campbell

et al, 2012; Kissling, 2018; Schimmel, 2003). Typically, in the realm of research on citizenship education, qualitative studies focus on specific practices that through a theoretical lens are deemed relevant for students' citizenship, such as service learning and classroom discussions. They either focus on students' experiences or teacher experiences with these practices (e.g., Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Hess & Avery, 2008; Nieuwelink et al., 2019). Meanwhile large-scale quantitative studies that connect a broad array of school characteristics and practices to a specific set of citizenship competences (e.g., Isac et al, 2014; Schulz et al., 2018) dominate current research on citizenship education. Although these studies allow for valuable international comparison and comparison between different types of practices, they give limited insight into underlying processes and mechanisms. To better understand how different members of the school community and multiple aspects of the school context contribute, several authors call for a whole-school understanding of schools' contribution to student' citizenship (cf. Gibb, 2016; Potter, 2003).

The perspective that I develop in this dissertation to further explore the role schools play in students' citizenship takes a whole-school approach and combines insights from research on lived citizenship and schools as communities.

1.1.2 Youth citizenship as lived citizenship

Lived citizenship is an understanding of citizenship that refers to the daily negotiation of rights, responsibilities, identities and belonging of all individuals as community members (Lister, 2007). Lived citizenship acknowledges that all individuals, including those lacking formal citizenship status and youth, engage in practices through which they influence the communities they are part of (Kallio et al., 2020). Building upon this understanding of citizenship as situated in people's daily lives, Wood (2022) has developed a conceptual framework for youth citizenship: youth becoming citizens, youth being citizens, and youth doing citizenship.

Youth becoming citizens refers to the fact that the meaning and everyday reality of their citizenship is influenced by their not yet being adults. It also highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of citizenship. While all three different expressions of youth citizenship, becoming, being and doing, have been researched in connection to schools and education, youth becoming citizens has dominated the research and is most often explicitly connected to citizenship education. It has for example informed research on the relevance of education for (future) voting (e.g. Schäfer et al, 2020; Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). But it is also present in research projects with a broader scope, such as the renowned ICCS (International Citizenship and Civic education Study) where a focus on future citizenship is reflected in the title of the 2016 report: 'Becoming Citizens in a Changing World' (Schulz et al., 2018).

Youth being citizens refers to how youths' membership of different communities influences their identity. Youth being citizens in school has mostly been researched from the perspective of school belonging and identification in connection to civic behaviors and attitudes within and outside of school, for example by relating students' sense of school belonging to their participation in within-school solidarity campaigns (e.g. Encina & Berger, 2021; Flanagan et al., 2007). However, (research on) citizenship education rarely starts with reflection on students' experiences of membership of the school community or, for that matter, with reflection on characteristics or qualities of the school community students can experience membership in.

Finally, youth doing citizenship refers to the practices through which youth shape the communities they are part of. Youth doing citizenship within the school context is extensively researched from the perspective of student voice (i.e. through discussion or through student council participation). These studies often conclude how valuable student voice experiences could be in terms of students' citizenship and yet how limited the actual opportunities for students to experience it are (e.g. Connor, 2020; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Moreover, despite the fact that in policy and research youth are increasingly recognized as potentially 'active citizens', in the realm of education the experiences offered to 'do citizenship' in school are still predominantly understood through the lens of their future civic and political participation; of their becoming citizens (Mennes et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2018).

This multi-faceted understanding of youth citizenship provides insight into how youth citizenship is experienced and expressed. And as it is situated in youth's everyday reality and their lived experiences as community members it is well suited to anchor the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship.

1.1.3 The school as community: a practice ground for citizenship

To better understand how these different experiences and expressions of youth citizenship are present within the school context, in this dissertation I use the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship. This perspective builds on the work of Dewey (1916) on democracy and education, in combination with insights from work on schools as communities (Bryk and Driscoll, 1988; Furman, 2012). This combination allows for a better understanding of how students' citizenship, their becoming and being citizens as well as their doing citizenship, is informed by and interacts with the school context.

In his work on democracy and education, Dewey (1916) approached schools as practice grounds for the experience of community membership. Dewey also explicitly connects

this to the civic nature of this experience through the notion of democracy as ‘a mode of associated living’ (p.93) in contrast to democracy as confined to formal procedures. This notion of democracy, as a lived and communal experience, is rooted in students’ relationships in the school; in their everyday life (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). Dewey’s understanding of schools as ‘miniature communities’ is not solely about the experience of community membership. Dewey’s vision on schools as practice grounds incorporates work-like activities and, as such, is about practice for future participation in society beyond the realm of mere civic and political participation (Van der Ploeg, 2016). Furthermore, despite the fact that learning by doing was a central tenet in Dewey’s work, his work was not centered around the way citizenship of students manifested itself *within* the school. In this dissertation, while building on Dewey’s ideas, I am especially interested in what schools have to offer students in terms of experiences of (school) community membership as citizenship is experienced and practiced through community membership. Therefore, I will extend my theoretical framework with work on the functioning of schools as communities.

Attention for schools as communities emerged primarily in light of research on school improvement and student engagement (e.g. Battistich et al., 1995; Payne et al., 2003) and also builds on insights from Dewey’s work (1897; Driscoll, 1995). At the center of research on schools as communities lies the idea that the experience of a ‘sense of community’ in school would benefit the individual school community members in terms of their wellbeing and their work as well as the functioning of the school as a whole (Furman, 2012). Research in this realm takes either an in-depth qualitative case study approach (e.g. Krätzer, 1997; Perry, 2002) or a quantitative approach, using measures of individual belonging to the school community. And indeed, research has indicated that there is a wide range of associated positive outcomes of school belonging, from student wellbeing to students’ academic performance (see for reviews: Osterman, 2000; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Furthermore, research shows that many key aspects of the functioning of school communities align with pressing civic issues in the wider world: how to deal with diversity within the (school) community (Ainscow, 2020; Banks & Banks, 2019; Shields, 2000), who has voice in (school) policy (Cook-Sather, 2020; Dominguez et al., 2022; Pearce & Wood, 2019), and the role of (school) community belonging (Allen & Boyle, 2022). Indeed, the school as a miniature community.

While research on the school as community uses Dewey’s work to argue the centrality of within-school relations in connection to school improvement, Flanagan (2013) builds on Dewey’s notion of schools as miniature communities, or according to her ‘mini-polities’, to better understand processes of youths’ political socialization. What her work shows is that the social identity of students is key in understanding the role schools play in relation to students’ citizenship or as she puts it: the school environment provides students with an opportunity to experience ‘how the social contract works for people *like them*’ (Flanagan,

2003, p.259) and, as such, what community membership means for them. Adults within the school (can) fulfill two roles in this context. First, students might see adults in the school as role models for their citizenship: the way teachers 'act politically' is mirrored in students' understanding of how they should act as citizens. This seems to especially be the case when teachers are considered to be part of the same social group as the student (Beaumont, 2010). Furthermore, teachers act as proximate authority figures for students, which means that they represent authority beyond the school walls for students. Research on students' experiences of fair treatment by their teachers illustrates this as it relates to students' political trust (Bruch & Soss, 2018; Lundberg & Abdelzadeh, 2019).

To conclude, combining lived citizenship and schools as community in the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship has several implications for how to understand the role of the school in youth citizenship. Firstly, students' experiences of citizenship within the school context should be understood along the lines of their (school) community membership. Students are not only becoming citizens in school, they are also 'being' citizens and doing citizenship. Secondly, adults within the school context can play a double role in light of their citizenship: they can represent authority for their students, as well as, possibly function as examples of people 'like them' or role models. Finally, youth experiences of the functioning of the school as a community inform their understanding of the functioning of the larger society and their role in that society.

1.2 Research question

The predominance of attention for what youth can, or should, become in the future as citizens has given us a relatively limited view of how the school environment and youth citizenship are related. And while research does give some insights in the relevance of youth being citizens and doing citizenship in school, the extent to which these insights are integrated into research on citizenship education and as educational practices in light of citizenship education remains limited.

Therefore, the main research question of this dissertation is: *How can the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship inform our understanding of the role schools play in students' citizenship?*

1.3 Research design

To answer the main research question, this dissertation consists of two parts. In the first part using a qualitative approach, the aim was to better understand in what ways

different schools are different practice grounds for citizenship. Subsequently, through a quantitative lens, it was examined how students' citizenship experiences within schools inform their citizenship in the wider world. Combining insights from both qualitative and quantitative studies allowed to give insight into the functioning of schools as practice grounds for citizenship as well as into the ways within-school experiences of being citizens and doing citizenship inform students' citizenship beyond the school walls. The data for these studies were collected as part of a large-scale project 'Understanding the Effects of Schools on Citizenship', a collaboration between the University of Amsterdam and the Erasmus University Rotterdam. The goal of the larger project was to gain insight into different school factors relevant for students' citizenship and in the ways these different school factors interact (Coopmans et al., 2020). The larger project was divided into different sub-projects: on students' civic knowledge (Ten Dam et al., 2020; Van Goethem et al., 2022), on how (ethnic) school composition is associated with students' citizenship (Sincer, 2019;2021;2022), and the project of this dissertation: on how schools function as practice grounds for students' citizenship.

For an in-depth exploration of the functioning of different schools as practice grounds for citizenship, in the first part of this dissertation qualitative data were used that were collected in six secondary schools in the Netherlands (2014/2015). These schools were selected through maximum variation sampling (Maxwell, 2004) to get insight in how differences between schools would be reflected in their functioning as practice grounds for citizenship. Four schools were selected for the research presented in chapter 2 and 3 that varied in their location (urban/rural), size, the tracks they offered, and the socio-economic and ethnic background of their student population. In all schools, interviews were conducted with school leaders, teachers and building maintenance workers. Furthermore, focus groups were organized with students. Observations and document analysis were used to inform these interviews and focus groups. This qualitative data allowed for an in-depth understanding of the functioning of the school organization and the relations within the school community: relations within the professional community, between teachers and students, and between students themselves.

To understand how students' citizenship experiences within the school inform their citizenship outside of school, in the second part of this dissertation quantitative data were used that were collected from school leaders, team leaders, teachers and students from 81 Dutch secondary schools (2016). Of these schools, 51 were randomly sampled and to increase the power of the analyses 30 additional schools were included through team members' professional networks. In each of the schools our contact person was asked to randomly select three 9th grade classes with the caveat that all tracks present within the school should be represented in the selection. In total, more than 5,000 students

participated. From the entire teacher body of each school approximately 15 teachers were randomly selected. Furthermore, a team leader and the school leader were also asked to partake in the project. The questionnaires for members of the professional community consisted of questions concerning the organization and practice of citizenship education as well as questions concerning within-school relationships. In both these studies student experiences within the school as practice ground were the main focus. For the purpose of the third study (chapter 4), both the teacher and student questionnaires were used. For the fourth study (chapter 5), only the student questionnaires were used. In both studies a three-level regression model was used to account for the nested nature of the data, students in classrooms in schools.

1.4 Dissertation outline

The first part of this dissertation focuses on the ways in which different schools are different practice grounds for different students and presents the results of two qualitative studies.

In *chapter 2* the main question is: ‘How do schools function as practice grounds for citizenship and how do they provide a context for students’ lived citizenship experiences?’ We use an exploratory multiple case study (Yin, 2003) of four Dutch secondary schools to answer this question. In this study the framework of youth citizenship – becoming citizens, being citizens and doing citizenship (Wood, 2022) – is applied to the four different school communities. The different expressions of students’ citizenship are explored in school portraits along different characteristics of the school community: school vision, within-school relationship and shared activities (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Furman, 2012). These characteristics and the related expressions of citizenship are compared and contrasted to better understand relevant differences and similarities between them.

One of the main themes in the context of the functioning of the school as a community as well as in citizenship education is the question of how to best deal with membership in a diverse community. In *chapter 3* we thus focus on how this specific citizenship theme, ‘dealing with difference’, permeates the functioning of the school as a community. Our main research question is: ‘How is dealing with difference enacted in different schools as practice grounds for citizenship?’ To answer this question an exploratory multiple case study was conducted in the same four Dutch secondary schools as in the first study, based on interviews with school leaders and teachers, as well as focus groups with students around themes such as teacher perspective on what differences between students are relevant in their practice and the theme of diversity as part of the school vision.

In the second part of the dissertation, the aim is to get more insight in the association between students' citizenship experiences within the school and their citizenship in the outside world and presents the results of two quantitative studies.

Voice can be considered the cornerstone of the democratic functioning of a community. In *chapter 4* we therefore look at students' within-school voice experiences. We distinguish between students' voice as discussion and students' voice as influence (Thomson, 2011). Voice as discussion is mainly understood as the sense of being able and willing to contribute to classroom discussion, while voice as influence is understood as having the experience of influencing school policy. Our main question is: 'Are students' experiences with voice in school related to students' attitudes towards voice? And, does the extent to which the school culture is democratic influence this relationship?' The aim of this study is to better understand if individual and collective experiences with voice within the school inform students' attitudes towards voice. In terms of these attitudes, we distinguished between attitudes regarding contributing democratically and listening democratically. Here, the focus is thus on doing citizenship in school. Furthermore, through teachers' perceptions of the democratic school culture, the extent to which the schools' democratic culture positively moderates this association was examined.

Finally, to better understand the relevance of a sense of school (community) membership, in *chapter 5* the association between students' sense of school membership and generalized social trust is examined. Sense of school membership essentially describes the quality of experienced relations with and in the school. Trust can be understood as a part of these experienced relations. Therefore, based on the experience of school membership, the aim of this study is to investigate if students' positive experiences with trust in school, trusting and being trusted, are associated with students' generalized social trust (Huang et al., 2011). And, bringing back the dimension of diversity within the school community from chapter 3, this study examines if this association is positively moderated by school community diversity in terms of ethnicity and educational track (Österman, 2021; Flanagan & Stout, 2010).