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### The school as practice ground

*Youth citizenship in schools as communities*

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# 6



Discussion and conclusion

During the past two decades, youth citizenship has become a focal point of educational policy throughout Europe (Eurydice, 2017) as well in the United States (Campbell, 2019; Cristol et al., 2010). Schools are understood to be of crucial influence on youth citizenship and issues such as a lack of societal and political engagement, interest and trust are expected to be addressed and improved through citizenship education (e.g. Claes & Hooghe, 2009; Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021; Geboers et al., 2013; Keating & Janmaat, 2016; Kiess, 2022). In line with the dominant perspective in educational policy, much of the research on citizenship education focuses on how experiences in school contribute to students' future as adult citizens and pays little attention to the ways in which students already are citizens (Malak-Minkiewicz & Torney-Purta, 2021).

Youth citizenship in this dissertation is understood as 'lived citizenship' and, as such, is primarily concerned with youths' community membership, i.e. how youths shape the communities they are part of and are shaped by them (Kallio et al., 2020). In addition to research that mainly focuses on how schools contribute to the process of students *becoming* citizens (i.e. Holbein & Hillygus, 2021; Schafer et al., 2020; Schulz et al., 2016), the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship sheds light on the ways the school environment provides opportunities for students *to be* citizens and *to do* citizenship in school (Wood, 2022). Being citizens refers to the role membership in different communities plays in youths' identity, while doing citizenship refers to the practices through which youth shape the communities they are a member of. Building on research on the functioning of schools as communities, the perspective of schools as practice ground is concerned with how different aspects of the school as a community function and interact and how these aspects provide a context to students' experiences of citizenship within the school (cf. Coopmans et al., 2020; Gill et al., 2018; Hoskins & Donbavand, 2021).

The main question of this dissertation was: *How can the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship inform our understanding of the role schools play in students' citizenship?* In this final chapter, I will first give a summary of the findings of each separate study. Following this summary, I will reflect on these findings, the limitations of the studies and explore themes for future research and implications for educational practice.

## **6.1 Summary of the main findings**

To answer the main question of this dissertation a multi-method approach was adopted, combining two qualitative and two quantitative studies. The two exploratory qualitative studies were concerned with gaining a better understanding of how different aspects of the school as practice ground (i.e. vision, within-school relationships and shared activities) interact with each other to provide a context to students' citizenship. The quantitative

studies addressed the question of how experiences with citizenship within the school inform students' citizenship outside of school. The relation between doing citizenship and being citizens in school and students' citizenship beyond the school walls was studied using a large-scale quantitative dataset.

The **first study (Chapter 2)** examined the ways in which different schools function as practice grounds for citizenship, employing a multiple case study approach that yielded four distinct school portraits of Dutch secondary schools. These four schools differed considerably in terms of their location, size, tracks, and student population. Interviews with members of the professional community and focus groups with students were used to study the within-school understanding of youth citizenship and students' citizenship experiences. Three different expressions of youth citizenship were examined: youth becoming and being citizens, and youth doing citizenship (Wood, 2022). These expressions were situated within the schools' functioning as a community by focusing on the school vision, characteristics of relationships within the school and shared activities (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Furman, 2012). The analyses showed that the schools differed in how they were practice grounds for their students' citizenship. Although each of the four schools articulated a vision emphasizing youth becoming citizens, there were considerable differences between schools in the main themes that were connected to students' future as citizens: ranging from a focus on labor market participation to independent critical thinking. Youth being citizens (e.g. being members of the school community) and youth doing citizenship received less attention in the school vision in all four schools, with one exception, School 1 did focus on being citizens in school and generally had a strong focus on the sense of school community. In terms of within-school relations, teachers played a crucial role as role models and proximate authority figures. Finally, shared activities in all schools could be understood as an expression of the vision and characteristics of the within-school relations, but, due to their infrequent nature, yielded limited added insights in terms of students' citizenship experiences. In research, youth doing citizenship is mainly understood through their opportunities to have voice within the school: to be able to partake in discussion and to influence school policy, for example through school council membership). The results of this study show that across the four schools, opportunities to have voice were especially limited for students in the pre-vocational track. The differing experiences of students from dominant groups and marginalized groups within the context of the school as practice ground for citizenship raised the question of how differences between students were addressed, as a key characteristic of the functioning of the school as practice ground for citizenship.

Therefore, **the second study (Chapter 3)**, using the same qualitative data, addressed how dealing with differences was enacted in schools as practice grounds for citizenship. Four themes emerged from our analyses. Firstly, 'being different' was mostly understood from

an individual, deficit perspective. Differences between students were understood mainly as individual characteristics and were reflected upon from the perspective of a possible lack in social-emotional or academic capacities. Teachers were primarily concerned with how to best compensate for students' capacities from this individualized perspective. One school, School 4, was an exception here, as differences between students were actively approached within the classroom as an explicit asset of the community. Secondly, differences, and similarities, between students and teachers remained underused in all schools. Students clearly looked for similarities between themselves and their teachers, for example in religious background, and if found, often approached teachers as role models. This was especially the case for students from marginalized groups in society. However, teachers did not use these differences as a starting point for reflection on what similarities or differences between themselves and their students meant in the context of inequality and social status in the broader society. Put differently, teachers did not use the quality of the school as a condensed version of society for reflection on the functioning of society. Thirdly, this limited reflection on the relation between school community-internal differences and school-external differences between social groups in society was also visible in more general terms: the student body was taken as the 'normal' group, which resulted in limited reflections on how students' lives were influenced by (not) being part of the dominant groups in society. Finally, in light of students' citizenship and citizenship education, primarily ethnic and cultural differences were deemed relevant. Taken altogether, our analysis showed that the diversity of the school community was approached in an individualized, limited and relatively superficial way. This resulted in missed opportunities for citizenship learning.

The first two qualitative studies of this dissertation showed that the perspective of schools as practice grounds provides new insights in how the functioning of the school as a community contributes, and provides context, to students' citizenship, in terms of students' being and becoming citizens and doing citizenship. Furthermore, the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship illuminates areas that deserve attention in light of students' citizenship: especially students' relations with teachers, students' (differing) experience of voice and students' sense of school membership. In the second part of this dissertation, in the quantitative studies, these last two themes were further examined in terms of how these were related to students' citizenship beyond the school walls.

In the **third study (Chapter 4)** the association between students' experiences with 'having voice' and students' attitudes towards voice (contributing democratically and listening democratically) was examined. By focusing (among others) on students' attitudes towards listening, this study highlighted a relatively under-examined civic skill. Students' voice experiences can be considered as an expression of students' 'doing citizenship' in school. Two types of voice experiences within school were distinguished: voice as discussion and voice as influence (i.e. the experience of influencing school policy). Furthermore, it was examined

whether a democratic school culture, as experienced by teachers, positively moderated the association between students' experiences with voice at school and their attitudes towards voice. The results of three-level multivariate structural equation models (of students in classrooms in schools) indicate that both the experience of voice as discussion and voice as influence were positively associated with students' attitudes towards voice, in terms of both contributing democratically and listening democratically. Voice as discussion was not only relevant as an individual experience for students' attitudes towards voice, but also as a social experience in the classroom. That is, if students were part of classrooms where the classroom average experience of voice as discussion was higher, students had a more positive attitude towards contributing and listening democratically. This was not the case for voice as influence, possibly because influence of students is mostly organized through a student council outside the classroom context. Finally, contrary to what was hypothesized, the findings did not differ between schools with varying degrees of a democratic school culture as experienced by teachers.

In the **fourth study (Chapter 5)** the focus was shifted from 'doing citizenship' in school to 'being citizens'. In this final study, the relation between being citizens in school and students' citizenship outside school was examined. Sense of school membership can be considered an important part of youth being citizens in school and primarily concerns the quality of relationships within school and with school. Generalized social trust describes trust in relationships with unknown others. Positive experiences with trust, being trusted and trusting, have been found to contribute to (generalized) social trust, especially when they involve others who differ from us (Flanagan & Stout, 2010). Therefore, the association between students' sense of school membership and their sense of generalized social trust was studied. Additionally, the diversity of the school community, in terms of track and ethnic background of students, was expected to positively influence the relation between school membership and generalized social trust. Three separate aspects of sense of school membership were distinguished: (1) identification with and participation in the school community, (2) perception of being accepted by peers within the school, and (3) connection to adults within the school community. The results of three-level regression models, showed that all three factors of sense of school membership were positively associated with generalized social trust. School diversity in terms of the number of educational tracks in the school did not moderate this association. However, school ethnic diversity did moderate the association, and in surprisingly different ways. For one factor of school membership, identification and participation in school, the moderation was positive, as expected. This indicated that school ethnic diversity strengthened the association of identification and participation in the school with generalized social trust. But for 'connection to adults', the third factor, the moderation was absent. Moreover, for the relation between the peer acceptance, the second factor, and trust the moderation was negative: experiencing acceptance by peers in a more ethnically diverse school community diminished its

association with generalized social trust. One of the possible explanations is that in more diverse communities, students tend to retreat in more homogenous peer groups (Munnikma et al., 2017), and their sense of peer acceptance could refer to that specific peer group while their contact with the diverse others present in their school is minimal. That implies that even in more diverse schools where individual students experience membership along the lines of peer acceptance of the school community, the social experiences relevant for generalized social trust might be missing. Put differently: a diverse school community does not automatically mean an inclusive or cohesive school community. In sum, the results of this study underscore the importance of fostering a sense of school membership for all students and cherishing diverse school communities in light of schools as practice grounds for citizenship.

## **6.2 Discussion of the main findings**

The aim of this dissertation was to gain insight in the way the perspective of the school as practice ground could contribute to our understanding of the role schools play in students' citizenship. In the following section the main findings will be further discussed.

All four studies in this dissertation, in their own way, illustrate the usefulness of the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship to better understand the role of schools in students' citizenship. Two overarching themes emerge when combining the insights from the four studies. The first theme concerns the value of situating students' citizenship experiences within the functioning of the school as a community to illuminate the untapped citizenship potential of schools. The second theme concerns the specific opportunities and challenges that the diversity of school communities creates in light of schools as practice grounds for citizenship. In the following section, I will further explore these themes.

### **6.2.1 The untapped citizenship potential of schools**

The first key theme illuminated by applying the perspective of schools as practice grounds is, on the one hand, the vast potential of schools to offer students relevant citizenship experiences and, on the other, the lack of conscious use of much of this potential by members of the professional community. The studies in this dissertation have shed light on why certain citizenship experiences and certain aspects of the functioning of the school as a practice ground for citizenship deserve more attention and reflection. In the following paragraphs, I will reflect on these experiences and aspects along the two conceptual pillars of the perspective of schools as practice grounds for citizenship that I adopted in this dissertation: youth citizenship, as lived citizenship, and the school as community.

Both conceptual pillars of the studies in this dissertation have been pivotal to be able to situate students' citizenship within the school. Regarding the first pillar, the conceptualization of *youth citizenship* by Wood (2022) as becoming and being citizens and doing citizenship has helped to clarify why a narrow focus on students becoming citizens limits the understanding of schools' role in students' citizenship. The conceptualization used in this dissertation fits a broader research agenda on youth citizenship that is critical of the exclusionary nature of many conceptualizations of citizenship (cf. Becevic & Dahlstedt, 2021; Kubow et al., 2023). The shared premise of this research agenda seems to be that youth expressions and experiences of citizenship are too easily disqualified and overlooked. The conceptualization of Wood emphasizes that, while there will always be a part of the citizenship experience of youth that is influenced by their not yet being an adult citizen (becoming citizens), they are also already part of communities that they influence and are influenced by. This understanding highlights youth as active civic agents (cf. Aponte-Martinez & Pellegrino, 2017). As such, adding the perspectives of being citizens and doing citizenship in school has shown the relevance of practices and experiences of students as part of their *current* citizenship.

Our conceptualization of youth citizenship has also helped to clarify what 'the school as a practice ground for citizenship' implies. The language of 'the school as practice ground' has been used in previous studies, specifically in the Dutch citizenship education context<sup>11</sup> (Veugelers, 2011; "school as a training ground", Wesselingh, 2000). However, while this perspective does invite attention for practices beyond the formal curriculum, in those studies the concept 'practice' is used predominantly to describe practicing *for* adult citizenship (and as such for becoming a citizen). Adding the dimensions of being and doing citizenship *within* school highlights two important shifts. I will take student voice as an example. Firstly, shifting the focus from practicing for (adult) citizenship to the practice of citizenship in schools highlights the importance of being able to question authority or being able to influence school policy. A second shift is that missed opportunities for citizenship experiences can be understood as lessons in themselves. For example, the lack of opportunity to influence school policy, teaches students something about what is expected from them as current citizens. Our findings in chapter 2 and 4 confirm findings of other studies that students' voice as influence on school policy remains limited, even when school policy is in place to invite student voice through a student council (cf. Mitra, 2018). The

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11 In the summary of the law 'Law to clarify the citizenship assignment of schools in fundamental education' (*Wet verduidelijking van de burgerschapsopdracht aan scholen in het funderend onderwijs*) it is stated as follows: "(...) the schools is a practice ground, where students must be able to practice the skills that they will need to participate in society later in life" <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2021/06/22/eerste-kamer-stemt-in-met-nieuwe-wet-voor-burgerschapsonderwijs> (Accessed on November 7, 2023)



lesson is that shifting attention from only becoming citizens to also being citizens and doing citizenship in school helps to locate missed opportunities for relevant citizenship experiences.

The second conceptual pillar of the perspective of the school as practice ground is the *school as community*. To better understand how different schools function as practice grounds for citizenship, three aspects of school community were included in chapter 2: school vision, characteristics of within-school relations, and shared activities (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). The qualitative approach of the first part of this dissertation allowed to identify how different aspects of the school as a community inform each other and are intertwined. Following a reflection on the role of these three aspects, additionally the value of including different perspectives on the functioning of the school as a community will be discussed.

Firstly, examining different *school visions* has been valuable to grasp the range of different thematic foci on citizenship education and citizenship of students. Research by Leeman et al. (2008) shows that teachers differ in their understanding of citizenship education across subject area and school type. What our findings add is that teachers' understanding of citizenship, despite within-school differences, seem to be rooted in the school vision. Insight in the school vision helped to clarify the role of these shared roots for teachers' understandings of the educational goals related to their students' citizenship. Furthermore, previous studies on vision on citizenship in the educational context have mainly focused on different types of citizens, most famously in the work of Westheimer and Kahne (2004), who identified three types of citizens: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. The notions of citizenship in the schools in our qualitative studies (chapter 2 and 3) were all surprisingly individualistic: the notion of becoming an (individual) member of the workforce or an (individual) critical thinker (cf. Biesta & Lawy, 2006). These different notions to a certain extent fit the personally responsible and justice-oriented context. In all schools, a focus on participatory citizenship was absent. This type of citizenship is concerned with engaging in collective and community-based efforts. Despite the thematic differences in all school visions, a vision on citizenship as community membership generally was lacking.

Secondly, the school as community perspective has helped to focus the attention on the relevance of *the characteristics of within-school relations* to better understand the role schools play in students' citizenship experiences. Although quantitative studies have illustrated the relevance of within-school relations for students' citizenship (e.g. Isac et al., 2014; Sincer et al., 2022; Wanders et al., 2020), the findings of both chapter 2 and 3 add depth as to why these relations matter. Teachers show students how they should behave as citizens (i.e. serve as role models) and how authority works (i.e. as proximate authority figures). Furthermore, relations with peers seemed especially relevant for students' citizenship in terms of social

learning within the classroom context. In the following paragraphs, the relevance of these relations will be further discussed.

Some teachers seemed to function *as role models* for students. This was especially the case when students could identify with them based on shared background characteristics, such as ethnic, cultural or religious background. Students reflected especially positively on instances where their shared background with a member of the professional community was explicitly mentioned or discussed. Our findings suggest that from the perspective of students' sense of school membership, their identification with teachers deserves more attention. Relations with adults within the school are a crucial element of the experience of being part of the school community (cf. Allen et al. 2022). This deserves special attention for students from marginalized groups, as generally speaking their sense of school membership is lower than that of students from dominant groups. Research indicates that teachers 'like them' play a crucial role in terms of their experiences of belonging (cf. Atkins et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2022). Conversely, the relationship between majority teachers and students from a marginalized background was more fraught. In light of their citizenship, these students were often approached as lacking required knowledge or experiences and their world was deemed 'too small'. As such, deficit thinking was clearly present in the way these students were approached (cf. Picower, 2009). To improve the teachers functioning as role models, increased reflection of teachers on their diversity beliefs would be valuable as these beliefs influence the learning trajectories of minority students in terms of school belonging and school engagement, both closely related to sense of school membership (Baysu et al., 2020). Moreover, the findings of our studies, especially chapter 3, underline the relevance of reflection on and awareness of teachers' diversity beliefs in light of their role as (possible) role models.

Theoretically, teachers are also considered to be *proximate authority figures* for students, representing authority beyond the school (cf. Flanagan, 2007). However, we have not found any explicit reference to or reflection on this role, neither by members of the professional community nor by students. Nevertheless, schools clearly differed in the way rules and regulations were a part of the school vision, were implemented and could be questioned by students. And previous studies show that the extent to which students perceive they are treated fairly by teachers or, conversely, when they experience a punitive regime in schools, relates to their citizenship; i.e. the perception of being treated fairly by teachers increases political trust and vice versa (Bruch & Soss, 2018; Flanagan et al., 2007). Thus, more awareness of teachers concerning the relevance of how student behaviors are regulated within school seems valuable.

Besides students' relations with teachers, *peers* also play an important role in students' citizenship experiences. In research on citizenship of students, the role of relations between

students and teachers often takes center stage (e.g. Bruch and Soss, 2018; Sincer et al., 2022). The studies in this dissertation underscore that attention for the relations between students is of additional importance to better understand the role schools play in students' citizenship. For example, the analysis in chapter 4 revealed that not only students' individual experiences of voice as discussion were related to their democratic attitudes towards voice, their classroom average also mattered. Put differently: when a student's classroom peers (on average) experienced more voice, this related positively to that student's attitudes toward voice. This indicates social learning on the level of the classroom (cf. Bandura & Walters, 1977). For voice as influence, which mostly plays out on the school level, this relation was not visible. Moreover, within our qualitative studies, students frequently highlighted the concept of students' classroom identity and as such referred to the classroom as a separate community in which they experienced membership. In the Dutch context, students are generally tracked early and thus for most of the students in our studies classroom and track coincide. Their peer context thus primarily consists of peers from the same track. This was also one of the possible explanations for the lack of moderation of tracks present within the school (in chapter 5) on the relation between sense of school membership and generalized social trust. Because students' social lives are primarily situated within their classroom contexts, the mere presence of different tracks within school does not per se increase their interaction with diverse others. When adopting a school as practice ground perspective it is thus relevant to situate students' citizenship experiences within their classrooms, as well as in the broader school context.

The final and third aspect of the school community, *shared activities* as part of the broader school context beyond the classroom, yielded less new insights. To a certain extent these types of activities can be understood as expressions of the school vision and they often seem to embody social dynamics that are also present within the broader school context. While other research illustrated the value of shared activities for students' citizenship, especially service learning (e.g. Bringle & Clayton, 2012), in our research these activities added little to the understanding of students' daily citizenship experiences due to their infrequent nature (i.e. a school trip, an arts project). This is also the main reason why in the second study, chapter 3, the focus shifted away from these shared activities and rested mainly on school vision and relationships.

Finally, the school as community approach also served as an invitation to include *the perspectives of different school community members* on the functioning of their schools. Generally, research on citizenship education, specifically qualitative research, focuses mainly on experiences of students *or* teachers *or* school leaders (e.g. Goren & Yemini, 2017; Olsen et al., 2015; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). The more inclusive approach in this dissertation has illustrated that all voices of school community members contribute valuable insights in the functioning of the school as practice ground for citizenship. For example, the

building service workers gave key insights (in their role) in the daily dynamics of the school community outside of the classroom. Interviewing two civics teachers in some of the schools showed that even teachers within the same subject area within the same school had different perspectives on students' citizenship, the functioning of the school as a community, and the role of the school in students' citizenship (cf. Leeman et al., 2008). And although these perspectives were generally complimentary and not contradictory, they resulted in different practices and approaches within the classrooms. While school leaders often had a clear story on the school vision and related practices, the experiences of other school community members added relevant nuance to the actual daily practice within the school and illuminated similarities and discrepancies between school vision, teacher practices, and student experiences (cf. McCowan, 2011). When the goal is to consciously use what the school as practice ground has to offer students in terms of relevant citizenship experiences, including the perspectives of different community members on the actual functioning of the school as a community is thus relevant.

### **6.2.2 Opportunities and challenges of a diverse school community**

The second key theme that emerged from our analyses throughout the studies of this dissertation, was dealing with difference within the context of the school as practice ground. The studies in this dissertation, particularly chapter 3 and 5, illustrate that the relationship between students' experiences of citizenship and the extent to which the members of their school community differ from themselves, from each other, from their teachers and from dominant groups in society, matters. One of the key questions that emerged from previous research on the impact of diversity on the functioning of communities is: are a sense of community and community diversity compatible (Neal, 2017)? Previous research shows that the relationship between diversity and sense of community is fraught and complex. The data in chapter 5 indeed showed a negative relation between school ethnic diversity and sense of school membership. In light of students' citizenship, this is a particularly relevant theme, as learning to deal with difference is a primary goal of citizenship education (cf. Banks, 2017). The following paragraphs will further discuss our findings concerning the diversity in the school community in relation to: (1) students' sense of school membership, (2) an inclusive and cohesive practice grounds and (3) the scope of included differences.

To be able to profit from a diverse school community, the experience of *sense of school membership* for students plays a role. The findings in chapter 5, show that for identification with and participation in school, an aspect of sense of school membership, the ethnic diversity of the school positively moderates the relation between school membership (identification and participation) and generalized social trust. This confirms the added value of experiencing membership in an ethnically diverse school community, as opposed to in a more ethnically homogeneous one. In addition to the finding in chapter 5 that students with a non-native Dutch background generally experience lower sense of school

membership, the findings of chapter 3 suggest that, when students from marginalized groups are a numerical minority within the school community, they struggle to feel being fully part of it (cf. Merry, 2016). These insights add to our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the so-called ‘civic opportunity gap’ between students from dominant and marginalized groups in society (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Wood, 2023). Previous research had already indicated that this gap might not only concern what is offered to students in terms of opportunities for citizenship learning, such as partaking in a debate or student council, but that their uptake of these opportunities also differs (cf. Mennes, 2023). The underlying mechanism might relate to their lack of sense of school membership, of which identification and participation are part, which in turn could explain the relatively limited uptake of citizenship learning opportunities by students from marginalized groups in society. This in turn serves as invitation to focus on supporting the sense of school membership of all students in light of the functioning of the school as a practice ground for citizenship.

The second, related, question that the diversity of the school population raises is: *how should diversity be addressed within the context of the school as practice ground for citizenship?* In the first two studies of this dissertation community was approached in a descriptive way, based on the premise that whichever way the school community functions matters for students’ citizenship experiences. However, how diversity is addressed in the context of the school community asks for reflection on more normative understandings of community. Our findings indicate that both the extent to which the school community is inclusive and the extent to which the school community is cohesive matters here. The findings in chapter 3, that not all students’ felt equally part of the school community, calls for reflection on the extent to which a school community is inclusive for all its members. If the aim is to nurture a sense of community in all school community members, research indicates that in a more diverse school context this asks for a sustained effort from the entire professional community (Hajisoteriou et al., 2017). Our findings illustrate that, while the explicit aim of a sense of safety for students is present in all schools, a sense of community as an explicit aim is much less visible. Only in one of the schools, that was relatively homogeneous in terms of students’ ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status and worldviews, this seemed to be an explicit goal.

Possibly, the first step towards strengthening the sense of community in school, of all members, starts with making it an explicit aim and embracing the conflict that may arise when reflecting on what that ambition implies (Achinstein, 2002). Additionally, making the way diversity is addressed within the school, a primary focus in the school vision could be a way to explicitly invite the discussion on how this should be done. This is what Shields (2001) proposes through the understanding of schools as ‘communities of difference’, also discussed in chapter 3. One of the schools in our sample attempts this approach, and the

students in our focus groups all reflected positively on their sense of belonging in this school. That was also true for students from marginalized backgrounds, which was not as evident in the other schools.

Furthermore, the diversity of the school community, raises the question: to what extent is the school community cohesive? The extent to which contact between students with different backgrounds is actively facilitated and encouraged, i.e. this cohesiveness is supported in school, seems to be a crucial characteristic of the functioning of the school as a practice ground for citizenship (cf. Banks et al., 2001; Banks & Banks, 2019). This is also illustrated by the unexpected finding in chapter 5 that in more ethnically diverse schools the relation between peer acceptance (as part of sense of school membership) and generalized social trust was found to be less positive than that relation in a more ethnically homogeneous environment. This alludes to the possibility that students in more ethnically diverse schools retreat into relatively homogenous peer groups (cf. Munniksma et al., 2016). The shared activities, as a characteristic of the functioning of the school as a community, might be especially relevant for students' citizenship experiences when organized in light of integrating the school community.

In sum: reflection on the extent to which the school community can be considered an inclusive community, where a sense of school membership for all students is supported, and the extent to which a school community can be considered a cohesive community, where relations exist across students' school-internal outgroups both seem to be valuable in order for all students to be able to profit from what the school as practice ground has to offer.

Finally, *broadening the scope of relevant differences* for students' citizenship experiences could contribute to make more conscious use of what the school as practice ground can offer students in terms of learning to deal with differences and being different. When citizenship education was discussed in relation to the concept 'diversity' during our qualitative data collection, primarily ethnic and cultural diversity was mentioned. Meanwhile, the, earlier mentioned, new Dutch citizenship education law explicitly describes the necessity of students' knowledge about and respect for a much broader range of societally relevant differences, including worldviews and sexual orientation. This broader perspective on differences was deliberately adopted in only one out of four schools in our qualitative sample. Consciously broadening the scope of differences could create more opportunities to practice dealing with difference in schools that, along the lines of ethnic and cultural background, might be considered homogeneous. To avoid unconsciously confirming that primarily ethnic, cultural, and religious background matters in light of citizenship (cf. Slooman & Duyvendak, 2015), a perspective on citizenship education that includes a broader scope of differences also seems valuable. Moreover, the theme of diversity and citizenship calls for including students in reflections on how being different from the

dominant groups in society relates to societal inequalities and prejudice (e.g. Banks & Banks, 2019). Our findings in chapter 3 illustrate that the extent to which this happened was very limited. To conclude, to profit from the diversity within the school community in light of students' citizenship requires a broad interpretation of diversity, a shared school vision and related practices in terms of the inclusive and cohesive character of the school community and conscious reflection with students on the societal implications of being different.

### **6.3 Limitations and future research**

The research in this dissertation has some limitations, that should be recognized. Firstly, although both studies using the quantitative data have theoretical grounds to justify the chosen direction of the relations that were researched, the data is cross-sectional and therefore does not allow for causal conclusions. Secondly, while the thematic focus of the dissertation, schools as practice grounds for citizenship, informed the quantitative data collection, choices in what data was collected were not informed by the analyses of the qualitative data. Due to the overarching project planning (consisting of two PhD projects and a post doc project) this was not feasible, as both data collections immediately succeeded each other. If the analyses of the qualitative data had been finalized before the quantitative data this would have possibly led to different choices concerning the content of the questionnaires. Furthermore, it proved challenging to translate the whole-school perspective into quantitative analyses anyway, as so many aspects within the school interact with and influence each other. Nevertheless, the quantitative data were suitable for the purpose of the second part of this dissertation: to examine aspects of the relation between youth citizenship experiences within school and their citizenship beyond the school walls. Thirdly, the qualitative data we collected has allowed for comparison between the functioning of four different school communities. However, although we were inspired by an ethnographic approach, and made field notes on observations and collected school documents, the analyzed data were interview data only. The additional data was used only to inform these interviews. Consequently, unconscious or implicit practices, that were part of what the studies aimed to grasp, may have been missed in the data collection and analyses. Finally, a different selection of schools might have yielded different insights especially in terms of the range of themes around students' citizenship addressed in the school vision, and the dynamics of within-school relations.

The findings, and limitations, of this research point towards relevant avenues for future studies that may be valuable in light of furthering the understanding of the relation between schools and students' citizenship. Firstly, and most urgently, our combined



findings raise the question of how to increase more conscious use of the potential of schools as practice grounds for citizenship? A design-based study, to develop a teacher and school leader professionalization program aimed to support them in gaining more awareness of their roles in relation to their students' citizenship could provide important and practical insights. It would be relevant to include the development of a school vision on the school as practice ground for citizenship in the program. Ideally, the impact of such a program on the functioning of the school as practice ground for citizenship would not only be measured through the perspectives of members of the professional community, but students would also be included. Additionally, a better understanding of youth citizenship itself, specifically within the school context seems valuable. Especially when a conceptualization of citizenship along the lines of lived citizenship is adopted, building on the experiences and interpretations of youth themselves is crucial (cf. Kallio et al., 2020). Youth's perspectives are needed to be able to understand which within-school practices and experiences are relevant for them in light of their citizenship (Arnot & Schwartz, 2012; Weller, 2007; Wood, 2010).

Our findings additionally warrant further reflection on the relevance of the diversity of the school community for students' citizenship. In terms of students being citizens in school, students' sense of school membership deserves more attention in research. This holds especially true for students from marginalized and minority groups. As research consistently shows, students from these groups have lower sense of belonging and membership in school (e.g. Pendergast et al., 2018; Sanders & Munford, 2016; Saravi et al., 2020). Research on their perspectives on what would contribute to experiencing a sense of school membership, what possible barriers they identify to that experience and what role teachers could play to overcome these barriers would thus be relevant. Another avenue for research in this realm would be to explore how the preparedness of future teachers to deal with diversity within the school population could be improved (Eggleston, 1993; Nieuwelink & Oostdam, 2021; Shannon-Baker, 2020). Our findings indicated that teachers with similar background characteristics are often identified as role models by students, especially those from minority or marginalized background. An important sidenote here is that this does not imply that individual teachers who share these background characteristics should be solely responsible for these students' sense of school membership (Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010). Finally, on the level of the whole school a better understanding of what an inclusive community implies seems necessary. Building on research on inclusive schools and inclusive school communities might be of value here. Although much of this research has a focus on special needs education, it gives practical, as well as theoretical and conceptual insights into how school communities can function in more inclusive ways (e.g. Carrington & Robertson, 2006; Hope & Hall, 2018).



## 6.4 Practical implications

The findings and conclusion of this dissertation lead to several implications for school practices, teacher training and educational policy. First, in light of school practices, more conscious use of what schools have to offer their students in terms of citizenship experiences would be a primary goal. Developing a shared school vision (i.e. including the perspectives of students and teachers) on the functioning of the school as a community and including a clear vision on dealing with diversity (i.e. not limited to ethnic and cultural diversity) in school seems to be a crucial first step. A second step would be to use this school vision to reflect on practices that are relevant in light of students' citizenship and to establish whether the vision and practices align, in terms of their underlying goals, principles and values. The conceptualization of youth citizenship used in this dissertation could guide that reflection: what does our school have to offer our students in terms of experiences of doing citizenship and being citizens?

In teacher training increased attention for teachers' different roles in light of their students' citizenship seems necessary. This pertains to *all* teacher training, as our findings show that all teachers play a role in students' citizenship; teachers play a role in students' sense of school membership, and are role models and proximate authority figures. In terms of students' sense of school membership, the quality of the experienced relations with teachers is crucial. This raises the question how future teachers can learn to make sure that their students feel seen and heard, valued and treated fairly? This last question is also crucial in terms of teachers' roles as proximate authority figures, while the first two relate to being role models. Being a role model additionally seems to ask for reflection on finding shared ground with one's students and for reflection on what kind of citizenship one would like to model. Finally, to be able to fulfil any of these roles all teacher training should include more significant preparation for dealing with difference in the classroom, also in connection to inequality in society.

Finally, in terms of educational policy, the findings in this dissertation call for a renewed version of the understanding of the school as practice ground for students' citizenship: such an understanding should include more attention for students being citizens and doing citizenship in school. This implies a stronger focus on the importance of: (1) all students' sense of school membership, (2) the opportunity for all students to contribute their voice (ideally also in terms of their school's policies) and (3) the functioning of the school as a community. Instead of choosing to simply offer an extra program or slight curricular adjustment in order to reach prespecified citizenship education goals, this could encourage schools to focus on their currently present, yet untapped, citizenship potential.

On a societal level, the increased attention for citizenship goes hand in hand with the experience of increased pressure on schools: yet another thing to achieve. This dissertation hopefully contributes to making better and more conscious use of what is already present within the school, inviting shared reflection in the professional community on existing practices and their alignment with the community membership they aim to model to their students. Moreover, I hope that this dissertation serves as an invitation to listen carefully, and democratically, to all students' voices when they share what citizenship means for them.