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Influencing youth citizenship

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1. General Introduction

To develop, sustain or improve democratic qualities of a society, democratic institutions and civic practices can only fulfill their potential when individuals and communities hold democratic convictions, have democratic competences and are motivated to use them. Yet, human beings are not born as engaged and democratic citizens. Equipping young citizens with the means necessary to participate in, reflect on and shape democratic societies requires conscious effort. Citizenship education is one of the foremost ways of organizing these efforts.

A coherent and elaborated perspective on what it means to be a good citizen and identification of factors that may effectively contribute to youth citizenship development are essential in realizing the potential of citizenship education. This dissertation aims to advance understanding of these prerequisites, by complementing existing knowledge on citizenship education programs with research on generic educational factors that influence citizenship development.

The call for citizenship education

Both citizens and policymakers have been expressed concerns about a range of social and democratic issues in the past three decades (Bronneman-Helmers & Zeijl, 2008; Den Ridder, Posthumus, & Dekker, 2013; Verhue, Verzijden, & Nienhuis, 2006). The range of social and democratic issues mentioned is large, and includes worries about the erosion of social cohesion, a decline in political knowledge and engagement of younger generations, and increases in political engagement inequality between young adults with different educational backgrounds (Abendschön, Schäfer, & Rossteutscher, 2014, Bartels, 2009; Gallego, 2007; Galston, 2001).

Some authors have suggested that young adults are still civically engaged, but in other spheres than those of formal democratic institutions (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, & Briddell, 2011). While this may be the case, a decline in and growing inequality of engagement remains problematic, as formal democratic institutions shape many of the structural conditions within which civic society operates. Similarly, in analyses

of the perceived erosion of social cohesion it is argued that the development of commonly held civic norms and conflict resolution skills may require active government policies (Educational Council, 2003; WRR, 2003). In recognition of these problems, policymakers and the majority of citizens contend that schools should make greater efforts in preparing students for dealing with these challenges (Eurydice, 2012; Verhue et al., 2006).

The unique position of schools in society

There are three conditions that give schools a unique position in current society. First of all, the school is generally considered a place for explicit learning. In other words, schools are thought to have a certain degree of legitimacy and authority in the development of students, both in the process of learning and the contents of learning (i.e., what should be learned). In doing so, they also instill certain norms and values in students. For instance, teachers may impose some order and structure on the classroom by setting rules and norms to facilitate the learning process. Moreover, even stimulating independence of mind is a value-driven enterprise, after all. Hence, education is not a neutral, but an inherently normative and frequently contested endeavor.

Secondly, educational systems typically reach virtually all non-adult citizens, due to compulsory education legislature. Very few other institutions reach all citizens of a certain age category, if any. This characteristic was underlined by former minister of Education Jo Ritzen, calling schools *'the only common experience'* in plural Dutch society (Ritzen, 1997). However, although countries such as the Netherlands and Germany exhibit a fair amount of national standardization of examinations and have organized quality control by national Inspectorates, very little national guidance and regulations pertain to citizenship education. In the Netherlands, schools' autonomy with regard to citizenship education is safeguarded by so-called 'freedom of education' legislation (i.e., article 23 of the Dutch constitution).

Thirdly, schools have student populations with a diversity of student backgrounds and abilities. While most schools display less diversity than local and national communities due to parental preferences and tracking by cognitive ability, they nevertheless tend to exhibit more diversity than is present in families and peer groups. As such, schools have often been conceptualized as 'playing grounds' for practicing democracy in plural societies. At the same time, critical scholars have also pointed at the potentially negative consequences of how diversity is dealt with by educational institutions for marginalized

groups, as schools may implicitly be geared at dominant societal groups, diminishing marginalized groups' self-respect and equality of opportunity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Mellink, 2013; Merry, 2014).

Implications of schools' position in society

From the special position of schools, a few implications follow. First of all, as schools cannot provide education that is value neutral, the following questions arise: Are there any values that all schools should stimulate in particular, and if so, which? How much freedom should be given to schools to instill students with their own school-specific values? And which balance should schools strike between instilling values in students and allowing them to develop their own values? While an extensive treatment of these questions falls outside the scope of this dissertation, it shows that schools need to develop a conscious position with regard to the normative aspects of the education they provide.

Secondly, as they reach virtually all non-adult citizens, schools can be positioned to not only raise the general level of citizenship competences, but to address inequalities in democratic ability and agency as well. As such, schools are uniquely situated to improve equality of democratic opportunity.

Finally, increasing diversity in both society at large and schools themselves places a much greater demand on the cultural awareness and professionalism of education professionals. Moreover, it forces schools to not only equip students individually, but also to deal with intergroup dynamics in schools and general society.

Previous research on citizenship education

Currently, policymakers in many nations have made the provision of democratic citizenship education mandatory, including the Netherlands (Eurydice, 2012), as they have good reason to consider schools as places in which students may develop democratic citizenship. Studies have shown that students who receive deliberate instruction in civics gain more civic knowledge than students who do not (Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Barber, 2008). Moreover, international comparisons, in-depth research on specific schools and meta-analyses have all identified that students' citizenship attitudes, knowledge, skills and political engagement increase when they experience a safe and open classroom climate in which they are encouraged to discuss controversial topics from

different perspectives (Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal, & Ten Dam, 2013; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). The majority of empirical studies have been performed on dedicated citizenship programs (e.g. Lin, 2015; Pauw, 2013; Verhoeven, 2012; SCDRD, 2010) or citizenship-specific curricula (Geboers et al., 2013; Keating, Kerr, Benton, Mundy, & Lopes, 2010), yet large parts of school- and class-level variance are left unexplained (Isac, Maslowski, Creemers, & Van Der Werf, 2014; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). Notably, the mechanisms that may influence individual citizenship behavior and development have received little attention in the literature.

At the same time, schools and teachers still struggle with the normativity inherent in citizenship education and often feel insufficiently equipped in these matters (Akar, 2012; Cassidy, Brunner, & Webster, 2014; Chin & Barber, 2010; Keating et al., 2010). For instance, teachers both in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands report difficulties in facilitating discussions on controversial issues (Hess, 2009; Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004; Radstake & Leeman, 2010). In the Netherlands, relatively few schools develop a concrete and specific perspective on citizenship education, and often fail to provide citizenship education in a focused and systematic manner (Inspectorate of Education, 2013).

The main research question

While a great number of empirical studies have been performed on dedicated citizenship programs and citizenship-specific curricula, research on generic factors in education that may contribute to citizenship development is still scarce. Generic factors are factors that are not necessarily a component of a citizenship program or curriculum, but instead are an inextricable part of education. Importantly, generic factors can serve multiple educational goals. Therefore, the central question of this study is:

Which generic factors in education may contribute to students' citizenship development?

In answering this question, various cognitive and motivational processes that are argued to be essential for dealing with citizenship situations will be investigated. Although none of the processes concerned are developed in social isolation, we distinguish between intrapersonal and interpersonal generic factors that may stimulate citizenship development.

The first category concerns predominantly intrapersonal factors that shape how individuals relate to the world, such as language ability (chapter 3) and perspective taking (chapter 5). The second category includes interpersonal factors that influence citizenship development. In particular, the potential contribution of the peer language environment (chapter 4) and norms communicated by significant others (chapter 5) are examined. Insight into these generic factors may inform citizenship education programs and practice, while potentially contributing to other disciplines and application contexts.

Before addressing these questions, this dissertation commences with a study investigating the normative aspects of citizenship education that explores whether, and if so how, coherent and explicit perspectives on citizenship education can be formulated (chapter 2). Many studies on citizenship education are non-empirical and frequently argue towards a normative position. As schools and teachers nonetheless still find the normative aspects of citizenship difficult and feel insufficiently prepared in these matters, answering this question may help schools formulate more concrete and specific perspectives on citizenship education, which is an important prerequisite for focused efforts in this area.

The assessment of generic factors that potentially contribute to the citizenship development of students is performed in various ways. Chapter 3 explores the influence of individual language ability on youth citizenship attitudes, knowledge, reflection and skills at the end of primary education, as students at this age experience a potentially sensitive period for citizenship development. After the mechanisms through which language may contribute to citizenship development are explored, the influence of language ability is isolated from the impact of other cognitive abilities using a quasi-longitudinal design. In chapter 4, the influence of the peer language environment on citizenship knowledge of grade 6 students is investigated. As classroom compositions remain more intact in primary education than in other periods of formal education, this allows for more precise establishment of potential peer effects. Finally, chapter 5 scrutinizes mechanisms that may improve intergroup tension resolution on higher education students using an experimental design. In doing so, it attempts to expose whether behavioral and motivational mechanisms may still influence this underexposed citizenship competence at a relatively late age.