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### Becoming a democratic citizen: A study among adolescents in different educational tracks

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## CHAPTER 6

### COMPENSATING OR REPRODUCING?

#### STUDENTS FROM DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL TRACKS ABOUT THE ROLE OF SCHOOL IN EXPERIENCING DEMOCRACY<sup>8</sup>

##### **Abstract**

Studies show that adolescents that are at a higher educational level have more positive experiences than those of lower levels with aspects of democracy, such as decision-making or discussions. In our qualitative longitudinal 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, 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 the implications of these findings with respect to equal opportunities for all citizens and the role of school in political socialization of adolescents.

**Keywords:** educational tracks, political socialization, equality, education, adolescents

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<sup>8</sup> Based on: Nieuwelink, H., Dekker, P., & Ten Dam, G. (submitted). Compensating or Reproducing? Students in different educational tracks about the role of school in experiencing democracy.

Young peoples' orientation towards society, politics, and democracy is shown to be strongly related to their educational level (Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012; Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal, & Ten Dam, 2015; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito 2010; Torney-Purta, 2002). Those at higher levels are often more positive about democracy and are more willing to participate, and to show more political efficacy. Those at the lower levels, on the other hand, are shown to be less interested in news and politics and to show more cynicism about politics. They are also shown to be more critical of their own abilities 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 from various educational levels appears to be different: young people at higher level discuss politics more often, and have parents that show more interest in politics and participate more often in civil society and politics (e.g. Authors, 2016a; Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009). This is problematic because it can hamper equal opportunities for participation in society and democracy, as has been often argued (Lijphart, 1996; Dahl, 2006; Stolle & 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). Some scholars argue that schools should also compensate for inequalities in citizenship knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In particular, for those who have less positive experiences with politics and democracy, the school can broaden their horizon (Biesta, 2009; Janmaat, 2008; Veugelers, 2009; Van de Werfhorst, 2014). Some studies have shown that schools can indeed have an effect to this end, but other studies indicate that schools are actually reproducing or strengthening existing differences (Campbell, 2008; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2011; Metz & Younnis, 2005; Ichilov, 2003; Ten Dam & Volman, 2003). Nonetheless, most of these studies have a quantitative perspective, usually questioning the students once during their school career and often focusing on one single context (e.g., school, family, or peers). More in-depth understanding of the possibilities of adolescents to experience democracy in school in addition to their experiences in other social contexts during their whole school career is still lacking.

This chapter reports about a qualitative longitudinal study on the perceptions of Dutch adolescents from different educational tracks of the possibilities to develop democratic attitudes in everyday social settings. The aim of our study is to deepen our insight as to how adolescents experience situations in everyday life that can potentially enable them to develop democratic attitudes, and whether young people from different educational tracks perceive school as a place where democratic attitudes are fostered. By interviewing them twice, we can provide a more comprehensive view of the experiences that adolescents have with democracy in everyday life and whether differences exist during various phases in their school life. With our

qualitative approach, we can add to the literature by providing more insights into the meanings adolescents attach to these experiences.

Since most adolescents have limited experiences with *political* democracy (e.g., the parliament, government, political parties) (Authors, 2016a; Schulz et al., 2010; Galston, 2001), in this study, we concentrate on everyday experiences with aspects of democracy. By doing so, we build on previous research that shows adolescents base their attitudes toward democracy and politics partly on what they experience in daily life (Flanagan, 2013; Sapiro, 2004). Our focus is on three central aspects of democracy (discussions, decision-making, and social and political engagement) that adolescents often encounter in these day-to-day situations.

### **Developing Attitudes Toward Democracy**

Democracy is a multidimensional concept that encompasses various ways of dealing in a collective and inclusive way with different perspectives and interests, and encompasses many aspects. Discussions are one of the features of democracy, as exchanging arguments, disagreeing with and convincing others facilitate that social groups with different interests and opinions can live together in a peaceful way. In the literature, political issues are highlighted in particular (Goodin, 2009; Held, 2006). Nonetheless, discussions can also involve situations where citizens form or share opinions about everyday issues, such as collective activities or rules of an organization. There are different ways of coming to a decision in a democratic way. Democratic decisions can be made through voting, negotiation, or deliberation (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, as it is a central means for people to make their voices heard and be involved in collective decision-making (Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

Many studies have shown that young people's political participation is rather limited, and that participation during adolescent and young adulthood is also strongly related to socio-economic milieu and education (Elchardus, Herbots, & Spruyt, 2013; Schulz et al., 2010). Similarly, they show that those adolescents who do not participate in politics develop attitudes toward democracy by following and discussing the news and by encountering aspects of democracy in everyday life. These experiences lay the basis for their attitudes toward democracy and politics and have been shown to have a lasting effect (Flanagan, 2013; Greenstein, 1965; Hess & Torney, 1967; Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003; Prior, 2012; Quintelier & Van Deth, 2014; Sapiro, 2004; Sears & Levy, 2003). For example, the views of young people about the responsiveness of politicians is partly based on their experiences with authorities in their daily lives (Gimpel et al., 2003) and interest in

politics during adolescence is an important explanation for adults' political interest (Prior, 2012). However, other studies indicate that it works the other way around—when becoming more familiar with politics, adolescents adjust their views about fair decision-making to how they view politics' works (Nieuwelink, Ten Dam, & Dekker, 2015; Abdelzahed, Zetterberg, & Ekman, 2014).

Adolescents can experience aspects of democracy inside and outside of school, at home, with peers, and in associational life on a daily basis. All of these contexts have been shown to be of relevance to the development of the adolescents' democratic attitudes. Encounters with aspects of democracy in daily life differs for social-cultural background and level of education (Amnå, 2012; Quintelier, 2015). Firstly, the role of parents has been shown as 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 an authoritative parental style, where the reasoning behind parental policies are open to discussion, is more common among the higher educated, and is positively related to positive views on social relations and politics (Chan & Koo, 2011; Gniewozs, Noack, Buhl, & 2009; Leman, 2005; Spera, 2005). Young people who grow up in social milieus with higher educated parents also experience talking about the news or politics more often (Cicognani, Zani, Fournier, Gavray, & Born, 2012; Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009; Neundorf, Smets, & Garcia-Albacete, 2013; Hooghe & Boonen, 2015).

Secondly, interactions with peers are important for adolescents to develop democratic attitudes (e.g. Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Research shows that adolescents influence each other's attitudes by discussing social issues and media content (Amnå, 2012; Erentaite, Zukauskiene, Beyers, & Pilkauskaitė-Valickienė, 2012; Gordon & Taft, 2010; Settle, Bond, & Levitt, 2011). Even though these studies have not looked into the differences between social groups, it is plausible that those adolescents with highly educated parents will also discuss the news and political issues more often with their peers. This puts adolescents with "lower" social-cultural background at a disadvantage.

Thirdly, civil society is widely seen as important for the fostering of civic orientations (Cohen & Rogers, 1995; Fung, 2003; Putnam 1993, 2000; Warren, 2001). Participating in some types of organizations (i.e., cultural organizations or youth unions) appears to have a positive effect on democratic attitudes, while participating in other associations (i.e., sport organizations) does not seem to affect democratic attitudes (Dekker, 2014; Fung, 2003; Hooghe & Quintelier, 2013; Van der Meer & Van Ingen, 2014). The highly educated often take part in activities in civil society (e.g. Dekker, 2014; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996), and have, therefore, possibilities to develop democratic attitudes.

## Can School Compensate for Society?

In a democracy, all citizens should have opportunities to develop democratic attitudes regardless of social-cultural background or educational level. This raises the question whether school, as a public institution, should be able to compensate for social inequalities (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 toward democracy (Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal, & Ten Dam, 2013; Isac, Maslowski, Creemers, & Van Der Werf, 2013; Manning & 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 & Mikkelson 2003; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001), a formal curriculum that includes specific citizenship courses (Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Hall Jamieson, 2007; Galston, 2001; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2007; Yang & Chung, 2009) and extra-curricular activities in combination with systematic reflection (e.g. service learning) (Metz & Younis, 2005; Van Goethem, Van Hoof, Orobio de Castro, Van Aken, & 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, & Bascopé, 2014; Gainous & Martens, 2012; Metz & Younis, 2005; Langton & Jennings, 1968). However, not all studies show that school actually compensates for society. Some research 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 & Dassonneville, 2012; Persson, 2015). Furthermore, it has been shown that goals and practices for 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 often strived for (Ichilov, 2003; Ten Dam & Volman, 2003). By pursuing different goal orientations, schools reproduce existing differences between (social groups of) adolescents. Finally, the characteristics of the educational system also influences the citizenship competences of adolescents. Van de Werfhorst and Mijs (2010) show that inequalities are magnified by external differentiation in separate school types. National level tracking leads to differences between students regarding their political knowledge and democratic attitudes, and are in favour of those in higher tracks.

We conclude from previous studies that the picture that emerges regarding the role of schools with respect to enhancing the citizenship of adolescents is mixed. Schools can compensate for the differences in opportunities that adolescents encoun-

ter outside the school to positively experience democracy, but they do not always bring this into practice. What is missing so far is insight into how adolescents from different educational tracks experience the various possibilities to learn democracy both inside and outside of school.

### **Current Study and Dutch Educational Setting**

The central question of this chapter reads as follows: *What are the experiences of adolescents from different educational tracks with democracy in everyday life, and do schools provide opportunities for those who have less experience of democracy in other settings?* By taking a longitudinal and qualitative research approach, we intend to deepen our insight into the issue whether schools compensate for prevailing inequalities in society.

The study has been carried out in the Netherlands. 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 the basic democratic values, and with an underlying vision of citizenship and social integration. Goals for citizenship are usually part of the subjects Civics and History, which are mandatory for all students and focus primarily on the cognitive aspects of citizenship. The Netherlands has an externally differentiated school system where education for the different tracks is generally provided at different locations. In the lowest track, there is pre-vocational education (PV). The highest track provides pre-academic education (PA).

### **Method**

For this study, we interviewed forty Dutch adolescents twice: when they were in their second year of secondary education (aged 13 to 15; 2011) and two years later (2013). We chose to interview students in the eighth and tenth grades because during these grades, schools provide the subjects wherein they explicitly pay attention to citizenship issues.

As to the selection of participants, a well-balanced dispersion was aimed with regard to gender, socio-economic status, ethnic background, and religious orientation. The twenty boys and twenty girls were equally distributed between pre-vocational (PV) and pre-academic (PA) education tracks, with thirteen adolescents from an ethnic minority. These students attended one of the following four schools in the Netherlands: 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 only provides 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. By selecting participants with diverse backgrounds and varying characteristics, we opted for a diverse sample that helped us to find perspectives on democracy from many walks of life.

### *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 they are engaged in within their private life (e.g., activities with friends, sports clubs, or religious associations) and the activities they participate in at school (e.g. student council, debating clubs). Second, the interviewees were invited to respond to 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 extra-curricular 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 “discussions” can be difficult to understand for young adolescents, they were asked whether situations exist where people can give their opinion and others respond on that opinion. Thereafter, their experiences with decision-making in their social settings were compared and discussed. Because decision-making can have a formal connotation to it, the adolescents were asked about how choices are made and who does it (e.g., “when you are going to do something together how do you choose between activities?”, “who decides about the rules and regulations?”). Subsequently, the interviewees were asked to compare whether they talk and discuss about the news and politics as indications of being socially or politically engaged. 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 and how these discussions evolve.

The final part of the interview zoomed in on the extent to which and in what way social and political issues and democracy are being taught and discussed in their classes. The interviewees were asked whether they talk about current events in educational settings and if it was related to school subject matter. Thereafter, they were asked whether and in what way they have discussed recent elections in class and through what kind of activities (such as watching of film clips of debates or discussing the outcomes).

### *Coding and Analysis*

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. With the help of ATLAS.ti, the interviews were coded and analyzed on the basis of the concepts that were derived from the theoretical framework and research question (cf. Miles & 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 analyzed 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, indications for adolescent experiences with discussions, different opinions, and the possibilities to voice their opinions in different settings, such as about joint activities or rules of the organization. Second, indications for the possibilities to influence or participate in decision-making procedures and how they come to decisions (e.g. voting or negotiating). Third, situations were searched where the adolescents were encouraged to be socially or politically engaged, for example, through talking about the news or elections.

### **Results**

All interviewees participate in a variety of social settings and interact with friends and other peers, family, teachers and school authorities, coaches and trainers, and religious authorities. Below, we discuss adolescents’ experiences in these various social contexts. First, we go into the experiences with democracy at home, with

friends, and in associational life. Thereafter, we present our results regarding the school.

### *At Home*

Daily activities at home create opportunities for many interviewees to have discussions in their households and to make collective decisions. Differences exist in adolescent experiences with discussions according to educational track. Many adolescents from the higher track (PA) stated at both points in time that they often discuss 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 the housekeeping]”. On the other hand, a substantial group of students from the lower track (PV) argued that they did not have many discussions in their household, and that strong disagreement was rare. This was especially the case when the students were in tenth grade. The explanation of one boy (PV) about the conversations he had with his father regarding soccer was exemplary: “Sometimes we talk about it. Was it a good game or a bad game? But that’s it. We don’t talk that much”.

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. Most interviewees stated that in such situations, they try to find consensus, but that their parents have the final say. This holds true for adolescents from both educational tracks and at both points in time. 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”. The students from both tracks seem to live in a household where the “pedagogical regime” is focused on consultation and negotiation, and this did not change over time.

Important differences exist in the adolescents’ experiences with talking about the news and politics. A substantial number of those enrolled in the PV-track, and this did not change over time, did not discuss the news or political events at all. These adolescents stated that the news is not a topic about which they talk, and many of them seemed to avoid politics in their discussions. Few of these young people talk about elections with their parents, and whether and for what party they will vote. Among those from the PA-track, on the other hand, the news and political events are being discussed as a matter of course and this increased with age. In the second round of interviews, nearly all of them explained that they talked with their parents more or less extensively about political events or elections, and many knew which kind of party their parents voted for and had discussed it with them. For adolescents in the higher educational track, politics is not distant from their lives, and their par-

ents seem to give them the impression that politics matters and talking about it 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 (semi-)regular discussed hobbies, such as musical preferences, and sporting events, such as Champions League matches, and how they will 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 strived for. One boy (PA) explained how they talk about such topics: “Recently we have discussed where we will go to in the summer. Someone said what he wants and others respond and say that they want something else. Then we will find agreement together”. However, the experiences of those in the PV-track 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 just do that”. Similarly, those in the PV-track engage in activities that all of them like, but they do not have much of a discussions about it; people give their opinion, but little more.

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. They viewed talking about the news or politics as a dull activity, and those who do talk about the news do so only briefly. The dominant view was that they preferred to talk about what matters to a teenager according to them: music, sports, role models, and boy/girlfriends.

### *In Associational Life*

Nearly all of the interviewed adolescents play 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. From the perspective of many adolescents from both educational tracks and at both points in time, there is limited room for discussion and collective decision-making in these organizations, and they do not discuss the news or political issues. The dominant experience of these young people, which did not change over time, was that they are able to voice their opinions, but that there is little to discuss and decide because everyone is there for the same reason and the rules are fixed. For example, one girl (PV) explained about the group she dances with: “The instructor decides about choreography, but we can say whether we want something to be changed... Sometimes we have a discussion, for example

about who should do a certain trick”. However, some interviewees from both educational tracks and in both eighth and tenth grade were able to make a decision together. These adolescents stated that they have discussions with their team and that their coach encouraged them to voice their opinions about the strategy of the game and lets them decide together. One girl (PA) explained for example: “Soccer is a team sport and you talk a lot with them. We discuss the tactics. I think ‘this is a good strategy,’ ‘that is a good strategy,’ ‘we have to do this and that’”.

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

In sum, those in the academic educational track discuss more often about everyday activities and social and political issues than those in pre-vocational; therefore, they encounter situations where they can develop democratic attitudes more often. This difference seemed to be even more apparent at a later age when the adolescents are in tenth grade. These results are in line with the expectations taken from the literature.

### *At School*

School can compensate for the differences in experiences in society, but do they actually put this into practice? What are the adolescents’ experiences when it comes to aspects of democracy in the classroom and by means of extra-curricular activities?

### *In the classroom*

Differences exist in the experiences of the adolescents from the different educational tracks regarding the opportunities to discuss (for example, rules and regulations of the school and joint activities). Those in the PA-track, stated that when they were in eighth or tenth grade, they had (semi-)regular discussions about these kinds of topics. During these discussions, many claimed that competing views were formulated, and that there was room for all classmates to explain their views. One girl in a combined class with students who also follow a class in Latin and Greek and regular PA-students explained that the rescheduling of a class can be difficult: “Then [those students with 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”. These students seem to be encouraged by their teacher to deliberate with others about everyday issues in the classroom.

The PV-students had different experiences, especially when they were in the tenth grade. Many explained that there was rarely a debate in the classroom, and if there were, these did not last long. One girl stated: “In class it is usually ‘open your book and get to work’”. Whenever these students had discussions, these did not seem to be very well ordered. One boy explained the 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”. During discussions in these PV-classrooms, it seemed that not all students have a say, as highlighted by one boy: “If someone has a good reason others will perhaps agree, but 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 situations in the classroom require a decision that will affect all students. Those from both educational tracks explained that when it comes to regulations, timetables, and the content of the lessons, the teachers or other school authorities decide. This did not change as they age. However, most students in both tracks felt that their school authorities were listening to them, both in the eighth and tenth grade. 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 with their classmates. These usually involved the rescheduling of a class, the screening of a movie, or a field trip. In some situations, such as when they leave school at an earlier hour, they all agree and decision is made by consensus. In other situations, they disagree about the best solution, and then typically, the majority 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”.

In all schools in the Netherlands, regardless of educational track, students have to 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. In the eighth grade of both tracks, the news, politics, or elections were not discussed often in the interviewees’ classrooms. Every now and then, the teachers referred to these topics, but there was little debate about them. However, in tenth grade the experiences of the two groups of adolescents diverge. 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. They just tell us that,

that's all". Political or democratic events are, from the perspective of the PV-student, not discussed either. About three months before the second interview took place, there were national elections for the Dutch parliament, 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". It seems that only in situations where the lesson content is related directly to politics will teachers talk about current affairs or politics.

The reported experiences of interviewees in the PA-track when in tenth grade differ substantially. These adolescents stated that they now discussed the news and politics on a regular basis within their History, Civics or Religion classes. One girl from the orthodox Protestant school explained how they 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?'... And what if there is a new medicine that can save five lives but would be at the expense of one healthy person. 'What would you do?'" The PA-students were encouraged to develop views on such complicated moral issues. These students also stated that they discussed politics at school when in the tenth grade, and most discussed the national elections of 2012. One boy (PA) explained: "The teacher asked us if we had seen the debates and what the strategy of the politicians was... We watched clips of [right wing politician] Geert Wilders because my teacher thinks he is a brilliant debater... We also discussed the outcome of the elections and that it is remarkable that many people voted for either [leftist] labor or the [rightist] liberals, and that now they are in a coalition together". Generally, these young people in the PA-track were at school regularly and were encouraged to think about and debate politics and elections, creating avenues to develop positive attitudes towards democracy.

### *Activities outside the classroom*

During our study, all students were able to participate in extra-curricular activities that can be seen as potential venues for developing positive attitudes toward democracy. In grade eight or nine, they had 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.

Second, the student council is also a venue for experiencing democracy. How-

ever, only a small number of interviewees from both educational tracks at both points in time actually participated in the council at their school, and most of the others are largely unaware of its workings. Those who are active in the council are positive about the possibilities they have to articulate their views on school rules and regulations, and they believe that they have a real influence on school policies. Despite this, it does not seem that the student members have structural contact with other students about what they discuss in the council; therefore, it does not seem like they learn much about the processes of actively representing the interests of others. Although the student council can have some positive effects, the scope thereof seems rather limited.

In both interviews, some adolescents mentioned a third type of activity outside of the classroom as their school encouraged them to participate in debating clubs outside the school. One girl (PV) was active in a national debating league, where they discussed various social and political issues, while one boy (PA) was engaged in the Model European Parliament, where they simulated a decision-making process in the European Parliament. Both adolescents were positive about the discussion skills they had learned in these situations. They even gave examples of political issues that they had to think about and discuss with others. Being involved in such activities can be very fruitful for the development of democratic attitudes, but very few young people have this opportunity.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

In this research, we investigated the experiences of adolescents from different educational tracks on democracy and whether schools provide opportunities for those who less experience democracy in daily life. In the Netherlands, after the final year of primary school, at the age of 12, students are already selected for pre-vocational education or for one of the levels of general secondary education in preparation for higher education. These tracks are often organized at different locations, which enables us to make a clear comparison between students of different educational tracks. The results show that in activities outside of school, adolescents in the pre-academic track 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.

Before discussing these findings in the light of previous studies, we pay attention to the limitations of our study. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with a small

number of adolescents in the Netherlands, which only allows for a cautious interpretation of the results. Second, we have not observed adolescent behavior in their everyday life, which means it is possible that differences exist between their reported experiences and what actually occurs in social settings. Third, we asked adolescents to reflect on their democratic experiences in the past months, and they may have difficulties remembering what has happened during those periods. With the design of our research, we tried to counter these limitations. We selected a diverse sample of adolescents from many walks of life and from schools with diverse characteristics (in student population and denomination) and from various geographical locations. That these findings were observable in various locations indicates these are present in many schools in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the results are in line with studies in other countries where relationships are also found for 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 different 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 these forty adolescents.

Our study underlines the importance of civic education in schools. Because differences between adolescents exist in the possibilities to develop democratic attitudes, the public institution of education should create opportunities for all young people to experience aspects of democracy on a regular basis. From previous studies, we can conclude that schools are able to contribute to the students' democratic attitudes by creating a democratic classroom climate, by helping students learn about society through a formalized curriculum, and by providing them with opportunities to reflect on extra-curricular activities (e.g., Geboers et al., 2013; Isac et al., 2013). This promise, however, is not fulfilled by the schools in our study. The students in the PA-track stated, especially when in tenth grade, that they often discussed social and political issues and events, such as elections, particularly in courses with related topics (civics, history or religious education). Those in the PV-track reported that they hardly talked about these topics in eighth or tenth grade. As a consequence, there has not been an objective public authority that has provided these students with a framework to think about events, such as national elections that are pivotal in a democratic process during these years, which are crucial for their political socialization (e.g., Prior, 2012; Quintelier & Van Deth, 2014; Sears & Levy, 2003).

Many scholars have emphasized that adolescents develop attitudes towards democracy and civic engagement in everyday mediating institutions (Flanagan, 2013; Helwig & 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 possibilities to experience and learn about democracy can result in different views on the importance of democracy and

citizenship (Elchardus et al., 2013; Janmaat, Mostafa, & Hoskins, 2014; Torney-Purta, 2002). It is worth investigating what kind of image young people from different educational tracks develop of democracy, decision-making, and the necessity of civic engagement during adolescence.

That adolescents' experiences with democracy in the school settings varies strongly and even exacerbate existing inequalities hamper equal opportunities 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, only teachers in the higher educational track seem to discuss political or controversial issues with their students. At least in the perspective of the students, topics related to democracy and citizenship are hardly discussed. Only when directly connected to the content of a (History, Civics or Religious Education) class and/or the final exam do teachers pay attention to these topics. The lack of compensation of differences between students is, in our view, in part due to the rather marginal position of citizenship education in the curriculum. Equality in opportunities for all adolescents would require more thorough attention to citizenship issues, especially in the later years of secondary education.