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

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CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

BECOMING A DEMOCRATIC CITIZEN

How young people perceive democracy and citizenship has long been the subject of academic and public debate, partly because there are doubts about the extent to which adolescents today are positively orientated towards democratic citizenship (Galston, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Ribeiro, Malafaia, Neves, Ferreira, & Menezes, 2015). It is considered important that the new generation also endorses democratic values. Young people should be prepared to be actively involved in society, to take the interests of others into account, and accept that there are views in the public domain with which they (fundamentally) disagree (Dahl, 1998; Galston, 1991; Held, 2006; Kymlicka, 2001; Shils, 1991). In arguing about democratic issues, adolescents have to deal with competing principles, such as freedom and equality, majority decisions, and minority rights, and the power of arguments and the power of numbers. Theoretical approaches indicate that democratic reasoning is usually complex in the sense that competing principles should be taken into consideration (e.g. Pennock, 1979; Thomassen, 2007). This places high demands on adolescents' views and attitudes.

This dissertation reported on research that considers adolescents' views on democracy. Particular attention was paid to decision-making, discussions, and social and political engagement as central aspects of democracy. The central research question was:

What are the views and experiences of adolescents regarding democracy and decision-making, and how do these develop over time?

In this chapter, the most important results and implications of the study will be discussed.

Summary of the Findings

Twenty adolescents from pre-vocational education and twenty adolescents from pre-academic education participated in this study. They were interviewed twice; once when in the second grade of secondary education (thirteen to fifteen years of age; 2011) and again two years later (2013). This stage in life is of great importance for the development of attitudes regarding democratic citizenship (Neundorf, Smets, & Garcia-Albacete, 2013; Prior, 2010; Sapiro, 2004; Sears & Levy, 2003). Furthermore, during the first years of secondary education, mandatory aims are set that focus on citizenship education. In the third or fourth grade, all students take the subject 'Civics' ('Maatschappijleer'), which has a strong focus on the political dimen-

sion of democratic citizenship (Education Council of the Netherlands, 2012; Maslowski, Van der Werf, Oonk, Naayer, & Isac, 2012). The adolescents were asked to discuss their views regarding democracy in everyday life, their perspectives on political democracy, and their interpretation of the concept of democracy. Furthermore, I talked with the adolescents about their experiences with democracy in their daily lives, and in school especially.

The results regarding different aspects of becoming a democratic citizen were presented over five chapters, with the central findings summarized below. Chapter 2 examined what the daily lives of young people in the second year of secondary education looks like in terms of democracy and collective decision-making. This chapter answered the following questions: *What possibilities do school, associational life, family life, and peers offer adolescents to develop positive attitudes concerning democratic decision-making? What are the differences between adolescents in terms of their educational track?* The results show that young people have limited opportunities to gain positive experiences of democratic decision-making and having a voice in their daily lives. At school, school leaders or teachers usually make the decisions, with students' views sometimes taken into account. Whenever young people can reach a decision together, in the experience of the adolescents they will do so by casting a vote; extensive deliberation or trying to find consensus is the exception rather than the rule. In associational life, adults make the decisions with little room for collective decision-making by the adolescents. From the perspective of the adolescents, they are being listened to at home, and consensus is often sought. Among friends, the young people have similar experiences. I found little variation between adolescents in different educational tracks. Based on these results, I conclude that these young people, especially at school and in associational life, have few opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making, and therefore have limited experience of the complexity of democracy.

In the third chapter, I investigated the adolescents' preferences regarding collective decision-making: *Which types of decision-making do adolescents from different educational tracks prefer in everyday situations in comparison with their views on decision-making in political democracy and their interpretation of the concept of democracy?* This chapter also focused on the adolescents during second year of secondary education. The results reveal that the young people have democratic views concerning situations that can arise in the classroom. When thinking about decision-making, these adolescents do not focus on their private interests, but instead concentrate on public interests. Most young people, from both educational tracks, have preferences related to majority decision-making, smaller groups of youths have preferences related to consensual decision-making or deliberative decision-making. Some of the adolescents then emphasize multiple and conflicting democratic principles, such as majority prefer-

ences and minority interests, or power of arguments and power of numbers. When making a decision, others focus on one principle only. For example, they solely stress a preference for the majority to make a decision, and do not pay attention to the arguments put forward or the interests of minorities.

The views of young people on collective decision-making in everyday situations are usually rich and multidimensional. However, this is much less the case when it comes to decision-making in parliament and the concept of democracy. This particularly holds among adolescents in pre-vocational education. A substantial number of interviewees are unable to formulate their preferences regarding parliamentary decision-making, and/or do not have an explicit image of the concept of democracy. The others mostly formulate the same considerations for decision-making in parliament and within the classroom; the majority decides, for example. Those who are able to provide a description of their interpretation of democracy often do so by naming one single aspect, such as majority voting or freedom of expression. In sum, the results show that the adolescents' views on democracy in everyday life are richer and more multidimensional than their perspectives on decision-making in parliament and the (formal) concept of democracy. This is primarily the case for young people in pre-vocational education who have limited comprehension of political democracy.

Chapter 4 further elaborated on these findings by examining the development of the views of young people between fourteen and sixteen years old regarding democratic decision-making. The following research question was formulated: *Do adolescents, with age, become more familiar with the political domain, and do they develop more complex views regarding democratic decision-making?* The results reveal that the adolescents, as expected, become more familiar with politics and democracy as they grow older. This is especially the case for young people in pre-academic education. However, their views do not simultaneously become more multidimensional. Becoming more familiar with politics does not, for these pre-academic students, go hand in hand with an increase in the complexity of their views. Strikingly, those in the pre-vocational track, more often stick to their initial multidimensional views on decision-making; they still take several principles into account, such as finding agreement, the interests of minorities, and the preferences of the majority. Among those adolescents in the pre-academic track who become more familiar with politics, however, a trend of focusing solely on the principle of majority voting is observable, both in daily life and in political democracy. From their perspective, the sole focus of politics is on the preferences of the majority, and this is exactly what democracy involves. They translate this one-dimensional conception of democratic decision-making to how they view everyday situations. Their initial, more multidimensional, views on decision-making in everyday life are colonized by a 'flat' perception of the

workings of political democracy. Therefore, the results of this study demonstrate that young people do not naturally ‘grow into politics.’ With the advancing of the years, they do not naturally translate their more complex ideas about decision-making in everyday life to (the principles of) political democracy. Rather, there is a reversed development, as the adolescents’ perception of the functioning of political democracy permeates their thinking on democratic issues in everyday situations.

In Chapter 5, I investigated whether similar developments occur for other central aspects of democratic citizenship, namely a willingness to be socially and politically engaged, being focused on public interests, and a reflexive interpretation of freedom of expression. *How do adolescents from different educational tracks view important aspects of citizenship, and how do these develop over time?* The results provided in this chapter show that adolescents in pre-academic education develop a stronger social and political engagement as they grow older. They consider active participation in politics especially suitable for people with a higher educational level. In addition, as they age they focus more strongly on procedural aspects when dealing with social or political issues. When arguing about situations that concern public interests, pre-academic students focus, with age, predominantly on procedural aspects. In their view, the majority should simply decide. In terms of issues related to the freedom of expression, they almost exclusively emphasize the opportunities that people have to give their opinions, while paying little attention to the sensitivities of others. In the views of adolescents in the pre-academic educational track, we can identify a *procedural republican* type of citizenship.

Adolescents in the pre-vocational track do not become more socially and/or politically engaged. They feel it is important that people help each other, but do not attach much importance to political participation or social participation beyond their own community. Instead, their engagement translates into taking care of one another by paying attention to everyone’s well-being. To the extent that they consider political participation important, their view is that this holds for all citizens equally. When arguing about social and political issues, it can be recognized that these adolescents place a stronger emphasis on inclusivity; from their perspective, the public interest is best served by taking into account everyone’s interests and trying to find consensus. Thereby, an *inclusive communitarian* type of citizenship seems to dominate the views of those in the pre-vocational track.

Together with differences in perspectives regarding citizenship among those from pre-academic education and pre-vocational education, this study also identified clear gender differences. When growing older, the boys develop views with a strong emphasis on competition and formal democratic procedures to a greater extent. The proper solution for a social or political issue can, in their view, be found when the correct procedures are followed. Girls to a greater extent remain their focus on

inclusivity and consensus. When dealing with social and political issues, they consider it of particular importance that the interests and sensitivities of all those involved are taken into account.

To gain insights into the role of the school regarding the opportunities adolescents have to develop democratic views, in the sixth and final empirical chapter of this dissertation I returned to the experiences of young people. The research question was: *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?* For finding an answer to this question I investigated young people's experiences of decision-making, having discussions, and being encouraged to be social and political engaged when in the second and fourth grades. The results show that adolescents in pre-academic education experience democracy outside of school with more regularity than their pre-vocational education peers. The pre-academic students indicate that they regularly discuss daily activities and social and political issues with friends and family; however, this holds to a much lesser extent for those in pre-vocational education.

Just as at home and with friends, those in the higher track report having more regular positive experiences of democracy at school than their peers in the lower track. Students in the pre-academic track feel that teachers of subjects such as History and Civics regularly encourage them to discuss everyday activities in the school. Those in the pre-vocational track note that there is far less scope in their classes to discuss such topics. When it comes to talking about politics, I found similar results. In the fourth grade especially, those adolescents in the pre-academic track are often encouraged to talk about social and political issues. For example, they discussed the 2012 parliamentary elections in the Netherlands extensively in the classroom. Pre-vocational students state that they hardly talk about politics, and the 2012 parliamentary elections were barely discussed in class. In sum, the results shows that in the second grade, differences exist in the opportunities for young people to have positive experiences with democracy. In the fourth grade, these differences manifest themselves to an even greater extent. Schools within the pre-vocational educational track seem less able to offer opportunities for their students to gain positive experiences with democracy.

Overall Conclusions

The central research question of this dissertation was: *What are the views and experiences of adolescents regarding democracy and decision-making, and how do these develop over time?* The five empirical chapters collectively answered this question. This research has shown that adolescents in both pre-vocational and pre-academic educational tracks have democratic views about decision-making in everyday life and the politi-

cal domain. The adolescents' views on democracy in everyday life are rich and mostly multidimensional, which means they are well able to formulate their preferences, provide answers to questions, explain their views, and take several democratic principles into account. However, this is much less the case with regard to decision-making issues related to political democracy. Although these adolescents, and especially the pre-academic students at a later age, are better able to explain their preferences, they have difficulties in explaining their views about democracy, politics, and parliament. Politics continues to be, especially for pre-vocational students, an abstract domain. Contrary to expectations, the adolescents do not develop more complex views as they grow older. The pre-academic students that become more familiar with politics predominantly start to focus more strongly on only one democratic principle. Their initial rich views about everyday situations are colonized by the way they perceive political democracy.

Young peoples' experiences of democracy in everyday life provide greater insight into the background of the observed trend of them having one-dimensional views. This study shows that adolescents from both educational tracks have only limited experiences with democracy at school and in other social contexts (such as at home and in associational life). In their experience, they seldom encounter the complex character of democracy. Combined with the one-sided image that pre-academic students in particular develop of the workings of political democracy, this explains the diminishing of complexity in the views of adolescents in the higher educational tracks.

Finally, in this dissertation I have found no evidence that schools compensate for inequalities in students' experiences of democracy outside of school. Between the second and fourth grade, the differences in experiences between students from different tracks are increasing, and schools seem to be reinforcing these differences. The possibilities that exist for schools to provide their students with positive experiences of democracy (such as letting students participate in decision-making and discussions about society) are not fully utilized. Schools offering pre-vocational education especially do not seem to be relevant arenas for young people to learn to reflect on democratic issues and to develop positive attitudes towards democracy.

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths and limitations of this study relate primarily to its qualitative and longitudinal character. The qualitative design made it possible to obtain in-depth insights into how young people think about issues regarding democratic citizenship, meaning the study provides a view of the underlying motives of the young people's views and experiences. The longitudinal character of the study allowed for establishing how these views and experiences developed over time. Therefore, the develop-

ment trajectories of individual adolescents concerning democracy, citizenship, and politics become clear. The longitudinal perspective enabled me to determine whether experiences with democracy change at various stages of adolescence.

Another contribution of this study to the research domain of political socialization is the manner through which the reasoning of young people has been investigated in terms of democracy. Most often, adolescents' views are investigated in the context of political democracy. Issues of democracy in that domain are, however, for most adolescents, abstract; they find it uninteresting and it carries little meaning to them. In this study, the interviewees were questioned primarily about aspects of democracy (decision-making and discussion) in everyday life. Consequently, I was able to discuss democratic issues in a way that made sense to the adolescents.

This study also has limitations. Due to its small scale, the results regarding differences for educational track, age, and gender cannot be one-to-one generalized to the broader adolescent population in the Netherlands. However, choosing for a selective and diverse sample (Creswell, 2013) (regarding educational track, gender, religiosity, social milieu, location, and school characteristics) helped me to identify the perspectives on, and experiences with, democracy of adolescents from many walks of life in the Netherlands. That I found quite a number of similar results in the views and experiences of young people with considerable diverging background characteristics is an indication that the observed patterns also exist among other groups. A quantitative study should examine whether this is indeed the case.

Another limitation concerns the study's time frame. I examined the views and experiences of young people when they were in the second and fourth grades of secondary school. This study has not rendered insights into how the views and experiences will develop when they grow into adulthood. During the first years of adulthood, people experience drastic changes, such as leaving home, beginning tertiary education, entering the labor market, and having the right to vote. These changes may affect the political socialization of adolescents (García-Albacete, Lorente, & Martín, 2016), and I cannot indicate how the adolescents' views may change when they encounter such experiences.

Finally, it might be seen as a limitation that this study used self-reporting to determine the experiences of young people. I have not observed the adolescents or talked to their teachers, friends, or parents, and therefore only have information from the adolescents themselves about what is taking place in their daily lives. As is always the case with research based on self-reporting, there may be a difference between what adolescents have reported and what actually happens. The perception of youth is, by definition, subjective. However, that young people in the same class formulate to a large extent similar experiences of the school context is indicative of a truthful reflection of their experiences. The results of this dissertation are also in line with previous

research that focused on the goals that schools set for citizenship education (Ten Dam & Volman, 2003), and the goals teachers claim to set for citizenship (Leenders, Veugelers, & De Kat, 2008). These are also indications that I have gathered a realistic reflection of what is taking place in schools in the Netherlands.

Discussion

The results and conclusions of this dissertation have several implications for the political socialization research field and the practice of citizenship education in schools. These implications are discussed below.

Implications for the Study of Political Socialization

This study contributes to the research domain by broadening its perspective and questioning some assumptions.

Broadening the perspective

In several ways, this dissertation has broadened the research-based approach concerning adolescents' views on democratic citizenship. First, when investigating adolescents' democratic attitudes, most studies focus solely on political democracy. Young adolescents are asked about their interpretation of the concept of democracy, whether they will vote when they turn eighteen, whether politicians will listen to people like them, and even if they trust the European parliament (e.g. Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2011; Keating et al., 2010; Schulz et al., 2010; Torney-Purta, 2001). For young people, these are rather abstract elements of the institutional structure of political democracy, and many studies show that young people have little knowledge of such institutions (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2011; Schulz et al., 2010). *The International Citizenship and Civic Education Study* reported that in the Netherlands, as in some other countries, a substantial proportion of young people score below the basic proficiency level that is necessary to participate actively in politics. This is particularly true for students in the pre-vocational educational track (Maslowski et al., 2012; Schulz et al., 2010).

That everyday life is the focus of this dissertation is a broadening of the dominant research perspective on democratic citizenship, and because of this orientation I was able to discuss complex issues of collective decision-making with young people who are relatively uninterested in, and ignorant about, politics and democracy. The results show that young people are positively oriented towards democratic ways of decision-making. Adolescents are able to provide arguments for both their preferences and the consequences of these inclinations. This approach has proven valuable for studying democratic citizenship. The dissertation builds upon the few studies that have also shown that the utilization of issues from everyday life can be a meaningful

route along which adolescent views on abstract themes can be investigated, such as power relations, having a voice, and social engagement (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009; Lawy & Biesta, 2006).

Because of the open questions in the interview, young people were able to formulate their perspectives on democracy and decision-making. Consequently, they were able to formulate views that are not in line with how these are usually measured. Previous studies have often adopted a majoritarian perspective on democracy by emphasizing voting and majority decisions, and neglected elements of other models of democracy, such as negotiating, striving for consensus, or deliberation (e.g. Kinoshita, 2006; Schulz et al., 2010). This study has shown that young adolescents from both pre-vocational and pre-academic educational tracks also hold views related to consensus democracy or deliberative democracy. This means that a one-sided research emphasis on aspects of a majority democracy disregards some of the adolescents' views on democracy. For the few studies that examined the preferences of young people with regard to various models of democracy adolescents from higher social milieus were almost exclusively selected (Helwig & Kim, 1999; Helwig, Arnold, Tan, & Boyd, 2003). This brings me to a third contribution to the research domain. Adolescents from both pre-vocational and pre-academic educational tracks participated in this study. Young people from higher social backgrounds are overrepresented in pre-academic education, while young people from lower social milieus dominate pre-vocational education (OECD, 2014; Bol, Witschge, Van de Werfhorst, & Dronkers, 2014). Therefore, this study contributes to the broadening of the research domain on political socialization by revealing that rich views about democratic decision-making are not reserved for the more highly educated or those from higher social milieus.

Questioning 'growing into politics'

Previous studies indicated that the views of adolescents become more complex as they grow older because they come to consider several democratic principles and account for the social context in which an issue exists (Adelson, 1971; Flanagan, 2013; Greenstein, 1966; Helwig, 1998; Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Kinoshita, 1989, 2006; Mann, Tan, MacLeod-Morgan, & Dixon, 1984; Moessinger, 1981; Sigel & Hoskin, 1981). Over time young people become more aware of the complexity of society and of the political domain, which can be seen as a process of 'growing into politics' (Abendschön, 2013; Adelson, 1971; Adelson & O'Neil, 1966; Greenstein, 1966; Helwig, 1998; Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Husfeldt & Nikolova, 2003; Gallatin & Adelson, 1971; Greenstein, 1966; Neundorf et al., 2013; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Sigel & Hoskin, 1981). These developments particularly apply to adolescents in higher educational tracks, as these young people endorse the 'good citizenship val-

ues,' such as tolerance, political interest, political self-efficacy, and the importance of pluralism (Converse, 1971; Lijphart, 1997; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1989; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Verba, 1996).

The results of this dissertation paint a different picture. With age, many adolescents develop a rather one-dimensional perspective of the workings of political democracy (democracy equals majority decisions). This perspective then 'colonized' their initial multidimensional views on decision-making in everyday situations, which is especially the case for the students in pre-academic education. The adolescents in pre-vocational education continue to emphasize several principles, such as majority voting and minority rights, the quest for consensus, and the importance of collective decision-making. The democratic views of those in the lower educational tracks are, to a large extent, consistent with theoretical perspectives, which indicates that democratic reasoning should always take into account several principles (e.g. Pennock, 1979; Thomassen, 2007).

Young people in higher and lower education tracks have different preferences regarding their engagement in creating a just society. Many adolescents find it important to be involved, but have different views about the social context in which people should be active. Students in the pre-academic track believe that a better society can be created by participating in politics; those in pre-vocational education state that this can primarily be achieved by being active in everyday social contexts, such as the neighborhood or voluntary organizations. Therefore, this research also finds that the views of those in pre-academic education differ from those of their peers in pre-vocational education, but that these cannot, from a theoretical or moral perspective, be seen as 'better' views.

The observed trend of a greater (exclusive) emphasis on the right of the majority to make decisions is remarkable in relation to the Dutch political culture, which is characterized traditionally by a strong emphasis on consensus, compromises, and coalitions (e.g. Lijphart, 1999, 2008). The discrepancy between the traditional political culture in the Netherlands and the direction in which the democratic views of these adolescents develop can be interpreted in light of their experiences in everyday life, as discussed above. However, the greater emphasis on majority rule may itself be an indication of changes in the Dutch political culture and news coverage thereof. Research shows that characteristics of a majoritarian democracy have also become more prominent in the Dutch parliamentary democracy during the past twenty years. Besides the still-existing coalition-based government, there is more emphasis on competition between political parties, on winning elections, and small majorities in parliament that do not search for wider support when deciding on new policies (Hendriks & Michels, 2012; Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011). The adolescents' perceived emphasis on majority rule may be an indication that the media provides them

with an image of democracy that focuses on the idea that it is primarily concerned with majority preferences. However, several studies show that in recent years in newspapers and on television news there has been no trend for a stronger focus on aspects connected to majority democracy, such as drawing attention to conflicts between political parties (Takens, Van Atteveldt, Van Hooff, & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013; Vliegthart, Orchards, & Bouman, 2011). Yet, this may not be the case with other (social) media, which is used mainly by young people (Shehata, Ekstrom, & Olsson, 2015; Stoker & Bass, 2011). Therefore, it is important to investigate what kind of information young people receive about democracy through channels other than newspapers and television news, and what impact this has on their views.

Citizenship Education: Implications for Research and Practice

The results of this dissertation also have implications for both research into, and the practice of, citizenship education. These are discussed in this section.

Suggestions for Further Research

I have discussed subjects for further research throughout this dissertation. These concerned international comparative, quantitative studies with the aim of determining whether the results of this study also apply to other groups of adolescents, observational studies to establish what the daily lives of young people look like, and longitudinal studies that follow young people over a longer period. Here, I focus on the theme of citizenship education.

First, more research should be conducted to consider the ways in which citizenship education can be more effective. The results of this dissertation reveal that young people – in pre-academic education but especially in pre-vocational education – have only limited opportunities in school to gain experience of, and learn about, democratic citizenship. This indicates that the possibilities therefore are not, or only to a limited extent, being utilized. Both in the curriculum and in how teachers interact with students, this study demonstrates that there are nevertheless opportunities for young people to have positive experiences with democratic citizenship. Individual studies and systematic literature reviews show that education may affect students' citizenship through the curriculum (citizenship as a subject matter) and by having a democratic classroom climate with room for discussion and hearing students' voices (Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal, & Ten Dam, 2012; Campbell, 2008; Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Hall Jamieson, 2007; Fjeldstad & Mikkelsen, 2003; Isac, Maslowski, Creemer, & Van der Werf, 2013; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2007; Yang & Chung, 2009). Research can provide more insights into the ways in which an effective curriculum can be designed and how abstract concepts of democratic citizenship can be presented to students in a meaningful way. In addition, studies can contribute

to the further development of a democratic educational climate. This usually involves the exchange of views and the ability of students to have a say (e.g. Isac et al., 2012; Torney-Purta, 2001). This dissertation has shown that young people, and those in pre-vocational education in particular, have limited experiences with such a pedagogical climate. Specifically, research can consider the development of an (effective) democratic classroom climate and the way in which young people can gain positive experiences of dealing with conflicting democratic principles (such as consensus or majority decision). Attention should also be paid to how such an environment is designed, and focus on how young people who are not used to democratic methods can be encouraged to participate in a dialogue.

Second, more attention should be paid to the role schools play regarding differences between young people of various educational tracks. Previous studies, and this dissertation, show that citizenship education differs greatly between higher and lower educational tracks (Ichilov, 2003; Leenders et al., 2008; Ten Dam & Volman, 2003), and that relationships exist between educational level and citizenship attitudes (Elchardus et al., 2013; Hooghe, Marien, & Quintelier, 2012; Janmaat et al., 2014; Persson, 2012, 2014; Torney-Purta, 2002; Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001). Although this topic has received much scholarly attention in previous decades (e.g. Almond & Verba, 1963; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lijphart, 1997; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996), much remains unclear about the specific role of schools in developing students' citizenship in higher and lower education tracks, and the underlying reasons for this. Therefore, it is important to investigate what students from different tracks both intentionally and unintentionally learn about their potential role as citizens in a democratic society.

There are differences in adolescents' political interest and engagement in higher and lower education levels, as has been described in detail in this dissertation. For example, those in the pre-academic track are more engaged and interested, but also assume that political participation should predominantly be reserved for the more highly educated. Where does this elitist view of political engagement come from, and what can schools do to teach students more about egalitarian perspectives on political engagement? On the other hand, the students in pre-vocational education are less interested in and engaged with politics. What has spurred the students in lower tracks who are politically engaged to become involved? How can young people learn from positive role models? Should schools provide more experiences of democracy for their students, or should they create opportunities for students to reflect on what they are already experiencing in everyday life? Such research can contribute to learning more about the barriers that impede the less well educated from becoming politically engaged.

Implications for the Practice of Citizenship Education

Finally, this dissertation has implications for citizenship education in schools. A first suggestion for educational practice focuses on what is taught regarding citizenship in schools. A long tradition of educational research shows that an important prerequisite for deep learning is that the class contents are recognizable and meaningful for students. Subsequently, a link can be made with subjects that students find more abstract (e.g. Pintrich, 2003; Randler & Bogner, 2007; Volman, 2011). The question is, does citizenship education in the Netherlands meet this condition? The findings of this dissertation show that daily experiences with democratic citizenship at school are limited. A previous study (Nieuwelink, 2008) pointed out that Civics textbooks on politics and democracy that are often used in Dutch secondary education pay scant attention to issues and topics that students can make sense of. These textbooks almost exclusively focus on abstract concepts, institutions, and actors (such as the rule of law and the relationship between cabinet and parliament). While adolescents attach virtually no meaning to such issues (e.g. Schulz et al., 2010; Gimpel et al., 2003), the results of this dissertation do show that young people are perfectly capable of arguing about democratic issues in their daily lives. In Dutch education, this ability of adolescents and their preconceptions about democracy seem to be underused. After dealing with meaningful issues in class, topics that students find more abstract can be introduced in relation to these issues, such as elections or the rule of law.

In many European countries, including the Netherlands, political themes are considered one of the core elements of the content of citizenship education. These involve political parties, the rule of law, and civil rights (Eurydice, 2012; Maslowski et al., 2012). However, this research has shown that it is not self-evident that these kinds of themes are integral to what is being taught in schools. The adolescents indicated that as far as social and political issues are dealt with in class, this happens only in subjects that are related in terms of content (such as Civics, History, and Religious Education). That these topics are only taught in these classes is understandable, but it is also problematic because of their relatively marginal position in the curriculum. The parliamentary election of 2012, for example, was virtually ignored in the pre-vocational track classes, partly because the students often did not take any of the aforementioned subjects in the fourth grade. While this period in life is crucial for their political socialization (e.g. Prior, 2012; Quintelier & Van Deth, 2014; Sears & Levy, 2003), schools apparently did not seize the opportunity to discuss this important democratic event.

The view of the importance of students learning about elections is widely shared by teachers and schools (Maslowski et al., 2012); that this does not happen indicates a lack of a coherent approach to, and perspective of, citizenship education in schools.

This corresponds with the image that the Education Council of the Netherlands (2012) and the Dutch Inspectorate for Education (e.g. 2010, 2014) outline of the current situation concerning this education component. The introduction of obligatory educational goals for citizenship in education (2006) did not lead to an acceleration of the development of citizenship education in the Netherlands; rather, it seems to be stagnating. Many schools and teachers are struggling to grasp the meaning of citizenship, and have trouble creating a coherent program that enables students to develop their democratic citizenship further. Dutch students have in comparative perspective little knowledge of aspects of political democracy (Schulz et al., 2010), which points at the desirability for the content of citizenship to have an important place in the curriculum.

A vibrant democracy requires citizens who are socially and politically active, are focused on the public interest, are willing to participate in discussions, and recognize the complexity of democracy. This is especially the case in a society where divisions between groups seem to be increasing (e.g. Bovens, Dekker, & Tiemeijer, 2014; Kleijwegt, 2016). When tensions between groups are mounting, democratic attitudes and methods protect against social erosion. This underlines once more the importance of citizenship education during adolescence. However, this does not exist naturally. This study showed that young people in associational life, at home, and with friends have only limited experiences that can enable them to develop democratic skills and attitudes. Parents, associations, and the media should be more active in creating possibilities for adolescents to develop positive attitudes towards democracy.

Meanwhile, inside schools, attempts to further the development of democratic citizenship are often not succeeding. There are important differences between adolescents' views and experiences, and this is precisely why school leaders, teachers, and education policy-makers have the important task of strengthening citizenship education in schools by means of an improved curriculum and forming a democratic class climate. The school can be a place where all students experience the importance of democracy, and where they learn to reflect on the ways in which conflicts of interests and values can be dealt with in a political democracy. By understanding and experiencing the ways in which a democracy can work, both in everyday life and in politics, young people can further develop their own perspectives, which ideally will also reinforce their positive attitude towards democratic citizenship.