The contribution of schools to societal participation of young adults

The role of teachers, parents, and friends in stimulating societal interest and societal involvement during adolescence

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Chapter 6

Summary, discussion, and conclusion
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The aim of this thesis was to study the extent to which schools contribute to societal participation. Tasked with promoting citizenship, schools are requested to motivate students to participate in society and encourage them to be self-reliant, responsible citizens, who support their own communities, overcome common good problems, and collaborate with others to change and improve their own and others’ well-being (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Eurydice, 2017; Zukin et al., 2006). There is little empirical data on the extent to which schools contribute to societal participation. Therefore, this thesis examined the contribution of schools to the societal participation of young adults.

To determine to what extent schools contribute to societal participation, three conditions of an open climate were studied: teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and teachers raising awareness of social issues. We argued that these conditions form the basis of a climate that provides a safe environment and gives students the opportunity to participate in discussions on societal issues. An open climate was then suggested to increase the willingness of students to participate in these discussions—thus stimulating their societal interest and societal involvement—which motivate students to participate in society.

Societal interest was conceived as a curiosity about or attentiveness to society. Becoming more interested in society was then expected to lead to societal involvement, which was conceived as a personal importance and affection toward issues in society. Increasing interest and involvement in society during adolescence was then expected to lead to greater societal participation in early adulthood. Because we expected that schools would play an important role in stimulating societal interest and societal involvement in students, we compared the role of the school with the role of parents and friends. This allowed us to better understand the actual contribution of the school to societal participation.

Previous studies have shown that the effectiveness of an open climate may differ for young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Campbell, 2008, Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2011, Langton & Jennings, 1968, Neundorf et al., 2016, Niemi et al., 2013). This thesis therefore studied whether the conditions for an open climate have an equal effect on societal interest and societal involvement for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. An open climate can be more beneficial for students from less advantageous backgrounds. This was mentioned as the compensation effect, as it compensates for differences between students (Campbell, 2008). On the other hand, students from more advantageous backgrounds can also benefit from an open climate. This was referred to
as the acceleration effect (Campbell, 2008). To account for this, we assessed whether the conditions of an open climate benefited students from less and more educated parents equally.

Three objectives were posited to study to what extent schools can contribute to societal participation. The first objective was to assess the extent to which open climate conditions stimulate societal interest and societal involvement. The second was to explore the extent to which societal interest and societal involvement stimulate societal participation in early adulthood. The third was to examine whether the effect of open climate conditions is equally beneficial for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Figure 6.1 depicts an overview of the expected relations. The results from analyses on two longitudinal studies were used—one from the Netherlands and one from Sweden—to achieve the three objectives.

**Figure 6.1:** Schematic overview of the expected relations in this thesis.
Summary of chapters

The previous four chapters addressed four research questions with five sub-questions in order to test the relations depicted in figure 6.1 and achieve the thesis objectives. The following section summarizes the results of the chapters.

Chapter 2 examined the first research question. Here, we asked to what extent teacher-student and student-student relationships stimulate societal involvement of adolescents in secondary schools? As a sub-question, we asked to what extent this is different for students with lower and higher educated parents?

We used the COOL data for 15-year-old students in 2010/2011 with two-level multilevel analyses (school, student) to address these research questions. Results showed that students are more societally involved if they perceive having a good relationship with both their teachers and fellow students. When studying school effects, we found that students in schools with better student-student relationships were generally more involved in society. Although students from both lower and higher educated parents benefitted from having a positive relationship with their teacher, students from higher educated parents benefit more from these relationships. Campbell (2008) calls this the acceleration effect. We also found that the level of societal involvement differed for students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Here, we found that students from lower income households and students from homes with lower educated parents are generally less involved in society and that, accounting for income and education of parents, students from employed parents were less involved in society than students from unemployed parents.

Chapter 3 built on the second chapter. Its intent was to study the second research question and examine to what extent the effects of teacher-student and student-student relationships already exist in primary school? Two sub-questions were posed in this chapter. First, we questioned if there is a relation between teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships in primary school, to what extent is there an effect of these relationships in secondary school? Second, we investigated the question to what extent is this different for students with lower and higher educated parents?

We used two cohorts with two data waves of students aged between 12 and 15 from the COOL study in 2008/2011 and 2011/2014, respectively. Longitudinal two-level multilevel analyses (class, student) were used to address these research questions. This chapter revealed that students in primary—and secondary—school were more societally involved when they perceived a good relationship with their teacher. If students perceived a more
positive relationship with their teacher in primary school, they were still more societally involved in secondary school. In primary school, students with lower educated parents benefited more from teacher-student relationships than students with higher educated parents. Campbell (2008) defined this as the compensation effect. In this chapter, positive relationships with fellow students did not lead to greater or less societal involvement in both primary and secondary school.

Chapter 4 addressed the third research question. Here, we examined to what extent raising awareness of social issues by teachers, parents, and friends stimulates the development of societal interest during adolescence? We further studied the sub-question to what extent is this different for students from lower and higher educated parents?

Data from the YeS panel study were used, in which students were questioned yearly from 2010 (age 13) until 2015 (age 18). Latent growth curve models enabled us to measure the development of societal interest, measure the development of raising awareness of social issues by teachers, parents, and friends, and relate the development of societal interest to the development of raising awareness by parents, friends, and teachers. This chapter revealed that awareness of social issues raised by teachers stimulates societal interest during adolescence, even in addition to the positive influence of raising awareness of social issues by parents and friends. In this respect, the effect of teachers was the strongest of the three socializing agents. Students from lower educated parents benefited more from teachers who raised awareness of social issues than students from higher educated parents. This relates to the compensation effect articulated by Campbell (2008). Moreover, we explored the development of awareness raised by parents, teachers, and friends to identify changes during adolescence. Here, we found that the level in which teachers raise awareness of social issues is consistent throughout adolescence; friends, in turn, generally start to raised awareness of social issues around age 16, and parents raise awareness slightly less often during adolescence.

Chapter 5 addressed the fourth research question. Here, we studied to what extent societal interest and societal involvement lead to greater societal participation in early adulthood. We further studied to which extent raising awareness of social issues by teachers, parents, and friends stimulates societal interest, societal involvement, and societal participation in late adolescence and early adulthood?

To examine this, two cohorts from the YeS panel study were used. One cohort consisted of students who were questioned yearly from 2010 (at age 13) to 2015 (at age 18). A second cohort had students aged 18 in 2012 and aged 20 in 2014. Latent growth curve models were estimated to study the relations between societal interest, societal involvement, and
societal participation during adolescence. Path models were estimated to study the extent to which societal interest and societal involvement lead to greater societal participation in early adulthood and to what extent raising awareness by teachers, next to parents and friends, stimulates societal interest, societal involvement, and societal participation in late adolescence and early adulthood.

In early adolescence, at age 13, students who were more interested in society were more involved in society and more likely to participate in it. This suggests that, at age 13, societal involvement mediates the relation between societal interest and societal participation. Studying changes in societal interest, societal involvement, and societal participation during adolescence revealed that students’ growth in societal interest was related to the growth in societal involvement. This shows, for example, that students who gradually became interested in society were more likely to participate gradually in society. However, if students became more or less involved in society, this did not translate into their being more or less active in society.

Further results showed that students who were more involved in society in late adolescence were more likely to participate in society in early adulthood. Societal interest did positively stimulate societal involvement in late adolescence, but societal interest did not stimulate future societal participation. It further appears that the level of societal involvement at age 13 and age 18 is associated with higher levels of societal participation at age 20. However, changes in societal involvement during adolescence did not lead to changes in societal participation from age 13 to age 18. This suggests that early societal involvement is indicative of the level of societal participation in early adulthood.

When studying the role of schools, we found that teachers raising awareness of social issues was important for societal interest and societal involvement at age 18 but had no effect on future societal participation (at age 20). Awareness raised by parents at age 18 stimulated societal interest but neither societal involvement at age 18 nor societal participation at age 20. Finally, awareness raised by friends was important for societal participation at age 20 and was unrelated to societal interest and societal involvement at age 18.
Overview and discussion

By using two long-term cohort studies, we were able to study a relatively long period of socialization from early adolescence until early adulthood. In this way, we were able to show that during adolescence, and by creating open climate conditions, schools can increase students’ interest and involvement in society, which motivates them to participate in society as young adults. These outcomes show that schools can indeed contribute to societal participation. These main findings can be further understood by reflecting on the three objectives of this thesis, as we do in the next section.

Assess the extent to which open climate conditions stimulate societal interest and societal involvement.

Through positive relationships with students and by raising awareness of social issues, teachers can encourage students to become more interested and involved in society. Besides other important socializing agents—parents and friends—teachers were able to contribute to students becoming more interested and involved in society. That parents and friends are important for developing societal interest and societal involvement was not necessarily surprising, as both are considered the primary socializers for children (Dostie-Goulet, 2009; Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2015; Shani, 2009). The positive contribution of teachers, in addition to these socializers, emphasizes the importance of our finding that schools can substantially contribute to both societal interest and involvement throughout adolescence.

Previous scholars have debated the contribution of teachers on socialization (e.g. Dostie-Goulet, 2009; Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2015; Neundorf et al., 2016). Some have stated that teachers play only a minor role compared to parents and friends. However, this thesis primarily focused on societal interest and societal involvement, while the studies in which teachers are of minor importance examined socialization of political interest and political involvement. While teachers stimulate societal interest and societal involvement, they do not necessarily contribute to political interest and political involvement. We have argued that the role of teachers is likely to be different for the social domain from for the political domain of citizenship because students often have negative connotations of politics; they find it irrelevant, complex, and dull (Hay, 2007; White et al., 2000). Accordingly, students are generally more interested in societal issues and less interested in politics (Abdelzadeh, 2016; Lauglo & Øia, 2007; Munniksma et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2018). It is suggested that future studies explore whether societal interest and societal involvement can stimulate political participation. Because of the limited role of teachers in stimulating political interest and political involvement, both important predictors for political participation (see Brady et al., 1995; Van Deth et al., 2007; Verba et al., 1995), finding a relation between
societal interest and societal involvement would suggest that teachers do not necessarily have to address politics to stimulate students to become politically active. Stimulating political participation is essential for democratic societies as, without it, democracy lacks both legitimacy and its guiding force (Dalton, 2008; Verba & Nie, 1972). Therefore, it would be interesting to examine if teachers set the conditions for an open climate, encouraging discussion on social issues and emboldening students’ societal interest and societal involvement, and if this also motivates students to vote, demonstrate political ideas, or work in politics.

Positive relationships with fellow students were also beneficial for societal involvement in secondary school. However, positive peer relationships had no effect on societal involvement in upper primary school. We expect these differences in our findings to be mostly age related, as fellow students arguably become increasingly important during adolescence (Buhrmester, 1990; Claes & Poirier, 1993; Hojjat & Moyer, 2017; Larson & Richards, 1991; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). First, as the influence of peers and the relationships with fellow students becomes increasingly important for students during adolescence (Buhrmester, 1990; Dostie-Goulet, 2009; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007), relationships with fellow students or peers can be less important earlier in adolescence than later in adolescence. Chapter 4, for example, revealed that friends started to raise awareness on social issues only around age 15, which suggested that later in adolescence, peers become a progressively important agent of socialization. That we were unable to find any effect in primary school may reflect the changing role of peers during adolescence and may be related to the age of students, as classmates become more important for socialization. Moreover, these different findings for students in upper primary and the middle of secondary school show the strength of our longitudinal study and the importance of studying the role of schools at several time points during adolescence.

In sum, we found that open climate conditions, especially created by teachers, contribute to the development of societal interest and societal involvement of students throughout adolescence, with the exception of student-student relationships in primary school. Students from various parental backgrounds benefited from these open climate conditions. The effectiveness of an open climate was not similar for all students. This is outlined in the next section.

Examine whether the effect of open climate conditions is equally beneficial for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Our thesis showed that students from more advantageous backgrounds are more interested and involved in society than students from less advantageous backgrounds. Parental education was particularly positively related to differences in societal interest
and involvement, even in early adolescence. The significant role of parent socioeconomic background touches upon issues related to inequality and raises questions about the extent to which schools are able to compensate for differences between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

In three of four chapters, we found that students with lower educated parents benefited more from open climate conditions in becoming more interested and involved in society than students with higher educated parents. In line with other studies (e.g. Campbell, 2008; Langton & Jennings, 1968; Neundorf et al., 2015), this confirms a compensation effect, which reasons that students with fewer experiences and lower societal interest and involvement benefit more from an open climate. This suggests that by creating an open climate, schools can reduce inequalities between students’ differences in societal interest and societal involvement based on parental background.

In the second chapter, we found that secondary school students, aged 15, with higher educated parents, benefited more from positive relationships with teachers than students with lower educated parents. This finding fits the idea of an acceleration effect, as defined by Campbell (2008), reasoning that higher SES students already have more competence to participate and discuss in the classroom and benefit more from the favorable learning opportunities offered by such a climate (Campbell, 2008). Even though students from both groups benefit from open climate conditions, this finding indicates that schools enhance inequalities based on societal involvement between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Although somewhat speculative, differences between the results in chapter 2 and the other chapters could be explained by the grouping of the student population in secondary schools in the Netherlands due to educational tracking. The acceleration effect was found in Dutch secondary schools, which groups students based on their ability. Indications of a compensation effect were found in Dutch primary school before tracking, and in Swedish schools, where tracking happens only late in adolescence. In the Netherlands, students move to different tracks at age 12 when transferring from primary to secondary school (Tikkanen, Bledowski, & Felczak, 2015). After primary school, children go to pre-vocational secondary education, which consists of four different tracks or to one of two tracks, both of which are oriented toward higher academic education. The Dutch education system is therefore known for its early tracking. By contrast, in Sweden, tracking starts from age 16 onward. Here, primary school (grundskola) is from age 7 to age 15, after which students can attend secondary school on academic tracks.
Previous studies have shown the influence of early tracking on educational inequalities and negative cognitive outcomes between students in different tracks (e.g. Bol, Witschge, Van de Werfhorst, & Dronkers, 2014; Dronkers, 2015; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2016; Korthals, 2016; Witschge & Van de Werfhorst, 2016). These results may reflect this, as in more heterogeneous groups—based on ability—lower educated students might benefit more from participating in an open climate, and schools can compensate for differences between students. More advantaged students, on the other hand, might benefit more from homogeneous groups, which suggests Campbell’s (2008) acceleratory effect of an open climate and enhanced differences between students.

In three chapters, through positive teacher-student relationships and teachers raising awareness of social issues, schools were able to reduce differences in societal interest and societal involvement due to parental background. This finding is important as it gives students from less advantageous backgrounds a more equivalent position for participating in society in early adulthood. Through positive teacher-student relationships and teachers raising awareness, schools can contribute to creating more equal opportunities for less advantaged students, as this motivates them—by stimulating societal interest and societal involvement—to participate in society.

Examine the extent to which societal interest and societal involvement lead to greater societal participation.

Both societal interest and societal involvement lead to greater societal participation. The anticipated effects of societal interest and societal involvement on societal participation changed during adolescence. In early adolescence, we found that students who were more involved in society also participated more in society. Students who were more interested were also more involved, which indicates that societal involvement mediates the relation between societal interest and societal participation. From age 13 until late adolescence (age 18), students who became more interested also participated increasingly even though becoming more involved in society during adolescence did not lead to greater societal participation. Finally, we found that students who were more involved in society in late adolescence were more likely to participate in society as young adults. Societal interest at age 18 also stimulated societal involvement in late adolescence, but societal interest did not stimulate societal participation. Even though this implies a mediation effect, a total effect of societal interest through societal involvement on societal participation in early adulthood was not found.

Furthermore, our findings revealed that societal involvement in early adolescence was indicative of societal participation in early adulthood. This finding has two notable implications. First, early education to stimulate societal interest and societal involvement
is important. In early adolescence, creating an environment in which students feel safe and are willing to talk about social issues—an open climate—can enhance their interest and involvement in society, leading to greater participation in early adulthood. Second, it is important for schools to reduce societal involvement inequalities in early adolescence and create more equal opportunities for students who are less involved entering adolescence. As our findings showed that schools were able to compensate for inequalities in interest and involvement in society, even in early adolescence, starting at this age gives schools the opportunity to reduce these inequalities and create more equal opportunities for both advantaged and less advantaged students to participate in society as adults.

Using long-term panel studies allowed us to better understand the role of schools in motivating students to participate in society and whether this leads to greater participation as adults. We will now reflect on some considerations on our data, online versus offline participation, and socialization as well as address ideas for future studies.
Future studies and considerations

Previous studies have underlined the importance of a life-course perspective to show the extent of patterns and processes during adolescence on future behavior (e.g. Amnå et al., 2009; Dijkstra, 2012). The longitudinal approach of this thesis expands our understanding of schools’ contribution to participation in society in adulthood, beyond school years. It showed that the school contributes to the development of societal interest and societal involvement during adolescence, next to parents and friends, and in turn enhances future societal participation.

It was previously argued that, for the sake of readability, causal statements were included in this thesis. These causal statements should be read carefully as we have not directly tested whether societal interest leads to societal involvement and whether societal involvement leads to future participation. Nevertheless, by using two longitudinal datasets that cover a relatively long period from early adolescence to early adulthood with advanced longitudinal analyses, this thesis made a step in the right direction. Although this thesis does not prove causal claims of socializing agents, societal interest, involvement, and participation, it does strengthen the causal claims on the role of the school on future participation beyond school years.

Only a few longitudinal datasets were available, and if present, they often covered only a relatively limited part of the life cycle. We used two longitudinal datasets—one from the Netherlands and one from Sweden—to study the effects of schools on social development throughout adolescence and the effect of schools on participation in early adulthood. The Dutch and Swedish contexts have sufficient common grounds to use both contexts for our goal to study to what extent schools contribute to societal participation. Both the Netherlands and Sweden score similarly on the Gini-index and have similar socioeconomic profiles in terms of income inequality (Eurostat, 2013). Both are considered social welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990), score similarly on child well-being (Bradshaw, Martorano, Natali, & De Neubourg, 2013), and have similar Gross Domestic Products per capita (World Bank). Both also score similarly on the Human Development Index (Jahan, 2016), with similar scores on (expected) years of schooling, Gross National Income per capita, gender inequality, and educational inequality (Human Development Report, 2016).

Where the Netherlands and Sweden have sufficient common grounds to estimate the expected relation in our model, we have already mentioned differences in tracking and their presumed consequences for variances in the compensation or acceleration effects of an open climate. Now we discuss another factor: participating in an open climate. Students in Sweden are more positive about participating in an open climate classroom and society
(Daas, 2014; Daas & Dijkstra, 2016; Munniksma et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2018). As they are more likely and willing to participate in class, creating the necessary conditions for an open climate for Swedish students is more likely to result in discussion and participation in class than for Dutch students. This implies that Swedish students are more likely to benefit from these conditions, as they are more likely to participate. We found positive effects in both Sweden and the Netherlands for open climate conditions on societal involvement. This indicates that despite the low participation of students in Dutch classrooms, conditions from an open climate still lead to greater societal involvement. This shows the potential in the Netherlands to stimulate students’ societal interest and societal involvement by further enhancing students’ attitudes toward classroom participation.

We previously noted that few longitudinal datasets on political socialization were available that cover both adolescence and adulthood. We were unable to follow up on the COOL respondents, as these data are not available in the Netherlands. Thus, to gain further understanding of the long-term effectiveness of schools on future participation in society in the Dutch context, setting up a new dataset and data collections in the Netherlands is necessary. In setting up a longitudinal dataset, we would advise using the YeS data as an example. Including multiple cohorts with multiple waves that cover a wide age range of 13 to 30 years old or beyond, with a focus on keeping attrition low, sets a good example of socialization data that cover both adolescence and adulthood. It should be noted that the data were collected in only one city in Sweden, although this city is largely representative of the Swedish population (Amnå et al., 2009). In setting up similar data collection in the Netherlands, it is advised to pay close attention to the transition between primary and secondary schools due to large attrition rates. We have argued that this transition is interesting, as it accounts for the consequences of early tracking and shows the role of primary school outcomes in secondary school. However, going from primary to secondary school involves students transferring to a number of different schools, moves which are highly sensitive to attrition, as mentioned in chapter 3.

In addition to this longitudinal quantitate data, including a mixed-methods approach and thus more qualitative data could shed further light on the specific mechanisms through which discussion on societal issues—in an open climate—stimulate societal interest and societal involvement. Future studies should consider examining the mechanisms underlying these discussions and how these discussions could lead to an increase in societal interest and involvement (e.g. Klofstad, 2010; Neundorf et al., 2016; Rubin, 2012). Interviews with students and teachers and studying observations of classroom interactions can give further insight into the mechanisms and interactions that stimulate societal interest and societal involvement.
At the same time, observations in schools allow for further exploration of the concept and mechanisms of an open climate. This thesis studied three conditions at the basis of an open climate, and its positive effects raises additional questions on how an open climate should be conceptualized or what an open climate entails. For example, it would be interesting to examine the specific interactions that stimulate students to grow as citizens or to study the conditions students find important for their ability, willingness, and feelings of safety to participate in discussions in school (see Maurissen et al., 2018). In setting up a new longitudinal data collection, we would suggest including a mixed-methods approach to complement the quantitative data.

After this discussion of the implications and considerations of our data, we now want to briefly address our specific focus on offline societal participation and offline socialization. This thesis did not include the role of (social) online media. In recent years, online media, as an extension to offline participation, or a socializing training ground for offline participation, has become increasingly important (e.g. Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006; Rheingold, 2008; Shah et al., 2005; Xenos et al., 2014). Including social media would indeed have been interesting, as it concentrates on the personal social environment of youth. One reason dominates our decision to focus on offline participation and socialization: including online activities may create a more optimistic or less conservative view of participation. There is little doubt that users have adopted social media as a new tool to boost participation (Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013), and online participation reaches groups of adolescents who would not have participated otherwise (Vissers & Stolle, 2014). Most adolescents use some form of social media, and if online socialization and participation had been included, we would have created a more positive view of the role of friends and participation in society. Our findings on societal participation are more conservative. The focus on offline participation was also motivated by the ongoing necessity of offline activities and participation in society. Volunteering, community work, and caregiving are real-time offline activities that are hard to replace with online activities; therefore, a conservative estimation of these real-time, offline activities was studied. This raises the questions of whether online activities are part of societal participation and to what extent online societal participation is relevant for reducing individualization within participatory societies. Still, for online socialization, the role of (online) media can, next to the role of the school as socialization agents, stimulate participation, and it would be interesting to include it in future studies on motivating students toward societal participation.
Conclusion

This thesis shows that schools can contribute to societal participation in early adulthood. By creating conditions for an open climate that encourages students to participate in discussions, schools can enhance students’ interest and involvement in society, which motivates them to participate in society as adults. Students from both higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds benefit from open climate conditions and become more involved and interested in society, although this effect varies among students from different backgrounds. We found indications that schools are able to reduce inequalities concerning interest and involvement in society because of parental socioeconomic background. This thesis confirms—what school policies in many developed countries have already assumed—that schools can promote societal participation and, to some degree, contribute to overcoming challenges due to eroding social coherence and advance the transition toward participatory societies.