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Adolescents' Experiences with Democracy and Collective Decision-making in Everyday Life

Hessel Nieuwelink, Paul Dekker, Femke Geijsel & Geert ten Dam

Abstract

Formal schooling, family and associational life are expected to enable adolescents to develop democratic attitudes. However, much remains unknown about how young people perceive these settings for developing such attitudes, and whether this perception differs for students in different educational tracks. This qualitative study of Dutch adolescents aims to gain insight into adolescents' reported experiences of democratic decision-making. The results show that the opportunities for young people to be involved in collective decision-making and to gain democratic experiences are rather limited in schools and in associational life. This holds for students from both higher and lower educational tracks.

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Introduction

Developing adolescents' attitudes towards democracy is widely seen as an important goal of formal schooling. In the past twenty years, significant scholarly attention has focused on the specific goals that should be set for democratic and citizenship education on the one hand, and on the results obtained at student level on the other. In particular, the importance of fostering a democratic attitude and political and social engagement has been emphasized (e.g. Eurydice, 2012; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010; Veugelers, 2009; Citizenship Advisory Group, 1998). This research has provided us with insights into the importance of schools' roles concerning the socialization of adolescents; however, many questions remain unanswered. For example, what are the differences in adolescents' experiences with citizenship and democracy in formal education compared to other everyday life situations, such as in associational life and contact with peers and parents, and how do the experiences differ depending on the adolescents' backgrounds? With this study, we aim to gain insight into the possibilities that groups of adolescents encounter for making collective decisions and making their voices heard in educational and other social contexts. With our focus on the experiences of adolescents in relation to these crucial aspects of democratic citizenship, we want to shed light on the scope for adolescents to develop positive attitudes towards democracy.

Opportunities for Experiencing Democracy

Since the early nineties, the degree of scholarly attention focused on the socialization function of formal schooling has increased rapidly, partly due to adolescents' perceived lack of societal involvement and perceived indifference towards democracy. This increase is most visible in the volume of research devoted to civic education programs and the formal civic education requirements that have been set in most Western countries in the past decade (Eurydice, 2012). During this period, many scholars have formulated goals for citizenship and democratic education. Schools are often portrayed as communities where students should be able to experience democracy and learn how to act democratically (Citizenship Advisory Group, 1998; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Veugelers, 2009). Therefore, students are expected to be able to develop civic skills (such as perspective-taking) and civic attitudes (such as the willingness to formulate their opinions and make collective decisions), and

to support civic and democratic values (such as tolerance and equality) (Eurydice, 2012; Schulz et al., 2010; cf. Gutmann, 1999). Schools' influence on the adolescents' democratic attitudes may vary from providing them with information and teaching social and political issues to organizing an open school climate with room for discussion (Amna, 2012; Quintelier, 2013; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001).

Empirical research on the effect of citizenship education shows that formal education can indeed affect adolescents' attitudes towards democracy (Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal, & ten Dam, 2013), and these attitudes can be developed both directly and indirectly. A large body of evidence attests to the role of a democratic classroom climate in which students feel encouraged to debate controversial issues (Campbell, 2008; Fjeldstad & Mikkelsen, 2003; Khoury-Kassabri, & Ben-Arieh, 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Other studies have shown that a formal curriculum that includes specific citizenship courses can also influence adolescents' democratic attitudes (Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Hall Jamieson, 2007; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2007; Yang & Chung, 2009.) Although these outcomes endorse the claim that schools can play a role in the political socialization of adolescents, the empirical knowledge base for this claim remains weak (Geboers et al., 2013; Isac, Maslowski, Creemers, & Van Der Werf, 2013).

More specifically, research has been conducted on students' experiences with decision-making in school, in which the student council is seen as a venue that enables students to develop democratic skills and attitudes. Studies reveal a small (positive) effect on students' attitudes (Mager & Nowak, 2012, see also the contributions of Eckstein & Noack and Elchardus & Siongers in this volume). Other scholars claim that schools are generally hierarchical in character, and thus argue that students lack democratic experiences in this setting because they have little say in many aspects of the school (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009).

Besides schools, other social settings can create opportunities for adolescents to develop democratic attitudes. Research shows that everyday life experiences and acquired attitudes have an impact on

how people evaluate formal democracy (Flanagan, 2013; Greenstein, 1965; Hess & Torney, 1967; Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003; Sears & Levy, 2003). More specifically, the roles played by parents, peers, and participation in associational life have been investigated. For example, the role of parents has been important in the research agenda of the political socialization of adolescents' right from the beginning, and has been found to have a crucial impact (Jennings, 2007). Studies following Putnam (1993; 2000) have claimed that civil society associations should also be seen as 'free schools for democracy', and have shown that those who participate in civil society tend to have more positive attitudes towards democratic values (Fung, 2003). Other scholars, however, have shown this to be more of a selection effect than a socialization effect, and that the effect does not hold for all types of organizations, such as sport organizations (Hooghe & Quintelier, 2013; Van der Meer & Van Ingen, 2009). As is the case with research regarding formal schooling, it remains unclear what specific mechanisms are responsible for these effects.

Socialization does not occur solely in organized settings. Teachers, parents, and other adults can create venues for adolescents to learn about the importance of democracy by enabling them to experience democratic ways of dealing with issues in everyday situations. However, contact with peers in non-organized daily settings, which is another important factor in the socialization process of adolescents (Biesta et al., 2009), has received less research attention, despite it being known that adolescents can influence each other's attitudes by discussing social issues and media content (Erentaitė, Žukauskienė, Beyers, & Pilkauskaitė-Valickienė, 2012).

Current Research

In this chapter, we shed light on the perceptions of adolescents in the Netherlands regarding the possibilities for developing democratic attitudes in school and in other social contexts. To do so, we focus on one aspect of democracy, namely decision-making in everyday settings (Nieuwelink, Dekker, ten Dam, & Geijsel, 2014). The aim of our study is to deepen our insight into the venues available for adolescents (aged 13–15) to learn about democracy. The following research questions are addressed in this chapter: 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?

To address this topic, we seek to bridge two gaps in the research literature. First, little is known about the ways in which students perceive the possibility of practicing aspects of democracy, such as decision-making in school, and about the ways in which students make decisions together, especially in comparison to their experiences in other social contexts. In our study, we compare these contexts with the aim of discovering whether there are differences in the decision-making method used depending on the context. We concentrate on three central modes of democratic decision-making: majoritarian decision-making, in which the majority rules through a voting procedure; consensual decision-making, in which participants attempt to negotiate between their fixed preferences to find as much agreement as possible; and deliberative decision-making, in which a discussion is used to find the best possible solution for a problem (Goodin, 2008; Lijphart, 1999).

Second, most studies about adolescents' political socialization focus on attitudes towards formal national politics (support for democracy and feelings of political efficacy measured using questions about attitudes towards parliament, elections, and authorities). These concepts are distant and carry relatively little meaning for many adolescents; therefore, we focus on democracy in everyday life. Adolescents' everyday decision-making experiences can enable them to develop their preparedness in several central aspects of democratic decision-making, such as making collective decisions, adjusting their own viewpoints, empathizing with others, and harnessing their (political) self-efficacy. The relevance of these experiences for adolescents' attitudes towards democratic values, political institutions, and political systems is supported by research demonstrating that adolescents base their attitudes towards these functions on everyday life experiences. What they learn in these situations thus influences their attitudes towards democracy (Gimpel et al., 2003; Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Sapiro, 2004; Sears & Levy, 2003). Other research shows that the attitudes towards democracy formed during (pre-) adolescence have a lasting impact on democratic orientations and behavior in later life (Jennings, 2007; Sears & Levy, 2003).

The Dutch Educational Context

School autonomy is a central element of the Dutch educational system. The Ministry of Education sets attainment targets and final exams for secondary education, but within these broadly defined margins, schools are free to formulate their own pedagogical approach, set their own goals, and decide how to design an education program for their students. Because both denominational and public schools are state-funded in the Netherlands, a wide variety of religious and pedagogically founded schools exist. This means the experiences of students in terms of democracy and collective decision-making probably vary according to the school settings.

In addition, studies have shown that in the Netherlands and other countries, the differences in the goals and practices that are set for citizenship education across pre-vocational and pre-academic education can help explain differences in political attitudes between adolescents enrolled in these two tracks in high school (Ichilov, 2003; ten Dam & Volman, 2003). Therefore, in this study, we compare the experiences of students from the pre-vocational track (PV) and pre-academic track (PA). Because adolescents from a higher socioeconomic background are overrepresented in higher educational tracks (OECD, 2014), and parental social milieu is shown to be related to democratic experiences and attitudes (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009; McDevitt & Kiouisis, 2015), this enables us to investigate differences with regard to experiences at home.

Method

Participants

In the spring of 2011, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 adolescents in their second year of secondary education in the Netherlands (aged 13-15). In selecting participants we have sought variety in both individual characteristic and school characteristics. Within each school a tutor helped us select the students based on the following criteria. We sought a well-balanced distribution with regard to gender, socio-economic milieu, ethnic background, and religious orientation. Twenty students from pre-vocational secondary education and twenty students from pre-academic education

were selected, with an equal distribution between boys and girls. In order to be able to interview adolescents from various social and educational backgrounds, we selected them from four schools in the Netherlands: a public school in Amsterdam with a mixed population of students that provides only pre-academic education; a public school in the middle of the country with a mixed urban/rural population of both migrant and non-migrant students that provides only pre-vocational education; a Catholic school in the northwest of the country with a predominantly non-migrant population that provides both pre-vocational and pre-academic education; and an orthodox Protestant school in the northeast of the Netherlands with predominantly orthodox Protestant and non-migrant student population that provides both pre-vocational and pre-academic education. This helped us to find perspectives on experiences with decision making from many different walks of life.

Interviews and Procedure

The interviews were conducted by the first author and were structured as follows. First, the adolescents were asked to introduce themselves and describe the social activities in which they participated (e.g., activities with friends, voluntary organizations, sports clubs, or religious associations). Second, the interviewees were invited to respond to eleven 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.” The interviewees were given the opportunity to explain whether these situations occurred within their social settings. Third, the adolescents were queried about the extent to which they experienced collective decision making in their various social settings. The interviewees were also asked to compare social settings with regard to their experiences with this aspect of democracy. Because ‘decision making’ can be interpreted as being related only to formal procedures, the interviewees were also asked about these processes in more informal terms (such as ‘Which person chooses what is going to be done?’ or ‘Who decides on the program?’).

Coding and Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. With the help of ATLAS.ti software, analyses were conducted for every interview, followed by cross-case analysis with a focus on finding similar and dissimilar patterns among the interviews (cf. Huberman & Miles, 1994). The coding scheme consisted of the following categories and subcategories:

- “Social contexts”: household, peers, associational life, and school and class; and
- “Experiences with decision making”: experience (e.g. collective decision-making; decision by authority), method used (deliberations, consensus, majority rule, authority decides), and topic (e.g. fieldtrip, rescheduling of a class, what movie to watch).

To determine the reliability of the coding, an independent judge coded fragments of the transcribed interviews for comparison to the coding of the first author. Cohen’s kappa reliability coefficient was then calculated. This resulted in a Kappa of 0.85, which falls into the category “almost perfect” (0.8-1.0) (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Results

The interviewees participate in many social settings. At school, they interact daily with their classmates, teachers, and other school personnel; at home, most of the interviewees live with more than three people and must find a way to make their households pleasant for all residents. In their spare time, nearly all of the interviewees participate in sports or leisure organizations, such as soccer clubs, hockey clubs, music clubs, boy scouts, or gymnastics clubs. Some of them also attend confirmation classes in their church or Koran classes in their mosque. Finally, these adolescents spend a large amount of time with their friends.

In all of these social encounters, these adolescents participate in joint activities in which they must address the preferences of different people and deal with rules they must obey but with which they sometimes disagree. Thus, in different social settings, the interviewees encounter situations where decisions are made that affect all participants. According to the interviewees, in many situations, adult authorities (such as teachers, trainers, or parents) make the decisions. Relevant differences, however,

exist between social settings in the extent to which these authorities are inclined to listen to adolescents' perspectives when making a decision. Nearly all of the interviewees stated that their parents are willing to listen to them, but their reported experiences with teachers at school and trainers in sport clubs vary greatly. Some interviewees said that their voice was being heard by school authorities, but others did not experience this.

From the perspective of adolescents, there are opportunities to make collective decisions in all social contexts, but sharp differences exist in their reported experiences. Interviewees claimed that although different perspectives exist among family members as well as among friends, they try to find consensus and tend to agree on activities in leisure organizations; however, at school, the majority rules. In this sense, they experience different modes of decision-making in daily life. These results are discussed in detail below.

Schools and Classrooms

Different experiences with having a voice

None of the interviewees felt that they as students had much of a say in what happens in school. One boy (PV) made the following statement: "In class, you do not really make decisions together. Most of rules and regulations are fixed." Others agreed with him, although this does not mean that the interviewees generally felt that their opinions were being ignored. While some students reported that teachers and headmasters never really listen to them, others stated that on some occasions, school authorities did consider their perspectives when making decisions. Considerably more students in the PA track than the PV track stated that they experienced situations where their teachers were not willing to consider their opinions. This is probably because these PA students seemed more likely to be critical of school situations they believed to be unjust, and therefore confronted teachers and administrators more often. The denomination of the school appeared to play no role in this.

Those interviewees who said they were ignored all claimed that teachers and members of the school administration were not interested in students' opinions. One boy (PA), for example, stated that:

“Most teachers will want to pretend they are listening to you but then will brush you off by saying ‘I will take care of it’ and then do nothing about it.” A classmate of his, discussing their tutor, argued along the same lines. “You cannot discuss anything with him... Whenever you try to explain your point of view and give an argument, he does not listen and tells you to stop talking or you will be expelled from the classroom.” Similar arguments were voiced by interviewees who felt their administrators did not listen to them. One boy (PV) claimed that talking to the headmaster about school regulations was a wasted effort: “No, he would argue that those are the rules of the school... He is in charge of the school, why would he listen to me?” He and other interviewees argued that they were ignored because, being students, they are obliged to obey the rules set by the administration.

In the case of the interviewees who did not feel ignored by teachers and administrators, while the authorities did not always act upon their opinions, at least the students felt that their opinions had been heard. They gave examples of situations where their teachers or form tutors allowed them to participate in substantive classroom or school decisions, such as the appropriate punishment for misconduct and the scheduling of tutoring lessons. One boy (PV) discussed the former situation, in which he and his classmates were told by their teacher that they were responsible for coming up with a solution for misbehavior in the classroom: “We had to discuss with each other how we were going to address our misconduct and the rules of the school... We thought about how we were going to do it and what type of punishment we thought was fair... Thereafter the teacher discussed the penalties we suggested with his colleagues.” Another interviewee (PA) explained that she and her classmates were able to influence the system of mandatory tutoring lessons for all students, to which they objected: “We explained our perspective to our form tutor and he said, ‘We will see what the whole class thinks about it. Which students agree with this and which don’t?’ Almost all students agreed with us. Our form tutor then went to the principal and explained our view. And now they have solved our problem.”

Voting in the classroom

In many school context situations, the interviewees reported that school authorities make the decisions. However, these adolescents also explained that in some instances they are able to make decisions with their classmates about, for example, which movie to watch in class, the date of a test, or the rescheduling of a class. Students sometimes disagreed on the best decision in these situations, in which case the majority typically decided. This was the dominant experience in PV and PA schools alike, and did not differ according to denomination. One girl (PV) described her experiences: “Well, one of us wanted to see one movie [in class] and someone else wanted another movie. The teacher said that we had to decide as a class... Eventually, the majority will choose.” In many instances when students are allowed to decide by majority rule, they do so without debating the issue. One boy (PA) explained: “The teacher simply asks us to vote and does not give us time to debate it... We just vote.” Although students sometimes have different viewpoints, they do not always get the opportunity to explain their arguments; instead, the option that most students favor will be chosen, with little attention paid to the reasons for students’ other preferences.

When students are able to voice their opinions before they cast a vote, they are usually limited to a brief debate, and many interviewees from both tracks claimed that not all students were able to voice their arguments. One girl (PV) stated that: “If a girl who is very quiet says something, nobody will listen, but if a loudmouth says something, everyone will listen... Most of the time even the teachers do not hear the quiet girls... So these girls do not really have a say in things.” This means that simply allowing debate about a decision does not ensure equal participation for all of the students involved. Adolescents from both tracks and all schools involved stated that some or even many teachers are not creating a pedagogical environment where all students are able to participate on an equal basis in decision-making procedures. Because these teachers, from the perspective of the interviewees, are more inclined to listen to ‘loudmouths’ and create little space for the quieter students, the latter will have fewer opportunities to explain their preferences and experience this aspect of democracy.

Although voting is the dominant mechanism for making decisions in the classroom, three interviewees mentioned the use of finding consensus among the students as an alternative. One boy

(PV) explained how they sometimes decided on the sequence of activities in the classroom: “Then, there will be a discussion, and we will find a solution together... One student voices his opinion, and another responds... I think that everyone takes part in the discussion... Finally, everyone agrees with what we come up with.” In this situation, the students were willing to listen to each other and attempt to take everyone’s interests into account when making decisions.

Student council: Largely unknown

Every school in the Netherlands is obligated to have a student council, and although it plays a role in school decision-making, most of the interviewed students were largely unaware of it. This held for students from both tracks and from all schools involved in the study. Those who were familiar with the council were usually not particularly interested in its workings or did not hold it in high esteem; for example, one girl (PA) stated: “Well, until recently, I didn’t know that we had a student council. So they are not very active... I know that they do not have much influence on school policy, so why would you want to join the council?”

Of the interviewees who were aware of the workings of the student council, two had participated in the council, three were willing to do so, while five others argued that it does in fact influence school policy. One boy (PA) who participated in his school’s student council explained that the administration was willing to listen to its ideas: “If you come with a realistic proposal they will listen to you. They will ask ‘Why do you want that?’ and you’ll have to explain your reasons, and other students can react. After that they discuss it with the administrators and tell us what the decision is and why.” This boy had experienced the administration’s willingness to take the student council’s ideas seriously, even to the extent of changing policies due to students’ requests. Some students who were not personally part of their school’s council felt that it did influence school policy, and argued that while an individual student cannot create change at school, the school council can because that is its role, and the administrators will listen to its members.

Although the student council can be a good tool for its student members to learn about decision-making practices, most adolescents interviewed did not view the council as effective in their schools, and raised questions about both its influence on school policy and its representativeness. These interviewees painted a picture of learning experiences not extending beyond those who participate in the council, even if they interacted with those council participants. Therefore, it is questionable whether those participants learn how to represent others' interests.

Leisure Associations and Religious Associations

Leisure activities

Nearly all of the adolescents interviewed were engaged in activities such as soccer, tennis, music, or dancing. They generally participated in these activities in an associational setting, where many activities would be performed with ten to twenty other adolescents under the supervision of an adult. While there is potential for adolescents to experience collective decision-making in these organizations, in general the interviewees did not experience this. Usually, an adult (e.g. a coach or trainer) decides on the activity for the group and sets the rules. For example, one boy (PA) explained the decision-making process in his soccer team: "We don't [decide together]... The coach decides about the line-up... Everyone has a fixed position. Nobody objects to that... the activities during training are also fixed."

The hierarchical structure of these leisure organizations seems broadly similar to the adolescents' experiences of the school context. While people are free to enter and leave these associations, the interviewees did not feel they had any particular influence within these contexts. The interviewees' experiences in leisure organizations vary in terms of the extent to which they feel the leaders take their perspective into account. Some interviewees were able to voice their preferences to their coaches or trainers, while others claimed that the coach or trainer rarely listened to them. We did not find any differences based on the type of organization or educational background of the students. One boy's (PA) story about scouting was typical of the experiences of other interviewees: "You can say what you'd like to do, but the officers ultimately decide." The voicing of preferences by the adolescents

seems a rather one-sided activity given that the adults make the final decisions. There appears to be little discussion between the adolescents about their preferences and the possibility of meeting their interests as far as possible.

Some interviewees explicitly stated that they felt ignored; the experience of one girl (PA) who participated in a circus theatre is exemplary. She explained: “One of the reasons I left that place was that my supervisor always told me what I had to do. We were going to have a show for the public, and then she said that I had to be a little animal, but I wanted to be something elegant... When you are an animal it seems like you’re not good at it, not elegant. So I decided to leave that theatre.” According to this girl, she had greater opportunities to voice her opinion in the classroom than in the theatre program, which, despite being voluntary and recreational, does not guarantee adolescents more influence over their activities. This girl’s experience and her reaction to it, however, also shows that situations in which a person cannot make her voice heard can be important for the development of democratic attitudes. She felt it was unfair that she was forced to perform a part that she clearly did not want; that experience showed her the importance of having an influence in decision-making processes.

Within the various associations, the interviewees were sometimes able to make collective decisions. In contrast to the classroom, however, the interviewees rarely recalled doing so by majority rule. On almost every occasion when allowed to choose their activity, the interviewees reported that everyone on their team or in their club agreed on what they wanted to do. In this setting, they never really experienced disagreement when provided with the chance to make a decision. One boy (PA) provided an example: “Sometimes we can decide what we are going to do during soccer practice. [...] Then, we are going to shoot on goal because that is what everybody loves the most.” The interviewees stated that disagreements about which activities to do did not really exist because all of the members joined the organization due to their love of that particular activity.

Confirmation class or Koran class

All twelve students from the orthodox Protestant school participate in confirmation classes in their church, while three students from other schools participate in Koran classes in their mosque. The experiences reported by the adolescents in these settings are quite similar to those reported in other organizations, with the exception of one aspect that is unique to this type of association. The activities in religious associations are relatively predetermined; some interviewees stated that the adult in charge of the meetings makes the decisions about which texts to read and discuss. Other interviewees, however, reported being able to provide input into the selection of topics and being encouraged to bring up issues that are relevant to them. One girl (PA) explained: “We also discuss topics that we are interested in... We may suggest topics that we want to talk about, and they listen to that, but they decide how the meeting takes place.” Although there are clear similarities with leisure organizations and school contexts, the fundamental difference in religious study organizations is that while there is some room for initiative in selecting the topics for discussion, the content of the discussions has a clear direction. One boy (PV) stated: “Our clergyman makes clear which opinions are allowed and which opinions are not allowed within our faith.” In contrast to their experiences with leisure activities and in the classroom, adolescents are confronted with strict regulations about the opinions they should express. Thus, their initiatives are much more directed along the lines of their faith.

Friends in Non-organized Settings

The interviewees believe they have the greatest opportunities to make collective decisions and the greatest chance of making their voices count when they are among friends. In most instances, they and their friends agree on what they will be doing. If they have varying preferences, most interviewees explained that they try to find a consensus on what they will do. For the interviewees, this is a logical process; as friends, you care for one another, you are inclined to have similar preferences, and you wish for everyone to be satisfied. This holds for all students, regardless of educational track and/or school. One girl (PV) explained what happens when her friends are unable to agree on what they are going to do: “Sometimes one girl wants to go cycling, someone wants to play hockey, and a third wants to play soccer. I make sure that everyone gets what she wants... We start by going cycling, then we play hockey, and afterwards we play soccer.” As this girl explained, all of the

members of the group can voice their preferences, and they then look for a solution that will satisfy everyone.

However, some interviewees also experience a different process of collective decision-making among friends, as in some cases the group simply opts for what the majority wants to do. One boy (PA) explained: “If you plan to go somewhere and only one person is not able to come on that date, then it is bad luck for him. You can try to find agreement with everyone, but if that is not possible, you just decide what most people prefer, and he can go another time.” From the perspective of these interviewees, not all groups of friends are focused on finding consensus and keeping everybody satisfied. In some cases, the decision-making process among friends is similar to what they experience in the classroom.

At Home

All interviewees still live at home with one or both of their parents and most have one or more siblings. All report that their families make collective decisions on joint activities. Family types did not seem to influence experiences with democracy at home. Their parents decide on the rules of the household, but most interviewees do not feel these rules are overly restrictive. In these and other situations where parents make the decisions, nearly all of the interviewees feel their parents consider their preferences. In addition, in this social setting there are no systematic differences found in terms of the students’ educational track or the denomination of the school. One boy (PV) explained how his family made decisions: “My parents are in charge, but I can say what I want to do, but ultimately they decide. If I want to go to a party and they don’t agree, then I can start whining as much as I like, but it doesn’t make a difference... Only when I have really good arguments will they change their opinions.” This boy and most of the other interviewees feel their parents take them seriously and are prepared to listen to them.

When deciding about daytrips or holidays, the interviewees explained that everyone in the family has a say. One girl (PV) said: “If we go on holiday, for example, we decide together about what we are

going to do. Then, we always reach an agreement together.” It seems that in these households, each family member focuses on making a decision that everyone can agree with, thus meeting everyone’s preferences. The interviewees feel that, compared to other social contexts, there is much more room for discussion when making decisions at home. 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.” In more formal, organized social settings, the interviewees explained there was limited discussion about the rules or activities employed. Conversely, in their households, most of these adolescents felt they could have a prolonged conversation about the preferences of all the individuals involved in a proposed activity, after which they are able to make a decision to which everyone agrees.

This horizontal power relationship does not hold for all households, however. Two of the forty interviewees described a more hierarchical relationship between themselves and their parents, where the parents make all decisions. One girl (PV) explained the habits in her household: “My parents make the decisions... Like where we go to when we go on holiday... I don’t have much to say about the rules at our home. My parents set certain rules, and I just stick to them.” In the experiences reported by these two interviewees, we find more traditional power relationships where the parents are the heads of the household; therefore, there is little discussion about household rules and the activities in which family members participate. However, most interviewees experience the household as a social setting in which horizontal social relationships exist, providing them with opportunities to voice their opinions and preferences.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this chapter, we have presented the results of our study on Dutch adolescents’ perspectives on and experiences with collective decision-making in everyday situations. We have sought to provide insight into the everyday opportunities available for adolescents, aged 13–15, to develop democratic attitudes and how these differ for students from different educational tracks and schools (denominations).

Many scholars have argued that associational life and formal education offer adolescents opportunities for experiencing democracy (Fung, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Veugelers, 2009). The results presented here offer, at best, a rather mixed view of this hypothesis. According to the perceptions of many of the interviewed adolescents, the opportunities to experience democracy by making their voices heard individually and making decisions collectively are limited in these everyday settings. This result is in line with an international study on citizenship education that shows students in the Netherlands have relatively limited opportunities for decision-making in schools (Schulz et al., 2010). Most of the forty adolescents in our study explained that their school administrations and club leaders are relatively uninterested in their opinions. This holds regardless of the students' educational track or denomination of the school. According to the interviewees, authorities in formal organized institutions often make decisions without considering their perspective. In this respect, the power relationships in formal education and associational life are far more hierarchical in nature than those found in more informal social settings. In contrast, nearly all interviewees indicated that their parents are willing to take their viewpoints and opinions seriously. However, the finding that voluntary associations provide adolescents with more possibilities to take the initiative and to gain democratic experiences than formal schooling (e.g. Biesta et al., 2009) was not supported by the adolescents we interviewed. Below, we will reflect on these results, particularly the question of inequality between students from different social milieus and educational tracks.

Previous research revealed differences in adolescent democratic attitudes and in the opportunity structure available for adolescents to develop these attitudes. Families from lower social backgrounds and pedagogical regimes in lower educational tracks are considered to be more often hierarchically organized, which means young people in these settings experience aspects of democracy less often (e.g. collective decision-making, deliberation) (Jennings et al., 2009; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2015; ten Dam & Volman, 2003). The results of the present study contradict this expectation to a certain extent. First, interviewees' experiences of relations at home are rather egalitarian. Although parents make the decisions, they are largely willing to listen to and include the preferences of young people. This holds

for students in both educational tracks and from different social backgrounds, and indicates, therefore, that young people in the Netherlands nowadays grow up in families where decision-making is a rather egalitarian endeavor. The experience of having a voice and being heard by parents is therefore not a satisfactory explanation for inequality in the democratic attitudes of young people. It can perhaps better be explained by considering the way in which politics is discussed in families in more detail (Jennings et al., 2009).

Second, the reported experiences of the adolescents in schools generally do not differ in terms of educational track. Students in both tracks have limited experiences with decision-making, and when they are allowed to make a decision together, they just cast a vote. In the eyes of adolescents from both tracks, there are limited opportunities to experience this aspect of democracy in schools. The few differences we found between educational tracks point in an unexpected direction. Rather than students from the PV education, it was actually those from the PA track that reported not having a voice when teachers or administrators make a decision. Perhaps these students, somewhat more often than peers in PV education, are susceptible to school authorities' lack of inclination to listen to students, and they say this loud and clear. It can also be the case that teachers in PV schools are more engaged with listening to what their students have to say in order to enhance opportunities. In general, taken from the perspectives of the interviewees, schools do not seem to create many venues for developing democratic attitudes. Our study does not support the idea that schools enhance inequality between students, but they do not seem to mend the inequality gap either. There are only limited opportunities for adolescents to develop democratic attitudes.

In some cases, the adolescents in our study had opportunities to make decisions collectively. With regard to this, relevant differences exist between schools on the one hand and family, friends, and associational life on the other. At school, when students are allowed to make decisions together, different perspectives often exist, and a majority decision is ultimately made. By doing so, students can learn about fair ways to address differences of opinion when making the best decision. However, it is remarkable that majority decisions seem to dominate in classroom settings. Students feel that

teachers rarely urge students to reach agreements among themselves, and participating in a deliberative decision-making process is very uncommon. If the perceptions of the interviewees hold true for larger groups of students, then it can be said that adolescents are not consciously learning about consensual decision-making or the deliberative decision-making process in school. Observational studies may reveal whether aspects of these types of decision-making occur in everyday school life.

According to the forty adolescents, agreement is often sought and for the most part is easily found, when a joint decision is made at home, with friends, and in organizations of associational life. The reported predominance of finding agreement can be explained by the characteristics of these contexts. Within associations, adolescents often have similar interests, whereas at home and with friends, people tend to wish to keep everyone satisfied. When adolescents are able to make collective decisions in associations, it is generally limited to a short exchange of preferences, and often, all agree on the proposed activity. The interviewees report that discussing their preferences for, or disagreement with, the planned activity is rare. While there are opportunities to learn cooperation in these social settings, it seems adolescents are not confronted frequently with situations in which they are forced to resolve differences in perspectives and opinions as a group.

In general, based on our research we are unable to indicate which of the social contexts discussed here (formal schooling, associational life, household, and friends) is 'most important'. However, it seems that experiencing democracy in everyday social contexts is more of a potential than a reality. In our view, schools are the obvious setting for students to experience and learn about democracy. At school, students are confronted with adolescents who have other preferences and values, and unlike with friends and voluntary associations, there are limited exit options. Schools should use this potential to create venues for students to identify their preferences about collective decision-making and to learn about social and political issues. Moreover, the pedagogical space of the school can be used to stimulate students to reflect on experiences with democratic decision-making outside the school. Students can be encouraged to reflect on everyday situations where they encounter hierarchical power

relations, undemocratic decision-making processes, and the lack of a voice. By helping students to reflect on undemocratic experiences, teachers can assist students in developing democratic attitudes. This can be especially important for PV students because studies (e.g. Ichilov, 2003; ten Dam & Volman, 2003) often show that students in this educational track have fewer opportunities to learn to reflect on social issues and (un)democratic experiences. These types of schools in particular should work to create venues for their students to experience democracy and develop democratic attitudes.

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