
Democracy & Education

Political Simulations

An Opportunity for Meaningful Democratic Participation in Schools

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Abstract

Political simulations are considered promising tools to instigate democratic learning in schools. This article reports a qualitative inquiry into student involvement in the organization of the 2012 mock elections—the shadow elections that schools can organize in conjunction with the official elections—in eight high schools in the Netherlands. The objective of this inquiry is twofold: to evaluate student involvement in mock elections in these schools and to lay the theoretical groundwork for further quantitative inquiries into student participation in political events. For the deductive analysis of student roles in organizing the mock election, I adapted Fielding and Moss's (2012) "patterns of partnership" typology using a critical democratic citizenship education lens. The analysis of interviews with teachers suggests that students were rarely envisioned as sources of data or as active respondents; they were not invited to deviate from existing planning protocols; and student-staff collaboration was not framed as a political project in its own right. Based on the empirical findings and the typology constructed for this study, I conclude with several recommendations for furthering meaningful student participation in mock elections and related events and for improving the quality of political spaces in schools.

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Introduction

SINCE THE 1960s, civic educators around the world have been introducing students to political simulations and events, including simulations of congresses, mock courts and mock elections.

This article reports an inquiry into mock elections—the shadow elections that schools can organize in conjunction with the official elections. The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) and research from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement suggest that

mock elections are popular in several European countries and the United States (ICCS, 2010; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2007). Although political simulations are considered promising tools to instigate democratic learning (Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011), there is limited published research on mock elections. To date, little is known about teachers' perspectives on mock elections (MEs hereafter), the learning activities accompany-

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ing MEs, the possibilities for meaningful student participation, and students' appreciation of MEs and ME-related education (cf. De Groot, 2017a). As elections determine policies on climate, immigration, welfare, education, and much else—and most EU countries seek to encourage democratic competences and participation among students (Veugelers, De Groot, Stolk, & Research for CULT Committee, 2017)—we need to learn more about the extent to which formal elections are, and can be, used for educational purposes.

This article reports a qualitative study of student participation in the organization of the 2012 mock elections—the shadow elections that schools can organize in conjunction with the official elections—in eight high schools in the Netherlands. The objective of this inquiry was twofold: to evaluate student involvement in mock elections in these schools and to lay the theoretical groundwork for further quantitative inquiries into student participation in political events. Its main research question was: to what extent can students meaningfully participate in the organization of mock elections in Dutch high schools?

To evaluate the role of students in the organization of MEs through a critical democratic citizenship education lens, I have adapted the “patterns of partnership” typology developed by Fielding and Moss (2012). The findings, it is hoped, will inform discussions among policymakers, NGOs, and teachers about the existing and desirable opportunities for students to engage in meaningful democratic participation in different school and political contexts, in the Netherlands and beyond.

Meaningful Democratic Participation and Critical Democratic Education

To define *meaningful democratic participation*, I first explain my understanding of meaningful and critical democratic education and how participation and education are related. Scholars working in the tradition of critical democratic citizenship education typically argue that civic education should not be limited to learning about political institutions and the encouragement of voting; students also need to learn to discuss controversial issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2014), engage in meaningful political activity and deliberation (Beane & Apple, 2007; Beaumont, 2010; Parker, 2003), and develop democratic values and identities (De Groot, 2017b; Oshri, Sheaffer, & Shenhav, 2015; Veugelers, 2007). Over the last decades, scholars have contributed to the development of tools, frameworks, methods, and schoolwide programs that aim to enhance the quality of democratic, participatory, and deliberative platforms and processes in schools and civic communities (e.g., Beaumont, 2010; De Winter, 2012; Fielding & Moss, 2012; Osler & Starkey, 2005; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989).

Building on the literature on critical democratic citizenship education (CDCE hereafter) as well as theories on meaningful learning, I consider critical democratic education to be meaningful when: (a) it makes use of effective methods, for example, formative feedback, peer feedback, project-based and spiraling learning (Hattie, 2012); (b) when, instead of covering many topics in a superficial manner, meaningful content is purposefully selected

and deep and adaptive learning is advanced (Parker & Lo, 2016); (c) when teachers help students connect with subject knowledge by explaining the personal and civic narratives behind its discovery and by linking this knowledge to existential themes and their personal lives (Egan, 2005); and (d) when it is directed toward advancing students' critical democratic citizenship literacy, skills, identity and/or a democratic participatory culture (e.g., Beane & Apple, 2007; De Groot & Veugelers, 2015).

This study focuses on the last component: advancing critical democratic competences and a democratic, participatory (school) culture. The term *critical* is key here. In mainstream civic education research, the impact of political simulations is typically measured in terms of their contribution to students' inclination to vote. While maintaining a certain level of electoral engagement is indeed important for our elected representatives to preserve their mandate, critical pedagogues (cf. Carr, 2011) have argued that procedural types of electoral participation may be more supportive of current hegemonies (e.g., the interests of multinationals and White, elite, and male citizens) than of creating more just societies. Furthermore, deliberative and radical democratic theorists have emphasized the need to attend to—and strengthen—the substantial and agonistic dimensions of democratic participation (cf. Elstub, 2010; Mouffe, 2011).

In accordance with a CDCE-framework, meaningful democratic participation implies helping (young) citizens to identify and address limitations of current democratic practices and procedures. This includes cultivating their ability to identify dominant and alternative discourses about what democracy entails, to reflect on who should decide about what in different institutions and platforms, and to envision what types of activities may or may not contribute to the vitality of a democratic political system, culture and ethos. Within educational contexts, meaningful democratic participation targets critical developments at the individual level (e.g., critical participatory skills & a moral compass for political participation) as well as the quality of dialogical and political spaces in school and society.

Important to note here is that this study focuses on *opportunities for student involvement* prior to and following the MEs: whether students have voice and/or influence; whether the activities merely introduce students to the procedures (technical dimension) or also involve negotiating procedures and principles (moral and political dimension); whether the activity is also directed at fostering dialogical and political spaces in school; and whether student participation is explicitly framed as an educational activity (Allen & Right, 2015; Biesta, 2011; De Groot, 2017a). Analysis and discussion of the educational activities offered to all students prior to and after the MEs is of interest as well but exceeds the scope of this study.

To analyze student roles in the organization of the 2012 ME, I decided to work with Fielding and Moss's “patterns of partnership” typology (Fielding & Moss, 2012, p. 16)—the student-participation typology that most explicitly builds on (radical) democratic theory. Inspired by the work of Hart and Shier, among others, this typology distinguishes among six modes of collaboration between young people and staff/teachers:

(1) students as sources of data; (2) young people as active respondents; (3) young people as coenquirers; (4) young people as knowledge creators; (5) young people as joint authors; and (6) intergenerational learning as participatory democracy (Fielding & Moss, 2012, pp. 15–16). When this sixth mode is established, young people and staff have reached a “genuinely shared, fully collaborative partnership [. . .] in ways which (a) emphasize a joint commitment to the common good, and (b) include occasions and opportunities for an equal sharing of power and responsibility” (Fielding & Moss, 2012, p. 16).

As Fielding and Moss (2012) developed their typology in the context of research on radical democratic public education, it required adjusting in order to serve as a framework for analyzing modes of collaboration that (may) exist when organizing a mock election in different types of schools (e.g., public, private, denominational, or based on a specific educational philosophy). Before presenting my revised typology of student-staff collaboration, I first discuss the three areas in which I adapted the framework. They concern types of student participation; the desirability of equally shared power; and the overall rationale behind collaboration.

Types of Participation, Power-Sharing, and Rationales for Collaboration

The first adaptation concerns types of student participation. Whereas Fielding and Moss (2012) focused on student-staff collaboration in everyday school life, in the designing or planning of activities, and in deliberation over policies, mock elections in schools do not necessarily offer opportunities for student-staff collaboration. In the Netherlands, MEs are organized prior to every national election—in some of the schools, also in conjunction with local and EU elections—by a single teacher or teacher-unit (De Groot, 2017a). This means that, at least in theory, much of the designing and planning has already taken place, and students will typically be asked to assist in facilitating the event, for example, by manning the ballot box or decorating the voting office. These types of student participation are not categorized—or valued—in Fielding and Moss’s typology, which emphasizes shared decision-making power. I therefore adopt a wider conception of student participation—one that also includes more hands-on types of participation (cf. Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2012). In the context of mock elections, this means that I include activities such as manning the ballot office in the school or the local community—activities that enable students to experience mock elections from the inside and which may lead to other types of student-teacher collaboration in future events and related educational projects.

The second adaptation concerns the desirability of equally shared power. While I agree with Fielding and Moss (Fielding, 2010; Fielding & Moss, 2012) on the importance of providing opportunities to share power—and with the dialogical approach to child participation advanced by Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith, and Taylor (2010) that underlines the importance of recognizing how children and students *can* contribute rather than how they cannot—I argue here that it is equally important to engage students in discussions about the (un)desirability of equally

shared power for certain types of decisions. This is in light of legal and developmental differences among students and staff and their different interests. As most high school students are minors and are not employed by the school, their rights and responsibilities differ from those of staff members. This means that decisions (can) have different consequences (e.g., teachers can lose their jobs). In my view, these differences legitimize greater advisory and decision-making power for teachers for many types of decisions. A similar argument can be advanced from a developmental perspective; it takes until late adolescence for most young people to appreciate the complexity of civic and educational issues and to consider sociopolitical context and different (educational and organizational) interests when judging the legitimacy of a course of action (Nucci, Krettenauer, & Narvaez, 2014). Finally, due to their different interests, teachers and students may have different priorities or opt for different strategies to reach a goal. Teachers, for example, will typically be more concerned about protecting relations with colleagues and management, and the public image of their organization. Examining the rationale behind—and the possible benefits of—existing inequalities in decision-making power in specific areas, I argue, will lead to more informed deliberation about desirable power (in)equalities in decision-making and in collaboration platforms in schools (cf. Birzea, 2005; Dürr, Spajić-Vrkaš, & Martins, 2000; Keating, 2014; Print & Lange, 2013).

The third adaptation concerns the rationale behind student-teacher collaboration. Here I agree with Fielding and Moss (2012) that, to prepare students for participation in democratic societies, schools need to offer opportunities for students to engage in partnerships that foreground “joint commitment to the common good” (Fielding & Moss, 2012, p. 16). Building on the notion that challenging or disrupting current practices and procedures are at the heart of the democratic experiment (cf. Biesta, 2011; Mouffe, 2011), the optimal mode of collaboration, I argue, occurs when partners are conscious of dominant and alternative perspectives on the common good and desirable differences in decision-making power, and when they are receptive to moments of disruption of the existing order. If schools and/or ministries of education are wary of supporting spaces for political debate within schools—for example, due to the history of state political indoctrination in the Czech Republic or to freedom of education legislation in the Netherlands (cf. Veugelers, De Groot & Stolk, 2017)—disrupting the existing order entails questioning the underlying principles, for example, the idea that schools can be neutral places. It also entails exploring alternative principles and aims and considering practices that can help prepare students for (future) political participation. Moving beyond the evaluation of politicians’ debating skills, teachers may, for example, invite students to study multiple perspectives on what it means to be a “good politician” and use the insights gained to co-construct additional criteria for evaluating political debates.

A Typology of Student-Staff Collaboration in Mock Elections

Based on these adaptations, I distinguish among six modes of student-staff collaboration within mock elections:

1. Young people as sources of data
2. Young people as active respondents
3. Young people as co-organizers
4. Young people as leading organizers
5. Young people as partners in co-constructing the event
6. Young people as partners in advancing the quality of political spaces

Modes 1 to 4 translate the modes as distinguished by Fielding and Moss (2012) to the mock election context. An important difference with the original typology is that modes 3 and 4 in the modified version also concern student participation in the facilitation of the ME. Modes 5 and 6 have been altered in light of the second and third issue areas, as outlined before. Another distinctive feature of this typology is that it specifies how participation *in each mode* may contribute to critical democratic citizenship development and a democratic school culture. Similar to traditional, linear participation models (e.g., Hart, 1992), this typology does contain a cumulative element, in the sense that student involvement in mode 6 (potentially) includes most elements of democratic participation in accordance with a CDCE framework. However, this typology also distinguishes multiple dimensions of critical democratic participation, both within and between the different modes. Considering this multiplicity and of a contextual approach to education, I do not envision the sixth mode as superior in itself. What (combinations of) modes of student involvement are desirable, and what dimensions of critical democratic participation are covered, will vary per context as it depends on the professional, pedagogical and political conditions in school and society.

In mode 1—*young people as sources of data*—staff collect and examine data on student appreciation of previous mock elections to decide about desirable adjustments. Survey questions may address the grade levels to be included and the type and quality of the educational activities organized for each grade level. Questions may also address students' (lack of) experience with sharing political perspectives, or their ability to participate in agonistic deliberation (Lo, 2017). For the participatory experience to reside with a CDCE framework—to generate a realistic sense of political efficacy, for example—students would also need to be informed about the outcomes of a student survey and its impact on the topic or practice explored (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2012).

In mode 2—*young people as active respondents*—staff invite students to discuss desirable changes to the mock election and related educational activities. The underlying idea is that professional decision-making requires listening to students and generating a school atmosphere that stimulates student involvement in educational issues (cf. Schultz, 2003). Here also, participation in line with a CDCE-framework implies that discussions are not only organized for the sake of students learning to express their views; their purpose is also to spur students' sense of citizenship efficacy, specifically how they can influence the ME-event and related education in school.

In mode 3—*young people as co-organizers*—teachers invite students to participate in the design, planning and/or

implementation of the mock election and/or related educational activities. Teachers delegate specific planning and implementation tasks to students and more or less actively invite students to discuss planning issues. As the ME is a recurrent event in the school, mode 3 primarily concerns *participation* in accordance with a given protocol; decision-making powers lies with the teacher.

In mode 4—*young people as leading organizers*—students organize the ME under teacher supervision. Teachers serve as consultants who help further student ideas about the design and planning of the event. In this mode, students are not explicitly invited to alter regular design and planning protocols. The experience of being a co-organizer or main organizer provides students with embodied knowledge about democratic practices and procedures. In modes 3 and 4, however, participation does not yet include negotiating procedures and principles, fostering dialogical and political spaces in school, and the organization of subsequent educational activities. It is these features that are characteristic for modes 5 and 6. As CDCE theory values addressing moral-political questions in relation to organizing MEs in schools more highly than giving maximal decision-making power to students, modes 5 and 6 both envision students as co-organizers.

In mode 5—*young people as partners in co-constructing the event*—students and staff work together to organize the mock election. They examine and discuss its desirable scale and subsequent design and planning choices. Students are encouraged to deviate from existing protocols and to improve the event and its related learning activities. While decision-making power still lies with the teacher, decisions are made following careful deliberation. Mode 5 participation thus—potentially—contributes to students' ability to express their views as well as to weight different perspectives and interests. Participation in this mode does not yet involve systematic deliberation about moral and political questions or addressing the quality of political spaces in school.

In mode 6—*young people as partners in advancing the quality of political spaces*—collaboration between students and staff is envisioned as a political project in itself. Here, students and staff complement the activities under mode 5 with (a) discussions about the desirable impact of the mock election on the quality of political spaces within and outside the school and (b) meta-conversations about the organizational or legal conditions within which the mock election can be designed and planned, about the rationale behind (and merits of) current arrangements, and about the desirability of altering political and organizational structures in the school. Decisions are made after careful deliberation, and decision-making power may be equally shared in some matters (e.g., vote-counting procedures). Student participation in this mode can also entail a joint effort to ensure a fair election process and a respectful engagement with political differences in class and school in the context of the elections.

Methodology

To gain a preliminary understanding of the extent to which students are able to participate meaningfully in the organization of mock elections in Dutch high schools, I adopted a qualitative approach. Practices in eight high schools were examined. Since

national elections are generally closely followed in Dutch schools, mock elections organized in conjunction with the national elections of 2012 were chosen as the study's focal point. I was especially interested in the role of students in the organization of the 2012 mock elections (RQ1) and how these roles related to my six modes of student-staff collaboration (RQ2). The larger project also examined how teacher objectives and ME-related learning activities relate to key features of critical democratic citizenship education. The findings from the sub-study on teacher objectives have been published elsewhere (De Groot, 2017a).

Data for this study were collected in 2015, as this study aimed to also generate building blocks for a survey in March 2017, following the upcoming national elections. The time lag between the event and the data collection process has several disadvantages. As opportunities for data triangulation were limited, I had to rely on teachers' personal recollection of the educational activities offered during the national elections in 2012 (and the local and EU elections in 2014) and archived documentation. Data were collected through one-hour semistructured interviews with teachers. To stimulate the teachers' recollection process, the interview guidelines were sent in advance, and they were invited to email relevant lesson materials and documents. When available, the materials were used to examine the reliability of the data provided in the interviews.

The questions covered the school population and its basic philosophy, the range of civics-related subjects it offered, the teaching team, and teachers' experiences with mock elections. Regarding the organization of MEs, the questions addressed who organized what, and for whom. The role of students was addressed in specific questions, and answers were probed with follow-up questions.

To recruit teachers, I used a database by ProDemos, the NGO supporting the organization of MEs in the Netherlands. In 2012, 436 schools participated in the elections, which is nearly 70% of Dutch high schools. Emails with an invitation to participate in the study were sent to teachers in four provinces. The only requirement was that respondents were involved in organizing the 2012 mock elections in their schools and interested in reflecting on their experiences. Eight teachers agreed to participate. Of the participating teachers, six out of eight had over 10 years of teaching experience. Seven were high school teachers; one taught at a primary school. The high school teachers all taught social studies in the five-year higher general secondary track (HAVO) and/or the six-year pre-university track (VWO). Five schools only offered the regular one-year class Study of Society. Three schools also offered the elective course Social Science and/or additional courses in civics. The participating schools reflect the variety of state-funded schools in the Netherlands (so-called public schools, denominational schools, and schools with a particular educational philosophy). All schools had a predominantly White to ethnically mixed student population.

The scale of the 2012 mock elections varied across the participating schools. Two schools organized the ME for a single social studies class, four schools organized the ME for multiple grade levels, and two schools organized it for the entire student

body. The participating schools also varied in the extent to which MEs were framed as an educational activity, as a set of (learning) activities to advance specific goals that could be defined in collaboration with students. Some teachers organized few (or no) activities, arguing that the main value of the event lay in introducing students to elections and having students experience what it is like to cast one's vote. Others had clear ideas about the kinds of (critical) political development they wished to promote, for example, understanding the political landscape, campaigning strategies, and how (intended) policies impact on the daily lives of different groups of citizens (De Groot, 2017a). The variety in scale and educational quality of MEs among the schools is in line with insights from recent studies about the lack of a coherent curriculum on citizenship education and of opportunities for students to engage in participatory activities in Dutch schools, compared to similar countries in Europe (Educational Inspectorate, 2016; ICCS, 2010; Munniksmas et al., 2017; Veugelers, De Groot, & Stolk, 2017). Based on these insights, I also expected opportunities for student involvement in the organization of MEs and attention for critical dimensions of democratic participation to vary widely.

All interviews were fully transcribed and prepared for inductive and deductive thematic analyses (Charmaz, 2011; Joffe, 2012). The relevant segments were selected with data analysis software (Atlas-ti). I used open and axial coding to answer RQ1 (the role of students). Answers to RQ2 (relation to the six modes of student-staff collaboration) were generated by categorizing the findings on student roles per school in accordance with the student participation typology. Because I had to rely on interview data, I could not meaningfully examine specific dimensions of critical democratic participation within the participation modes. Instead I examined, more generally, whether each mode was offered in the participating schools.

Results

In the following sections, I first present the results of inductive analysis of student roles in the organization of the 2012 mock elections in participating schools. The latter sections present the results of deductive analysis of student roles in relation to the six modes of student-staff collaboration.

Student Roles in the Organization of Mock Elections

Inductive analysis of the relevant interview segments led to distinguishing between three levels of student participation in organizing the mock election. The first level concerns student involvement in its design: the extent to which students were involved in discussions and decision-making on, for example, the scope of the ME. The second level concerns student involvement in planning the event in accordance with the given design, for example, the logistics of the voting process. The third level concerns student involvement in facilitating the event: practical preparations and activities supporting the actual ME, for example, escorting students to and from the ballot office.

Analysis suggests that students were not commonly involved in the *design and planning* of the 2012 mock elections (see also table I). Only one teacher (T2) involved students in the design of

the ME. In line with the school's mission statement, she stated that students were involved in daily decision-making about the curriculum and school life. When organizing the ME, she usually had students deliberate about desirable procedures. This teacher was also the only one who mentioned involving students in discussions about how to organize the counting of the votes and subsequent administrative tasks following the election (e.g., by whom and how the ME results would be presented). None of the teachers talked about involving students in discussions about (the further development of) learning materials and activities for students.

Table I
Level of student participation in mock election organization

	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8
Level 1: Students as codesigners		X						
Level 2: Students as coplanners		X		X	X			X
Level 3: Students as facilitators	X	X			X		X	X

Several teachers involved (or intended to involve) students in the planning of an election debate with (local or youth) politicians in the school. A wtypical reason for not involving students concerned the timing of the 2012 elections, which took place shortly after the summer vacation. Another teacher explained how student involvement varied per year. He sometimes had students organize the ME as an assignment, while at other times he preferred to organize it on his own.

Analysis also revealed that schools which involved students in the (design and) planning process invited a variety of student groups for this task (see table II): students who had enrolled for a related practical assignment, members of the student debating team, members of the student council, and members of the youth council and befriended students from upper secondary education. Several teachers also mentioned involving the school debating team in the organization of (student) political debates elsewhere in the curriculum.

I distinguish among three types of *planning activities*, concerning:

- The voting process itself, for example, studying guidelines, making timetables, consulting administrators, arranging facilities (ballot office, computers)
- Exposure and decoration, for example, ordering campaign materials, publishing the results.
- Organization of a related event, for example, an election debate.

Regarding the making of timetables, for instance, one teacher explained:

Beforehand I ask the students who have signed up for this project to make a schedule for the voting process. For this particular task, they

need to consult the school administrator. They also need to consult teachers, who may have to reschedule a practical assignment or a test.

Again, analysis revealed that in the 2012 mock elections, student participation in these types of planning activities was not widespread in the participating schools. Typical reasons for not engaging students in planning concerned the limited scope of the ME in the school, or the habit of organizing the ME as teachers or as a unit of teachers.

Table II shows that teachers primarily engaged with students in (design and) planning activities *prior* to the elections and that students were rarely involved in planning activities following the elections. This finding resonates with my previous analysis of teachers' objectives (De Groot, 2017a), which revealed that teachers rarely instigate discussions or organize learning activities following the elections to encourage students' political development. As one teacher explained:

Discussing the results . . . that does not always happen, also because of the time between the elections and the next lesson. I usually stick to sharing the results. Yeah . . . discussing the results is definitely something that I would like to do.

Table II
Student role in design and planning prior to and after the mock election

Student design and planning activities prior to the ME and who was invited	After the ME
T1	
T2	Students who joined Deliberate about desirable ME procedure Plan exposure and decoration Discuss who will count the votes and present ME result
T3	Order campaign materials for decoration purposes
T4	Students with a practical assignment Plan exposure and decoration Prepare election debate (students versus politicians) Debating team Prepare election debate (with students and politicians) Write a report for the school newsletter on the school's ME results (and comparison with other schools/results of national elections)
T5	Youth council and befriended students Plan voting process Plan exposure and decoration Debating team Prepare election debate Write a report for the school newsletter on the school's ME results
T6	
T7	
T8	Student council Plan voting process Plan exposure and decoration

Participation on the third level was most popular. Teachers often invited students to facilitate the ME process. As one teacher explained:

I tell students when the voting will take place and where. I then assign different roles to six to eight students [. . .]. Two to four students will escort students per class to the voting office. Two others man the voting office. These students are dismissed from their classes for the day.

As table III shows, typical participatory activities here included assisting with the decoration of the classroom, school and/or ballot office and monitoring, and assisting with the voting process (e.g., running the voting office, guiding the flow of students). After the elections, some of the teachers invited students to discuss the results of the elections. The rationale for categorizing this activity as facilitative—apart from its educational value—is that it can serve as a preparatory activity for the dissemination of the school election results and participation in political discussions about the (mock) election results in school, on (social) media and at home.

Table III
Student role as facilitator prior to and after the mock election

Student as facilitator prior to the ME	During the ME	After the ME	
T1	Decorate classroom and school	Monitor and assist with the voting process	
T2	Sign up for participation (after participation in orientation activities) Decorate classroom and school	Monitor and assist with the voting process	
T3	Prepare election debate (students versus politicians)	Reflect on voter regulations (e.g., anonymity)	Discuss possible explanations and impact of results
T4	Participate in (and chair) election debate at school Order campaign materials Prepare questions for election debate Decorate classroom and school	Monitor and assist with the voting process	
T5	Decorate classroom and school	Monitor and assist with the voting process	Discuss possible explanations and impact of results
T6			
T7	Decorate classroom and school		Discuss possible explanations and impact of results
T8	Decorate classroom and school	Monitor and assist with the voting process	Discuss possible explanations and impact of results

Other activities were mentioned only once or twice. Two of the teachers (T3 and T4) invited all students to prepare questions for the school election debate. The primary school teacher (T2) explained how she asked students to sign up for participation in the ME, following an activity that aimed to illicit pupils' interest for the event. One of the teachers who organized the elections within his social studies class also used student questions and behavior during the voting process to initiate a discussion about voter regulations with students. The rationale for categorizing this activity as facilitative—apart from its educational value—is its potential contribution to a sense of shared responsibility for having fair elections.

Evaluating Student Roles in Light of Critical Democratic Citizenship Theory

Tailoring these findings to the six modes of student-staff collaboration in the design, planning, and facilitation of mock elections suggests that young people were rarely envisioned as sources of data or as active respondents (modes 1 and 2). Moreover, student-staff collaboration was not framed as a political project (mode 6). Deductive analysis revealed that mode 3 was the most common, with five out of eight teachers involving students in the facilitation of the 2012 ME. More substantial student involvement was uncommon, with teachers rarely appointing students to be the main organizers of the ME (mode 4). In what follows, my findings are specified per mode of collaboration.

Modes 1 and 2: Young people as sources of data and as active respondents.

Given the recent calls for “visible learning” (Hattie, 2012) and policies that encourage research-informed teaching, one may expect that teachers would be interested in using data to improve their teaching. Yet none of the teachers explicitly mentioned using *young people as a source of data* to improve their ME-related educational practices. This may have to do with the limited scope of mock elections or the fact that they are not part of the main curriculum. It may also have to do with Dutch teachers' limited use of research tools and strategies to innovate educational practice (Leeman et al., 2017).

Likewise, teachers did not commonly talk about using *young people as active respondents*. One teacher was adamant about including student voices and advancing student influence and explained how, when he co-organizes the ME with the student council, he tries to involve its chair as much as possible, informing him of every step in the process. The teacher stated: “I just feel it is important that young people's voices are heard, so I want it to be an event by students and for students.” Another teacher explained how he sometimes involved students from his social studies class to draft questions for the political forum that he co-organizes with students from the debating team. Given such student involvement in planning, one suspects that there may be more teachers interested in using student voices to strengthen the mock election and related learning activities.

Modes 3 and 4: Young people as co-organizers or leading organizers.

Students were involved in the design of the mock election in one of the eight participating schools. Students were involved as coplaners in three schools; in five schools, they were invited to facilitate the program, for example, by helping decorate the school for the elections. Two teachers involved students in the organization of the ME in a more substantial way. For instance, they organized meetings to study the ME protocol as developed by the school or by ProDemos (the facilitating NGO), and to further specify planning tasks and activities for the 2012 ME. As one teacher explained:

When a group of students applies for this assignment, we will plan a meeting in which I walk them through the protocol and show them some materials. I also explain that, on top of the elections, we will organize a political debate. I do not let them select and email the politicians. I do invite them to make up statements and questions for the political debate, design posters, announce the debate . . . those kinds of activities.

Typical explanations for choosing this mode of participation concerned student competences such as their ability to approach school administrators, political parties, and the media and to communicate in a constructive manner. As one teacher said: “It is very difficult for young people to know how to arrange things, and whom to approach.”

In one of the schools, the organizing of the 2012 ME was led by students. It was the custom for the local youth council to initiate the ME and organize it in collaboration with befriended students, under the supervision of the head social studies teacher. In accordance with this mode, youth and student organizers discussed their ideas about the planning of the mock election with the teacher. Analysis suggests that this teacher did not explicitly invite students to alter the regular design and planning protocol, characteristic of a mode five-type collaboration.

Modes 5 and 6: Young people as partners in advancing the quality of political spaces.

Apart from the one teacher working in the explicitly democratic school, the interviewed teachers did not invite students to deviate from the regular design and planning protocols for the 2012 mock elections, or actively encourage students to improve the quality of the event and its related learning activities (in line with mode 5). Teachers did not initiate meta-conversations about the political climate in school and society, about the ME’s desirable contribution to the quality of political spaces in the school, or about the organizational and legal conditions within which the ME was designed and planned. Nor did teachers initiate meta-conversations about the rationale for, and the merits of, current arrangements and the desirability of changing existing political and organizational conditions in the school. On a facilitator level, one of the teachers did advance a sense of shared responsibility for holding fair elections by addressing student questions regarding voter regulations during the ME. It is possible that the other teachers did not mention this, because learning about voter regulations is covered in the general social studies curriculum.

Still, it is interesting to find that the teachers did not talk about student contributions to a fair election process, or about practicing a respectful engagement with political differences in class and school, in the context of student participation in the MEs.

Conclusion and Discussion

This qualitative inquiry into mock election practices in eight high schools in the Netherlands aimed to evaluate the role of students in the organization of MEs and provide the theoretical groundwork for further quantitative inquiries into student participation in political events in schools. To evaluate the role of students, I developed a democratic teacher-student collaboration typology building on insights on democratic student participation and critical democratic citizenship education. Inspired by Fielding and Moss’s (2012) “patterns of partnership” typology, it distinguishes among six modes of student-staff collaboration: young people as sources of data, as active respondents, as co-organizers, as leading organizers, as partners in strengthening political spaces in the school, and as partners in a political project.

Based on the evaluation of student involvement in the organization of the 2012 ME, I conclude that in the schools under study, students had limited opportunities to practice meaningful and critical democratic participation in this context. In these schools, students were rarely envisioned as sources of data or as active respondents (modes 1 and 2). More commonly, students were invited to facilitate the ME (mode 3), in particular in schools that organized MEs for multiple grade levels. Students were rarely appointed as the main organizers (mode 4). Moreover, in 2012, student-staff collaboration in these schools was not framed or used as a political project, which would entail, among other things, that teachers and students examine the conditions in school and society that may impact, and should inform decision-making processes within the ME context (modes 5 and 6), for example, political polarization, wariness of political indoctrination, and student dialogical, deliberation, and digital participation competences (Allen & Light, 2015; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Veugelers, De Groot, & Stolk, 2017).

These findings resonate with previous studies that found limited opportunities for students in the Netherlands to deepen and discuss their understanding of democracy and democratic practices and procedures, and limited opportunities for youth in many EU countries to participate in decision-making concerning everyday school life (De Groot & Veugelers, 2015; Nieuwelink, Dekker, Geijssel, & Ten Dam, 2015; Veugelers, De Groot, & Stolk, 2017). Whether or not these findings are representative for Dutch high schools in general is examined in a follow-up survey, conducted in conjunction with the 2017 national elections (De Groot & Eidhof, 2018).

Although this study has focused on opportunities for meaningful democratic participation, its findings also raise important questions about related educational activities, the quality of MEs as an educational activity, and attention for critical, substantive elements of democratic development in these activities. In rigorous, project-based education, experiential learning is typically connected with, for example, literature study and debates

on carefully selected content (cf. Parker & Lo, 2016). Do teachers in the Netherlands offer seminars in the context of MEs? Are students also encouraged to evaluate utterances of politicians and peers on social media in light of democratic principles? Are they encouraged to reflect on their own political agency, both prior to and after the elections? Insight into the current—and desirable—educational quality of ME as a political simulation and attention for substantial and critical dimensions of democratic development in this regard are generated in the follow-up survey. Analysis of the survey data will also shed light on the extent to which mock elections as organized in the Netherlands meet the criteria of a political simulation as defined in social studies research: as a “pedagogically mediated activity used to reflect the dynamism of real life events, processes or phenomena, in which students participate as active agents whose actions are consequential to the outcome of the activity” (Wright-Maley, 2015, p. 70).

Limitations

A first limitation of this study concerns the lack of opportunities for data triangulation, which stems from the time lag between the 2012 election and the data collection in 2015. Ideally, I would have complemented the interview data with data from participatory observations, student interviews, and document analysis to verify the claims made by teachers in the interview process and, as such, control for the subjectivity of memory and the social desirability of teacher responses. As this was not possible, I explained to the interviewees that there are no wrong answers, and that I was interested in existing practices in their schools as well as their concerns and aspirations. The data as well as email contact with teachers indicate that teachers did not sugarcoat ME practices at their school. In email conversations prior to the interview, for example, several of the teachers explained that they were hesitant to participate as they felt that there was not that much to say about their practice. Participants were also not familiar with my work on critical democratic citizenship education.

A further limitation of this study concerns its limited scope. The study only examined schools in 4 of the Netherlands’ 12 provinces, and did not include schools with a large percentage of students with an immigrant background. It is up to future comparative studies to identify commonalities and differences among contexts, both in terms of the modes of student participation offered and of variations in the quality of democratic learning opportunities per mode. Regarding mode 2, this may pertain for example to whether teachers report back on how and why student suggestions were or were not adopted. This study also does not provide insight into how different modes of student participation impact the (critical) democratic competences of individual students, or how they impact the quality of political spaces in school. Gaining insight into the impact of student involvement in designing MEs on their moral compass for political participation, for example, requires further design and mixed method research.

Invigorating Political Spaces in School and Society

What suggestions for furthering ME-related democratic student participation in schools can be derived from the democratic

teacher-student collaboration typology as developed in this study, the evaluation of student involvement in the 2012 MEs in eight schools in the Netherlands, and the existing literature on democratic citizenship education policy and practice in Europe (e.g., Birzea, 2005; Veugelers, De Groot, & Stolk, 2017)?

The empirical findings so far indicate that there is ample scope for schools in the Netherlands and elsewhere to expand the current opportunities for student involvement in the organization of political events in schools, and thereby to strengthen attention for critical dimensions of democratic participation. To strengthen ME-related political education, teachers may introduce, for example, student (and teacher) surveys on student experiences with official and mock elections and related knowledge, concerns and questions (mode 1). They can invite groups of students who have participated in earlier mock elections to brainstorm about desirable alterations (mode 2). Teachers can consider making students co- or main organizers (respectively modes 3 and 4) or invite students to examine and deliberate about the desirable scale of the ME and its related educational activities (mode 5). Finally, teachers can initiate meta-discussions among organizing partners about existing power inequalities in the schools and the organizational and political conditions in which the ME takes place (mode 6). The latter implies that students are actively invited to deviate from regular ME design and planning protocols to enhance the quality of the event. Moreover, it implies that teachers attend to moral-political dimension of student participation: that they initiate meta-conversations about the quality of the political climate in school and society and the desirable contribution of the ME to political spaces within and outside the school; the organizational and legal conditions within which the ME is designed and planned; the rationale behind current arrangements; and the desirability of existing organizational conditions and arrangements. On a facilitator level, teachers could also encourage students to help cultivate a respectful engagement with political differences in class and school.

A second suggestion concerns the resources needed to organize meaningful education around MEs and other political events in schools. Both the participation model and the findings of this study indicate that organizing meaningful and critical student participation in political events requires a serious commitment on the part of national governments, school leaders, and educational partners. Likewise, recent studies on citizenship education have shown that supporting policies and policy measures regarding attention to substantial components of democracy, designated time in the curriculum for teaching values, adoption of dialogical, participatory and reflective learning methods, and related teacher professionalization are not paramount in the EU (e.g., Veugelers, De Groot, & Stolk, 2017).

This suggests that in many EU countries, the quality of ME-related student participation and critical democratic education can benefit from additional resources. In line with a democratic curriculum approach (Bron, Bovill, van Vliet, & Veugelers, 2016), governments may, for example, define general curriculum standards regarding the range of activities that students need to be able to engage in and the attention to the moral, political, and

existential dimension of political participation in related educational activities (e.g., opportunities for students to evaluate utterances of politicians in light of democratic principles). Furthermore, governments can complement existing policies on (post)initial teacher training to (further) stimulate teacher professionalization on substantial components of democratic participation and education in schools. As the desirability of organizing political events in schools in itself can be contested and depends on the context, it is also important for governments to stimulate deliberation among NGOs, school leaders, administrators, teachers, students, and parents about the desirability of organizing mock elections and other political event in schools. Such deliberations will need to take account of insights and theoretical discussions regarding the extent to which schools are de facto political spaces (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2014), the political climate in the school, the pedagogical vision and didactic competences required for organizing political events, and the legal and developmental differences between students and staff.

In educational policies throughout Europe, governments have committed to cultivating young people's democratic competences and advancing a democratic school culture. If governments and schools are serious about preparing young people for participation in democratic and pluralist societies, and if they are also committed to fostering critical democratic competences and creating healthy political spaces within schools and in society at large, then increasing the resources to enable meaningful student participation *and* critical democratic education in the context of mock elections and related political events would be a good place to start.

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