

What Students Want to Learn?

Involving Students in Negotiating the Social Studies Classroom Curriculum

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Abstract: Students negotiate their social studies classroom curriculum, enhancing 21st century skills, citizenship education and human rights in the present study. Curriculum negotiation augments student engagement, giving them opportunities to practice and so experience citizenship. In the process students develop abilities related to 21st century skills and skills for democratic citizenship while exercising their right to participate. Students involved in curriculum design improve the quality of the curriculum by making it more relevant as they offer unique perspectives on topics to be later addressed in class.

Key words: student voice, curriculum design, democratic citizenship

Introduction

This article explores the possibilities of giving students a voice in curriculum development in the social studies classroom. There are two reasons why we consider this important:

1. Involving students in the design of their own curriculum can improve the relevance of the social studies curriculum; and
2. Social studies share aims with citizenship and 21st century skills, in particular aims on developing participation of students.

In this article we introduce the concept of student voice and its relationship to citizenship education and 21st century skills. When citizenship education is based on the rights of the child, it partly overlaps with student voice: in experiencing to have a voice and to participate in influencing decision making. When inviting students to discuss what is relevant, the regular curriculum can be used as a learning opportunity for student voice as well. To allow this kind of flexibility and responsiveness into curriculum design, the curriculum must be viewed as a process rather than a product. Examples of this way of working with the curriculum are scarce in the literature. Some examples found are “curriculum negotiation” as developed and practiced by Boomer (1982) in Australia and the examples of democratic schools as described by, for example, Apple & Beane (1995) and Windschitl (2011). These examples have inspired us.

Next to the theoretical exploration of concepts, this article offers a case study of secondary education students negotiating the social studies curriculum for their future lessons. Students’ activities are considered as citizenship and 21st century skills. Experiences with this approach in Geography and Nature and Health Studies in two secondary schools in The Netherlands are

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presented. An instrument used in the research to enable students to produce learning questions is explained and experiences with this instrument are analyzed.

Exploring Different Concepts

Before looking at the methodology and the results of the case study, we introduce four related domains of educational studies that are essential in our research: student voice, citizenship education, 21st skills and curriculum development.

Student Voice

The term "student voice" has re-emerged over the last 20 years, especially in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Australia, indicating a way of thinking that strives to reposition students in educational research and reform (Bovill, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007). Cook-Sather (2006) explains that "this way of thinking is premised on the following convictions: that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education" (pp. 359–260).

Student participation and voice is a way of including democratic attitudes in education. At the same time, it is a follow up on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), which states that children and young people have the right to express their views and to be heard, to take part in activities and decisions that affect them.

Citizenship as Practice

Citizenship education is a broad domain within education that in the European context can according to the Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (Eurydice) include,

a knowledge of basic democratic concepts including an understanding of society and social and political movements; the European integration process and EU structures; and major social developments, both past and present; skills such as critical thinking and communication skills, and the ability and willingness to participate constructively in the public domain, including in decision-making through voting. Finally, a sense of belonging to society at various levels, a respect for democratic values and diversity as well as support for sustainable development. (Eurydice, 2012, p. 8)

Citizenship education can be considered an international movement (Kerr & Nelson, 2006; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). According to a recent Eurydice study on Citizenship Education (Eurydice, 2012) that included 31 countries in Europe, citizenship is somehow featured in all national curricula, either as a subject, cross curricular issue or by having the school function as a place where students learn citizenship from experience. In many cases, the countries seek to develop possibilities for promoting active and democratic citizenship by providing students with opportunities to experience civic responsibility (Kerr & Nelson, 2006). If we regard schools as a place to practice

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citizenship skills, Lawy and Biesta (2006) have provided us with new insights into schools as a place of practice. They argue that citizenship is often largely understood as the outcome of an educational trajectory. Conceptualizing citizenship as an outcome reveals a strong instrumental orientation. Pupils are seen as not-yet-being-a-citizen. This “deficit approach” assumes that some knowledge and skills are missing, that they should be put in place by means of a distinctive subject. The focus is mainly on effective means to bring about “good citizenship.”

Lawy & Biesta (2006) suggest that citizenship should primarily be understood as something that people continuously do: citizenship as a practice. To make the concept of citizenship as a practice successful, opportunities for practicing aspects of citizenship must be developed.

Embedding student voice and student participation in curriculum design is a way to provide opportunities for young people to experience and experiment with elements of citizenship, democracy and human rights.

21st Century Skills

There seems to be a growing interest in the so called “21st century skills.” The term holds a number of educational objectives drawn up for the citizens of the future. For though the future is uncertain, nevertheless, schools should prepare their students for possible contingencies. Definitions and classifications of what is considered to be 21st century skills differ. Nikhil Goyal (2012), who at the time of writing was seventeen years old, advocates for a different way of learning and teaching, promoting the often used 4Cs by Trilling & Fadel (2009): Critical thinking, Creative thinking, Collaboration, and Communication. However, Goyal adds a few more: imagination and curiosity, taking risks and overcoming failure. His inclusion of curiosity seems especially worthwhile as an addition that enhances learning. At the same time, Goyal (2012, p. 35) holds that schools “drum creativity out of kids” because students are only encouraged to seek answers to questions either posed by teachers and/or schoolbooks when all the while they should be encouraged to formulate good questions.

On the other hand, the phrase “skills” in 21st century skills is somewhat deceiving for the concepts included are not just restricted to skills but includes subsets such as knowledge and attitudes as well, consider, for example, the Knowledge Skills, Attitudes, Values and Ethics (KSAVE) model (Binkley et al., 2010).

Whereas the focus of Citizenship Education and 21st century skills is on the participation of students in society now and in their later lives, Citizenship Education emphasizes in Western societies democratic attitudes, social cohesion and coping with diversity. 21st century skills, on the other hand are especially concerned with participation in future job markets. The emphasis is on being creative thinking, problem solving, working together, communication, information and communication technology, and on world citizenship (Voogt & Pareja Roblin, 2010).

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Despite the fact that citizenship education is not the same as 21st century skills, we found the discourses overlap somewhat. Also, in some elaborations of 21st century skills, such as KSAVE, citizenship is included. The same goes for the relation between these skills and "voice." The Promethean Education Strategy Group produced a research paper on the relation between learner voice and 21st century learning. They regard voice as a way to improve learner engagement by "bridging the gap between how students live and how they learn, thus making education more relevant to the learner's world and encouraging the development of skills needed to adapt to changing global conditions" (Dykes, Furdyk, Hassan & Corriero, 2013, p. 3).

Curriculum Development

Curriculum decisions are made by different actors, depending on the level (class, school, state, nation, supranational) and political context (Cras, 2010). Students however are seldom seen as relevant contributors. Over the years, curriculum theorists have pleaded for a stronger, more prominent role for students in curriculum development. This starts with the early 20th century pedagogical reformers such as Dewey in the United States (Dewey, 1938) or Freinet in France (Acker, 2007). The 70s of the last century saw some strong advocates for student participation, like Eisner (1979) and Goodlad (1979). In the 80s the Australian Garth Boomer (1982) did ground-breaking work on students negotiating the curriculum with their teacher. Since the turn of the century the emphasis seems to have shifted towards the school level emphasizing school reform and the role students ought to play in these reforms (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Levin, 2000).

We argue that involving students into the process of curriculum design can increase the quality of the curriculum because one important stakeholder is involved. The Netherlands Institute For Curriculum Development distinguishes four quality criteria for the curriculum: relevance, consistency, practicality and effectiveness (Nieveen, 2009). We hold that by adding students as important stakeholders in curriculum development, its relevance increases.

To consider involving students in curriculum design, we need to see the curriculum not as a product or a fixed set of requirements, but as a process wherein external aims give direction but also where teacher and students influence what is actually experienced in class. Different authors have emphasized the dynamic character of the "live" or "enacted" curriculum where teachers and students engage in meaningful activities (Boomer, 1982; Dewey, 1938; Eisner, 1979; Joseph, 2011).

Dewey (1938) opposed the idea that the curriculum is a prescription of what learners have to undergo. He argued that learning cannot happen by the external motivation of a prescribed curriculum. Learning starts with the experiences of the learner, the "crude beginnings" and builds on that towards a more systematic growth of knowledge and insights. He considered personal contact between the teacher and child as crucial. Eisner (1979), who regards curriculum development as a practical and artistic undertaking, goes so far as to claim that the quality of the curriculum can only be determined by watching the teacher and the students in the class.

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We consider the interaction between teacher and student, as well as students' interaction amongst themselves and student's interaction with teaching and learning materials to be the heart of the curriculum. Around which is the whole context wherein these interactions that eventually lead to learning and development take place, such as the school, the expectations of the different actors, the testing regime, curriculum documents on different levels and ultimately culture in general. Like a live performance on stage, the curriculum thus appears as itself in action, making it both situational and temporal. With that view we place ourselves in the tradition that considers the curriculum to be something that is constantly influenced and changed in the process. This does not mean that we regard curriculum documents as unimportant. They give direction and should inspire teachers to use their knowledge and ability to decide what and how to teach.

Methodology

We investigated academic literature as well as handbooks and curriculum material on four concepts that comprise the focal point of our research: the concept of student voice, and its relation to citizenship education, to 21st century skills, and to curriculum theory. We will present an overview of these concepts and their relationships.

The empirical case study explores the possibility of student voice in curriculum development in the social studies classroom. We consider this procedure as an example of student voice as well as active democratic citizenship.

Case Study Design

Case study design (Yin, 2009) was employed to explore the potential of student voice in curriculum development in schools and classes. The motive for choosing the case-study design is that we found in the literature little to no studies on student voice in curriculum development focusing on adaptation of the curriculum itself. Therefore there is a need to explore and to study the practice of this approach. Explorative case studies can contribute to our understanding of curriculum negotiation processes in classes and schools.

The case study took place in two schools for secondary education in The Netherlands. Both schools are located in middle sized cities (100.000 – 200.000 inhabitants) and have a somewhat mixed ethnical population with around 15% of migrant children.

In the first school, four classes of a low level of pre-vocational secondary education participated. It is a government-funded Christian school. The classes worked on a project on global warming in a subject called "nature and health." The project was offered over a period of 6 weeks twice a week in a 60 minutes plus independent work in the school's "study-room" and/or at home. The 92 students who participated were 12 or 13 years of age. The teacher was a female, aged between 40 and 45 and her teaching normal style includes a lot of group-work, class discussions and group

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presentations of students' work. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) was intensive: all students used school-purchased tablet computers that contained digital textbooks.

The second secondary school is a public school. In this school the procedure was used by one teacher in two geography classes. The students were also 12 or 13 years old and in their 1st and 2nd year of the higher cognitive strands (called "havo/vwo"). The lessons were respectively covering the themes "Africa" and "Weather and climate." One class was a bilingual class, which means that English is used as the language of instruction instead of Dutch. The teacher was a male of age 35–40 and in his regular teaching practice, the lessons were for the most part textbook driven. Group-work was not uncommon, but individual work on assignments was dominant.

We will briefly describe the activities of these two teachers by looking at the way the procedure was conducted and present the data we collected with the different instruments.

Research Questions

This case study is part of a larger study consisting on a series of case studies in different subject areas. The general research question is: What can be the role of secondary education students in curriculum development? To further specify this general question, we have formulated four case study research questions.

1. Do students bring new perspectives to the curriculum?
2. Does "curriculum negotiation" contribute to the development of the following skills and attitudes?
 - Students have a positive appreciation of learning as a life-enriching activity and develop an initiative to learn.
 - Students want to promote a social climate in which everybody feels free to express themselves.
 - Students show willingness to participate in democratic decision-making at all levels.
3. What influence does the context (school, class teacher) have?
4. How does the student worksheet function?

In the first question, we inquire skills and attitudes we consider to be important aspects of voice, democratic citizenship and the 21st century skills. The skills and attitudes are derived from the Dutch curriculum framework for citizenship education and from the KSAVE framework for 21st century skills (Binkley et al., 2010). The second question inquires the contribution students can make to the curriculum. Do students formulate other kind of content? Question 3 focuses on the context in which the study takes place and how that can affect results. Question 4 considers the use of the instrument and is in fact a formative evaluation of the worksheet, with the intention of improving it.

This article is oriented in particular to curriculum issues, therefore the focuses is on Question 1. In the forthcoming case studies, other research questions will be explored.

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Research Instruments

In the larger study that explores the four research questions, five different methods for gathering data will be used. The instruments used in each of these methods are being designed specifically for our research questions but are based on existing instruments (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007, Schulz, Ainley, & Fraillon, 2011). We will briefly introduce each of the instruments and go more into detail on the first instrument that provided the data for this specific case study.

Instrument A: Student Worksheet.

We produced a worksheet that enables students to develop learning questions to function as input in the micro-curriculum like a lesson series or course. As the students fill out the worksheet individually, knowledge on a specific topic is awakened. The next step in the procedure is that small groups of students develop questions they would like to explore regarding a topic. Once this stage is completed, the entire class meets and discusses the various perspectives in a conversation that can be regarded as "negotiating the curriculum" (Boomer, 1982). The teacher is leading this dialogue. It is during this phase that the teacher puts forth the curriculum requirements as formulated in the formal curriculum. It is interesting to notice whether the teacher's input does or doesn't correspond with the students' questions. This results in a set of questions that form the core of the forthcoming lessons. Table 1 describes the different steps that are taken. The instrument itself strongly focuses on producing content and conceptual understanding. The process the students go through involves numerous skills and attitudes related to citizenship education and 21st century skills.

Table 1: *The Four Steps of the Curriculum Negotiating Process*

Steps	Activity	Skills
1. Individual assignment	List all items related to the general topic. List the questions you have regarding the topic.	Brainstorm, associate, awaken previous knowledge.
2. Group assignment	Develop a word web around the topic, using the different lists from 1. Decide on a set of questions your group finds most relevant and interesting about the topic.	Share, discuss, explain, convince, negotiate, decide.
3. Class assignment	Groups of students share questions. The class decides on priorities and a distinction between mandatory and optional questions. Teacher makes sure certain curriculum requirements are met.	Share, discuss, explain, convince, negotiate, decide.
4. Distributing questions back to groups	The selected questions are distributed amongst groups. Groups plan how best to answer them.	Discuss, explain, convince, negotiate, decide. Choose information collection method, locate sources.

Coding Scheme.

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For analyzing the data produced with the worksheet and to answer the research question, we developed a coding scheme. The coding scheme focusses on the five aspects that reflect the essence of the procedure: helping students to identify prior knowledge, learn from each other, develop unique questions, democratically decide on the questions of most worth, and to use the questions in forthcoming lessons. The five aspects are:

Development: An increase in the quantity of concepts and questions raised by students throughout the process. Our assumption is that quantity will increase during the process as students hear the responses of other students and negotiate the questions that are of most interest.

Negotiation: The use of questions generated by individual students in the small groups and whole class. Our assumption is that negotiating can take place in the groups as well as in the whole class.

Uniqueness: Examples of inspiring, unique questions raised by students that can provide new outlooks on a certain topic. Our assumption is that students come up with "out of the box" questions when given time to think and talk about a certain topic.

Personalization: This allows students the option to isolate and answer a particular question, apart from and regardless of the group and class negotiation. Our assumption is that students might want to answer a question individually even if others do not find the question interesting.

Instrument B: Questionnaire.

The questionnaire that is being developed consists of multiple choice questions about student perceptions of teacher characteristics and teaching style; experiences with and opinions about student participation in class and school; experiences with the worksheet; and skills and attitudes: How the students evaluate their own role in group work and negotiation process.

Instrument C and D.

Instruments C and D are interviews with the case study teachers, that are conducted individually before the teacher starts the intervention (instrument C), and after the lesson series (instrument D). The interviews mainly focus on the teacher's ideas on the curriculum and what the teacher intended to offer regarding the theme, the so-called "perceived curriculum" (Goodlad, Klein & Tye, 1979, p. 61). The post-intervention interview reflects on the intervention, on the curriculum as it had developed during the process, that is, the "operational curriculum." By comparing both interviews, conclusions can be made on similarities and differences between the "perceived curriculum" and "the operational curriculum," and on influence of the students on the operational curriculum.

Instrument E: Observation and Reflection.

Instrument E consists of class observation. We have learned from initial initiatives that observations might contribute to our understanding of the way in which the student worksheet is employed as well as help us obtain an impression of the teacher's way of using the instrument.

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Results

In this section we present the outcomes of our case study based on our interpretation of the data from the research instrument A and finding an answer for our first case study research question: *Do students bring new perspectives to the curriculum?*

For answering this question, analyses of the student worksheets that we received back from the two schools have been made. We used a coding to analyze these worksheets. After retrieving the worksheets from the classes, the data from each worksheet was independently analyzed by two researchers. They employed a coding scheme devised to make generalizations possible while looking for certain trends, but at the same time, record the data that honors the uniqueness of each individual student. The results of the analyses were then compared. In some instances the worksheets were scored differently. When this happened, the original data were re-examined and a consensus was reached as to the best interpretation or application of the data.

Unique Perspectives

The worksheet produced numerous questions raised by students. One assumption of student voice is that students offer unique perspectives. Some examples of questions on global warming that we consider somewhat unique in the sense that they can provide new insights on the topic are:

- How long will it take for the world to recover?
- Why is an electric car so much more expensive the same price as a regular car?

Examples of student questions related to lessons on the Africa are:

- What do Africans think of our lifestyle?
- Why do most people in Africa earn so little for such heavy labor?
- Can Africa ever get rich?
- Why are there different colored people?
- How are white people treated in Africa?
- Why are Africans coming to the Netherlands?
- Why are there still so many extraordinary animals in Africa when they have disappeared in The Netherlands?
- Why is education so poor in Africa while we donate so much money?

Examples of student questions related to lessons on climate and weather are:

- How can it hail at a temperature above freezing?
- Why can the climate be different in another country?
- How is the weather news made?
- How long is the voyage of a falling raindrop?
- How can people change the climate?
- How can you predict the weather by yourself?
- Is there weather on other planets?

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The Development Process

We will now present the results of the coding scheme in relation to the five aspects we introduced in the methodology section. In this section the focus is on the process that students went through while working with the instrument.

Development.

The number of concepts named by students ranges from 1 to 8 with a mean of 3.98 (standard deviation 2.2). The number of questions raised by students ranges from 1 to 7 with a mean of 2.44 (standard deviation 1.7). The standard deviation implies that there are great differences between the number of questions that students came up with.

We assumed that there would be an increase in concepts and questions and found that this assumption was correct in most cases. We noticed an increase in concepts after switching from individual work to the work in small groups among 66% of the students. If we look at the increase in questions, we found an increase with 76% of the students.

Negotiation.

We assume that negotiation took place in small groups and class discussion. From the data we can only conclude whether the questions of the different students played a role in the negotiation. We cannot conclude anything about the quality of the negotiation. In future, observations and/or video recordings and interviews should be used for getting more insight in this negotiation process. However, we did find that one or more of the individual questions of 67.5% of the students were used in the small groups. The rest did not see their questions return in the selection made in the small groups. If we look at the questions from the different groups which have made it to the class selection, we see that of nearly three-fourths of the groups one or two questions were used. The rest of the groups saw more (3-5) of their questions return.

Uniqueness.

We have listed some examples of questions that provide a unique perspective in 4.1. The assumption that students can provide new and original viewpoints on a topic generally turned out to be true. This was not the case for all students though; in one school a class of 21 students produced 17 questions that we considered worth mentioning. An observation made while taking a closer look at the data was that some of the student generated questions were quite original, but had not always made it through the negotiation process: they were not included in the final selection of the class. It can be that teacher and/or students tend to favor questions that are associated with the school context.

Personalization.

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We have added the option of isolating a specific individual question in the worksheet and 12.8% of the students used this option. This percentage is lower than we had expected. We will have to see what the outcomes on this aspect will be in future cases and emphasize with the teachers that this option is available for students.

We also found that students develop a question of their own to answer regardless of the negotiation process in the group or whole class. The assumption was that this question would be raised at the beginning of the exercise, when students work individually. However, we have seen that this question was raised during the negotiation process instead. The individual question didn't appear until later in the process when the students were in their work groups, or during class discussions. Apparently some questions developed during the conversation in groups or students were confronted with other student's questions that they found of interest to include in their "individual question box."

Conclusions and Discussion

We consider the interaction between teacher and student, as well as the students' interaction among themselves at the heart of the curriculum. The curriculum thus displays itself in action, making it both situational and temporal. With that view we place ourselves among those who consider the curriculum to be constantly influenced and therefore, changing in the dialectics of both teaching and learning.

This paper presents the results of a case study in which 12 and 13 year old students were invited to participate in a discussion of what is relevant curriculum content to learn given a certain topic or subject. This type of work is prominent in the philosophies of student voice, in citizenship as practice and in 21st century skills.

We developed a worksheet to guide students through a series of steps, beginning with individual awakening, that is, a self-conscious awareness of insights acquired previously in life. The momentum from there leads to small group negotiations concerning relevant questions and finally negotiation between class and teacher as they selected and prioritized learning questions thought relevant to students and in line with curriculum requirements.

Our study shows that the results of this working method are positive: it enables students to build on prior knowledge to co-create questions that often reflect unique students' perspectives. This is in line with one of the characteristics of student voice as described by Cook-Sather (2006). However, we found that most of the non-traditional questions were not included in the final selection of the class, in the negotiation process by groups of students and the teacher these questions got filtered out. Apparently at this stage questions associated more with the school context are preferred. Future case studies will be conducted in schools that more often allow student initiative and participation and where a process curriculum is accepted and practiced. We can then compare the results in these schools with the results of the more traditional schools.

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If we relate the participation of students in curriculum design to student voice and the development of citizenship and 21st century skills, we can say that the students in the case study were given the opportunity to express their views and they were heard. They took part in the participatory activity to activate their prior knowledge and experience, formulate questions, negotiating these questions in small groups and class and in making decisions that affected them. In one school, students made a difference in the lessons that followed.

Our assumption is that students learn from the process of curriculum negotiation in terms of citizenship and 21st century skills. Our research instrument functioned as a vehicle for this. In this case study we did not gather data that proves that the aforementioned skills were developed, but we can say that these skills have been practiced and this provides the fundament for the development of these skills. Future studies will focus more on the development of skills as other research instruments are being used, providing us with new data on other qualities.

The outcomes of our study are relevant for the social studies. Involving students in making decisions on the content of their lessons provides opportunities to bring student out-of-school experiences into the classroom and raise engagement by making learning more relevant and related to their questions. The method we presented can be well integrated into project-based or issue-based learning in social studies lessons.

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