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High school students debate the use of embryonic stem cells: the influence of context on decision-making

Abstract

The present study analyses decision-making and argumentation by high school students in a debate situation on a socioscientific issue, the use of embryonic stem cells in research and therapy. We tested the influence on the debates of two different contexts. Adolescent students at the high school level in the same grade (mean age 16.4 years) from rural and urban zones of Provence, France participated in three debate sessions. During the first session students listed the background questions they want to ask the expert(s). They were also required to identify one or two major issues that would serve as an outline for the future debate. They then discussed these with the expert(s) during the second session and took note of the answers. During this session, control groups met with a neuroscientist whereas the experimental "contextualized" group met with the same neuroscientist together with a representative of an association of patients suffering from a neurodegenerative disease. Analysis of the students' arguments and decision-making revealed that contextualization introduced dynamism in the students' exchanges: they paid more attention to their peers' arguments and were more motivated to argue their own opinion. However, this type of contextualization may contribute to reinforcing ideology in scientific progress.

Keywords: *debate, socioscientific issue, argumentation, contextualization, expertise, decision-making, human embryonic stem cells.*

Introduction

Meetings between researchers and the public are a significant modality of contemporary science communication. By doing so, researchers express their will to meet lay people, and particularly students, to discuss science and society connections. The debates we study here are an example of such meetings. In formal and informal science education contexts, debate protocols are considered effective strategies to engage people in socioscientific issues. The training of participants in argumentation skills is one of the major challenges of scientific citizenship education. Argumentation is the way individuals make and justify claims and conclusions. In this study, we focused on the consequences of debate contextualization on students' argumentations when they are making a decision on a socioscientific dilemma: the use of human embryonic stem cells.

Socioscientific issues' research: rationale and objectives

This research uses the theoretical framework of socioscientific issue (SSI) didactics that arose from the Sciences – Technologies – Society movement. SSI relative to health, environment and techno-scientific innovations are defined as social dilemmas linked to science about which citizens have to make decisions. Many authors have proposed introduction of SSI in science curricula in order to promote development of responsible scientific citizenship (Zeidler, 1984; Aikenhead, 1986; Driver & al., 2000; Kolstø, 2001). The initial purpose of the movement was to engage students in meaningful learning of “*context knowledge*” in order to help them identify the interdependence between science and society (Sadler & al., 2004). This mission is in line with the goal of enhancement of *scientific literacy* promoted by the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences since the 1990's.

According to Simonneaux (2003), who participated in introducing SSI to French science educators¹, the issue for educationalists is how “*to enable pupils, informed in scientific research methods, its practical applications and its possible implications, to propose and argue decisions in an uncertain context and to participate in debates as citizens*”.

Sadler (2004) pointed out that SSI research focuses on four main directions: relationships between the nature of science conceptualizations and socioscientific decision-making, ways of evaluating information regarding SSI, influence of conceptual understanding on reasoning regarding SSI, and socioscientific argumentation (Jimenez-Aleixandre & al., 2000; Simonneaux, 2001; Osborne & al. 2004; Zohar & Nemet, 2002). In this study, we focus on the links between the nature of science conceptualizations and socioscientific decision-making, and on socioscientific argumentation, ie, how individuals make and justify claims and conclusions about a SSI. Debate between peers appears to be a pedagogical strategy for helping students to think about open ended and complex issues and to develop argumentative skills. The present study analyses students' argumentation during a debate situation on a SSI where they were asked to express their personal opinions.

Socioscientific issues and the nature of science

Most of the studies focused on the nature of science conceptualization assume that students' knowledge about science influences their interpretation of knowledge in science (Kolstø, 2000,

¹ In French context, whereas the « *éducations à* » (*education to* health, human reproduction, environment) existed in sciences curricula since 1970's, science and society interlinks were introduced *per se* during the last reform 2000-2001. In this context, the field of research dealing with SSI is called ‘didactique des questions socialement vives’ and analyses the teaching of ‘socially ‘acute’ questions’ (Legardez & Alpe, 2001; Simonneaux & Simonneaux, 2004).

2004; Ratcliffe & Grace, 2003). This research concerns how students put into practice their conceptions about values and ways of thinking in science. According to Kolstø (2001), we investigate “*content transcending knowledge*”, that is to say “*knowledge or skills and attitudes that do not have their focus on the products of science community. [...] The focus is shifted from knowledge in science toward knowledge about science*”. For Kolstø (2005), essential knowledge about science appears necessary to understand an SSI. The first is that science is not the only aspect to consider when studying an SSI. Financial, ethical, legal, political and social aspects also have to be considered. Because of the interrelatedness of science and society, science cannot be considered neutral. This is an important point to make if we want students to be able to evaluate scientific expertise. Second, science is process based, relying on argumentation and peer criticism. Third, an understanding of the temporary nature of scientific results is necessary in order to debate controversial issues. In order to escape from an absolute relativism, we can distinguish between « core science » and « frontier science », that is between consolidated knowledge and knowledge under construction.

Socioscientific issues and socioscientific argumentation

A majority of studies concerning SSIs focus on students’ argumentation skills. Research designs often include debates between peers and individual decision-making about an SSI. Most of the studies reveal the weakness of students’ skills in argumentation whatever their age (Khun, 1993). Many studies underline the lack of correlation between science conceptualizations and argumentation skills (Perkins & al., 1991; Sadler & Donnely, 2006).

Several debate situations have been proposed to encourage students’ argumentation. For example Simonneaux (2001) compared role-play to debate using an issue in animal transgenesis. She concluded that debate is more efficient than role-play to encourage students’ discourses in science. Other studies suggested encouraging students to compare contradictory discourses. Students can integrate and internalize information from media reports and the diversity of the viewpoints expressed (Ratcliffe & Grace, 2003; Simonneaux, 2004; Federico-Agraso & Jiménez-Aleixandre, 2006). Zohar & Nemet’s study (2002) also highlights the interest for students to get involved in a time consuming and metacognitive work about argumentation.

We are particularly interested in proposals taking into account the consequences of the debate context on students’ argumentation and decision-making. Several authors (Patronis & al. 1999; Kolstø, 2000; Jiménez-Aleixandre & al, 2000) dealing with the inclusions of SSI in science classrooms have pointed out the importance of context for improvement of argumentative skills. The main hypothesis is that personal connections to local, but not global, SSI will improve students’ argumentative skills. The majority of these studies dealt with environmental SSI. For example Spanish students debated the *Prestige* oil spill, which hit the Galician coast in 2002 (Jiménez-Aleixandre & al, 2004). However, few studies have addressed contextualization involving interactions with experts in the field, particularly researchers. These studies revealed that this setting does not allow students’ opinions about science and scientific knowledge to be transformed (Trabelsi Chalgoumi, 2006; Simonneaux & al., 2005).

In this study, we chose to analyze a controversial health-related SSI and we assessed the effects of contextualization on students’ argumentation, by encouraging direct interaction with specialists.

Use of human embryonic stem cells as a socioscientific issue

1
2
3 The use of human embryonic stem cells (hESC) for research or treatment of
4 neurodegenerative diseases is considered an 'acute' socioscientific issue for multiple reasons. In
5 the 1990s neuroscientists proposed the use of embryonic stem cells to generate healthy neurons to
6 replace brain neurons damaged by trauma or compromised by disease, like Parkinson's disease or
7 Huntington chorea. Controversies on how to obtain and store hESC (issues of proliferation and
8 differentiation) and on their therapeutic use (feasibility, therapeutic efficiency, risks for the
9 patient to develop tumors...) exist within the scientific community. The use of the human embryo
10 as a source of totipotent cells is influenced by social representations and value systems due to the
11 fact that isolation of hESC requires embryo destruction and raises the question of the embryo's
12 status. It is therefore highly controversial in society. The benefit-to-risk ratio for patients treated
13 by cell therapy are debated in society and at the time of this study, the ethical framework for
14 therapeutic use of stem cells in France was provided by restrictive legislation on hESC use that
15 was in place at the time (Biomedical Agency)². The last controversial point concerns therapeutic
16 cloning, by which scientists create human embryos through nuclear transfer and extract stem cells
17 for cell therapy, thus avoiding immuno-compatibility problems. Obviously, the large media
18 coverage of the social dilemmas related to hESC use contributes to making this issue 'acute' in
19 the classroom because students are not entirely naïve on the subject. However, teachers often do
20 not believe students will be able to deal with it³.

27 Questions of research

28 Our work concerns a comparative assessment of debate situations within two frameworks. We
29 both evaluated the effect of the location of the debates (a cultural science center within a
30 scientific institute) and the effects of the contextualization of the debates (meeting with experts)
31 concerning students' argumentation and decision-making. In the students' argumentation
32 regarding hESC uses, we paid particular attention to knowledge in science and about science.

33 *The test consisted in evaluating the content and quality of students' argumentation in two*
34 *situations.* In the contextualization framework, we tested the effects of the presence of a
35 representative of an association of patients suffering from a neurodegenerative disease, together
36 with a researcher specialized in the topic (contextualized group). In the control framework,
37 students benefited from discussion with only one expert, the researcher (control group).

42 Methods

43 Participants

44 Seven science classes of high school students (107 girls and 89 boys, mean age: 16.4 yrs)
45 from the same grade-level, from French high schools of the Provence Region including urban and
46 rural areas.

49 ² In 2004, during the bioethics law revision, the French government declared a moratorium concerning hESC
50 research. Starting in 2006, research was allowed, for a five-year period, on stem cells of supernumerary embryos
51 from in vitro fertilization or on imported hESC lines. (See <http://assemblee-nationale.fr/12/dossiers/bioethique.asp>)

52 ³ Without developing media coverage of hESC uses, let us specify that national generalist newspapers (*Le Monde, Le*
53 *Figaro, Libération...*) and specialised press (*La Recherche, Pour la science*) dealt with this issue about one time a
54 month since 1990s'. According to political or legislative agenda, media coverage can increase (bioethics laws
55 revision, popular consultation as 2005 Italian referendum...). Scientific papers are also relayed by the media as the
56 well known example of first reported nuclear transfer in humans by south Korean researcher Hwang W.S. (Hwang &
57 al., 2004, 2005). See also Jiménez-Aleixandre & Federico-Agraso, (2009).

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3 rural zones, engaged in debate following the protocol described below. They met with seven
4 different scientists and (or not) four representatives of associations. Debates took place in 2005
5 and 2006, that is to say, during the time in which restrictive legislation on hESC use was in
6 effect.
7
8

9 10 ***Protocol of the structured debates***

11 We assigned the theme of the debate to students 4-6 weeks in advance: *Embryonic stem*
12 *cells and human brain repair*. They were required in a *pre-test* to give their definition of stem
13 cells and to note their immediate questions. Then they had to seek background information and
14 documentation during the 4-6 weeks preceding the debate.
15

16 The debate protocol included three successive sessions, each of one hour duration. The
17 first day, students were provided with the entire 3-day protocol, objectives of a debate (to
18 improve argumentative skills and to build a position regarding a SSI) and the elementary rules of
19 a debate. During this first session (Day 1), students listed the background questions they wanted
20 to ask the expert(s). They were also required to identify one or two major issues (questions) that
21 would serve as an outline for the future debate. Then they discussed these questions with the
22 expert(s) during the second session (Day 2) and took note of their answers. The debates occurred
23 during the third session (Day 3) on the question identified in session 1.
24

25 We divided each class in two homogenous groups, control and contextualized⁴. The first
26 and third sessions were identical for the two groups. In contrast, the second session differed.
27 Control groups met a neuroscientist whereas the contextualized group met the same
28 neuroscientist together with a representative of an association of patients suffering from a
29 neurodegenerative disease (Parkinson's disease, Multiple sclerosis, Huntington chorea).
30 After the last session, in a *post-test*, high school students were required once more to give their
31 definition of embryonic stem cells (that may or may not have evolved) and their arguments for or
32 against the use of embryonic stem cells in (1) scientific research and (2) treatment of
33 neurodegenerative diseases. All participants agreed to be video and audio taped. One of us (G.
34 M.) was the moderator and adopted the position of committed impartiality, that is to say he
35 provided his own points of view while encouraging analysis of competing points of view on the
36 controversial issues (Kelly, 1986)⁵.
37
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41 ***Analysis of the debate content***

42 We first performed a general analysis of pre- and post-tests in order to quantify the decision
43 making regarding hESC uses, the eventual presence of arguments or not in the votes (claims with
44 or without justifications **or restrictions**) and in particular of scientific knowledge based arguments
45 to explain the votes (Zohar & Nemet, 2002). These were **counted, categorized and** compared
46 between control and contextualized groups. The general analysis allowed us to identify a
47 classroom (one control group and one contextualized group) in which the group's argued
48
49
50

51 ⁴ The science teachers of the class decided the group assignments on the bases of students' facilities to express
52 themselves in task group.

53 ⁵ Kelly postulated four positions which teachers might adopt: exclusive neutrality (positivistic approach surrounding
54 sciences product free values truth), exclusive partiality (characterized by the deliberate intention to bring students to
55 adopt a specific point of view), neutral impartiality (characterized by the unrealistic point of view sustaining that
56 moderator should remain neutral and not reveal his own beliefs) and committed impartiality (the moderator, if asked
57 to do so, tells his position on the subject of debate).
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3 decision-making distribution was very close to the distribution when all of the students were
4 quantified. We then performed a detailed qualitative analysis of the discourses of these two
5 selected groups.
6

7 These were divided in *sequences* or episodes and underwent three levels of analysis
8 (Simonneaux, 2003). In turn at speaking system, *sequence* is defined as dialogs with high
9 semantic and / or pragmatic consistency (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1998). For the first we analyzed the
10 macrostructure of the debates: we identified the themes discussed, their recurrence and those
11 common to both groups. Inductive analysis method was applied, that is we did not use any
12 predefined set of categories for the analysis (Kolstø, 2005). We also quantified the total duration
13 of the debates, the number of turns each student had at speaking, and the number of the
14 moderator's speech acts. This analysis allowed us to characterize the dynamics of the debates and
15 to select specific episodes concerning the human embryo's status for a more accurate
16 comparative analysis.
17

18 For the second level we performed a microscopic analysis of the quality of the arguments: we
19 counted claims without justification, simple arguments relying on only one justification, and
20 multiple level strategies involving several justifications that were linearly linked or interrelated,
21 i.e. with counterclaims or rebuttals (Toulmin, 1958; Adam, 1992) and finally the type of
22 arguments used (Breton, 1998).
23

24 For the third level, we examined *modalisation*. Modalisation consists in the semantic way used
25 by speakers to reveal their level of adhesion to their arguments. We classified the types of
26 *modalisation* used into four categories, following Bronckart (1996): logic, deontic, appreciative
27 and pragmatic *modalisation*⁶. The grid of analysis was therefore a combination of different grids
28 (Simonneaux, 2003; Federico-Agraso & Jiménez-Aleixandre, 2008) for a more robust analysis.
29
30

31 Results

32 First we present the macroscopic analysis of the students' (n = 196) decision-makings and
33 written arguments in the post tests, and then the microscopic analysis of the two selected groups'
34 argumentation comparing the control and contextualized sessions of the oral debate.
35
36

37 *Macroscopic analysis of the students' decision-making and arguments in their post-tests*

38 More than 75% of the students from the control and contextualized groups voted in their post
39 tests in favor of the use of human ESC in research only as early as 2006. In contrast, 80% of the
40 students from control groups voted in favor of the therapeutic use of hESC, compared to only
41 60% of the contextualized group. This latter group, compared to the control group, showed an
42 increase in the response "no" and in the "may be" response (figure 1).
43
44

45 Please insert Figure 1 about here
46

47 On the whole, weakness of students' skills in argumentation was obvious when they expressed
48 their decision-making during the post-tests. Some decision-making lacked justifications or
49 restrictions, but the arguments given were rarely simple, often relying on many linearly linked
50
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54 ⁶ Logical modalisations consist in truth value judgment of formulated opinions (considered as certain, possible,
55 uncertain, probable...). Deontic modalisations consist in formulated opinion appreciation considering social values
56 (socially allowable, unsuitable, necessary, advisable...). Appreciative modalisations are the expression of a more
57 subjective judgment, facts are considered as felicitous, unfortunate, strange... Lastly, pragmatic modalisations refer
58 to someone's responsibility (will, objective, abilities, reasons...).

1
2
3 justifications.

4 Concerning arguments in favor of hESC uses, they were in order of occurrence:

5 - The hope “to cure”, “to save lives”, was the main argument used by students to justify their
6 vote in favor of the use of hESC for research and therapy (63 occurrences). That category of
7 arguments was twice as much in the contextualized groups (42 occurrences) than in the control
8 ones (21 occurrences). Moreover, students of the contextualized groups expressed more often
9 restrictions that took into account the potential risks of cellular therapy in their argumentation in
10 favor of the use of hESC (14 occurrences vs 11 for students of the control groups). The most
11 prevalent justification was: “To save lives, we must accept the sacrifice of other lives”
12

13
14 - The progress and freedom of scientific research was also used as justification. The written
15 arguments were for example: “This can make the world better”, “hooray for science and
16 progress”. We found 42 occurrences of that kind of arguments in favor of the use of hESC for
17 scientific research, without significant differences between the control and contextualized groups.
18 Concerning students in favor of the therapeutic use of hESC, arguments for the progress of
19 research were twice as much in the contextualized groups (8 occurrences) than in the control ones
20 (4 occurrences)
21

22
23 - The embryo is not a human being was an argument used 13 times: “the embryo is a group of
24 cells, [a piece of meat], thus it does not think “. That kind of arguments was equally used in both
25 groups.
26
27

28
29 In addition, there were 23 students who did not justify their vote in favor of hESC uses in the
30 control groups compared to 11 in the contextualized ones. Even if students' skills in
31 argumentation appeared globally weak, the contextualization participated in enhancing students'
32 ability to justify their written opinions and to precise their limits.
33
34

35 Concerning the few students that were against the use of hESC for research or therapy (only 10%
36 of the total), their arguments were more unsophisticated, often with only one justification:

37 - The embryo is a future human being and its legal status is not clear (12 occurrences). The words
38 “crime”, “to kill”, “to sacrifice” were used, without significant difference between the control and
39 contextualized groups. Theological or ideological arguments were presented: “Today society has
40 gotten too far away from the principles of life”, “I am a neoconservative”, “We must leave
41 natural selection to make decisions about life and death”.
42
43

44 - The hESC therapy is risky and further research is needed “before being able to cure, we need
45 research”. That category of arguments was often associated with the one concerning the
46 possibility of alternate therapies, such as those using adult stem cells (16 occurrences of which 10
47 were from the contextualized groups);
48

49 - This could lead to oocyte trading and the commercialization of life (9 occurrences);

50 - Therapeutic cloning can lead to reproductive cloning (3 occurrences).
51
52

53 In conclusion the majority of students were in favor of the use of hESC for research and
54 in the clinic as early as 2006, although they were fully aware of the potential risks in such
55 treatment of neurodegenerative diseases, as researchers explained them. Concerning nature of
56 sciences, students expressed a strong ideology in favor of the progress of science but they did not
57 clearly understand the differences between fundamental, clinical research and therapeutic
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1
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3 applications. To the extreme, a few students were against research on stem cells but in favor of
4 their therapeutic use.

5
6 The meeting with both a researcher and a representative of a patient association
7 (contextualized groups) dampened the above arguments, as the students better understood the
8 risks of the therapeutic use of hESC previously explained by the researcher. This is a paradox as
9 the patients generally lobby for the use of hESC in cellular therapy. Students that met both types
10 of experts (a patient and a researcher) had the opportunity to hear two different viewpoints. This
11 may also explain why their arguments are more complex, and include restrictions and refutations.
12 For the other 50% of contextualized groups, the ideology of the progress of science was probably
13 reinforced by the emotions brought by the meeting with a patient suffering from a
14 neurodegenerative disease. The contextualization radicalized the decision-making.

15 16 17 ***Microanalysis of the argumentation in control and contextualized sessions***

18 We chose to precisely analyze the control and contextualized groups of a single classroom
19 because the decisions and arguments in post tests were representative of the mean (Figure 1). In
20 the contextualized group, the duration of the discussions between students and the number of
21 turns at speaking were higher than in the control group, where the majority of the feelings
22 expressed did not lead to discussions. Conversely, the number of interventions of the moderator
23 was, proportionately to the debate duration, a little bit lower. This indicates a better involvement
24 of the students in the discussion (Table 1).

25
26
27 Please insert Table 1 about here

28
29 Moreover, dividing debates in sequences allowed us to identify common themes to each group
30 (human embryo's status, cellular therapy risks, therapeutic and reproductive cloning) and some
31 specific to one or the other (Table 2). The latter were twice as numerous for the contextualized
32 group. Therefore contextualization introduced dynamism in the exchanges between students, with
33 more attention paid to what the other students are saying and motivation to promote their own
34 opinions.

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37 Please insert Table 2 about here

38
39 Comparative analysis of the debates showed that students of the contextualized group were twice
40 more engaged in episodes of argumentation than in simple assertions. This comparative analysis
41 corroborates the findings concerning argued decision-making analysis of the students in the post
42 tests. In the contextualized groups, students were more involved in the debates. Emotion
43 generated by the meeting with a patient suffering from Parkinson disease positioned debates in
44 the complexity of the reality and led students to pay attention to their responsibility when they are
45 debating about hESC uses. Contextualization helped students to develop argumentation skills
46 (reinforced agreements, specifications or restrictions).

47
48 Furthermore, contextualization drove many students to diversify their conceptions regarding the
49 nature of science. Faced by the risks of cellular therapy for the patients, many students in the
50 contextualized group considered alternative therapies such as deep brain stimulation or
51 alternative research such as adult stem cell research. In addition, legal (diversity and changes in
52 national legislations) or fiscal (funding systems of research) aspects of science were addressed
53 only during contextualized group debates.

54 55 56 ***Microanalysis of arguments during debates***

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3 We performed a detailed analysis of the microstructure of two episodes (one from a control
4 group and one from a contextualized group) on embryo's status, which is the major issue of the
5 debates. We identified the different strategies of argumentation, the speech acts, the rhetorical
6 moves and the *modalisation* indices in the verbal interactions. We could not draw robust
7 conclusions about the influence of the contextualization on the quality of the oral debates at this
8 analysis scale. Microanalysis of the quality of arguments was inconclusive because it did not
9 detect significant differences between the two groups, as we may be reaching the limits of such a
10 comparative analysis. Indeed, at the other scales of analysis taking into account the whole
11 debates, and not only a single episode, the nature of students' argumentation appeared better in
12 the contextualized groups than in the control ones.

13
14 Communication between high school students appeared to be more influenced by psychological
15 and sociological factors (whether they were used to speaking in front of a large audience, whether
16 they were militant for a cause, or familiar with acting as a leader, girl or boy...). This meant that
17 some students (3 out of 15 students of the group) did not participate in the discussion. This does
18 not mean that they did not pay attention to the discussion. In fact, they developed a panel of
19 written arguments in the context of their decision-making, at the end of the third session.

20
21 Students had difficulties developing an argumentation while they were speaking. The
22 moderator had to reopen the debate and to regulate it quite often in order to let someone speak,
23 insist that students pay attention to the person speaking, or ask for explanations on what has been
24 said. Often, declarations were imposed without arguments or with very simple ones. The large
25 majority of arguments revealed a low level of adhesion from the speakers. Arguments relying on
26 social or logical values, i.e. with deontic *modalisation*, were the least present. The analysis of the
27 episode of debate on embryo status (Table 3) sheds light on the relationships between scientific
28 knowledge and opinions expressed by students (control group). To elaborate their position on
29 embryo status they used scientific arguments to prepare the audience to receive their opinion in
30 favor of the use of embryonic stem cells. That kind of argument, called a framing argument
31 (*argument de cadrage* in french) according to Breton (2003), is often used by students.

32
33 Please insert Table 3 about here
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39 Hassen and Corentin (at time 50, 56, 58 and 55, respectively), reduced the embryo to its
40 biological definition ("a group of cells" time 50 and time 55), skipping any human dimension
41 (time 56, 58). For Elsa, the embryo is not even alive (time 53). The scientific arguments
42 concerning the absence of nervous system and therefore cognitive functions ("they do not yet
43 have neurons" time 50, "it does not have a nervous system" 52) were aimed at confirming the
44 non human character of the embryo. They refer to a calendar of development of the central
45 nervous system that they never explain. These definitions of the embryo from a biological point
46 of view only have the ability to make the audience accept its destruction or the use of its cells.
47 And when Hassen introduces the researcher in the discussion (time 50, 'she' explained) it is as an
48 authoritative argument. Rewording processes reducing the human embryo to his / its cell
49 dimension occur in these kinds of sequences. The implicit purpose is to present the embryo as an
50 object more than a subject and so to legitimize its / his use for research or therapy. Rewording
51 processes concerning the embryo's status appears as a framing argument to make the others
52 accept the human embryo as an object and not as a subject.
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Discussion

In the contextualized situation, high school students participated much more in the debate on the possible use of hESC for research and therapy. Meeting a patient suffering from a neurodegenerative disease seemed to have generated emotions, motivation and a sense of responsibility that helped students to better understand the consequences of their votes. According to previous research, the type of contextualization tested in this study (meeting with experts and in particular a representative of an association of patients suffering from a disease) contributed to improve situated cognition by giving a meaning to the debates (Jiménez-Aleixandre & al., 2000, 2004; Kolstø, 2004; Patronis & al, 1999). The diversity of viewpoints, scientific doubts, and uncertainty of the results and risks for patients, became more obvious when debates were in a real-life context. Also, students better recalled their scientific knowledge (ESC proliferation and differentiation, brain plasticity) as if having met with a patient added a new dimension to what they had learned before. Science then became a social activity with legal (the bioethics law and its evolution) and economic (how research is financed) aspects.

The above conclusions should not occlude the fact that concomitant consultation of a scientific researcher and a patient reinforced positivism and the idea that beneficial clinical applications always emerge from basic research. In a recent study Simonneaux and Simonneaux (2008) studied students' reasoning about three controversial SSI characterized by a local contextualization (the reintroduction of wolves in Mercantour and that of bears in Pyrenees in France) and a global one (global warming) and pointed out "the limits of a local contextualization that involves students too much". They observed a lower level of critical analysis and of knowledge appropriation in the case of local issue compared to a global one.

In addition, for most of the students, the place where the debate was organized (a scientific institute), the choice of scientific experts (scientific researchers who were all in favor of the use of ESC in research) probably had an impact on their decision-making. We think that the location reinforced the ideology of progress due to scientific activity that was formulated by students when they declared themselves favorable to cellular therapy, in spite of the risks raised by the researchers. This did not motivate them to challenge science authority and legitimacy as revealed by Federico-Agraso and Jiménez-Aleixandre (2008) concerning students' perception of scientific papers. Moreover, Jiménez-Aleixandre & al. (2000) had previously pointed out that often students give the arguments that teachers were waiting for, in particular for their first debate as in the present study. Science museums or centers for scientific culture may be placed more adapted to debates on SSI (appropriate public spaces for *public use of reason* according to Rasse, 1999). High schools also would be more adapted if the classroom is a democratic place where students can freely express their opinions without any religious pressure.

Weakness of students' skills in argumentation was the other prominent characteristic of the debates. **Even if we detected a difference between students' argumentations in contextualized and control groups, both had difficulties in constructing arguments.** Students used a small panel of arguments (they rarely mentioned ethical, legal, economic or social aspects of the question) and gave arguments without justification, with authority, or accompanied by simple analogies. Students deeply need to learn the difference between arguments and emotions, to gain ability to construct argumentation to defend their position i.e. to advance a reason for or against, a proposition or course of action. This confirms previous studies pointing out the difficulty of

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3 teaching argumentation (Jiménez-Aleixandre & al., 2000; Kuhn, 1991; Sadler, 2004 ;
4 Simonneaux, 2003...). Only long-term efforts seem to give positive results, as proposed by Zohar
5 & Nemet (2002) with a protocol including eleven sequences of work and a specific training to
6 argumentation. Practices such as assessing alternatives, weighing evidence, interpreting texts, and
7 evaluating the potential viability of scientific claims are all seen as essential components in
8 constructing scientific arguments (Latour & Woolgar, 1986). So too are scientific controversies
9 and the collective analysis of the different ways a scientific result has been communicated (press
10 release, audio-visual supports, numerical, exhibitions...) (Federico-Agraso & Jiménez-
11 Aleixandre, 2006; Sadler & al., 2004). This is too often neglected in science curricula.
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15 Science is usually “*taught as a nearly unmitigated rhetoric of conclusions in which the*
16 *current and temporary constructions of scientific knowledge are conveyed as empirical, literal*
17 *and irrevocable truths*” (Schwab, 1962, p. 24). As pointed out by Simonneaux & al. (2005),
18 frontal transmission of scientific results via conferences given by a researcher to students without
19 any upstream preparation or downstream discussion reinforces the image of the power of science
20 and ideology of progress through science. On the contrary, students deeply need to understand
21 the instability of scientific results as they rarely study epistemology in their curriculum. Also they
22 did not understand how scientific data are produced by researchers, and that they are
23 continuously debated within the scientific community and result from a collective work. The
24 majority of students ignored the difference between basic and applied research and confused
25 basic science with its technological applications. As students are usually keen and enthusiastic to
26 meet researchers, if such meetings are well prepared, it gives them the opportunity to learn more
27 about a subject and understand the instability of scientific results. When debates are thus inserted
28 in a global strategy, students also learn how science is ‘produced’ in laboratories.
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33 Placed in a socioconstructivist context, science teaching through debates implies trusting
34 students’ ability to generate knowledge and to develop scientific expertise that they will use
35 outside classrooms. It implies that teachers used to being the one ‘who knows’ become
36 facilitators of the collective construction of knowledge. Debates on SSI allow teaching of science
37 within a social context. Learning how to debate appears therefore essential for the future citizens
38 that will have to make scientific and technical choices during their life. To achieve such a goal,
39 each classroom has to be seen as a community that will produce knowledge instead of one that
40 will consume knowledge (Jiménez-Aleixandre & Pereiro-Munoz, 2002). In this perspective,
41 students would choose the question that they want to debate within the framework of the general
42 topics proposed by the teacher. He also proposes that the aim of the debate sessions is that
43 students’ argumentation progressively evolves as they integrate new scientific and technical
44 knowledge with societal aspects. Meeting with a diverse group of experts should help them to
45 achieve this goal. This also helps students to identify their own position in an argument.
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48 Are French science teachers trained in a way that would enable them to debate SSI with
49 students? This would require knowledge regarding how science is produced, and an ability to
50 place scientific within historical and social contexts. But initiation to scientific research, and
51 studies of the historical aspects of science and epistemology are absent from their coursework.
52 Lack of opportunities for the practice of argument within science classrooms, and lack of
53 teacher’s pedagogical skills in organizing argumentative discourse within the classroom are
54 significant impediments to progress in the field. Structured classroom debates help advance two
55 goals many teachers struggle to achieve with their students: classroom participation beyond the
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“usual suspects” present in every classroom (Oros, 2007) and critical thinking on the scientific claims generated by the plethora of SSI that confront them in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

Meeting with researchers appears to be a positive experience for students debating a socioscientific issue, which increases their knowledge of science and the nature of science. Concerning health-related issues, their meeting with patient association representatives gives more meaning to their knowledge, providing a connection between science and their everyday lives. To make the most of these meetings, students must be prepared to put actors and discourse into perspective, and to evaluate the plurality of viewpoints with the necessary critical distance.

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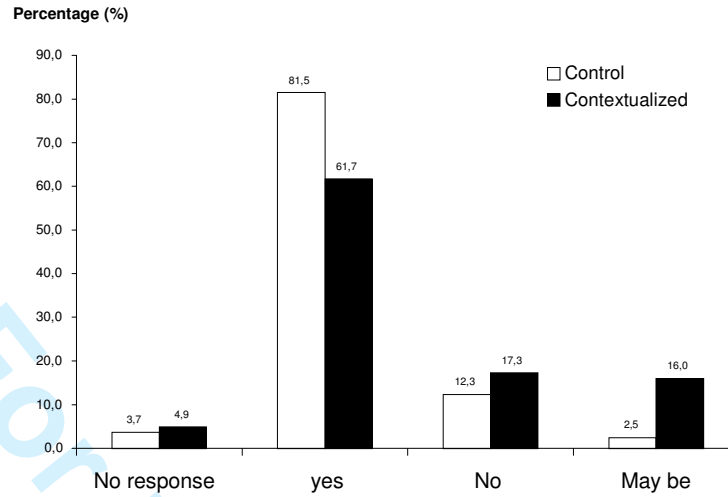


Figure 1: Diagram showing the votes of high school students in response to the question « Are you in favor of the therapeutic use of human embryonic stem cells (for human brain repair) starting in 2005 and thereafter? » (n = 196)

Table 1: Quantification of the exchanges in the two groups

	Control	Contextualized
Duration (minutes)	33	45
Number of turns speaking	145	298
Number of turns speaking/min	4.39	6.62
Number of times the moderator intervened	45	61

Table 2 : The different themes discussed in the control and/or contextualized group

	Themes
Themes common to the control and contextualized group	<p>The embryo status, its therapeutic use</p> <p>The risks of grafting human ESC</p> <p>Abortion</p> <p>Viewpoint of patients, scientists, ordinary people</p> <p>Therapeutic cloning and its links to reproductive cloning</p>
Themes specific to the control group	<p>Science must go on</p> <p>The opportunity of the debate, the social legitimacy of adolescents compared to legislators</p> <p>The ethic committees and their roles</p>
Themes specific to the contextualized group	<p>Alternate therapies (deep brain stimulation)</p> <p>The different laws about the use of ESC for research in different countries</p> <p>Animal models (Parkinson)</p> <p>The neuroscientist and his work</p> <p>The patient suffering from Parkinson's disease, his symptoms, his everyday personal and social life</p> <p>Problems linked to a referendum (example of abortion)</p> <p>The cost of research</p> <p>The possible use of adult stem cells instead of embryonic ones</p>

Table 3: Arguments given during a debate episode on the embryo status

Speaker 00 :10 :20	Oral sentences	Speech acts Argumentation
50 Hassen	[...] As to ethical problems, she explained that when they get the embryos they are just a group of cells, they do not yet have neurons, they are not human beings.	Confused knowledge about the embryo status Simple argument (with authority)
51 Moderator	Do you all agree?	Reopening of the debate
52 Denis	it does not have a nervous system (he thinks), it is not a human being	Agreement with addition of knowledge
53 Elsa	We cannot say that it is alive, it becomes alive only later?	Non justified agreement
54 Victor	It depends on religion, this a religious and ethical question / it has nothing to do with science/ it is a human embryo that could become a human being if we left it to grow / it's not something totally alive / it's alive but	Objection based on scientific knowledge of the definition of the embryo status
55 Corentin	The embryo has no shape since it is just a group of cells / it does not speak, it does not eat, it is unconscious of what it is	Simple argument (de cadrage)
56 Hassen	We can't say that it is human just because it is made of cells	Same argument as 6 minutes before
57 Victor	Scientifically speaking, it is not more developed than a bacteria, or just a little more	Agreement reinforced
58 Hassen	than an animal.	Agreement reinforced