

Maria Olson

Stockholm University and Dalarna University College

Nora Elise Hesby Mathé

University of Oslo

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The student as the subject in social studies and the potential of social studies in students' lives

Introduction

Social studies education in schools in the Nordic context consists of four subject areas: social science, history, geography¹ and religious education. Which of these subject areas are included in the mandatory social studies subjects varies between the Nordic countries. Each of these subject areas, and all of them together, are aimed at offering children and young people space for subject specific growth of different kinds. Social studies address a historically established group of school subjects in the Nordic educational context that can provide students ground for being and acting with other people, in society and in the world. This special issue of *Acta Didactica Norden* focuses on the potential of social studies to offer such possibilities, in and outside of school. Inspired by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (2006, 2018), it addresses a specific encounter – that between the student(s) and the social studies subjects in school. Arendt was concerned with the significance of the situated and the experiential for a rich and qualified understanding of the world and society. This concern addresses the potential of social studies to offer a rich understanding of work, culture and the political, the three realms that she pointed out as key for being and acting in the world (2018). Arendt's concerns are further linked with the importance of gaining insight into the processes, content and aims of any educational situation, from the point of view of students' possibility for growth, as well as from the point of view of the teachers' ways of (re)presenting the 'old world' to them (2006). Taking on these Arendtian concerns, the special issue highlights the social studies subjects, their teaching and related research. We aim to discern and point out central themes, conditions and concerns related to the question of what kinds of potentials for the

¹ There are no articles covering geography education in this special issue. Previous reviews have pointed out that geography didactics is an area in need of further empirical research (see for example Skjæveland, 2020).

students becoming, being and acting in society and the world that are or could be made possible in or through social studies education.

Our goal with this special issue is to make a research-oriented overview of significant ongoing social studies research in the Nordic countries related to the special issues' concern; that is, research based on various theoretical, empirical and methodological frameworks focusing on the student as a subject in the encounter with the social studies subjects' varying content matters and types of knowledge. With Deng (2020) and Biesta (2017, 2022), two established educational theorists from contrasting traditions (Anglo-Saxon curriculum tradition and continental philosophical tradition respectively), these differences can be related to diverse positions regarding the relationship to knowledge and the relationship to education. Regarding the relationship to knowledge, there are three or four different "perceptions of knowledge" to which the articles can be related (see Deng & Luke, 2008; Wahlström, 2020). And these perceptions of knowledge can, in addition, be tentatively put in relation to different "orientations to [social studies, *authors' comm.*] education" (Biesta, 2017, 2022). Together, the two conceptualisations – perceptions of knowledge and orientations to [social studies] education – may provide a way of rendering visible the inborn field of tension in the social studies didactic research in the special issue. Given the diversity of approaches to social studies education in school, our aim is to contribute to advancing the social studies didactic field of knowledge in a way that enables continued Nordic knowledge accumulation and dialogue in the field.

The scientific motives underpinning this aim are several, and stem from various perspectives. Social studies didactic research in the Nordic context has long pointed to the need for deepened and qualified empirical insight about students as knowledgeable, growing persons, critical beings and skilled individuals in and for democracy and citizenship, into how these abilities and opportunities relate to students' perspectives, and further how they come through in the social studies classroom. There is also a need for empirical as well as theoretical exploration of how agency and existential aspects linked with Nordic social studies teaching, knowledge and understanding contribute to enlarged thinking, agency, student engagement and responsibility, qualified belief, moral, and value-based judgment in society, in their own lives, and in relation to the educational situation of social studies subject teaching. Insight is also needed about the different ways in which these processes can matter in elementary and secondary students' lives in and outside of school, in society and in the world (Ammert et al., 2022; Bergström & Ekström, 2015; Björkgren et al., 2019; Bladh et al., 2018; Bråten & Skeie, 2020; Børhaug, 2023; Christensen et al., 2017; Christensen & Mathé, in press; Christensen, 2011; Gullberg, 2014; Iversen, 2019; Jägerskog et al., 2022; Larsson & Ledman, 2023; Nordgren, 2023; Osbeck et al., 2023; Sandahl et al., 2022; Skjæveland, 2020; Solhaug et al., 2020).

The articles in the special issue

The eleven articles in this special issue span over three countries and three subject areas within the broader social studies didactic field of research in the Nordic countries. In specific ways, they all contribute to highlighting and qualifying the role and importance of the students as the subjects in social studies, and further in society – in contrast to notions of students simply as being objects of the subject teaching. The eleven articles focus, in varying ways and with different aims, applying diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, on the students in the classroom and their encounters with the subject or knowledge content. In addition, this special issue offers in-depth insights into the voices, perspectives and ideas of students, teachers, curriculum and subject teaching and research in social studies education – when it comes to the potential for students' lives inside the classroom as well as elsewhere in society. In the following, we briefly present the eleven articles of the special issue grouped by subject area.

Social science education

In the article entitled *Det oväntade subjektet: Konturer av en arendtsk samhällskunskapsdidaktik* [The unexpected subject: Outline of an Arendtian social science education], Ásgeir Tryggvason aims to develop the aspect of “the unexpected” in social science didactics theoretically by focusing on the “why” question, the purpose of the school subject, in the light of two different citizen ideals: the reflective spectator and the acting citizen. By drawing on Hannah Arendt's theory of the relationship between action and coming into being as a subject in society and the world, Tryggvason argues for the importance of a space for the unexpected and for students' action taking in social science education. Tryggvason's article in this special issue contributes to much needed theoretical development of how to understand the purpose of social science education in intimate conjunction with the theme of the special issue in the Nordic context.

Thomas Eide's article, *Elevar sine opplevingar og bruk av ferdigheiter i samfunnskunnskap: Ein kvalitativ studie av sosiale klasseskilje i norsk vidaregåande skule* [Pupils' experiences and use of social studies skills: A qualitative study of social class inequalities in Norwegian upper secondary school], contributes empirical knowledge about the role of students' social background in their perceptions of and experiences with common social science skills, such as discussing and thinking critically. The article reports on qualitative interview data with students in upper secondary social science education in Norway and offers insights into social class as an inequality producing mechanisms potentially influencing students' opportunities and desire for democratic participation.

In the article *Suggesting a framework for students' academic perspective-taking in secondary social science education*, Nora Elise Hesby Mathé makes a theoretically underpinned case for the development of an integrated model that aims to contribute to students' perspective-taking in social science education. In

fusing a present model of academic perspective-taking with democratic theory, Mathé's article contributes theoretical knowledge to the research field, as well as to the subject teaching practice, in terms of didactic implications of the elaborated framework for students' perspective-taking concerning sociopolitical issues.

In the article *Students' narrative action in social science teaching in Swedish upper secondary school: Limitations and openings*, Katarina Blennow and Maria Olson make a case for the importance of increased attention to students' way of telling stories in social science teaching and in related research. Through an empirical narrative analysis, light is shed on social science teaching as an ongoing narrative battlefield, where the students, apart from the teacher, are deeply involved in the making. This calls for a widened scope of what counts as subject teaching content in social science teaching and its related research.

History education

In his article entitled *In search of the meaning-making student: Notes on the lack of third-order concepts in the Finnish history curriculum*, Jan Löfström aims to identify the potential for students' meaning-making, through so-called "third-order concepts" in the Finnish history subject in lower and upper secondary education. Based on empirical analysis of selected curricula, Löfström argues that third-order concepts play a minor role and that this weakens the history subject's opportunities to matter in students' lives. This article offers insights for the field of social studies didactics, not only concerning Finnish curricula, but also concerning the history subject's potential for students as historically conscious subjects.

In her article *The In-between: On Arendt's metaphor go visiting and empathy-in-history in students' meaning making in history education*, Maria Deldén aims to develop theoretically the meaning of historical empathy as it relates to the history subject. The author uses Hannah Arendt's concepts of "go visiting" and "the in-between" to investigate the relationship between past and present, and opportunities for students' meaning-making when using feature films in history education. To illustrate the theoretical perspective, Deldén incorporates excerpts from interviews with upper secondary students, thereby contributing with both theoretical and empirical insights into "empathy in history".

Religious education

The article by Gull Törnegren, *Vem är du, vem är jag och hur kan jag värdera när våra världar möts? Om religionskunskapsämnets potential att bidra till utvecklingen av elevers omdömesbildning* [Who are you, who am I, and how can I make judgments when our worlds meet? On the potential of Religious Education to contribute to the development of students' judgment formation], aims to develop the relationship between student narratives (stories) and the major narratives in the subject of religious education through the scope of the subject's task and potential for students' judgment formation. Based on narrative approaches

and Hanna Arendt's emphasis on plurality, together with a conceptual framing of judgment as an "extended thinking", Törnégren provides a theoretically based, constructive proposal on how religious education can be developed in a way that contributes to students' critical judgment formation.

In Ingela Visuri, Andreas Rimondini and Joel Gruneau Brulin's contribution, entitled *Supernatural post-mortem beliefs among the Some and the Nones: Ambiguity as a tool for rethinking the 'secular' pupil in Swedish religion education*, the aim is to provide affirmed ground for religion education to open for increased attention to secular literacy, as a widening of the more established notion of religious literacy. Taking on a neuro-psychological perspective on a quantitative study of lower and upper secondary students' 'secular' beliefs, the article contributes with empirically founded knowledge about these students' existential worldviews, which calls for a subject teaching that takes these views into serious account.

Cross-disciplinary approaches

Mikael Berg and Sara Irisdotter Aldenmyr's article *Elevers angelägna frågor: Gymnasieelevers berättelser om angelägna frågor utifrån humanistiska, samhällsvetenskapliga och naturvetenskapliga disciplinära ansatser* [Students' urgent questions: High school students' narratives about important questions on disciplinary approaches within humanistics, social science and science], looks across school subjects and aims to investigate upper secondary students' urgent questions as they are framed and formulated by students themselves. The authors analyse student texts focusing on which issues are addressed, whether the issues are oriented towards optimism or pessimism and which disciplinary perspectives students rely on. Berg and Irisdotter Aldenmyr's article contributes with empirical knowledge to the field of social studies didactics by showing how students apply social scientific and other disciplinary perspectives when they are free to choose.

The ambition in Anders Persson's contribution *Mellan mål och mening: Elev-emancipatoriska eftersträvanden i lärares skildringar av den egna bedömningspraktiken i samhällskunskap och historia* [Between stipulated objectives and open-ended meanings: Emancipatory aspirations in teachers' descriptions of their assessment practice in civics and history], is to highlight the tension between pre-defined learning goals on the one hand and students' emancipation on the other. The article builds on interviews with teachers in upper secondary history and social science education in Sweden about their assessment practices, focusing on opportunities and limitations for students' emancipation that are actualised in the teachers' stories. As such, Persson contributes both with empirical knowledge about assessment, but also with theoretical considerations about the two subjects' purposes and types of knowledge.

Sara Blanck's article *Migrationsbiografiers didaktiska potential: Inferenser och begreppslig utveckling när mellanstadieelever möter ett rekonstruerat innehåll om migration* [The didactic potential of migration biographies: Inferences

and conceptual development of middle school students who encounter reconstructed content about migration], takes its point of departure in an empirical study on social studies cross-subjects' community-oriented teaching about migration at middle schools in Sweden. By focusing on the encounter of the students and the subject content, through the scope of reconstructed concepts stemming from geography and social science, the aim is to make concrete contribution to the development of the students' conceptual, value-based and emotional growth in and through teaching about migration in social studies education in middle school. Through a teaching design of reconstructed disciplinary concepts and perspectives, the potency of using students' migration biographies in this teaching is pulled forth – in order to offer opportunities for the students to attach to the reconstructed subject content knowledge in conjunction with their own life worlds.

Although each article has a unique approach, there are four common themes across the articles. In the next section, we discuss the articles according to these themes to show how they relate to the topic of this special issue.

Central themes in approaches to the student as the subject in social studies education

The articles' ways of addressing the social studies subjects' potential for students becoming, being and acting in society and the world can be depicted in terms of four central themes that come across in the articles: 1) meaning-making; 2) storytelling; 3) students as cultural and social beings; and 4) students' growth and emancipation. We use these themes to group the articles and to discuss the various approaches to the topic in question – the ways in which the students and their lives are considered subjects in their encounters with social studies education.

The first theme is found in the contributions from Deldén and Löfström. Their articles both delve into an emphasis on *meaning-making* as being a comprehensible way in which the student comes into being as a subject in (history) teaching. More precisely, their articles both provide concrete and theoretically nurtured ways in which room for students' meaning-making in the history subject in Sweden and Finland can be made. Deldén combines a theoretical exploration of the concepts of historical empathy with empirical excerpts of upper secondary students' experiences of feature films in Swedish history education, in order to render visible the promise of history education regarding cultivation of empathy-in-history. Löfström approaches the Finnish curriculum of history education in lower and upper secondary education as empirical data and critically identifies opportunities – and lacking opportunities – for students' meaning-making and personal connections with the history subject. Combined, these articles reflect the opportunities and limits of secondary students' creation of meaning in the encounters with history education in these contexts.

The second theme is found in Törnégren's, Blennow and Olson's, and Berg and Irisdotter Aldenmyr's contributions. Clear emphasis is here on the role of *storytelling*, or narratives, in the ways in which the students and their lives are actualised as subjects in the teaching. These authors all approach storytelling as entailing a high-yielding dimension that bridges the subjects' reproductive and productive role in different ways. In addition, these contributions share the notion that narration, didactically and/or analytically, has the potential to comprise the liability and changeability of society and the world. In Törnégren's theoretical article, a scrutinisation of religious didactic research provides argumentative ground for the opportunity of religious education to see to small and large narratives to offer space for cultivation of students' critical judgment. In Blennow and Olson's article, the importance of taking secondary students' stories and their ways of telling stories seriously in Swedish social science teaching is given special importance in relation to the ways of seeing to the renewal and recreation of the students, the subject of Swedish social science education and of society. They show how student stories relate to each other, and how some stories are silenced or never uttered in the classroom. In Berg and Irisdotter Aldenmyr's article, Swedish upper secondary students' own narrations about society come to the fore through their analysis of student texts about urgent social issues. In this way, students' perspectives both on society and on key subject matter content in social studies education is provided perspective through student scopes of optimism and pessimism. Combined, these articles theoretically and analytically elucidate the significance and value of student narration, and the need for contextual sensitivity beyond universalistic notions of the subjects' content knowledge in a way that paves the way for change in the students' lives and in society.

A third theme is found in the contributions from Eide and from Visuri, Rimondini and Gruneau Brulin. These articles are characterised by a strong focus on students as *cultural and social beings*. Through results from empirical analyses, Eide and Visuri, Rimondini and Gruneau Brulin show the extent and the ways in which contextual aspects (social class and religiosity respectively) are addressed in students' depictions of key matters in the subject teaching of social science education, and religious education respectively. Eide's article highlights, from a critical perspective, social class as a marker for inequality. Eide points at the role that the students' social background can have for their desire and ability to discuss and to think critically in ways expected and offered to them in upper secondary social science teaching in Norway. Visuri, Rimondini and Gruneau Brulin's article points at pronounced secular young people's somewhat ambivalent beliefs about death and life after death. They discuss the weight and importance of a religious education that not only addresses religious literacy, but also secular literacy, in order to offer a subject education for all students in the Swedish and Nordic highly secular teaching context. Combined, these articles illustrate the importance of students' contextually borne experiences and

resources through which the subject teaching is perceived, acknowledged and gains value.

The fourth theme, actualised by the contributions from Blanck, Mathé, Persson, and Tryggvason is characterised by a focus on *students' growth and emancipation*. Each article provides rich theoretical elaboration, and a discussion of didactic implications on the potential involved in the encounter between the students and the subject content knowledge of social studies education. In Blanck's contribution, emphasis is put on how students create inferences between their own experiences and the transformed, or reconstructed, subject content teaching about migration. In this way, the article renders visible, empirically, the worth and usefulness of a teaching design where the teacher's reconstruction of disciplinary knowledge into the teaching offers opportunities for students to connect with the subject content knowledge in ways that correspond with their life worlds. Mathé's article emphasises the potential of political deliberation for upper secondary students' academic perspective-taking in social science education and argues for how such perspective-taking activities can contribute to students' ability to understand and influence society concerning sociopolitical issues. In Persson's contribution, the focus is on the conditions for upper secondary students' possibility for emancipation that comes across through analysis and critical discussion of the functions of teachers' evaluation and assessment in history and social science education. As in Persson's contribution, Tryggvason's article relates to the notion of emancipation in relation to social science education. Here, focus rests on the question about the purpose of the social science subject. In challenging different conceptions of the purpose of social science education that is distinguished from social science didactic research, it is argued that social science education needs to be seen as a space for students', and thereby society's, becoming(s). On the one hand, these articles address course of action and reflection, and justification of the ways in which the subject content knowledge and skills embodied by social studies can be qualified and made available (as an offer) to students, and thereby contribute to their growth and emancipation as agentic beings in the own lives and in society. On the other hand, they address the limiting and opening scope for the very function of the encounters between students and the school subject in relation to such availabilities and offers. Albeit in different ways, both sides point to the very function and responsibility of the subject content and its potential role in students' growth and emancipation.

Concluding remarks and tentative fields of tension

The articles' ways of addressing the social studies subjects as potential for the students' subject-specific becoming, being and acting as unique beings, as part of society and in deepened relationship with the world, have been presented above through four themes: meaning-making; storytelling; students as cultural and

social beings; and students' growth and emancipation. These four themes arise from different subject-specific disciplinary fields that themselves embody different scientific logics, concepts, models, encounters, accumulated experience-based knowledge, abilities and qualified widening of thought as part of their subject content matter and its role in the fabric of life. In other words, the qualified approaches to the topic that emerge in the articles have their unique ways of telling what, when, how and why something matters for the students and when it does not. And these approaches relate in turn to different educational viewpoints, juxtaposed to cultures of science that foremost can be described, discerned and talked about in scientific-philosophical terms (Føllesdal et al., 2001).

Taking on these cultures of science inherent in the social studies subject areas' selective (didactic) traditions, the school subjects' content and the organisation of subject areas themselves vary within the Nordic context. All in all, these historically and contextually sedimented circumstances add to the articles' delving into contrasting ways of approaching and handling the topic of this special issue – the students as subjects in social studies education, and the potential of social studies education in students' lives. As introduced above, this paves the way for a plethora of ways of embracing the topics in the articles, in manners that feed into a tension-filled picture of social studies didactic research in the Nordic context, which can be depicted in terms of their inherent and/or articulated relationship to knowledge and to education (Deng, 2020; Biesta, 2017, 2022). Roughly, the tension-filled picture can be delineated, we argue, by looking into the various ways in which the articles respond to the question about the overall purpose of social studies education, including its teaching, its teachers, its students and related research, when it comes to the student as the subject.

The varying ways that the articles stress what is needed as part of social studies educational knowledge and understanding (see for example Wahlström et al., 2020) in relation to students as subjects in institutional and societal programmatic depictions with related (struggle for) selection of subject goals, and educative goals where the teacher “makes” the subject – point toward paths to be elaborated, rendered visible, problematised or opened for in order to provide for the subject-in-the-making in social studies education. These paths affirm specific tensions. Without any claim of being non-eclectic (as the initiative is perfectly and convincingly eclectic from the very start), the abovementioned proposed actuation, positioning research in terms of its relationship to knowledge and to education, can be seen as one proposition among others for a deepened scrutiny of tensions in the social studies didactic field of research. Such a scrutiny could serve the pragmatic aim of advancing the social studies didactic field of knowledge, which we argue is much needed in order to enable continued accumulation of knowledge and widened understanding and dialogue in the Nordic field of research. Finally, facilitating subject specific research and conversation about the very purpose of the social studies subjects through systematisation of themes and tensions is a way of qualifying the body of research in and between the Nordic countries. It is also

a way of unbridling social studies didactic research for members of school communities, such as teachers, teacher educators and other policy makers. Returning to Arendt and her concern with the significance of the situated and the experiential for a rich and qualified understanding of the world and society, we point back to the call for this special issue: to see to the potential of the social studies subjects to offer students such possibility in the Nordic context. The rich and qualified responses to this call, presented in the article contributions, fuel hope, affirmation and acknowledgment to continued research efforts in the field of social studies education didactics.

Om redaktørene for dette temanummeret

Maria Olson is Professor of Subject Teaching and Learning at Stockholm University and Guest Professor in Educational Work at Dalarna University College. She specialises in the relationship between politics, democracy and citizenship and subject didactics. Her research interests include equally critical and constructive aspects of school and education in general and subject didactics and subject teaching in particular, nationally and internationally, with a specialisation in social science education and religious education.

Institutional affiliation: Institutionen för ämnesdidaktik, Stockholms universitet, S-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden.

Email: maria.olson@su.se

Nora Elise Hesby Mathé is associate professor of social science didactics at the University of Oslo. She has studied students' perceptions of democracy, politics and social science education in school and is currently doing classroom research on aspects of quality in social science education.

Institutional affiliation: Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, P.O Box 1099, 0317 Oslo, Norway.

Email: n.e.h.mathe@ils.uio.no

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