

# Social science education (samfunnsfag) in Norway

## A country report

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**Keywords:** Social studies, Norway, curriculum, teacher practice, research

- Teacher education programs include also a master's degree for social studies.
- Teacher centred practices with the use of textbooks still dominate.
- Textbooks are rather descriptive and 'objective' with less critical thinking.
- New curriculum 2020, "Fagfornyelsen" (subject renewal), introduces interdisciplinarity but still many detailed subjective goals.
- Research is presented but the subject is rather under researched.

**Purpose:** The current article on social studies in primary and secondary education in Norway covers a range of relevant topics which starts with a brief context of Norwegian society, history and social studies framework. Main topics are the new (2020) curriculum, textbooks analyses, social studies teacher competence and practices followed by research in social studies.

**Findings:** The original data on teacher practice reveal that teachers talking while using textbooks is (still) a dominant form of practice in Norway, but there is a great variety of practices both in and out of school (excursions). The textbooks still aim at being 'neutral' and less critical. A new national curriculum from November 2019 emphasises interdisciplinarity subjects, and have less goals than the previous 2006, but is still very specific and rather top down. Some research is presented, the field is under researched, and an outlook is discussed.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Vi ere en nasjon vi med,  
vi små en alen lange,  
et fedreland vi frydes ved,  
og vi, vi ere mange.  
Vårt hjerte vet, vårt øye ser  
hvor godt og vakkert Norge er,  
vår tunge kan en sang blant fler  
av Norges æres-sange.

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The opening paragraph is a poem written by the Norwegian writer Henrik Wergeland in 1841; a somewhat meaningful translation would be as follows: 'We are also a nation, though we are small children, we are many and our hearts know, our eyes can see, how beautiful Norway is'. The poem is also the title of a textbook that was used in Norwegian schools for at least two decades, starting from its first appearance in 1947 (Hæreid, 1947). For generations, history – and later social studies – textbooks have had the purpose of building a sense of national identity and unity among citizens (Lorentzen, 1988; Slagstad, 1998). In the current article, we show what characterises contemporary social studies education in Norwegian schools by looking at textbooks, teacher competence, teaching practice, the curriculum and research.

In this report, we prefer the term 'social studies' (and not social science education) because the subject draws on several scientific disciplines, which is illustrated by the following definition by the National Council for the Social Studies (US) (NCSS, 1994).

"Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school programme, social studies provide coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." (Johnson, 2010, p. 3).

The main social scientific disciplines in Norwegian social studies are political science, sociology, anthropology and social psychology, with law and criminology constituting minor roles. Social studies (*samfunnsfag*) merged with history and geography. A compulsory teaching method 'the researcher' (*utforskaren*) was added in 2013 for primary and lower secondary school. Students were to use research methods, curiosity and creativity in social science problem solving, stimulating critical assessment of sources as well as of established and new knowledge. The compulsory subject of social studies (*samfunnskunnskap*) in upper secondary school only includes the social scientific disciplines mentioned above. Since the call for country reports to this edition of Journal of Social Science Education (JSSE) emphasises 'social sciences', history and geography are excluded, and the focus remains on the social scientific part of social studies in primary school and upper secondary school. In upper secondary school, students may also choose to major in social sciences in various subjects, but a review of these disciplinary subjects was excluded in the current report for space reasons.

We build on a previous review article titled 'Civic Education in Norway', which quite narrowly defined civic education as 'educational efforts that are concerned with the relationship between citizens and governmental authority' (Børhaug, 2010b, p. 66). This focus on vertical integration is widened by a horizontal integration scope in the current report. Despite different conceptualisations (civic education and social studies), these various areas overlap considerably. The somewhat fragmented but pragmatic framing of social studies content has developed and become both useful for one's civic ability to develop public opinion and for critical citizenship. Both Sætre (2013) and Børhaug (2005) emphasised social studies as useful to students, whereas Børhaug (2005) underlined the educational *Bildung* as central for an individual's political legitimacy aspects. Social studies are essential to citizens' ability to participate and contribute to public debate and social progress.

We aim to respond to the many wishes in the call for this issue in the Journal of Social Science Education (JSSE) by asking the following question: *What characterises social studies education in Norwegian schools?* We open with a brief social, political and school context of social studies. We continue with a review of the social studies curricular framework, emphasising the ongoing

curricular reform to be implemented in schools starting in August 2020. We look at textbooks and previously unpublished data on classroom practices in social studies teaching, as well as data on social studies teachers and their education. We continue by presenting various aspects of social studies in school. Our final aim is to characterise social studies in Norway and give an outlook for further research in this country.

## 2 BACKDROP AND CONTEXTUALISATION

### 2.1 The context in education

Social studies are situated in the historical and contemporary Norwegian society. We therefore provide a few important historical notes and contemporary information about the country and particularly social studies in Norwegian schools.

Norway is 'small, rich and democratic' (Grindheim, Heidar, & Strøm, 2017). According to Statistics Norway (SSB) the population totals about 5.3 million people (SSB, 2019a). Norway's citizens have some of the highest median salaries in the world (WorldData, 2015). The Norwegian state has accumulated an energy fund for wealth benefits that totals one trillion dollars (NorgesBank, 2019), and the country's political rights and civil liberties are ranked among the highest in the world (FreedomHouse.org, 2019). Despite this 'glorious picture', political trust is declining (Difi, 2019). The children of immigrants are four times as likely to live in a low-income family (NAV, 2017), and altogether, 10% of children in Norway live in low-income families. The main political cleavages are centre vs. periphery, conflicts along lines of religion, language, alcohol prohibition and economic conflicts between the working class and owners and employers (Aardal, 2007b; Valen & Rokkan, 1974). The 'Nordic welfare model', which is characterised by universal tax-financed benefits, is highly valued for its good social performance (Kautto, 2010). However, there is a decreasing median age in the 10% of the population aged 18–67 who are on disability benefits because of health challenges that make them unfit for employment (SSB, 2019b). Due interest has been paid to the Nordic political welfare model, with striking egalitarianism, a strong public sector and a culture of cooperative institutions that merges private with public interests (Østerud, 2007, p. 1).

The historical subordination of Norway and Danish colonisation from 1375 to 1814, followed by a union with Sweden until 1905, might have fuelled scepticism towards supranational integration in the EU (Gstöhl, 2002). This subordination is also reflected in two Norwegian language norms, *Bokmaal* (Norwegianised Danish) and *Nynorsk* (New Norwegian) that are built on local dialects (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019b). Students have the right to use both languages in school (textbooks, and written tasks). In addition, three Sami languages are official languages, and the Sami have their own parliament with a very limited self-government; yet the indigenous Sami community is challenged by a demographic change and urbanisation (Falch, Selle, & Strømsnes, 2016).

Norway, like most European countries, is becoming increasingly pluralistic, also reflected in classrooms, with 17% of students being immigrants, of which half are non-Western (SSB, 2019c). Immigration is a major political issue, and some children are being excluded from the right to kindergarten and school because of their lack of legal residency (The Ombudsman for Children in Norway, 2019).

Schooling was introduced for all children in Norway in the early eighteenth century and became mandatory in 1889 with *Folkeskoleloven* (Normalplankomiteen, 1939; Tønnessen, 2011), securing seven years of education starting at the age of seven, which was extended to nine years in 1964 and 10 years starting from the age six in 1997. Early social studies education in schools focused on small pieces of history (Brondbjerg, Christophersen, Jakobsen, & Sørensen, 2014; Børhaug, 2010b).

The national history curriculum in school has been a force for national unification, which in some ways made teachers become 'nation builders' (Lorentzen, 1988; Slagstad, 1998) and prepared citizens for political engagement (Telhaug & Mediås, 2003). The dominant content has been the formal structure of national political institutions (Børhaug, 2010).

Early social studies programmes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterised by a 'patriarchal approach', with values and practices such as 'national unity', citizens' obligations to the state, an emphasis on political elites, social and political harmony and ethnocentrism (Eikeland & Jacobsen, 1989). Social studies was taught separately starting from 1959 (Eikeland, Teig, & Østeng, 1976). In a curricular reform in 1974, social studies became the 'popularised versions' of the new social scientific subjects. In the reform in 1987, the subject moved towards a critical approach and was rebranded as *Orienterings-fag/O-fag* (orientation subject) with integrated elements from geography, history, and the political and social sciences. The social scientific disciplines were reintroduced in 1997, and in 2006, the five 'basic skills' of reading, writing, calculation, oral and digital skills somewhat marginalised social studies. Didactically, social studies (also in Denmark) moved from a focus on 'facts' (1960s) towards analyses, syntheses, explanations and assessment (current state), reaching the 'highest taxonomy level' during the late 1980s (Brondbjerg et al., 2014, p. 48).

Democracy has always been an important part of social studies. Because starting in the 1950s Norway has been increasingly promoting peacebuilding, democracy and human rights in its foreign policy, making national identity and democratic competence among Norwegian youth particularly important (Vesterdal, 2016). This 'democratic and humanitarian branding' of foreign policy has built a 'positive self-image', enhancing international influence for the 'humanitarian superpower'. The 'democratic' self-image fuelled by high international democracy ratings has sometimes made it difficult to be critical, which is a challenge for critical awareness, also in educational settings (Vesterdal, 2019).

### 2.3 Social studies lessons

In the 2006 reform (K06), the subject of social studies (*Samfunnsfag*) has been allocated 385 hours in grades 1–7 and 249 hours in grades 8–10. Social studies includes history, geography and a mix of political science and sociology. *Samfunnskunnskap* (social studies in upper secondary schools, grade 11–13) is a three-hour course per week with a total of 84 hours in the first (general branch) and second years (vocational branch), and it is given to all students. With these lessons making up less time than the 'high stakes' subjects like math, English and Norwegian, social studies has become a low(er) priority subject in both lower and upper secondary school. However, in upper secondary school, students may choose to specialise in five-hour-a-week courses of *Politikk og menneskerettigheter* (politics and human rights), *samfunnsgeografi* (human geography) or *Sosiologi og sosialantropologi* (sociology and social anthropology).

### 2.4 Teacher education programmes in social studies

In Norway, there are four teacher education programmes that all include social studies. We briefly present the four programmes at Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), a large campus for comprehensive teacher education in Norway. Teacher education reform has resulted in five-year master's programmes, qualifying for teaching in grades 1–7, 5–10 or 8–13. The former two are named *grunnskole-lærer* (general teacher education), whereas the latter are discipline studies in the social or political sciences integrated with a *lektor* (teacher training profession study). There is also an option for a master (two-year master's programme in social studies didactics), as well as a *praktisk pedagogisk studium* (one-year practical pedagogical study after completed social or political science masters), the latter with a flexible two-year option. A recent reform set forward demands for subject-specific teacher qualifications, typically

in language and mathematics, with European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) 30 for primary and 60 for secondary. However, demands for social studies and other subjects were set to ECTS 0 for primary, 30 for lower secondary and 60 for upper secondary. Theo Koritzinsky's textbook has been the dominating one (Koritzinsky, 2014), but Sibylle Reinhardt's book *Teaching Civics* (2015) has been introduced in several teacher education programmes and universities.

### 3 NEW CURRICULUM 2020 FAGFORNYELEN (SUBJECT RENEWAL)

The aim of social studies is described in the opening paragraph:

“Social studies should contribute to student’s engagement and their critical and reflective participation, respect for diverse opinions and human equality. The subject contributes to the students understanding of the interrelationship between individual choices, social structures and the sustainability of the nature. In social studies, students are given opportunities to reflect on their identity, the local society in which they live, and on national and global issues. During the course students should understand how geographical, historical and present issues are preconditions for the satisfaction of human needs, as well as the distribution of power and resources.” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2018)

#### 3.1 Goals and Interdisciplinary themes

The samfunnsfag in primary and lower secondary school has five core elements, to wonder and explore about social affairs, critical thinking on society and relationships, democratic understanding and participation, sustainable society and identity and community. The curriculum is composed of compulsory and rather specific goals that should be achieved after the second (13 goals), fourth (13 goals), seventh (17 goals) and the tenth grades (19 goals).

The social studies course “Samfunnskunnskap” is a compulsory subject in upper secondary school for one year and has three lessons a week; it has four core elements: to wonder and explore, obtaining a variety of perspectives and critical thinking, citizenship and sustainable development and identity and life skills. The core elements are slightly changed from primary school to a) to wonder and explore, b) diverse perspectives and critical thinking, c) citizenship and sustainable development and d) identity and life skills. The subject has a total of 14 goals. Samples themes from the 10<sup>th</sup> grade goals are as follows: reflect on what it means to be a citizen and compare how political systems are organised differently in countries and regions; assess how power influences humans and society; and discuss the relationship between economic growth, standards of living and quality of life from a global and sustainable perspective.

The new curriculum also emphasises three compulsory interdisciplinary themes: (1) ‘public health and coping with life’, which is about interpersonal relations, sexuality, drug abuse, alienation, personal economics, tolerance of diversity and life choices, (2) ‘democracy and citizenship’, which is about democratic competence, and (3) ‘sustainable development’, which emphasises the interrelationship between the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019a). In the new curriculum framework, social studies has been given special responsibility for developing digital skills among students and across subjects.

In a comment to the new curriculum Børhaug argued that two challenges in introducing interdisciplinary themes are that no subject teacher may feel responsible for it, and conceptual confusion towards democracy and citizenship. Furthermore, in a analysis of an early draft curriculum he found three perspectives on democracy in the new curriculum: democracy as values not to be problematised, democracy as learning how to work together with others

(*samhandlingskompetanse*) and democracy as working with real issues in real political processes (*demokratisk kompetanse*) (Børhaug, 2018).

### 3.2 Summary of curriculum characteristics

First, the curriculum is *national* and a part of the comprehensive Norwegian school system. Second, the curriculum consists of goals that originated in scientific subjects such as geography, history and the social and political sciences (only the social sciences is considered here). Personal economy is present but not social economy or corporate finance. Third, the curriculum is still rather detailed in the number of goals and diversity of subjects in the goals; it is also regulated by 'core topics', 'basic skills' and 'interdisciplinary subjects' that are all compulsory. Fourth, student's exploration indicate that 'research' and thereby active knowledge seeking is part of the curriculum. Despite student exploration (see also introduction), we still think the dominating language creates moralising imperatives that the students internalise. Fifth, it seems that social studies in primary education is a subject that politicians use to implement quite a few of their 'morals and musts' as 'policies' measures such as 'discuss how the individual can become more sustainable (fourth grade)'. Sixth, democracy and citizenship are separated, with democracy only mentioned in primary school. Because individuals in their early adolescence are considered to be in their politically formative years (Franklin, 2004; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995), it is surprising that democracy is left out of the competence goals in the higher grades. Although the number of goals are reduced, there are still a complex mosaic of 'core elements', 'basic skills', interdisciplinary teams and many detailed subject goals.

In an analysis of the 2006 curricular reform (all subjects), Solhaug (2011) argued that the numerous explicit goals may be interpreted as 'hands on management' and 'clear standards' and regularly testing as an output control, making up three out of five characteristics of 'new public management' (NPM) in the 2006 curriculum. The new curriculum is somewhat reorganised but very much 'hands on' the education in social studies in school which is in line with the NPM tradition. Social studies do not have a mandatory yearly output measuring exam check, but part of the subject is evaluated by the International Organisation for Educational Achievement (IEA) International Civic Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) study on democracy and citizenship.

## 4 LEARNING RESOURCES AND TEXTBOOKS

### 4.1 Strong tradition of textbooks

Textbooks are important, but a decade-long national approval of textbooks was abolished in 2000 for three reasons. First, schools and teachers should plan teaching independent from textbooks; second, teachers and schools should be encouraged to use several sources to stimulate critical thinking; and third, the publishers of textbooks and their authors should be responsible for the quality control of the content, along with their equality and language (Bratholm, 2001). Printed textbooks are still free for students up to upper secondary school, and increasingly presented digitally. There are currently several textbooks for primary and lower secondary school, but only three to four dominating publishers. In secondary school, the most common textbooks in social studies are *Kosmos* (Cosmos) from *Fagbokforlaget* (Nomedal & Bråthen, 2014), *Nye Makt og Menneske* (Power and Human) from *Cappelen Damm* (Helland, 2015), *Matriks* (Matrix) from *Aschehoug* (Andresen, 2006), and *Underveis* (Underway) from *Gyldendal* (Strand, 2006). The front covers are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Frontpages of the most common social studies textbooks for upper secondary school in Norway**



#### 4.2 Criticality and textbooks

For decades, textbooks have complied with a strong demand for 'objectivity' and a firm belief in the possibility of telling a true story (Johnsen, 1993). Growing radicalism in the 1960s fuelled a critical look at the demand for objectivity and the possibility of telling a true story. The political discourse evolved around concepts such as 'indoctrination' and 'politisation' and a growing awareness of school as dominated by state authorities. 'Indoctrination' is understood as using the ideas of the authorities as a basis for students' self-understanding, while politisation is 'committed to what is true and reasonable' and as connected to such dialogue (Hellesnes, 1975; Koritzinsky, 1977). Haavelsrud (1979) picked up on the political and critical trend in a book titled *Indoctrination and Politisation*. Building on these two seemingly contradictory concepts, Haavelsrud argued that the extent to which textbooks invite students to judge or discuss its content should be emphasised. The book elaborates on the criteria from a firm discussion of objectivity and how books should contain information on 'what is generally agreed upon'. A critical approach to teaching social studies and other subjects is widely argued for throughout chapters on conflict, youth crime and gender equality. Being a thorough scientific attempt to introduce sound judgement, critical thinking, debates and deliberative practices, the book became influential within teacher practices and school administration, textbook authors and policy makers.

A more recent textbook analysis (Børhaug & Christophersen, 2012) used four analytical criteria; first, whether the text invite students to judge and discuss by presenting several perspectives; second, if the books presents a comparative perspective; third, if the books offer a normative scale for sound judgement; and fourth, if social change is presented as possible. The criteria are certainly in line with the ones used by Haavelsrud (1979). From Børhaug and Christophersen's work, we present a summarising analysis of six textbooks for grades 8-10, which cover nine topics. On the topic democratic values, the authors find a rather narrow conceptualisation of democracy, with no comparisons given. The textbook chapters on political participation in elections and the formal political system still dominate across the six books, but several methods of political participation are emphasised, and attempts are made to make comparisons. A chapter on international politics is found in five of six books and includes themes such as the UN and peace, and stability is the most common theme, with a rather idealistic

approach without conflicts. International interdependence is also mentioned in some books, but a critical review of policies and systems and making comparisons or otherwise raising critical questions is rare or absent. An exception is the attitudes towards the EU, which is considered controversial in the textbooks. The presentation of the legal system and crime is rather formal, very descriptive and alike, but one book raises the question of whether punishment for crime works according to intentions. The chapters on Norwegian culture are rich on topics and traditions that bind Norwegians together. More conflictual topics, such as migration and the relationship between minorities, are included. The books are preoccupied with normative views on accepting difference, but these chapters lack a reflective and critical perspective. The chapter on economics covers economic systems, public financing, state budgeting, international economic systems and the oil economy. There are occasional attempts to compare and reflect on economic issues. Consumption is presented rather negatively or at least critically, emphasising social and commercial pressure, as well as the many negative consequences of consumption and overconsumption. The goal seems to be making students reflect on their consumption, but the text has a somewhat moralising character. Entrepreneurship and work are included and are descriptive. The descriptions are rather harmonious and lack a presentation of conflicts, such as the relationship between unions. The chapter on society is devoted to understanding what constitutes society and what characterises the society the students are living in. There is an absence of conflict in the description. A major trend in the current analysis is that after 30 years of scientific discourse, the books analysed here may still be characterised as descriptive; indeed, to a large extent they aim at being objective or neutral and seem to avoid conflicts, only occasionally providing normative views that aim at a more critical analysis. Børhaug and Christophersen's (2012) findings are somewhat surprising. Despite the fact that the textbooks are rather descriptive, the classroom climate might be more open and critical, and teachers may use the textbooks as a departing point for raising questions.

As mentioned above, Haavelsrud (1979) did not include the word critical thinking, a contemporary buzzword in social studies. A question is whether textbooks invite students to critically reflect on the content of the subjects (Ferrer & Wetlesen, 2019) and how critical thinking might be selective towards the predefined issues allowed for criticism (Børhaug, 2014).

## 5 TEACHER COMPETENCE AND PRACTICE

Teacher practice varies depending on the background aspects of a teacher's academic competence and education. This is evident in the evaluation of a previous social science curriculum. Teachers in the middle and lower secondary school only 'to some extent' manage to develop the students' academic methodology competence, mostly because of lack of teacher methodology skills. Student competence in methodology improved only when teachers gained academic method competence and used it in teaching (Christophersen, Børhaug, Dolve, & Knutsen, 2003, p. 171f.). Classroom practice, teacher competence and teaching materials also vary considerably between schools.

Male teachers tend to have more in-depth social studies education than their female colleagues. A trend in the last generation is that younger teachers study longer, especially teachers under 30. Novice teachers with short classroom experience have longer academic studies than those who have taught 10 years or more. In general, large schools in central areas have easier access to academic competence, but in recent years, the three northern counties Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark have clearly strengthened their social studies faculty (Perlic, 2019, p. 82ff).

The grades that students receive in social studies after 10 years of schooling in social studies are related both to the schools and the individual teacher's assessment practices, which challenges the validity and reliability of the grades, as well as the fairness of the grading system.



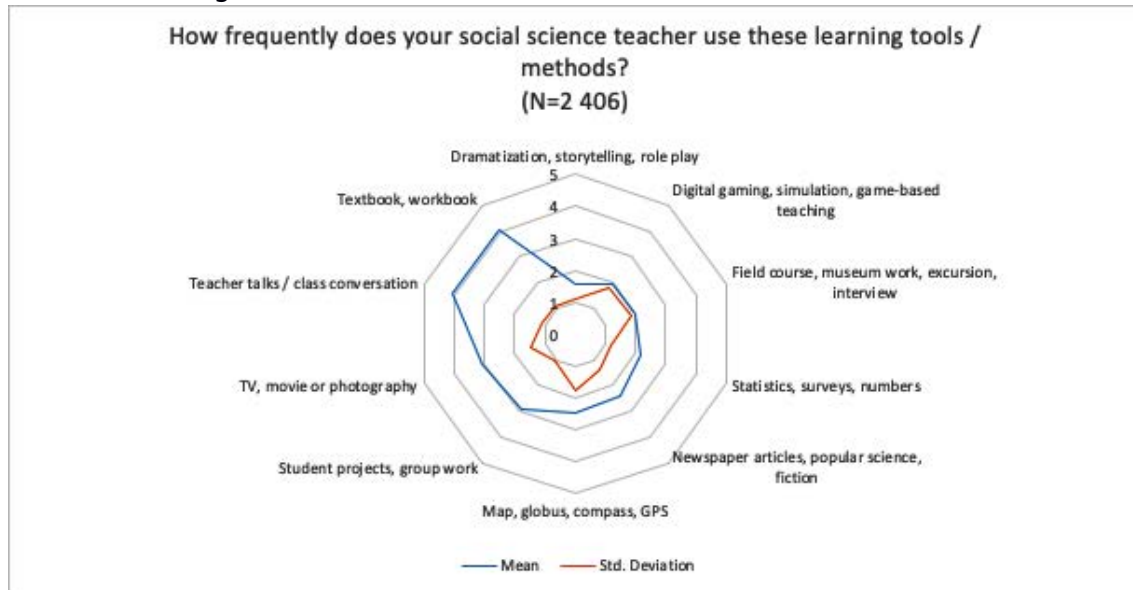
In response to varieties in teacher competence and practice, the UDIR initiated a grade supporting test for voluntary use (Dahl, Grut, & Østerås, 2015). These grading support tests for social studies were developed annually by NTNU in the years 2012–2016 (Dahl & Grut, 2016). Social studies proficiency was measured based on a construct for subject skills that were based on year 10 curriculum (SAF1-03). As part of the grading test survey, a total of 2,406 students responded to the following survey question: ‘How frequently does your social science teacher use these learning tools/methods?’ The results are presented below.

## 5.2 Dialogical classroom practice

Already in 1939, the national curriculum recommended varying the teaching methods in the classroom as much as possible so that the students would not be bored (Normalplanen, 1939, p. 15). Everywhere possible, the work should be facilitated so that the students can be active in doing their own assignments and experiments, and it was argued that this would make students learn better. Still, 72% of social studies teachers in the lower and middle grades in Norway often use the typical classroom routine in which the teacher gives lectures in front of the whole class (Koritzinsky, 2014a, p. 180). Social studies have traditionally relied on teacher-centred instruction combined with assigned reading from textbooks (Christophersen, 2004 p. 11; Brondbjerg et al., 2014). Despite being teacher centred, the Teachers And School Leaders as Lifelong Learners (TALIS) surveys from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have continuously shown very good relations between Norwegian teachers and students (Caspersen, Aamodt, Vibe, & Carlsten, 2014; Vibe, Aamodt, & Carlsten, 2009; OECD, 2019) Data from the above-mentioned survey (not previously published) of teacher practice is presented in Figure 2.

The dominant classroom practice is the one where teacher talks or uses a class conversation supported by textbooks (mean=4). Teacher talks rarely for long periods like a university lecture but more often invite to a conversation and dialogue with the class and between students. Textbooks are available as digital resources and are often used for scaffolding progression in subjects. Here, teacher and student interaction is mostly relaxed compared with more authoritarian and discipline-oriented teaching styles. In support of this, the TALIS study reported very good relations between Norwegian teachers and students in general, which also is true for social studies. The ascribed teacher role model may be described as authoritative rather than authoritarian and is supportive in both school and personal issues. As Norwegian teachers comparatively teach less hours (15.8), but still prepare quite thoroughly for each class (6.3 hours) and teaching experience may result in greater ability to relate to students overall. Teachers in lower secondary generally use comparatively little time for classroom management, but novice teachers report less confidence in their ability to control disruptive behaviour (OECD, 2019, p. 64).

**Figure 2** Students aged 16 and their perceptions of classroom practice/activities in social studies in Norwegian schools. Mean scores and standard deviation. N=2,406



The use of TV, movies or photography was also quite commonly reported (mean=3) although with larger variations (SD=1.46). Norway was an early adopter of digital learning tools; starting from around 2010, classrooms were generally digitalised in one way or the other, with broadband connection and access to digital learning resources, either ready at hand for the students or easily available. Many classrooms have projectors or smartboards, facilitating the screening of 'moving pictures'. Swapping between classroom activities is eased by the availability of digital resources, and these are also frequently used in connection with group work and student projects and presentations (mean=2.9). Norwegian society at large, especially younger generations, have absorbed smartphones and social media into their daily use, and teachers have faced challenges reigning in the use of these for school subject purposes. The research project Ark & App (<https://www.uv.uio.no/iped/english/research/projects/ark-app/>) suggested a trend of social studies teachers' active practices, where the teacher initiates activities via a monologue or dialogue one-third of the time, and two-thirds of the time is left for individual or group work. The older the students are, the more time is left for their activities (Gilje et al., 2016, p. 34f.). Developing teachers own judgement of how and when to use which learning resource is a concern raised by (Gilje et al., 2016, p. 71). The development of critical web literacy is also a pressing issue for digitised and social media-filled social studies classrooms. Map resources, such as a globe, GPS or compass, are also used (mean=2.47) and are reported as being used somewhat more often than newspaper articles, popular science and fictional literature (mean=2.39), whereas statistics, surveys and numbers are utilised even less (mean=2.39). Excursions outside the classroom to museums or field work and doing interviews are more seldom (mean=1.99), with game-based teaching and simulations being even less so (mean=1.97) but having more variation (respectively, SD=1.88 and 1.78), such as organisations for 'kids coding' or computer programming. In many communities, resources outside schools can be mobilised for such activities. Using drama, role play and storytelling were reported only sporadically (mean=1.57). These non-traditional activities demand a shift in the role, 'whereas a teacher's role in passive learning is that of the "sage of the stage", in active learning that role shifts to being "the guide on the side"' (Morgan, 2003, p. 352).

The government supports civil society as arenas for excursions, and seven peace and human rights institutions have a mandate from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research to aid schools in the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights. These include the following: *Senter for studier av Holocaust og livssynsminoriteter* ([HL Centre](#)), *Arkivet freds- og menneskerettighetscenter* ([The Archive Peace and Human Rights Centre](#)), *Raftostiftelsen* (The Rafto Foundation for Human Rights), *Falstadsenteret*, *Narvik Krigsmuseum* ([Narvik War Museum](#)), *Wergeland-senteret* ([the European Wergeland Centre](#)) and *Nansen fredssenter* ([Nansen Centre for Peace and Dialogue](#)).

### Image 1: Roleplaying Climate Change and Human Rights



Photo: The Rafto Foundation for Human Rights.

Student-activating teaching methods in social studies seem to decrease as the students get older and reach lower secondary education, but it is quite common to have students study political parties and then visit local branches of political parties (Børhaug, 2010b). In addition, all upper secondary schools in Norway arrange a mock election (ME) every second year, where the students can listen to, meet and interact with party members and cast a vote for their party of preference (Borge, 2016). A report commissioned by the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion concluded that mock elections should be made mandatory for lower secondary and upper secondary schools to participate in (NOU, 2011:20, p. 108). A quantitative study revealed a strong and positive connection between voting in mock elections at school and students' willingness to vote in the Norwegian parliamentary elections (Borge, 2016). However, qualitative data from fieldwork explained the findings as the school presenting voting as a norm and how this was more about socialisation for future turnout than promoting the political preferences of youth today (Borge, 2018).

## 5.2 Summary classroom practice

We have observed a classroom practice where social studies teachers largely support their teaching with textbooks and talking, using somewhat less activities demanding more complex project preparation and cooperation. A professional practice where learning resources, both analogue and digital, are chosen and curated between the subject teachers can be found in some schools, but far from all. A national strategy for quality and cooperation in teacher education for 2025 has been put forward (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2014). This may represent a venue for strengthened professional development of critical competency in social studies both in schools and teacher education institutions. There are differences in opinion and educational background among teachers, creating different local milieus for professional practice, research and development.

## 6 RESEARCH TOPICS

### 6.1 Research on participation in and out of school

Students' participation in schools is reflected in the previous and new curriculum. Students should experience participation; there should be school councils with democratic procedures and students have a say on important issues in the school board.

For decades, Norwegian schools have been obliged to organise student councils. The national curriculum requires that councils be included in decision making concerning the management and development of the school, which is seen as an exercise in democracy (Børhaug, 2007). More than 9 out of 10 Norwegian students reported that they have participated in student representative elections, and 6 out of 10 reported they have participated in decision making on how the school should be run, which is above the international and Nordic average (Huang, Ødegård, Hegna, Svagård, Helland, et al., 2017). However, it seems that the relationship between student council and school management is more of an administrative, hierarchical nature and that the students do not set their own agenda. It is 'difficult to claim that the student council is democratic participation, even though the curriculum states that it is supposed to be' (Børhaug, 2007; Huang, Ødegård, Hegna, Svagård, Tarjei, et al., 2017, p. 98).

The 2016 ICCS study Norwegian report presented data for in- and out-of-school participation among 14-year-old students. The data are valid for classes in schools but are not limited to social studies. Norwegian 14-year-old students in grade 9 scored high on the scale for knowledge of how democracy works in theory and practice compared with the international average. The students were asked whether they participated actively in discussions, voted in elections for student council, participated in the operation of the school, discussed actively in all meetings, been a candidate for student council and improved the school environment. Norwegian students scored the highest in Scandinavia on in-school participation and well above the international average. Girls participated more, and perceived the teachers as significantly more open to discussion than the boys. Furthermore, Norwegian students had high expectancies for election participation, but the lowest in Scandinavia on informal social and political participation; however, this was still above the international average. On the open classroom climate variable, Norwegian students assessed their teachers as more open and supportive of discussion and disagreement than the international average (Huang, Ødegård, Hegna, Svagård, Helland et al., 2017).

### 6.2 Political socialisation

Qualitative studies by Solhaug and Kristensen (2014) revealed that there is a complex dynamic between the 'agents' of political information, arguing for researching the dynamics among school,

media, family and friends. According to the school election survey conducted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) in upper secondary schools every mock election year (NSD, 2017), 58% think the Internet is the most important source of information about political and social affairs, followed by TV and radio at 19%, while 9.1% mention schools first and only 7% report family as the prime source (N=6,925 random sample). A closer study of the 9% who think school is the most important reveals a mixed group of students who reported as being less interested in politics. It seems that political information in school is particularly important for groups who otherwise would avoid such information (NSD, 2017).

Students' stories also revealed the absence of instrumental rationality in their political orientation (Solhaug & Kristensen, 2011), but politics can be highly emotional (Kristensen & Solhaug, 2011). Contrary to instrumentalism, students emphasised how they see themselves in relation to the political field (political identity) (Kristensen & Solhaug, 2017). The latter study revealed that students take a very serious approach towards making their party choice to fit their political self. Political socialisation and teaching should thus allow for authentic issues where emotions may energise the process of constructing a political self.

Mathé researched 16–17-year-old students' perceptions of the meaning of the concepts of democracy (Mathé, 2016) and politics (Mathé, 2019), including their own role in relation to the political and the factors associated with students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies (Mathé & Elstad, 2018). Among her findings, she noted that students expressed both bottom-up and top-down perceptions of democracy and politics. Students' enjoyment and instruction were most strongly associated with perceptions of citizenship preparation. She recommended building on student perspectives to address bottom-up understandings and engagement to support young people's citizenship and discussing multiple perspectives on concepts and issues.

In a qualitative study of a small sample of immigrant students from upper secondary school, Kristensen and Solhaug found that some students were often well informed about critical issues but did not see themselves as interested in politics (Kristensen & Solhaug, 2011). Despite their claim of actually not being interested in politics, the students were knowledgeable about specific issues. They would also like to participate in specific situations. They were therefore labelled 'the religious participant', 'the withdrawn participant' and 'the latent participant' depending on the issue and their conditions for becoming more active. Also, the latter category, 'the latent participant', has much in common with the 'monitorial citizen' found in larger studies (Amnå, Ekstrøm, & Stattin, 2016). These findings underscore that the 'not interested in politics' group needs to be looked into. In a qualitative study of how young people define political interest and engagement by Borge and Mochmann, they suggested four types of political space, where the fourth category explore the nuances of students who answered 'not interested in politics' yet highly engaged in politics (Borge & Mochmann, 2019, p. 295).

Børhaug argued that citizen participation must be justified for students, and teachers need to allow for critical reflections on whether political participation is really worthwhile (Børhaug, 2010a).

Vesterdal studied the roles, approaches, and conceptualisation of human rights education (HRE) in social studies in Norwegian upper secondary schools and in Norwegian education policy. He is currently doing a study on the approaches to international issues and global awareness in upper secondary schools of social studies in Norway. The studies on HRE have pointed to human rights as a platform of values, as part of national identity construction and as an inclusive principle in policy documents (Vesterdal, 2016). The teachers showed a high level for support for human rights learning in social studies although there are tendencies of presenting human rights violations as something that primarily occur outside the national borders. This challenges the critical potential of social studies and may contribute to a limited understanding of human rights and its relation to democratic citizenship and how students identify structural problems and human rights issues in the students' own society (Vesterdal, 2019).

Nielsen (2019) conducted a study as part of his dissertation on a large sample of primary school students participating in the museum game 'A world at stake', thematising UN millennium goals. Among the findings is that participation in this game may contribute to students' global awareness (Nielsen, 2019).

Klein and Wikan (2019) discussed whether study-abroad programmes in teacher education are a proficient way of developing intercultural competence and global awareness for preservice teacher students. The authors critically analysed a three-month teaching practice programme in Namibia offered to Norwegian preservice teacher students. The paper noted that many students expressed more tolerance and openness towards 'otherness' after the programme than before. However, ethnocentric attitudes towards certain aspects of Namibian society, traditions and educational practices were also found. The findings were analysed and discussed in light of the postcolonial theory.

There are clear gender differences among young people in their political orientations, where girls are politically more left and boys more politically right oriented (Solhaug & Børhaug, 2012). This reflects gender differences in the population (Aardal, 2007). Gender differences are also reflected in attitudes to immigration, in particular intercultural empathy (Solhaug & Osler, 2018) and intercultural competence (Solhaug & Kristensen, 2019).

### 6.3 Skills and concepts for democratic citizenry

Democracy and citizenship have been among the most important topics in social studies which have resulted in several books for teacher education. A book by Solhaug and Børhaug (2012) analysed education for democracy. It covered democratic theory, theory of citizenship, participation, political culture, political knowledge, immigration and pluralism, motivation, globalisation and didactical approaches to teaching. The new interdisciplinary subject on democracy and citizenship inspired two recent edited volumes, one by Madsen and Biseth (Madsen & Biseth, 2014) and Breivega and Rongnes (Breivega & Rangnes, 2019). The books are in Norwegian.

An edited volume by Børhaug, Hunnes, and Samnøy (2015) collected articles ranging from content about the role of the local society to values to what kind of democracy perspective the subject should promote and what the subject should say about people living in other parts of the world.

Lysø (2009) argued that mathematical skills are needed in social studies, and social studies is needed for mathematics. He mentioned several mathematical strategies for understanding, pointing to timelines, area and range, economics and currencies, proportions and electoral mandates as examples of vital 'statistics' for an informed practice in social studies (Lysø, 2009). Overrein and Smidt (2009) asked if there is a trend towards a discourse community where a writing culture for social studies essays, with subject specific concepts, rhetorical tools and societal imagery could replace more traditional essays in the 'mother tongue'. Overrein and Madsen (2014) investigated how basic (oral, reading, writing, counting and digital) skills in social studies may be used to develop critical competencies, here especially mentioning subject-specific conceptual understanding and writing culture.

Knudsen (2013) named her article 'Solidarity with the Sami' and looked at newer social studies textbooks, pointing to steps (from Norwegian authors) towards a revision of hegemonic assimilation practice, but also towards showing Sami resistance towards the said practice while pointing to indigenous and minorities rights. However, a critical intersectional reading shows that this solidarity is ambivalent and primarily identifies with the actors connecting to modernity and majority.

Øgreid (2016) studied writing in social studies for eighth graders. She found that the gradual incorporation of writing frames, accompanied by dialogical guidance from the teacher, is beneficial.

## 7 SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

### 7.1 Summary

Social studies in Norway are situated in an affluent society that has relative equality among citizens, a good welfare system and a rather well-working, but far from perfect, democracy.

In social studies lessons, textbooks still play a significant role. Despite the critical analysis and recommendations from authors, the books are informative, but mostly descriptive with rather little critical thinking. The new curriculum 2020 (see above) emphasised students' criticality, and we can expect different types of textbooks in the future. Data from a random sample of teachers revealed a teacher and textbook approach towards teaching, with additional tasks and material brought to the lessons by the teachers. Despite a curricular goal of student exploration, this teaching approach is still rather rare. Having said this, most students experience collaboration, excursion and research during a school year. Furthermore, many students have good access to technology in classrooms.

Teacher education is being strengthened so that every teacher needs to have a master's degree. To teach social studies, having no specific qualification in primary school will continue to be a challenge. The new curriculum has introduced sustainability, democracy and citizenship and health and mastering of life as compulsory interdisciplinary subjects, which might be promising for the future of social studies in school. Interdisciplinarity has been part of the practice in schools for decades, but is little documented. Since democracy, citizenship and sustainability are core subjects in social studies, there is the option for the social studies teachers to take the 'lead' in the interdisciplinary collaborations in schools. The leading position of social studies might strengthen its position between high stake subjects. Otherwise, the curriculum is national, detailed, compulsory and heavily influenced by the theory of new public management.

There has been some research on random samples of students and teachers, but the ICCS student and teacher data are clearly under researched. Among interesting qualitative research, we wish to point out two issues. First, to the extent that students engage with social and political affairs, they seem to be preoccupied with how they see or present themselves in social and political affairs. Related to this, their engagement is often accompanied by emotions or the issues that matter to them. We believe that social studies teaching should reflect how students are involved in the process of constructing a social and political identity. These processes are always emotional, and the teaching should allow for these emotional processes. Rather than making student the 'target' of predefined knowledge (Hedtke & Zimenkova, 2013), students seem to be in the need of an open climate with a variety of outcomes in their personal orientation.

### 7.2 Further research

Børhaug et al. pointed out that 'even though the society is rapidly changing, there is little debate about what the social studies subject should be, with a few exceptions' (2015, p. 35). The authors further claimed that social studies face didactical challenges. There is, for instance, no agreed-upon didactics in teaching democracy and participation, which reflects the political character of social studies. Thus, the need for accurate and thorough insights into subject didactics for social studies is increasing when it comes to both the content and methods. One subfield that needs to be explored is how students learn the skill sets of discussion and how these skills are assessed (Langø, 2015, p. 157). Another challenge is that social studies lacks an understanding of progress in learning, as discussed by (Børhaug, 2015). The curriculum 2020 implies a very early start at the age of six which certainly requires a clear understanding of children's social and conceptual development and progress in teaching.

Bjørshol and Nolet (2017) suggested that exploration could be the future of didactics and presented a collection of articles on how all subjects in school can be more about in-depth

learning and exploration. In social studies, they promoted exploratory talk in an open classroom climate (Bjørshol & Nolet, 2017).

Generally, social studies teaching and learning from grade 1 in primary school to grade 13 in upper secondary school is under-researched, which is a challenge for scientifically based didactics. Therefore, we would like to see studies from teacher and student perspectives, both qualitative and quantitative. To be more specific, it is important to explore the dynamics of teaching: In what way is it teacher centred? What is the specific role of textbooks compared with other sources of knowledge? Are students more active in the development of their political and social self? A central political issue is whether teaching and learning are dominated by 'legitimation' or 'a critical approach' to the social and political order. Classroom studies in combination with quantitative follow-up research seem particularly appropriate for this. Also, what motivates student learning is important. In a more visionary outlook, we want to point out the following:

- Broadening the scope of critical scholars in professional practice can create cohorts of curious learners who are open to partaking in the tedious tasks of knowledge production for the common good.
- Enabling well-versed teacher researchers to keep eyes on both the social science discipline and social studies professional didactic horizon is important.
- Creating more efficient communication with the larger public and setting agendas for diversity and sustainability in both technology and humanistic practice are crucial.

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