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Article

Between compassion, anger, resignation, and rebellion: Vocational civics teachers and their struggle to fulfil the intentions of the civics subject

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Keywords: civics education, democratic citizenship, vocational training, discourse analysis, street-level bureaucrats

Highlights:
– Civics teachers face challenges in offering male vocational students quality citizenship education.
– Civics teachers perceive this student group as vulnerable and in need of extra support.
– When unable to offer desired civics education, teachers feel angry and resigned.
– Civics teachers are willing to bend certain rules to support this particular student group.
– If this student group lacks better civics education, their future and Sweden's democracy are at risk.

Purpose: This paper examines how vocational civics teachers navigate structural constraints and their understanding of the challenges involved in preparing vocational students for democratic citizenship.

Design/methodology/approach: Using a discursive psychological approach to analyse interview material, the study discusses identified discourses about critical policy analysis and street-level bureaucracy theory.

Findings: The findings reveal that the structure of vocational upper-secondary education significantly constrains civics teachers. Teachers oscillate between feelings of compassion, anger, resignation, and rebellion as they attempt to manage these challenges.

Research limitations/implications: The study highlights the need for further ethnographic research on teaching practices.

Practical implications: A significant number of Swedish upper-secondary students receive a limited civics education that inadequately prepares them for democratic citizenship.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sweden has a long history of striving for an educational system that promotes equality (G. Bergström, 1993; Carlsson, 2006; Englund, 1986; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000; Richardson, 2010). The general ambition of equality has, for example, been manifested in an ambition to provide students with similar educational content, facilitate students' social mobility and avoid "dead ends" where learners are not given the opportunity to re-choose or further develop their academic journey. Key reforms of this endeavour were introducing the 9-year compulsory primary school in 1962 (Qvarsebo, 2018) and introducing a unified upper secondary school in the 1970s when vocational and theoretical upper secondary lines were brought together in a coherent upper secondary school. As late as 1994, this ambition was further advanced concerning the organisation of Swedish upper secondary schools. Now, the curriculum for vocational education was reformed to improve students' eligibility for admittance to higher education, and a range of academic subjects were made mandatory in vocational programs (Lundahl, 2008). This resulted in further standardisation of content and a further reduction of "dead ends", giving Sweden one of the most coherent educational systems in the world at the upper secondary level.

However, this historic strive for weak differentiation between academic and vocational tracks in upper secondary education is being challenged today. Since the 2011 reform, there has been a shift toward a sharper distinction between tracks, leading to a significant divergence in the educational content that different student groups encounter. This is particularly noticeable in civics[1] education (Alexandersson, 2011; Arensmeier, 2018; Nylund, 2013; Nylund et al., 2017). While programs within the academic track still have a 100-credit course in civics (Civics 1b), programs within the vocational track only have a mandatory 50-credit course (Civics 1a1).

Partly due to these changes, teaching civics in vocational programs has become increasingly challenging. Teaching hours are limited, students exhibit significant variability in their prior civics knowledge, and overall levels of democratic knowledge and interest are generally lower among these students compared to their academic track counterparts (Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2003). At the same time, the policy's ambition remains high regarding the democratizing role of upper secondary education, and civics teachers are supposed to ensure that all students develop sufficient knowledge and skills to act as citizens (Gustafsson, 2016). As street-level bureaucrats, civics teachers are therefore compelled to navigate a contradictory terrain, balancing conflicting aims and purposes (cf. Lipsky, 1980/2010). The outcomes of these processes will determine the civics education that this student group ultimately encounters, making it crucial to examine the transformation processes where the formal syllabus is interpreted by the teachers (Diem et al. 2014).

Furthermore, the outcomes of these negotiations are also important at the societal level. Previous research has shown that students in male-dominated vocational school settings need democratic training the most (Ekman & Pilo, 2012; MUCF, 2023; SNAE, 2017). It is a well-known fact that educational attainment is strongly correlated with political views, knowledge and behaviour

[1] In Sweden, the civics subject is a school subject that is studied by all students, from primary school to upper secondary school, to some extent. The subject differs from other school subjects since it does not originate from a single university discipline. According to the syllabi, civics consists of political science, sociology, economics, and "other social science and humanistic and humanities disciplines" (SNAE, 2018). The subject also has a special position in relation to students' citizenship education. Already from its inception, the government has underlined that the subject should safeguard the survival of democracy.

(Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004; Niemi & Junn, 2005; Whiteley, 2009), and these differences also exist when we compare students with different specialisations in their education. For example, large differences have been found between students in different upper secondary school programmes (Persson, 2012). In general, boys, young people with a foreign background, young people in rural areas, and young people with parents with low educational backgrounds show lower levels of political engagement (MUCF, 2023), and it is these students we often meet in vocational programmes' civics classrooms. Therefore, the civics education that this student group encounters can have important implications for democracy. The design of civic education can determine whether the political exclusion of the student group is maintained or challenged

1.1 Aim and research questions

This paper analyzes civics teachers in male-dominated vocational programs as street-level bureaucrats, and it focuses on the complex negotiation processes involved in the teachers' ambitions to fulfil the intentions of the civics syllabi. The specific aim is to analyze how civics teachers represent the challenges they meet when trying to prepare future citizens for democratic citizenship. Based on these perceived problems, I also want to analyze how the teachers discuss potential ways forward and how they look upon their margin of discretion as a way to handle some of the identified difficulties.

- Q1. What challenges are emphasized by teachers when discussing their teaching and their efforts to provide their students with a good-quality civics education?
- Q2. How is the particular group of students discussed by the teachers?
- Q3. How do the teachers discuss their ambitions to offer students a good-quality civics education despite the identified difficulties?

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

2.1 Swedish school system and the historic strive for equality

Sweden has a long history of educational reforms with equality as an overarching goal (G. Bergström, 1993; Carlsson, 2006; Englund, 1986; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000; Richardson, 2010). Already at the end of the 19th century, liberals and social democrats fought for the introduction of common schooling for Swedish children (G. Bergström, 1993; Englund, 1986). In terms of political reforms, this ambition finally materialized when the nation's first education act for comprehensive schooling was introduced in 1962, stipulating a nine-year comprehensive school system throughout the country (Qvarsebo, 2018). The older system of parallel schools with several elementary and secondary school forms was then superseded by a unified and compulsory comprehensive school system for all. Herby, all students were to receive an education that was equal in terms of both substance and quality (G. Bergström & Ekström, 2016). According to Olof Palme's (1997) famous quote, the Swedish school system could now be used as a tool to dismantle the class-based society and could now be used as a "spearhead" towards the future.

Concerning upper secondary education, the strive for equality is mainly seen in the ambition to avoid and postpone definitive choices. With differentiation at a later stage, the possibility of compensating for the social background was assumed to increase (G. Bergström, 1993; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000; Richardson, 2010). Such an ambition is evident in the reform of 1991 (prop. 1990/91:85), where differences between vocational and academic tracks were further diminished

(Lundahl, 2008). The curriculum of the two tracks was equalized, leaving students from both tracks with common knowledgebase, and both groups of students were also eligible for higher education.

However, in the last decades, there has once again been a move towards a more differentiated school system in Sweden. The reform of 2011 (prop./government bill 2008/09:199) constituted a significant break with the previous integration trend, and the ambition of the 1970s and 1980s to postpone definitive choices was replaced with a focus on "students' aptitudes and interests" (prop. 2008/09: 199, p. 38). The vocational track should now take students' different aptitudes and interests seriously, not forcing these students to study an unnecessary amount of theoretical substance. According to the logic of the reform, the previous vocational training had been too academic, resulting in the school failure of many vocational students (prop. 2008/09:199, p. 37). Therefore, vocational training should, from now on, dedicate more teaching hours to vocational studies, creating a better preparation for vocational students' future working life (prop. 2008/09:199, p. 37; SOU/Swedish Government Official Reports 2008:27, p. 342).

In line with such logic, a privileged description in the reform is the need for clarity in secondary education about the purpose of the education (Y. Bergström & Wahlström, 2008). According to the reform, it needs to be clear whether a track aims toward working life or towards higher education. Therefore, the reform clearly divided students into three separate streams: academic track, vocational track, and apprenticeship education and training (SOU 2008:27; prop. 2008/09:199). For students in the vocational track, this led to fewer teaching hours in a range of theoretical subjects, such as civics, and diminished eligibility for higher education[2].

2.2 The establishment of the "democratic school" and the purpose of the Swedish civics subject

In parallel with the aim of promoting social equality through the reform of the Swedish school system, the post-World War II era was marked by a strong drive to create a "democratic school." Here, Swedish schools were envisioned as key players in the broader democratization of society. (Englund, 1986; Richardson, 1978). The new and reformed school system should be based on anti-authoritarian ideals, and students should be socialized into critical individuals rather than obedient nation-state members (Björklund, 2021; R. Olsson, 2016; Sandahl, 2015).

In line with such an ambition, the 1946 school commission also proposed the establishment of a new subject with extra responsibility for the democratic education of Swedish students. This subject, called civics, was introduced in Swedish schools in 1955. Civics lacked a direct academic counterpart in higher education but was an interdisciplinary school subject, drawing influences from academic disciplines such as political science, economics, sociology, and law (Bronäs & Selander, 2002). The school commission in general (Samuelsson et al., 2021), and the civics subject in particular (R. Olsson, 2016), was heavily influenced by progressive education and Dewey's pragmatism. As a result, the civic subject was intended to be a "modern" subject, where students would actively engage in the learning process rather than passively "receiving knowledge" (R. Olsson, 2016).

[2] Before the 2011 reform, all upper-secondary education programmes provided eligibility for higher education. Following the reform, vocational students were required to take additional, non-compulsory courses to qualify for higher education. According to the SNAE (2021b), only 37% of students graduating from vocational programmes in 2019/2020 achieved eligibility for higher education. Due to these low figures, starting from autumn 2023, all courses necessary for higher education eligibility will be reinstated as part of the standard curriculum in vocational programmes. However, these courses will remain non-compulsory for vocational students, meaning they can still choose not to take them.

The introduction of this subject was also an attempt to break away from the traditional and authoritarian history subject, which had previously been responsible for students' democratic training (Bronäs, 2000; Sandahl, 2015). From now on, citizenship training should be broader and more emancipatory, and the civics subject should support students' democratic development in three different ways (Ekman & Pilo, 2012). First, the subject should provide students with knowledge of the components or dimensions of democracy. Who governs? How do elections work? Without this knowledge, students cannot participate in society; if they do not understand how democracy is organized, they cannot exercise their democratic and civil rights.

However, knowledge of society does not automatically lead to students' democratic participation (Solhaug, 2013). Besides knowledge, students must also embrace various democratic values, such as tolerance and trust. Without these values, students are more likely to be susceptible to adopting views such as misogyny or extremism. Lastly, civics should offer students opportunities to practice democratic skills, such as participating in debates and decision-making processes within their school context. Civics should thus provide students with an opportunity to act as citizens, and the civics subject should function as a nursery garden for future democrats (Ekman & Pilo, 2012).

During times, the priority of these aims – to teach knowledge *of*-, values *for*- and training *in* democracy – has shifted. Sandahl (2014, 2015) argues that democratic and civic skills, which could emphasize students' ability to understand societal development and different aspects of political life, are given less importance in the civics syllabus of 2011. Instead, qualifying aspects are emphasized, and the subject is therefore pushed towards focusing on learning about society rather than educating citizens.

2.3 Differences in civics education between different tracks

In general, the vocational curriculum and the civics syllabus of the 2011 reform downplayed the importance of democracy and citizenship education within the civics subject (Y. Bergström & Wahlström, 2008; Nylund, 2013). This was done in two complementary ways. First, teaching hours in civics were cut by 50%, and second, the remaining teaching hours should be tied to the program-specific content of the vocational program (SOU 2008:27, p. 26). As a result, content of great importance for citizenship education, such as knowledge of political economy, mass media, political ideologies and methods in social sciences, was excluded from the civics syllabi of the vocational track. These changes are in line with the general ambition of the reform. In the final report from the Committee that prepared the reform, it is stated that the orientation of the upper-secondary program (vocational or academic) should have a high impact on the design and content of the upper-secondary education from the student's very first day (SOU 2008:27, p. 23).

The differentiation between tracks has also been analysed in relation to civics textbooks. Aligning with the vocational syllabi's decreased emphasis on analytical skills, Cecilia Arensmeier (2018) shows that textbooks produced for vocational programs do not offer students relevant analytical training. Vocational students are primarily expected to learn basic factual knowledge, whereas students in the academic track receive more advanced training both in terms of content and cognitive skills.

Similar results are also found with teaching practices. Based on observations of teaching, Gustafsson (2016) has demonstrated that students in different tracks are not given the same preparation for their future roles as democratic citizens. While students in the academic track are taught how to analyze societal issues, vocational track students are taught how to memorize and repeat factual knowledge. Similarly, while students in the academic track are positioned as subjects who

are supposed to take an active part in democracy in the future, students in the vocational track are positioned as subjects who hopefully will follow laws and regulations (Gustafsson, 2016).

These results align with Möllenborg's (2023) study, which shows that different conditions exist for civics teaching in different upper secondary programs. The shorter civics course that vocational students attend is based on an emphasis on students' personal responsibilities (such as being law-abiding citizens) and a lack of problematising abilities and in-depth knowledge of political ideologies.

Similar findings are also evident in studies on vocational students' workplace learning. Although studies have shown potential for citizenship learning during these periods, this possibility seems to have been missed, according to student interviews (Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021). While students have experienced themes relevant to citizenship education during their workplace learning, these themes aren't picked up by either the workplace or the civics teachers in the school setting.

In light of these findings, analysing how teachers view and try to manage the democratic training of male vocational students becomes urgent. How can you teach civics to students who desperately need these skills when both textbooks and curriculum impose severe constraints? How do teachers try to side-step these constraints? What possibilities and problems do teachers identify within the structural demands of their work? In light of this, it is also relevant to ask broader questions as to whether the traditional aim of the Swedish civics subject – to integrate students with working class background into society in a social, economic, and democratic fashion – is abandoned and if civics teaching today primarily is a way to reproduce class-based differences.

3 Theory

The theoretical framework of this study is two-pronged. The article initially builds on the street-level bureaucracy theory, which focuses on the structural limitations of teachers' work when trying to fulfil the ambitions of the existing curriculum and syllabi.

Furthermore, this study employs critical policy analysis to analyse policy documents and teachers' interpretations of documents. This theoretical framework also highlights the necessity of not only looking at formal policy documents alone; teachers' understanding of policy documents will influence what is addressed in the classroom. Critical policy theory is also valuable for identifying how certain understandings of policy documents tend to coexist with broader power structures.

3.1 Theory of street-level bureaucracy and the potential alienation of street-level bureaucrats

The decision to employ Michael Lipsky's theory on street-level bureaucrats is largely driven by its emphasis on the micro level of policymaking, which directly relates to teachers' day-to-day work. A key premise of the theory is that street-level bureaucrats are the ones who actually produce public policy, positioning the theory with a clear bottom-up perspective on politics and public policy-making (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). Street-level bureaucrats have this potential to produce public policy because street-level bureaucrats always exercise discretion. Since their work is highly complex, it is impossible to design rules to be followed in every circumstance.

The theory of street-level bureaucrats further highlights many of the conditions under which the teachers in this study work. First, the theory points to the bureaucrat's scarcity of resources, such as time. Lipsky (1980/2010) points out that street-level bureaucrats generally have an intense workload and, therefore, seldom have time to reflect on their practice. In the context of vocational

training in Swedish upper secondary education, this is evident in the cut of teaching hours in civics. Today, civics teachers must cover almost the same course content in half the teaching hours.

Secondly, street-level bureaucrats must deal with conflicting goals. Policy actors in the earlier stages of the policy process may decide on vague or contradictory policies, leaving street-level bureaucrats responsible for interpreting and balancing these competing objectives (Lipsky, 1980/2010). In the context of this study, this is evident in the diverse learning goals that civics teachers are expected to fulfil. For instance, the current civics syllabus (SNAE, 2011/2018) aims to both foster democratic citizens and ensure students are equipped with the necessary skills to function effectively in the labour market.

Thirdly, the theory underlines that there might be elements of coercion involved in street-level bureaucrats' work and that public service clients may be reluctant to receive or use the service (Lipsky, 1980/2010). This is relevant since students may be unwilling to attend upper secondary school in general and to learn a theoretical subject in particular.

As evident from the discussion, street-level bureaucrats thus work in contexts that are conditioned by structures that severely impact their work. Lack of resources, conflicting goals, and reluctant policy users may hinder the ambitions of civil servants, i.e., teachers. Teachers are often also guided by a sense of altruism, like many street-level bureaucrats, in that they aim to do well and help young citizens. However, structural conditions may circumscribe these ambitions, causing a sense of alienation, a lack of influence, motivation, and a sense of belonging (Lipsky, 1980/2010). This idea of potential alienation among street-level bureaucrats has been further developed by Tummers et al. (2009), who address the concept of alienation as having two dimensions: powerlessness and meaninglessness. In the first category, powerlessness can be experienced when street-level bureaucrats are excluded from policy formulation or when they don't get to implement policies in their preferred way. In the second category, meaninglessness may be experienced when street-level bureaucrats perceive policy as inadequate to achieve the intended goal or when the policy is not perceived as beneficial to clients (Tummers, 2011, 2012).

3.2 Critical policy analysis

The second theoretical framework is critical policy analysis. This umbrella category has five key features constituting this theoretical field (Diem et al. 2014). First, attention is often given to the difference between policy rhetoric and practised reality. In this article, this is reflected in the interest in the transformation and negotiation processes where the formal writings of the syllabus are to be realised in the classroom. This ambition is also evident in discussions concerning the difference between the formulation and realization arenas (Linde, 2012; Lindensjö & Lundgren 1986, 2000). Formal policy documents will only have limited potential to govern teaching practice since professional teachers will always establish the exact meaning of the curricula (Jarl & Rönnberg, 2010). The curricula and the syllabi always leave room for discretion and professional judgment (see previous discussions on Lipsky's theory). Therefore, a central premise of the theory is that a transformation process will take place as teachers make sense of the policy documents (Linde, 2012; Öberg, 2019). Because of this process, we must analyse what is happening in the transformation- and realisation arenas (Linde, 2012; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 1986, 2000). This focus becomes even more critical in a decentralised and differentiated school system like the Swedish (Berg, 2003). Furthermore, this arena is especially significant to the particular subject of civics, as the Swedish curricula and syllabi provide extensive freedom and responsibility for teachers to interpret and design

civics teaching (Björklund, 2021; Hudson, 2002; Karlefjärd, 2011; Lindmark, 2013; R. Olsson, 2016; Sandahl, 2015).

The second focus of critical policy analysis is on the origin and development of policy. Scholars are interested in understanding how policy emerged, what problems it was intended to solve, how it changed and developed over time, and its role in reinforcing dominant culture (Diem et al., 2014). Scholars might seek historical and contextual clues to better understand policy changes, conditions, and results (Brewer, 2014).

A third concern is the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge and the creation of "winners" and "losers". Here, the unit of analysis may be the site of implementation or who gets what, when, and how (Diem et al. 2014). In the article, such a focus is evident in analysing whether male students in vocational programs are offered equal possibilities to act as citizens.

Social stratification, a fourth and related concern, focuses on the broader effects a given policy has on relationships between inequality and privilege. Questions such as: Does policy X somehow reinforce or reproduce social injustices and inequalities become important (Diem et al., 2014)? This focus relates to the discussions on whether the reform consolidates the initial differences between students in different tracks and whether class-based inequalities are being reproduced or challenged.

Finally, many critical policy scholars also focus on members of non-dominant groups who resist processes of domination and who engage in activism (Diem et al., 2014). This is reflected in the articles' focus on teachers' resistance to some of the intentions and guidelines of the reform in order to help students who are being targeted by the reform.

4 METHOD AND MATERIAL

4.1 Material

The article's material mainly consists of 16 semi-structured individual interviews conducted between the autumn of 2021 and the fall of 2022. The semi-structured characteristic of the interviews implies that the interviews have been guided by a range of themes – such as the respondent's view on the aim of the civic subject, their preferred teaching methods, and their view of the particular student group – and that the interviews have had a conversational style concerning these themes. About half of the interviews were conducted in person, but respondents living more than a 2-hour drive from Stockholm were interviewed digitally. The interviews lasted about 60-90 minutes and have been fully transcribed. All quotes have been translated into English by the author.

The respondents have all taught in male-dominated vocational programs such as the Vehicle & Transport program. In addition, the selection of respondents has been guided by an ambition to capture different sexes, geographic locations, and employers. This diversity in respondents' backgrounds is crucial, as teachers' education, interests, and values have previously been shown to influence their teaching focus (Lindmark, 2013). The interviewed teachers had all finished teacher education and had between 3 and 16 years of teaching experience. These teachers can, therefore, be described as experienced teachers, which is significant since experience is often described as a key factor in developing teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987).

In addition to the interview material, the analysis is also based on formal policy documents. The government bill (prop. 2008/09: 199) and the official Report of the Swedish Government about this reform (SOU 2008:27) were analysed to understand the reform's underlying logic. The curriculum

and the civics syllabi of 2011 (SNAE, 2011/2018, revised 2018) were also analysed to comprehend the changes the reform introduced concerning the civics subject. However, since the article focuses on the transformation and realisation arena and how the teachers interpret and implement the reform, these policy documents receive less emphasis in the analysis within the results section.

4.2 Method of analysis – Discursive psychology and the search for interpretative repertoires

When analyzing the transcribed material, the discourse-oriented method known as discursive psychology (DP) was employed (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). This discourse analytical approach views individuals as both producers of and produced by discourses. Wetherell (1998) and Wetherell and Potter (1992) emphasise that discourses should not be considered independent causal agents. Instead, individuals are expected to creatively use existing perceptions to modify or reproduce specific understandings of events or occurrences. This middle position regarding questions of agency and structure aligns with the theory of street-level bureaucracy previously discussed (Lipsky, 1980/2010). In this theory, subjects are also perceived as operating within certain limitations and structures, yet these structures can be transcended under certain circumstances.

DP is often applied to interview material (Potter, 2012), and the method aims to capture societal discourses rather than the respondents' true, inner beliefs. This understanding is consistent with the methodological discussions of Carol Bakers (2002). Here, the goal of interviews is never to fully reveal a true version of the respondent's inner life; instead, the material is viewed as co-constructed by the interviewer and the respondent. Similarly, interviews do not provide a mirror image of the external world; rather, the external world is also reproduced in the interview context.

More specifically, a DP analysis is often guided by a search for interpretative repertoires, which can be understood as small-scale discourses. Unlike a focus on broader and overarching social discourses assumed to dominate an entire sphere, discursive psychologists emphasize the existence of variation and point to the fact that debates and spheres are often characterized by competing views (Wetherell, 1998). Such a more fragmented way of looking at meaning is captured by the central DP concept of interpretative repertoire, which commonly is described as: "a recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterizations of actors and situations. Such repertoires become evident through repetition across a corpus" (Edley & Wetherell, 2001, p. 443).

In the search for the repertoires, one may also search for feelings and emotions embedded within them. Over the past decade, one of the founders of DP, Margaret Wetherell (2012, 2013), has elaborated DP to build a more productive dialogue between rich discourse studies traditions and new research lines on affect and emotion. Building on the renewed interest in the role of affect and emotion in social science, Wetherell, on the one hand, has emphasized how affect cannot be neglected in the study of discourse. Still, on the other hand, she has also stressed that affect isn't something that goes beyond or past discourse. Instead, Wetherell (2013) concludes that "talk, body action, affect, material contexts and social relations assemble *in situ*" (p. 351). This combination has led advocates of DP to focus on affective-discursive repertoires as a methodological tool to address the entanglements of embodiment and discourse. These repertoires are open-ended, intertwined affective–discursive patterns people draw upon to explain and discuss societal issues. Therefore, in addition to the previously described focus on a recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations, the focus on affective-discursive repertoires also considers how feelings and emotions become evident in the repertoires.

The following results section is organised around four affective-discursive repertoires in line with this approach. In these repertoires, the respondents discuss the civics subject and the possibilities and challenges involved in their teaching practices as linked to four emotions: compassion, anger, resignation, and a mood of rebellion.

5 RESULTS

5.1 The affective-discursive repertoire of compassion and confidence building

Throughout the interviews, a recurring theme is the difficulties faced by this student group. The teachers highlight issues such as students' working-class background, the presence of neurodevelopmental disorders, and a general sense of low self-esteem stemming from a history of school failure. Due to these challenges, the interviewed teachers emphasise the importance of prioritising relationship-building work, which they consider essential to their role. They describe it as their duty to help these students develop a more positive sense of self. When asked about the challenges involved in teaching this student group, one teacher, for example, responded:

> I think the biggest challenge is probably their self-esteem. Because there's many students in vocational program who… well some have a clear picture of what they want to do, but then there are the students who just don't see their own capacity in the theoretical subjects, and because of that they protect themselves by avoiding them. And many of them, a lot of them, have learning difficulties, so their self-esteem is really low in these kinds of subjects. (Respondent 7)

Due to these challenges, the interviewed teachers often emphasise the importance of recognising these students and helping them build confidence. This sense of compassion and responsibility is also evident in the teachers' discussions about the extra time and energy they dedicate to helping these students. For instance, one teacher describes how s/he visits vocational students during their practical placements in her/his own spare time. According to the teacher, such visits are crucial as they provide an opportunity for the students to demonstrate a range of skills, thereby helping the students to rebuild their confidence:

> So when I had the possibility, I used to go down to visit them in the machine shop. For these students, to be able to show their teacher that "Look, I actually know some things!" Because writing argumentative texts with me in Language 1, like they just hate it. And they feel bad. They are already from lower secondary and used to feel bad, and now I also will think that they are bad. So then I went down to the machine shop, and there they could shine. And they looked at me like, "Look, I am not completely stupid!". (Respondent 5)

In addition to emphasising the importance of supporting this particular student group, many teachers also highlight that working with these students brings them an additional sense of satisfaction:

> I like working with this student group very much, and I feel that I can make a huge difference in these young people's lives. If I enter [name of an upper secondary school with high achieving students], I would make a marginal difference. Those kids will manage just great anyway. However, with my students, some of them have been criminals, too, and you can really change someone's path in life. (Respondent 6)

Despite structural limitations, such as limited time and potentially unmotivated students (cf. Lipsky, 1980/2010), it is evident that the interviewed teachers remain deeply committed to this

student group and derive significant fulfilment from working with them. This points to the first affective-discursive repertoire identified in the material: a repertoire characterised by recurrent descriptions of students in need and a strong sense of obligation to help these students regain confidence in themselves and their future. Aligned with Lipsky's discussion on street-level bureaucrats, this repertoire thereby reflects a strong sense of altruism on behalf of the teachers. Interpreting this repertoire through the lens of critical policy theory, we can also conclude that the altruistic attitude of these teachers may serve as a means to support a vulnerable group (cf. Bacchi, 2009). In their efforts to support these students, teachers may be seen as engaging in social activism (Diem et al., 2014), providing crucial additional support. They provide extra assistance, which can be especially significant for those from working-class backgrounds (cf. Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021).

5.2 The affective-discursive repertoire of anger toward an unjust system

According to the previous discussion, the teachers perceive students in male-dominated vocational programs as facing various difficulties. Consequently, they are frustrated that the current civics curriculum does not support these students' civics learning but rather hinders it. As noted earlier, the 2011 reform halved the teaching hours for civics in vocational students. Before the reform, both academic and vocational tracks included a compulsory 100-credit civics course, but after the reform, only a 50-credit course (Civics 1a1) became mandatory for vocational students. Despite excluding content such as political economy, mass media, and political ideologies from the 50-credit course syllabi, there remains significant overlap between the content of the 50-credit and the 100-credit courses. The teachers, therefore, argue that the reduction in teaching hours has not been accompanied by a proportional reduction in the civics syllabus. As a result, vocational students are required to learn nearly the same amount of material and competencies as their academic counterparts, who benefit from twice as many teaching hours:

> I feel that it is easier for students who take the Civics 1b course [the 100-credit course] to finish the course, than what it is for students who take the 1a1 course [50-credit course]. It is a difficult course because there is so much substance. It is democracy, government, human rights and public international law, etc. etc. etc. It leaves very little space for the things the students actually find interesting, like current societal events, media and stuff like that. (Respondent 1)

The overlap between the two courses is even more pronounced when considering the grading criteria. Students are required to achieve nearly the same outcomes to obtain a particular grade (SNAE, 2011/2018) despite having only half the time to learn and demonstrate their skills compared to their academic counterparts. According to the teachers, this situation is further exacerbated because vocational students typically require more time than those in academic tracks. One teacher describes the 50-credit course as "an act of abuse," arguing that it imposes higher demands on students who generally struggle more with academic subjects compared to their peers in academic tracks:

> I can only tell you this, the 1a1 course is not a course, it is an act of abuse. I don't know how the person in question has thought this through, because the way I see it this really isn't sane. (…) This means that those with the least theoretical qualifications have a course that is more difficult than the one students in the social science program [an upper secondary program in the academic track] have. Those students are given more time for specialisation, more chances to redo things. And if you look at the grading criteria, you see they are very similar, there is very little difference between 1a1 and 1b. So that means that they have less time, but they are to finish almost as much. They are supposed to show just as many competencies but in a shorter time. I mean, it is insane. (Respondent 12)

Taken together, there is an affective-discursive repertoire in the material that highlights the perceived unfairness of the current system and its detrimental impact on the student group. The repertoire is tied together by recurrent descriptions of injustice and unfairness, and the phrase "act of abuse" can be seen as a vivid image holding the repertoire together (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The affective-discursive repertoire is also deeply imbued with emotional affect (cf. Wetherell, 2012, 2013); the descriptions of injustice, abuse, and insanity ooze feelings of anger and disappointment.

In relation to the previous theoretical discussions of winners and losers in policy proposals (Bacchi, 2009), it is evident that teachers view this reform as exacerbating the division between different student groups. Teachers repeatedly point out that the 2011 reform provided vocational students fewer opportunities to succeed in their civics classes compared to their fellow students in academic tracks. In the short term, this situation results in vocational students facing inequitable conditions regarding attaining higher grades. Over the long term, it undermines the compensatory aims of the Swedish education system (SFS 2010:800). Rather than addressing disparities, the current system reinforces them by providing more support to students who are already in a more advantageous position. Instead of compensating for initial differences in knowledge and motivation, the reform effectively diminishes the opportunities for underachieving and less motivated students to improve their understanding and skills in civics.

5.3 The affective-discursive repertoire of resignation and restricted possibilities to achieve the intended aims of the civics subject

If teachers, according to the previous repertoire, responded with anger towards the harsh structural conditions, there is also a parallel response where resignation seems to be the answer. This response aligns with previous discussions on alienation, powerlessness and meaninglessness (Lipsky, 1980/2010; Tummers, 2011, 2012). Responses that can be interpreted as a coping mechanism in a context where structural constraints appear to overwhelm teachers' efforts to support young citizens effectively.

In this repertoire, the reform is frequently described as inadequate in conveying the comprehensive nature of the civics subject and preparing vocational students for active civic participation. Teachers consistently attribute the reform's shortcomings to insufficient teaching hours, and the predominant concern voiced by teachers is the lack of time allocated for instruction. When asked about the primary challenge in teaching civics to this student group, one teacher answered: "For me, it's really the structure, it's too little time. It's too much substance and too little time" (Respondent 12).

The concern regarding insufficient teaching hours is also reflected in teachers' observations about how these limitations impede more advanced discussions. Teachers note that the scarcity of teaching time results in merely scratching the surface of the subject, as articulated by the following observations:

> You must almost have the approach that we are only scratching the surface here. It's more of a recognition factor, when they get out, they might have some kind of compass. However, they want to be able to know, but there's no room for that in a 50-credit course. (Respondent 7)

According to the teachers, this lack of time and depth further leads to several adverse side effects. Due to the scarcity of teaching hours, teachers repeatedly explain that important competencies must be downplayed in favour of factual knowledge. The course is described as containing an enormous amount of content, and to address this breadth, essential competencies such as analytical skills, democratic norms, and democratic actions are consequently reduced (Arensmeier, 2018;

Gustafsson, 2016; Rosvall & Nylund, 2022). In line with the current civics syllabus, the teaching practice thereby prioritises knowledge of democracy at the expense of democratic values and training in democracy. Civics education is thus shifted towards learning about society rather than fostering active citizenship (Sandahl, 2014).

In the following quote, one teacher, for example, discusses how s/he tends to prioritise factual knowledge at the expanse of both analytical skills and democratic values, even though these competencies could be highly relevant for this particular student group:

> The factual knowledge is always covered to some extent, I think, but it's trickier with the [analytical] tools. It's difficult to teach someone to think critically or to have an analytical approach in just one school year. However, something else that is also lost is the teaching of democratic norms and values. Because this is really also something that's connected to the creation of democratic citizens. And it really exists quite a lot of intolerance in these groups, mainly sexism, homophobia but also pure racism. Concerning those parts, it takes a longer time to process these values. So, I guess you don't always succeed with that part (Respondent 6)

Further on, teachers explain that by focusing on covering the knowledge component, students can at least pass the course (cf. Gustafsson, 2016). However, passing the course does not necessarily equate to possessing the competencies required for democratic participation. As previously noted, knowledge of society does not automatically translate into democratic engagement (Solhaug, 2013). In addition to knowledge, students need to embrace a range of democratic values, such as tolerance and trust. Without these values, students may be susceptible to adapting, for example, misogynistic or extremist views. Similarly, Malin Tväråna (2019) has emphasized that factual knowledge is insufficient for preparing students for democratic participation. According to Tväråna, students must engage in critical thinking during their education; without such opportunities, students will be as unprepared for civic participation as swimmers who have only studied theoretical knowledge are unprepared for actual swimming.

The lost opportunities for practising democratic competencies are particularly evident when considering students' potential to engage in democratic activities within their own school context. According to policy documents, students are expected to develop future democratic participation by progressively increasing their opportunities to influence their educational environment (Ekman & Pilo, 2012; SNAE, 2021a). Unfortunately, opportunities for practical democratic training – such as participating in debates and decision-making processes – seem to be missed. When asked whether and how students might experience training in democratic participation, one teacher responded.

> Well, here, time also matters. Sometimes, it feels like it is easier if I just plan the whole thing and implement it. But of course, I pose general questions like 'What are your views?' and 'How do you learn the best?'. (Respondent 4)

Rather than having the opportunity to experience how participation functions in practice, students are, according to the respondents, often left with minimal opportunities to influence their teaching environment (cf. Gustafsson, 2016; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021). Teachers attribute this situation partly to time constraints, noting that it is more efficient for them to make decisions themselves. Additionally, the lack of student influence is discussed in relation to students' perceived disinterest in their schooling. Thus, teachers describe students as disengaged from their education, resulting in teachers making all the decisions (cf. Carlsson, 2006). However, another potential explanation is that students do not engage because they are not accustomed to participation.

Consequently, students must be taught how to participate to effectively utilize their opportunities to influence their learning environment.

Students' previously discussed subordinate role is also evident in the teaching methods employed. The interviewed teachers emphasize that the lack of time compels them to rely on teacher-centred approaches. The teachers describe this as “traditional teaching” or “square teaching” or “boring teaching”. When asked about how time constraints influence their teaching practice, one teacher, for example, responds:

> It feels like the teaching becomes quite “traditional”. They enter the classroom, a short lecture, maybe some individual work with some questions they’ve been given the answers to in the lecture… it feels like it would have been fun to challenge them a bit, to sort of put more responsibility on them to search for information, and it could have been in some area of their own interest, but you really don’t have time to go that deep…. Most of the groups also only have one class a week, and then it’s a field day some week, and you don’t see each other in two weeks... it’s a lot like you fight as a teacher just to cover the most essential, and then you don’t have the time to challenge them and maybe to have them work more on projects, so that you could give them loose reins and actually give them responsibility
>
> Interviewer: You feel that they could manage such a responsibility?
>
> Respondent: Yes, they would, but it’s more that you don’t think that there is enough time (Respondent 4)

The teacher-centered approach evident in this repertoire represents a clear break with the historical objectives of the civics subject. When civics was introduced in Swedish schools, it was intended to be a “modern” subject in which students actively participated in the learning process rather than passively receiving knowledge (R. Olsson, 2016). Drawing on Dewey’s ideas about student-centred teaching methods, the subject was designed to engage students as active participants in knowledge construction, providing opportunities for discussions, debates, and exploring students’ questions and perspectives. Furthermore, the presence of debate and deliberation is often highlighted as beneficial to civic education (Andersson, 2012; Dassonneville et al., 2012; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Torney-Purta, 2002), and the lack of such possibilities are therefore impacting negatively on this student group.

Overall, structural limitations – primarily the lack of time – appear to foster a sense of despair and resignation among the teachers. They feel it is impossible to achieve the goals that should be prioritized, leading to a focus on providing learning experiences in the least detrimental way. According to the street-level bureaucracy theory, this sense of meaninglessness and alienation can arise when street-level bureaucrats perceive the policy as inadequate for achieving its intended goals or unsuitable for their clients (Tummers, 2011, 2012). In this context, teachers do not believe that this approach to teaching civics aligns with the overarching goals of the subject, nor do they feel it effectively motivates this particular student group. Students who require motivation through inspirational teaching methods are, for example, subjected to lectures that teachers themselves describe as boring or “square.”

5.4 The affective-discursive repertoire of a mood to rebel and an aspiration to bend the rules

Based on the understanding that vocational students are mistreated and that civics teaching in vocational programmes doesn’t give students a sufficiently deep understanding of democracy,

teachers in the study also discuss ways to handle these situations. Teachers describe how they occasionally bend the rules to address perceived flaws in the current educational system, reflecting the focus on discretion in Lipsky's (1980/2010) theory. The teachers thereby use their autonomy to personally fix some of the perceived problems with the reform. Concerning the limited and factual focus on vocational civics teaching, some teachers discuss how they add content to their teaching, even though these aspects aren't included in the syllabi. Some teachers describe, for example, how they emphasize political ideologies since these are considered crucial for students' future democratic participation:

> To be honest, I add things that don't exist because I agree with my colleague that you can't talk about politics or democracy without talking about ideologies. (Respondent 1)

Another teacher motivated her/his decision to incorporate this focus with reference to the students' interests. Since the students were first-time voters, they had requested an ideological analysis of the parties (Respondent 10).

Even in relation to assessment and grading practices, teachers discuss how they sometimes bend the rules and utilize their discretion. Many highlight the ambiguity in policy documents concerning the role of written presentations, using this uncertainty to structure their assessments in ways that benefit students. Since the policy does not explicitly mandate that students demonstrate their knowledge through written work, many teachers largely forgo written tests and assignments. Instead, they opt for oral assessments, which they believe make it easier for students to demonstrate their understanding (cf. Respondent 2).

Another strategy to help students achieve a passing grade is through adopting a more holistic approach to assessment. One teacher, for example, mentions considering not only the results students have demonstrated but also the potential they perceive the student to possess.

> I had a colleague, and he always said "Can this student carry this grade?", in other words, can this student live up to it later? Even if the student may not be able to show everything now, on paper, but can this student, does this student have so much with him that I know that the teaching has produced results, then you can choose it [the pass grade]. And I think it's a reasonable attitude – and it's against all the rules and stuff – but maybe you can't always judge by results, but by expectations or potential. (Respondent 12)

Since the system is perceived as unjust to these students, teachers view these practices as compensatory measures. From the perspective of critical policy analysis, this can be seen as a form of social activism and a way of resisting processes of domination (Diem et al., 2014). Teachers adhere to rules and guidelines, but they do so with the intent of supporting students disadvantaged by the reform. Such actions can be linked to discussions of bureaucratic activism (cf. J. Olsson & Hysing, 2019), raising important questions about whether this form of activism undermines the democratic system by circumventing established rules or, conversely, serves as a vital example of professional ethics in practice (Bornemark, 2018).

6 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this paper, I have shown how the interviewed teachers draw on four different affective-discursive repertoires when discussing their civics teaching in male-dominated vocational programs. These repertoires collectively illuminate the teachers' perceptions of the significant challenges inherent in their teaching practice. Central to their concerns is the lack of time and the overwhelming number of objectives to be achieved in the civics classroom, which often leads to

feelings of anger and disappointment. Even before the reduction in teaching hours, both researchers and teachers emphasized the fragmented nature of the civics subject and the challenges in fulfilling its objectives (Bronäs & Selander, 2002; Sandahl, 2018). These issues have only been exacerbated by recent changes.

Moreover, the teachers express that their students are not offered a fair opportunity to succeed in their studies, while the teachers themselves are not provided with the necessary conditions to deliver high-quality civics education. This can lead to a sense of resignation. The structural limitations compel teachers to continue delivering a civics education that they themselves view as suboptimal, lacking the ability to organize their teaching in a manner that aligns with both their professional preferences and the recommendations of previous research. As a result, teachers risk experiencing feelings of alienation (Lipsky, 1980/2010; Tummers et al., 2009). Teachers are fully aware of what is needed to provide students with a high-quality education, but they lack the necessary resources and conditions to implement it effectively.

In line with the focus of street-level bureaucrats' altruism, it is also evident that the teachers are fulfilled by the mission to help this group of students. The teachers describe this student group as facing numerous challenges and often perceive them as having been inadequately supported during their previous schooling. This educational background highlights the need for additional support; however, under the current system, these students continue to face injustices. Therefore, the teachers' sense of responsibility and care motivates them to address these issues by bending existing rules and regulations. For instance, they utilize their discretion (Lipsky, 1980/2010) to interpret grading criteria in ways that better support the students' success.

At a broader level, the structural barriers faced by teachers impact not only the educators and students but also the Swedish school system and Swedish democracy. When students receive limited teaching in democratic values and democratic participation, a potential democratic space in the Swedish education system seems to be neglected. If the potential of civic education is only partially realized for this specific group of students, it raises questions about whether the educational system still upholds the traditional principle of "a school for all" (SOU 2020: 28)? The student group with the lowest levels of trust in democracy should reasonably receive the most rigorous and in-depth civics education, but here the situation seems to be the opposite (cf. Rosvall & Nylund, 2022). Thus, the Swedish school system no longer seems to work as a "spearhead" toward the future (Palme, 1997) but rather as a class-reducing system. This situation is troubling not only in terms of the Swedish school's compensatory duty (cf. G. Bergström & Ekström, 2016) but also for the broader development of Swedish democracy. Male students in vocational tracks exhibit the lowest levels of political trust and engagement (Ekman & Pilo, 2012; MUCF, 2023; SNAE, 2017). If we wish to prevent them from turning away from democracy toward alternatives like populism, it is essential to provide them with the highest quality civic education.

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