



PhD Revisited: Students' Perceptions of Democracy, Politics, and Citizenship Preparation and Implications for Social Studies Education¹

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Abstract

While several studies have investigated young people's attitudes towards and participation in democracy and politics, as well as the influence of citizenship education on young people's political participation, few studies have explored students' perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics and their own perceptions of citizenship education. The purpose of this study is to investigate the theme of democracy and politics in social studies in upper secondary school. Methodologically, this study relied on multiple methods of data collection and analysis to investigate students' perceptions: Qualitative focus groups and interviews and a quantitative survey. To analyse students' perceptions, I drew on citizenship education literature, focusing on the role and teaching of school subjects such as social studies, as well as political theory, focusing on theoretical perspectives on the concepts of democracy and politics. The findings show that the students perceived 'democracy' and 'politics' both in terms of top-down notions of government and other political institutions and bottom-up perspectives focused on discussions and other non-institutional aspects of democratic politics. Moreover, the findings indicate that students perceived social studies as valuable in terms of preparing them for current and future citizenship and that their enjoyment and aspects of instruction were most strongly associated with these perceptions.

Keywords: social studies didactics; citizenship education; democracy; politics

Introduction

The purpose of this study within social studies didactics is to investigate three aspects of the theme of *democracy and politics in social studies*, namely students' perceptions of

¹ This text presents the overall results of a doctoral study (Mathé, 2019) from the University of Oslo (PhD thesis defended 4th April, 2019). This is an article-based thesis, with three published articles (Mathé, 2016; Mathé, 2018; Mathé & Elstad, 2018). The thesis in its entirety can be found here:

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the concept of democracy, students' perceptions of the concept of politics, and students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in upper secondary social studies in Norway.

While young people's perspectives on democracy, politics, and citizenship are influenced by a diverse range of experiences and sources, education in school represents one of society's main attempts to provide children and young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values deemed appropriate and necessary for them to care for and contribute to that society (Biesta, 2011a; Olson, 2009; Solhaug, 2018). One of the most emphasised forms of preparation is that of citizenship education (Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Sandahl, 2015). In democratic countries, a central aspect of this education is preparing young people to understand and participate in democratic processes to ensure that they engage in and exert their influence on democratic politics. Citizenship education is organised in different ways in different countries. A *stand-alone approach* indicates that one school subject is dedicated entirely to citizenship education, an *integrated approach* indicates that citizenship education is integrated with other topics in a school subject, and a *cross-curricular approach* indicates that citizenship education is taught across school subjects (Eurydice, 2017). In Norway, citizenship education is taught through both a cross-curricular approach and an integrated approach in the subject of social studies. Indeed, Solhaug (2013) argued that 'as a research field for citizenship and education, "social studies" is very relevant' (p. 182).

Several studies have investigated young people's attitudes towards and participation in democracy and politics (e.g., Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007; Huang et al., 2017; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, & Agrusti, 2017; White, Bruce, & Ritchie, 2000), as well as the influence of citizenship education on young people's political participation (e.g., Kahne & Spote, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Pontes, Henn, & Griffiths, 2017). However, few studies have addressed the question of *how* young people perceive the concepts of democracy (Arensmeier, 2010; Avery, Levy, Simmons, & Scarlett, 2013; Flanagan, 2012) and politics (Harris & Wyn, 2009; Manning, 2010; O'Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007; White et al., 2000), and how students themselves perceive the social studies subject in terms of citizenship preparation. Moreover, these themes are central to the subject of social studies in school, particularly in light of the subject's reliance on different perspectives, for example from the social sciences, social structures and topical issues, students' experiences and interests, and a foundation of democratic values (Christensen, 2015). To address this gap in research, the overarching aim of this study was to investigate 16- to 17-year-old students' perceptions of the core concepts of democracy and politics and aspects of citizenship preparation in the social studies subject in Norwegian upper secondary school.

Theoretical framework

To analyse students' perceptions, I drew on citizenship education literature, focusing on the role and teaching of school subjects such as social studies, as well as political theory, focusing on theoretical perspectives on the concepts of democracy and politics. To frame

the role of the school subject of social studies, I drew both on Christensen's (2015) model of knowledge domains in social studies and Davies' (2015) framework of citizenship education in school. Using citizenship education and political theory to understand students' perceptions of core concepts and citizenship preparation in social studies aligns with Christensen's (2015) model of knowledge domains in the *social studies subject*, which includes topical issues and social structures and processes; students' lifeworld (for example their own curiosity and experiences); social science disciplines; and democratic values (Christensen, 2015, p. 23).

Davies (2015) suggested three main characteristics of *citizenship education* in school. First, citizenship education is concerned with contemporary content. Second, citizenship education depends fundamentally on conceptual understanding. Third, a commitment to social justice should permeate citizenship education in school. These aspects of social studies and citizenship education in school are reflected both in the interview guides and in the survey instrument I used to collect data for the present study.

Concerning political theory, I have approached democracy and politics as contested concepts. This implies that theorists and others have disagreed on their meaning and that multiple ways of understanding and using them are widespread. The contested nature of these concepts is a justification for the importance of exploring how young people understand and perceive them: that is, investigating students' perceptions of these concepts is not aimed at uncovering misconceptions or how much they know about them, but at learning what meaning the students themselves assign to these concepts.

To include different approaches to democracy, I built on three theoretical perspectives, namely liberal, participatory, and deliberative democracy (e.g., Barber, 1984; Cohen, 2002; Dahl, 1998; Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1995, 1999; Pateman, 1970; Schumpeter, 1994). These three theoretical strands present different ways of understanding the relationship between people and government in a democracy. Specifically, these perspectives have different views on the role and responsibility of the state and the role and responsibility of its citizens.

I used political theory to present some key dimensions of the concept of politics (Barry, 2000; Held, 1991; Leftwich, 2004; Mouffe, 1993, 2005; Schmitt, 1996). I outlined such dimensions to allow for students' various associations to politics, which can be a difficult concept to grasp. In political theory, definitions of politics range from most human activities to state-linked conceptions (Barry, 2000; Held, 1991).

Applying Christensen's (2015) model to the overarching theoretical framework of this study, the theme of democracy and politics represents topical issues and social studies content; students' perceptions are considered expressions related to their lifeworld; political theory contributes to social science disciplinary perspectives; and citizenship education theory incorporates democratic values.

Methodological approach

This study consisted of three interrelated phases, all focused on 16- to 17-year-old students enrolled in upper secondary social studies. I used multiple methods of data collection in a sequential design (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) to investigate students' perceptions: Qualitative individual interviews, qualitative focus groups, and a quantitative survey.

Data collection

The study resonates with three of Greene's (2007) purposes of mixing or integrating methods in research projects, namely complementarity, development, and expansion. Specifically, my study relies on complementarity because I have used qualitative and quantitative methods that tap into facets of the same complex phenomenon, namely students' perceptions of three aspects of democracy and politics in social studies, with different local and regional samples in different phases, seeking to gain a more comprehensive picture by exploring different perspectives. I relied on development by collecting and analysing data sequentially across phases to let convergence or contradiction from one study inform the next, specifically implementation and measurement decisions, as well as identification of the sample for the next phase. Finally, I relied on expansion by collecting and integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate different phenomena across phases.

The three phases had separate but related student samples, data collection periods, and data analysis methods. I designed phase one (autumn 2014–spring 2015) as a qualitative investigation to examine how a group of 16-year-old students expressed their understanding of the concept of democracy and how they perceived the teaching of concepts in general in social studies. For this phase, I conducted five focus groups (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) with 23 students who attended social studies classes at three upper secondary schools.

I also designed phase two (spring 2015–spring 2016) as a qualitative investigation based on the findings in the previous phase. The main purpose was to explore how 16-year-old students perceived the concept of politics. I decided on the concept of politics because findings from phase one showed that the students' perceptions of democracy were closely related to aspects of the political system. I also learned in phase one that while focus groups were well suited for facilitating conversations between the participants and allowing them to build on each other's responses, they were less suited for in-depth exploration of individual students' reasoning. To access in-depth perspectives in phase two, I conducted individual interviews with nine students at five different upper secondary schools (Creswell, 2013).

Enabled by the multiphase design, phase three built on findings from phases one and two. I designed a survey instrument consisting of three sections. The first section built

directly upon the findings from phases one and two and concerned the students' perceptions of and relations to democracy and politics. The second section was aimed at investigating the students' perceptions of various aspects of the social studies subject, including the teacher's instruction, discussion of multiple perspectives, the value of social studies, and their own work with the subject. The third and final section concerned the students' political interests and activities outside formal school activities. The sample in phase three was based on convenience sampling and included 264 students (aged 16–17) from a total of 11 upper secondary schools in three counties of south-eastern Norway.

Data analysis

All the qualitative data were transcribed in full using the software program InqScribe and analysed using thematic analysis. Listening through the audio-recorded interviews and transcribing in full was important to include nuances in the students' responses. This analytic strategy enabled me to make sense of and categorise data that focused on what the students expressed, consequently highlighting their perspectives. I used thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The main focus of the analysis was the students' understanding of the concept of democracy in phase one and the students' perceptions of the concept of politics and the relationship between people and politics in phase two. For the focus group data, I analysed individual statements and identified how students built on each other's responses (i.e., elaborating, agreeing or disagreeing) first within groups and then across. In the interview data, I looked for patterns in the responses from each student and across all the students, for example by comparing and contrasting student profiles.

The purpose of the quantitative analyses performed in phase three was to search for patterns and associations on an aggregated level rather than individual responses. The focus of the analysis was instructional and personal variables associated with students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. The survey data analysed consisted of students' responses to statements and questions on a predefined seven-point scale. I used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyse the quantitative data in three steps: First, I made sure the data quality was sufficient for further analyses and ran descriptive statistics on each item. Second, I conducted exploratory factor analysis for each construct to see whether the items aimed at measuring a construct worked well empirically. Third, I used multiple regression analyses to investigate the relationship between the variables produced in the factor analyses by defining one dependent variable (i.e., students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies) and five independent variables (i.e., enjoying social studies, teacher contribution, discussing democracy and politics, online political communication, and political interest of family and friends).

Together, the three different methods of data collection and analysis contributed to knowledge about different aspects of students' perceptions of democracy, politics and citizenship preparation in social studies that are presented in the following section.

Findings

Concerning the concept of democracy, I found that students' understanding of democracy centred around four themes: (a) rule by the people, (b) voting and elections, (c) other forms of participation, and (d) rights and responsibilities. These findings show that students primarily expressed a liberal understanding of the concept of democracy, focusing on voting and elections, but that they also mentioned more participatory and deliberative perspectives. Another central finding was that students' understandings differed in terms of how elaborate they were, for example in terms of nuancing and questioning their own and others' responses.

Concerning the concept of politics, the main findings were that students perceived politics to concern three main aspects: (a) shaping society, (b) ruling a country and (c) discussion and debates. These themes involve bottom-up perspectives, focusing on citizens' role in politics and in developing society, and top-down perspectives, emphasising politicians as the main actors and institutional arenas, on politics. Further, the students expressed three conceptions of the relationship between people, including themselves, and politics: Five students expressed what I have named 'engagement', describing an overlapping and largely positive relationship between people and politics. Three students expressed 'passivity', describing people and politics as belonging to different spheres, with influence primarily moving from politics to people more than the other way around. Nonetheless, they expressed interest in certain political issues. One student expressed 'detachment'. This student demonstrated interest in and personal concern for political issues, such as the environmental crisis and animal welfare, but she did not label this as political interest and distanced herself from formal politics. Finally, although all students reported reading people's comments in online discussion fora, none participated in such discussions themselves.

Concerning citizenship preparation in social studies, the survey data indicated that students perceived the role of social studies positively in terms of preparing them for citizenship, for example in terms of helping them understand the world around them. Further, the regression analyses revealed that students' reported enjoyment of social studies and aspects of the teacher's instruction were most strongly associated with their perceptions of citizenship preparation. Somewhat surprisingly when compared with previous research (e.g., Quintelier, 2015), the variable measuring students' perceptions of the political interest of and discussions with family and friends was not significantly associated with their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

Contributions and implications

The contributions of this study relate to the theme of democracy and politics in social studies, particularly emphasising student perspectives. An important aim was to contribute with knowledge about students' perceptions of the core concepts of democracy and politics as well as how the subject contributes to preparing them for current and future

citizenship. As my study built on and expanded previous research on social studies and citizenship education, it may have implications for other countries with various kinds of social studies or citizenship education subjects.

Empirical contributions

A first empirical contribution of this study is how it shows that the students' understandings of democracy shared similarities with understandings identified in other countries, which is not a matter of course due to the differences in education, political systems, and the provision of welfare services and other relevant social and political factors across different country contexts. Moreover, this study provides insight into students' reasoning about their own understandings. For example, some students offered critical reflection on the idea of democracy as 'rule by the people', questioning the precision of this definition of democracy, and several students gave examples in which they related democracy to their everyday lives.

A second empirical contribution is how the explicit focus on the concept of politics not only emphasised students' perceptions of what politics is, but also of where and how they believe it takes place and who they see as the main participants. This insight into students' perceptions of politics also contributes to the existing empirical research from other countries, in which top-down perspectives, particularly relating to various authorities, have been an important aspect of young people's perceptions of politics (O'Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007; White et al., 2000). While partly associating politics with politicians and government, students participating in my study also offered expressions of bottom-up ideas such as being able to shape society, focusing on the role of ordinary people; solving problems; talking about politics, and the importance of the public sphere. In this sense, politics can take place everywhere and include everyone. Moreover, students across levels of interest in or experience with politics highlighted these aspects of politics.

The third empirical contribution of this study concerns how the empirical data contribute to our knowledge about students' perceptions of social studies in school. Previous studies of citizenship education have often reported the quantity of such education and its associated activities (e.g., Hoskins et al., 2012; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015). In this study, students particularly expressed the importance of social studies in helping them to understand and making them curious about the world, challenging them to think, and preparing them to participate actively in society. Not only do these findings indicate that citizenship education in social studies may contribute to students' engagement, similar to other studies (e.g., Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Pontes et al., 2017; Tonge et al., 2012), but they also indicate some aspects of social studies that students reported as reasons why social studies is important, relating to knowledge, skills, and engagement.

Further, the indication that students' enjoyment of social studies lessons, aspects of instruction, and discussions of democracy and politics may influence the degree to which they see social studies as valuable in terms of preparing them for citizenship contributes

to building knowledge about social studies and citizenship education, which is also relevant in an international context.

Theoretical contributions

This study has two theoretical contributions. The first is related to social studies didactics and concerns how this study supports Christensen's (2015) model of knowledge domains framing social studies, while the second concerns how the empirical data from this study contribute to nuancing and strengthening perspectives on young people when put in dialogue with political theory during data analysis. The students' ideas about what politics is and how and where it takes place contribute to political theory by providing the views of young people below the legal voting age.

Methodological contributions

Several studies of citizenship education reviewed in this study have reported on quantitative data. For example, existing instruments measure the impact of citizenship education on young people's civic and political engagement (e.g., Hoskins et al., 2012; Kahne & Spote, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Lin, 2015; Reichert & Print, 2017), and the ICCS instrument covers a range of activities in school, such as students' participation in school democracy and the measure of an open classroom climate (Huang et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2017). The instrument I designed in this study represents a methodological contribution to developing quantitative research on social studies instruction. For example, the development of the measure 'citizenship preparation in social studies' is a contribution to citizenship education because it measures students' own perceptions of this aspect of their education. The contribution of this measure lies in providing a tool for investigating how students experience some aspects of social studies lessons and the subject's value in preparing them for current and future citizenship rather than measuring the impact of citizenship education on political engagement. To the best of my knowledge, this approach is a new effort in investigating the role of social studies and similar subjects.

Further, the measure 'teacher contribution' focuses on central aspects of instruction, such as the teaching of concepts, which Davies (2015) suggested is one of the defining features of citizenship education in school. This measure includes items tapping into both the teacher's explanation of concepts and the extent to which students are involved in discussing various ways of understanding concepts, meaning that it is sensitive to the importance of the teacher's instruction, the contested nature of many social science concepts, and students' various understandings. Consequently, the 'teacher contribution' measure includes both a focus on social science concepts and students' perspectives on these (Christensen, 2015).

Implications

The findings resulting from this study suggest some implications for educational practice. Although there are differences in terms of organisation and content, citizenship education is found in countries across Europe and elsewhere (Eurydice, 2017). In light of some of the social and political developments in Europe and the US of political polarisation, low trust in politicians, youth unemployment, and economic hardship, insights into the perspectives of young people is important for citizenship education to be able to meet its purposes in terms of supporting, encouraging, and qualifying young people's citizenship practices. In this sense, the local understandings of this study can bring to light trends that exist across different contexts.

First, educators should carefully consider how they conceptualise and present the concepts of democracy and politics and how they build on bottom-up and top-down perspectives. This implies being open to different ways of understanding core concepts as well as being sensitive to how different understandings may have different consequences for students' sense of their own role in society and the scope for their own citizenship practices.

Second, this study indicates that social studies and citizenship education subjects have the potential of reaching more students than those who are already politically engaged. That is, quality explanations of complex concepts and issues and teachers' presentation of diverse perspectives, in addition to students' enjoyment of social studies, seemed to matter more for students' perceptions of citizenship preparation than students' own online political communication and political discussions with friends and family.

Third, educators should build on students' interests in political issues to support their quite varied modes of engagement. This means that although studies from different countries have found that young people report being less interested in politics than older people, this study suggests that even young people who report that they are not interested in politics, express interest and concern for several topical issues and events. Recently, young people's engagement has been visible in several countries in Europe through school strikes where the message is that adults in general and politicians in particular need to take action to protect the environment. This issue influences young people's lives and has the potential to provoke and engage them. At the same time, it presents a real and challenging issue for investigation and discussion that has no easy or agreed-upon solutions. Moreover, issues relating for example to the environment, unemployment, diversity, and discrimination have in common that they transcend the local, national, and global levels, potentially enabling students to engage both with local initiatives and challenges and broader structures, efforts, and consequences. Students' perceptions of democracy, politics, and citizenship preparation might indeed be used as a foundation for explorations of individual and structural perspectives at the local, national, and global levels within social studies and citizenship education in school.

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