

# Conditions for high democratic awareness and participation in Norwegian schools

## Rolf Mikkelsen

The Norwegian students in the Civic Education study are doing very well on civic knowledge, skills, attitudes and concepts. Despite this documented democratic awareness the student's score is below international average on interest in politics and conventional participation. On the other hand the 14 year olds carry an important willingness to vote as adults, they have a high level of trust in their government and they want to participate in the school society. In what way can these Norwegian findings be explained, and are the school system and the school activities part of the explanation?

## Civic Education in Norway

Civic and citizenship education in Norwegian schools is supported by strong policy documents and is governed by comprehensive implementation, especially through the Curriculum for the 10-year compulsory school in Norway. The education takes place both as a distinct subject area, integrated in several subjects and through relations between student and teacher and through student's participation in the school community.

The main responsibility for Civic education in the Norwegian schools is assigned to *social subjects*. Throughout all ten years of compulsory schooling, the students participate in lessons in this subject. The subject consists of lessons in history, geography and social studies. The subject takes into account both democratic ideas and training for practical democracy. The general aim for this social subject's course is described in the introduction:

*It is a prerequisite for a dynamic, democratic society that its members are familiar with, and support, certain democratic values. Each new generation needs to learn the value of participation, and to uphold the democratic rules that govern various sectors of our society. All pupils are members of society and will in due course take part, in a variety of ways, in its shapening and its government. Social studies are intended to prepare students for different tasks in the society by equipping them with knowledge, confidence in their own value, and the desire to undertake tasks for the common good. These aims must be achieved in close cooperation with wider society outside school.*

In addition to social subjects there are other subjects in Norwegian Schools responsible for Civic and Citizenship education. *Norwegian* (mother tongue) trains democratic skills, especially thinking skills, and stimulates both national identity and empathy with others. *Christian knowledge with religious orientation* works with questions concerning values and moral consciousness as well as ethical conflicts and choices. Also *mathematic* and *natural science* contributes with highly relevant skills like numeric literacy and facts about political questions like the environment.

The objectives as a whole can be regarded as a synthesis of a democratic *competence* or *awareness* consisting of knowledge, skills, attitudes and concepts. The building of the democratic competence emphasizes theoretical and more practical teaching and learning. Democratic knowledge consists both of knowledge of democratic institutions, democratic

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rights and obligations on the one hand and knowledge of society in the past and contemporary political questions on the other. Important democratic values are both individually oriented, like freedom, equality, fairness and honesty, and collectively orientated values like empathy and social responsibility. Democratic attitudes originate from values and include gender equality, tolerance, compassion and solidarity. Democratic skills include thinking skills like reading, interpretation, reasoning, problem solving and the ability to separate facts and opinions, and social skills like ability to listen, to speak, to discuss, to cooperate, to master conflicts and build compromises. Democratic concepts are influenced both by knowledge and skills, and by values and attitudes. Certain concepts regarding democracy are required and important components in a democratic competence. This competence is regarded as necessary, but not sufficient for being an active citizen in the future. In recent years the Norwegian authorities have put weight on practicing democracy through participation and influence in school and engagement in classroom activities and student-centered methods in teaching. The Norwegian Basic Curriculum points to that when stating:

*In the course of their schooling, children and young people should have imparted to them such basic democratic rights as intellectual freedom, tolerance, the rule of law, freedom of opinion and religion, freedom of organization and freedom of speech. Pupils must be given insight into and develop respect for democratic ways of thinking and working through their day-to-day classroom work and by participating in representative bodies in the school democracy. As they experience joint consultation in planning and influencing their own learning and schoolwork, they gain experience of democracy in practice. It is also one of the tasks of compulsory education to develop pupil's social attitudes and social skills (Norwegian Curriculum page 64).*

This means that Norwegian schools are facing a double task in citizenship and civic education. Traditionally the schools are supposed to teach the students *about* democracy and politics. This involves democracy-related knowledge, skills, attitudes and concepts. Over the last years the task is extended to train the students for democratic citizenship. The last task is conducted through student participation and real influence in the school society and through a democratic and activity-oriented teaching and learning climate in the classroom. Briefly we can sum up the Norwegian the *about* and *through*-perspective in four points, which we call *strategies for teaching and learning democracy in Norwegian Schools*.

- Teaching and learning about democracy, its institutions, its possibilities, its prerequisites
- Developing democratic skills and increase consciousness on democratic values and important attitudes
- Teaching and learning *through* democracy - student's participation in class council, students council and influence on planning and evaluation of various school activities.
- Promote an education with teaching-activities which contribute to active students and student participation

## **The awareness and engagement of Norwegian students**

The Civic Education Study reveals that Norwegian students have a good democratic awareness and carry a will to engage in society. Regarded solely and in an international comparative perspective, the Civic Education Study in Norway presents a picture of 14 year olds who seem well prepared to enter their role as citizens in a democratic society (Torney-Purta et al 2001). Most of them are well informed, they master democratic skills, they carry good attitudes and they have a high level of consensus on what is good and not good for democracy. Almost all of them answers that they intend to vote in national elections and some of them want to be a candidate for a local office. Quite a lot are positive to take part in peaceful demonstrations. The answers from the 18-year olds in Norway are even stronger and more desirable in a democratic perspective (Mikkelsen et al 2002). The results support the theory that civic knowledge, skills and concepts in a high

grade are connected to age, more specific to years in school. Mackey (Mackey 1991) shows how thinking regarding the political socialisation of young people is inspired by Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg 1987). According to Kohlberg a significant leap in socialisation takes place around age fourteen. He states

*(..), at about age 14, there is a dramatic change in capacity of teenagers to think about social phenomena. At this time, many adolescents begin to think abstractly and are able to engage in thought processes that characterize adult thinking (Mackey 1991 op cit)*

Analyzing the differences between 14 year olds and 18 year olds in Norway, we find this change in capacity to think about social phenomena. The scores on cognitive questions have improved very much. The concepts on what is good and not for democracy emerge as more wanted and mature. This indicates the importance of age, but when looking on age alone we find small differences between students who are 17, 18, 19 or 20 years old. It seems to be years in school that is connected to the change. Years in school seems to be a key factor. (Mikkelsen et al 2002).

Despite their democratic awareness the Norwegian students score significantly lower than the international average on some very important democratic indicators. The most worrisome is a weak political interest and a future representative participation well beyond the international average. This impression is strengthened by relatively low support for the concept of the conventional representative citizen.

The future representative participation scale includes the willingness to join a political party and run for a local office, but not the likelihood to vote as an adult. More than eight out of ten 14 year olds and nine out of ten of the Norwegian 18 year olds intend to vote in national elections. This shows a willingness to participate that society must regard as a major challenge to cultivate and nourish. This is especially important when an increasing number of citizens no longer use their right to vote (Amnå 2002). In Norway less than 60% of the first time voters take part in their first National election. It could be regarded as a little peculiar that so many 14 year olds and more 18-year olds intend to vote, but neglect to fulfil the intention. We find the explanation in the wording in the question. The question is not about the first election, it is about future elections. This will to participate seems confirmed in new Norwegian research. It states that in the last three national elections in Norway 99% of the voters take part in one of them or more.

Only few Norwegian students, 17% compared to the international average on 21%, intend to join a political party. And fewer can imagine themselves being a candidate at a local election (10% in Norway compared to 20% as the international average). The Norwegian 18 year olds express even weaker will to be candidates. These results call for a discussion on the ideal number of willing representative students. The whole idea with a representative democracy is that a few shall represent the many. But few can be too few, and we would like the Norwegian results to be closer to the international average.

We can read this tendency to be less supportive on the representative democracy also in the student's interest for politics as well. Only 31% of the Norwegian students answer positively on this question, while the international average is 39%. On several questions containing the words *politic* or *politicians*, the Norwegian students gives answers with lower support than expected and wanted. But despite this they express trust in government. In fact the trust is the second highest in the study for the 14 year olds. One interpretation is that the students already can separate the politicians in position and in opposition. The politicians in government seem responsible and trustworthy; the politicians in opposition are considered as more irresponsible. This does not favour politics, especially party-politics. Politics do no longer contain clear visions on the future we can or should choose, says Engelstad (Engelstad 2001) in an article on youth and power. Politics today first of all deals with adjustments. He calls this a shift of horizon, and he argues that the engagement will go down when society no longer discuss important questions as the environment and human rights. This is extremely important for young people. A statement that seems to be confirmed in the Civic Education Study. When describing the grown up citizen 91% (84%) answers that he/she is supportive to human rights and 91% (81%) that the good citizen

do something for the environment (international average in brackets).

There can be various reasons for an adjusting political agenda instead of discussions of important political questions and principles. One explanation can be found in the Norwegian welfare state. Norway is a rich country, and the richness is democratically distributed. Even if there are some very rich individuals, most Norwegians benefits from the welfare state. In fact in the Human Development Index for last year (*Human Development Report 2002*) Norway is ranked as number one. The index combines various indicators with the weight on National Gross product, education and health. For many political parties this ranking seems to call for adjustments more than reforms and profound changes. On the other hand there are signs on growing political differences in the Norwegian society as liberalism and market-orientation are introduced and forced on new sectors. For example new public management nowadays is tried out on the school sector.

## The through-perspective and engagement in schools

As mentioned earlier in this article an important part of the through-perspective in democracy preparation in Norwegian schools is conducted through student participation and real influence. One part of this is to see to that as many students as possible get experience with positions of trust. Another preparatory effort in this field is to let the student have real influence on planning, choice of methods and assessment.

In lower secondary the implementation of class councils and student councils are supported by their own curriculum and by lessons called the "class hour". The name of the curriculum is "***Class and pupil council activities***". The curriculum is structured around three objectives, and for each year in compulsory school there are aims within this structure:

- *Participation in decision making.*
- *Cooperation.*
- *Individual development.*

## The students participation in the school society

More than half of the Norwegian students has been or is in a position of trust in class councils or school councils. In lower secondary school almost 47% of the student's answer that they have or have had *positions of trust* in the class council or in the student's council. In upper secondary more than half of the students answer positively to this question.

An interesting question for analyses is *who these students with positions in trust, are*. This could be an indication on the effect on the strategy for learning democracy through practicing democracy in school. In both lower and upper secondary more girls than boys participate as students with trust. The trusted student's score slightly well on knowledge and skills, and more of them are interested in politics than the average student. They come from homes with more books than average, and their ambitions for future education are much more advanced. In fact you could say that many students with plans for further education in 5 years or more call on such positions. These are students with rich resources, both culturally and intellectually. This indicates that the challenge for schools here is to stimulate students with weaker resources, to "run for office".

In the Norwegian survey we added a group of national question to the international questions. One third of the students answered questions about their influence on planning, choice of methods and assessment.

**Table 1: Participation in planning, choice of methods and assessment**  
(somewhat / to a great extent in percent - to a great extent in brackets)

C12		Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary
a.	Have the class participated in planning the teaching in the class this school year?	19 (1)	47 (6)
b.	Have you discussed in class how to work during lessons this school year?	40 (4)	60 (13)
c.	Have you in class discussed how to assess the students?	38 (6)	42 (6)

Almost no students in lower secondary answer that they to a *great extent* participate in planning, discussion of working methods or assessment. Approximately four out of ten students have sometimes experienced discussions on how to work and assess. In upper secondary near half of the students have experienced planning, and even more students have discussed working methods. But when it comes to discuss evaluation there are small differences between lower and upper secondary.

The answers from the Norwegian students on these three questions tell us that Norwegian Schools and Norwegian teachers in lower secondary have some steps to comply to cope with the ambitions stated in policy documents and in the curriculum. This area of democratic education and training is one of the most difficult for development of democracy. Both trying, failing and learning is necessary for developing this field.

## The will to participate in the school society

The Civic Education Study presents questions mapping the student's confidence in participating in the school community. The average score for Norwegian students on the participation scale was significantly above the international average, particularly for the lower secondary students, but also for the upper secondary students (*Amadeo et al 2002*).

**Table 2 : Importance of students participation in school**  
(agree / strongly agree in percent - strongly agree in brackets)

		Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary
J1	Electing students representatives to suggest changes in how the school is run, makes schools better	82 (36)	84 (25)
J2	Lots of positive changes happen in this school when students work together	84 (33)	82 (22)
J3	Organising groups of students to state their opinions could help solve problems in this school	80 (28)	85 (22)
J4	If member of my class felt they were unfairly treated, I would be willing to go with them to speak to the teacher	63 (22)	72 (18)
J5	Students acting together can have more influence on what happens in this school than students acting alone	81 (38)	91 (40)

J6	I am interested in participating in discussions about school problems	61	60 (15)
J7	When school problems are being discussed I usually have something to say	60	59 (14)

On all the questions dealing with cooperation, working together, organizing groups and participation with student's representatives in school council, more than four out of five students answer that these activities are important or very important. They seem to have a very strong faith in common behavior and the importance of a spirit of a communal atmosphere in school. These answers also indicate a will to engage and to participate, a will that a democratic society must desire being transformed to society outside school.

One question (J4) deals with unfair treatment. Six out of ten students declares willingness to talk with the teacher if another student feels unfairly treated. This is both an indicator of the will to stand up for others, and an indicator of how the teacher in the class is regarded. The Norwegian teacher is not a person that a majority of students is afraid of.

Two questions deal with student interest and activity. Six out of ten students are interested in discussing problems in school, and they also answers that they usually have something to say when school problems are discussed. It is very interesting to compare the interest for and will to discuss school problems with the answers on political interest and will to discuss political questions. Less than one third of the students in lower secondary and more than 40% of the students in upper secondary answered that they were interested in politics. We know that school problems often are political problems, so we interpret this as indicators on an interest for society issues that is stronger than what we map when using the word politic.

The student answers on this questions correlates significant with several other scales in the study. We find high positive correlations with the scales for support to immigrants and woman's rights, importance of social-movement related citizenship and society-related government responsibilities. This gives indications on the importance of the participation in school, but it also indicates that such participation is not sufficient for developing political interest and increased support for the representative challenges in the society.

There are small differences between the students in lower secondary and the students in upper secondary. But it seems easier for the elderly students to take contact with an unfair teacher than it was for the younger. And the belief in acting together is very strong in upper secondary.

## **The students perception of teaching activities and the classroom climate**

This dimension in the mapping of the students gives indications of how the students perceive the teaching and education they are part of, the instructional principles used in school. The section of questions contains both indicators of a traditional education - and indicators of a more modern classroom practice. The student's perception on more modern practice will be indicators on how teachers promote an education that contributes to active students and student participation. Both the traditional way of teaching and the more modern ways, characterize the teaching in the classes participating in the study, both by dissemination and by more student activating methods. Many 14 year old school perceive an open classroom climate for discussion, and even more so do the 18 year old from upper secondary, especially those attending theoretical classes.

Seven questions in the study illustrate a working climate and a classroom climate with open minded and encouraging teachers. In this classroom *the teachers* respect the student's opinions, encourage them to take part in discussions on social and political

issues, encourage them to make up their own minds and they present several sides of an issue. *The students* can freely disagree with their teachers and express their opinions in the classroom. It is safe to say that a clear majority of the Norwegian students have a positive perception of an open classroom climate.

Compared to other countries, the perception of an open classroom climate in Norway is very high. Norwegian lower secondary students show the second highest scores on the scale variable for open classroom climate among students of the 28 countries participating. Particularly on three questions concerning the possibility *freely to disagree with their teachers in social and political questions, freely to express their opinions in class even if they are different from others and teachers encourage them to make up their own minds* - the Norwegian students deliver strong answers compared to the international mean. The American researcher Carol Hahn (*Hahn 1998*) points out that schools in one Nordic country, Denmark, seem very skillful in working with the classroom climate. The perception of an open classroom climate for discussion in Norway are significantly higher than in Denmark.

On all these questions the concept of an open classroom climate is even more significant in upper secondary than in lower secondary. We find the greatest difference (17 percent points) on the question about teachers encouraging the students to express opinions even if they differ from others. The other differences are less than 10 percent points.

A Civic Education Study from 1971 found that a classroom climate for discussion was an important predictor for almost all students outcome (*Torney et al 1975*). On student level in the recent Civic Study the concept of an open classroom climate is one of the powerful predictors in the study. For lower secondary the correlation in Norway between the student score on classroom climate and the cognitive score is  $r = 0.22$ . The correlation between open classroom climate and the score on support to woman's rights is  $r = 0.23$  and support to immigrants political right is  $r = 0.21$ . On class level the correlations increase to  $r = 0.35$ ,  $r = 0.38$  and  $r = 0.25$ .

The fact that the students are answering positively on an open classroom climate for discussion, interpreted as a modern teaching activity, does not mean that other methods and practice do not exist. When the students were asked about more traditional classroom practice, most of the students answered positively also to that. Most students experienced that teachers gave lectures and the students took notes, and most students answered that they sometimes or often were working on material from their textbooks.

In social subjects, one might say that methods and practice in Norwegian schools is a mixture of traditional and more modern teaching methods. But the important thing for teaching democracy is the support for democracy learning the students get from teachers choosing an open classroom climate - at least some of the time.

## The importance of school

A main reason for conducting the Civic Education Study in Norway has been to explore the importance of the school for developing the student's democratic awareness and engagement. As seen in examples the curriculum is distinct in describing the tasks in democracy teaching, and the school is one of the institutions which most explicit prepares young people on their role as citizens, that is as participators in democratic political activity.

There seems to be tight links between ambitions for civic and citizenship education and the results documented in the Norwegian part of the Civic education Study. Compared with other countries the results on knowledge, skills, attitudes and concepts seem satisfactory. And the comparison between Norwegian 14 year olds and 18 year olds shows improvements closely connected to student's years in school. The *about-perspective* seems well taken care of by the schools, teachers and students.

The student's answers also indicate that the *through-perspective* is taken seriously. A great number of students have experienced positions of trust. And the will to participate in the

school society seems high, well above international average in the study. The instructional principles read as the classroom climate seems to favor openness. Both cognitive and attitudinal results correlate with the student's classroom climate and their will to participate in school society. Student influence on planning, choice of methods and evaluation still seem to be a major field for development.

Norway has an integrative school system. Almost no students are taken out of classes to participate in special programs, and the theoretical and vocational grading takes place first at the age 16 or 17. This integrative school-system together with the open classroom climate seems to make conditions for attractive democratic attitudes. The Norwegian students have very high scores on support to woman's rights and high scores on support to immigrant's rights correlating with this open classroom climate..

Despite a good awareness, high trust in government and positive indications on participation and influence in the school society, there seems to be a challenge to translate this into political interest and with the exception of voting a stronger support of the representative democracy. Few questions from the political agenda are discussed in classrooms, especially when they are regarded as belonging to the party-politics.

As mentioned it is possible that the reasons for this challenge are to be found out of school and not in the school. What politics deals with seems important, especially important for young people. Inviting the politicians from the different parties into the school and classrooms could perhaps close part of the contradictory gap

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