

Outlining similarities and differences in civics education in Europe

A starter kit for transnational European research

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1 INTRODUCTION

Transnational travel and exchange of ideas has always played an important role in the history of democratic education and school reform. For example, in Imperial Germany the association *Vereinigung für staatsbürgerliche Erziehung des deutschen Volkes* (Union for Civic and Patriotic Education of the German Nation) was founded in 1909. Country reports from Denmark (Gröndahl 1911), Belgium, France and Switzerland came out from this initiative soon after. In the following decades knowledge and information about the situation of civics and social studies education in Europe has increased, among other by the country reports published in the JSSE.

In this volume the JSSE continues its long tradition of special issues with country reports. The first three such special issues appeared soon after JSSE had started in 2000 (JSSE 2002-2: Civic and Economic Education in Europe; JSSE 2003-1: Civic Education; JSSE 2003-2: Country Reports). Countries represented in these initial issues were (in alphabetical order): Austria, Cyprus, England, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Macedonia, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain. England and Germany appear with separate reports on civic and economic education. During the last five volumes since 2015, the country report section includes: Italy (2017-2), Estonia (2018-2), Poland (2019-1), Macedonia (2019-3) and Finland (2019-4). All reports in this issue refer to such previous reports in this journal, when available.²

The country reports can ideally function as a swift and efficient source for readers who want to find out about the essentials of current developments pertaining to civics in different countries. While preparing this current issue, as a further guideline for content and style of a country report, the following hint was given to the authors: Imagine a foreign colleague, who wants to initiate research on citizenship education and civics in foreign countries. The country report should provide your colleague with a **starter kit** to get access to the relevant literature and be able to contact the key persons and institutions in the targeted country.

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JSSE's internal guidelines for authors (2016) describes the task of a country report as follows:

“JSSE Country Reports address an international scholarly public. They give an overview over the current situation of civic, citizenship, economic, political and/or social education in a country. A report should refer to educational institutions and policies in these fields, the scholarly state of the art, and the education of the educators. The paper may include past developments, decisions, policies and events which shaped the present situation of social science education.

As a rule, a country report should, amongst others, analyse the broad domain of social science education in schools. What are the main goals and rationales from the perspective of subject didactics, subject methodology and from general didactics? What are the main challenges of the domain from a scholarly point of view? The paper should inform about curricular baselines, nationwide or regional timetables, key contents of syllabi or course schedules of relevant school subjects which may apply to different school types. Tables or charts would be appreciated.

Points of high interest are also styles of teaching and learning, methods in classroom practice. Moreover, a report may deal with obligatory or eligible textbooks, teaching and learning material and the main producers of these items. An exemplary portrait of key institutions in the field of social science education in the broadest sense would be of interest, too. Furthermore, the readers would like to be informed about specific scholarly and teacher associations, their policies, impact, congresses and publication organs.

The report may go beyond the school and education system and describe extra-school field of civic, citizenship, political, social or economic education of the youth, of adults or of specific target groups. Moreover, the paper may inform about studies dealing with the political, social or economic awareness, attitudes and practices of the youth, teacher trainees, teachers or teacher educators.

The JSSE readers, of course, would like to be informed about the scholarly knowledge about all these issues like surveys, case studies, ethnographic descriptions, textbook analyses etc.”

A special referee policy was established, adapted to the affordances of the genre. We created invisible tandems (who did not know about each other!), one referee from inside the country, focusing on the factual correctness of the country report, and a second referee from outside, focusing on the comprehensibility of the report to an international audience. Among the latter, authors of other country reports in the volume were included (again without knowing about this), so as to share some expertise and experience with the format.

In this editorial we aim to help readers navigate the special issue now at hand.

We have arranged the country reports in the special issue so that they proceed from East to West, but of course the reader is free to choose his or her own reading-pathway. This series of country reports already started in JSSE 2019-4 with a country report on Finland.

We have not included charts or tables describing national educational systems in the reports. Such information is easily accessible in the web, e.g. National Educational Systems on the Eurydice website of the European Commission (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/national-description_de).

We encouraged the authors to include illustrations from recent textbook covers in the country report. A comparative iconography of these illustrations can open interesting perspectives on civics education, and it can be a good exercise when beginning an academic teacher education course, for example.

The language policy of the JSSE prefers multi-lingual presentation, not global English only. Therefore, key terms are given in active bilingualism, in English and in the local language, which

may interrupt and make reading slower but perhaps more reflective. Policies of translation may be openly discussed.³

Name of the subject in non-vocational education (overview)

обществоведение (Social Science, Russia)

Történelem, Társadalmi és Állampolgári Ismeretek (History, Societal and Citizenship Studies), and Társadalomismeret (Social Studies, Hungary)

Samfunnsfag, Samfunnskunnskap (Social Studies, Norge)

Samfundsfag (Social Studies, Denmark)

Politik und Wirtschaft (Politics and Economy), Sozialwissenschaften (Social Sciences) and many other (Germany)

Enseignement moral et civique (Civic and Moral Education), Sciences économiques et sociales (Economic and Social Sciences, France)

Ciencias sociales (Social Sciences), Valores sociales y cívicos (Social and Civic Values, Valores éticos (Ethical Values, Spain)

The list of references should preferably contain national titles. This is not only to avoid redundant or token references to the omnipresent icons of citizenship education, like John Dewey, David Kerr or Jürgen Habermas. The view from inside each country reveals a number of national journals, which are not dedicated to social science education only, but often include relevant articles on the subject. The JSSE wants to follow these discussions better in the future.

The authors were also encouraged to discuss regional diversity. In some European countries there are federal or similar structures that allow regions their own specific arrangements in the school system. In some cases tensions between regions and the central government may be reflected in educational policy, like in Spain in connection to the Catalanian question, referred to in the Spanish country report in this volume.

When reading the country reports on the state of social studies teaching, it becomes evident that there are both similarities and dissimilarities between the countries. We point out areas where we think those similarities and dissimilarities are of importance and worth attention.

2 SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES

2.1 “Patriotic filter” or cosmopolitan approach in social science didactics?

One similarity that should not come as a surprise is that social studies as a school subject appears to be very much national by nature, like history. All school subjects dedicated to a systematic study of society focus on the political and legal institutions through the lens of student’s “own” society, underpinning a traditional ideal of citizenship, belongings and loyalties. International comparisons could open new and valuable didactical perspectives in the study of society. For example, students could be asked to analyse differences between social policy systems in different countries and assess their respective strengths and problems, thus gaining new understanding of the systems in their “own” country which otherwise may easily appear as self-evident and non-problematic. It appears, however, that a comparative approach is rare in the social studies curricula, if at all reserved to higher classes and study of international politics.

Though, examples of such comparative perspectives are mentioned in the Danish and Norwegian country reports.

2.2 “Affirmation” or critical inquiry?

Another similarity, closely connected with the previous one, is that in the manifest learning objectives of social studies and civics teaching in all countries there is a tension between preparing students to adapt to the existing political, legal and economic order, and to take a critical view on it, think of alternatives, or even work towards changing it. This is, of course, a dilemma that educational systems face in general. The functions of education are, according to the model of Gert Biesta (2010), qualification, socialisation and subjectification; and between the latter two there is always a certain tension. Reading the country reports it appears that the implications of the tension are not openly acknowledged in the social studies curricula, and hence they are likely to remain undiscovered and undiscussed by teachers and students themselves (from what we know). Sometimes, this tension becomes visible in an educational policy conflict, like in Spain in connection with sexual education, or in Russia or Hungary with conflicts about the prevalent national master narrative. It may be addressed in the classroom or in the study (learning) material, and in the French and Spanish country reports in particular it is shown that the community of social studies teachers sometimes bring the political tensions of the subject matter to open air in their public political actions.

Are pupils in the civics classroom taught to become primarily merchants, scientists, or citizens – such conflicts about prevalent role models and underlying leading social science disciplines are clearly shown in the introductory essay on the professional debates in France. Similar struggles about dominance in curriculum are visible in all the reported countries. Debates over economic education (the merchant) are not an integral part of the reports given, and they would deserve a new special issue.

2.3 The subject – a negligible phenomenon in the school timetable?

As a similarity between the countries reported in this special issue it may also be noted that social studies as a separate subject may or may not be a popular subject among students, but it is never one of the prestigious school subjects, like mathematics, or – if we look in the domain of social studies – history. In this respect, geography may share a similar destiny with social studies. Social studies is a relatively young school subject, and often closely connected with some more well-established subject. A social studies or civics teacher is often, and primarily, also a teacher of history or philosophy, and social studies is then his/her “minor subject” only. And yet the task of educating future citizens is readily seen as one of the foremost important duties of school in the rhetoric of public discussion and educational policies. It may be that the task is more easily associated with the school subject history because of its long history of contributing to nation-building. In fact, social studies and civics has often its historical roots in the history subject from which it has been later on gradually detached, like in Sweden, Norway and Finland.

2.4 A grocery store without a recognizable profile for public?

As a quick testimonial of prestige and public standing of a school subject, the student timetable can be revealing. A written timetable, as it hangs nearby the door in many homes, is glimpsed in a morning hurry as children and their parents have a final check which subjects are on the list that day. If we would collect and test a selection of such timetables, we suspect social studies would appear in homeopathic doses only!

Figure: Example of a written student timetable

Uhrzeit	Montag	Dienstag	Mittwoch	Donnerstag	Freitag
7:55	Deutsch	Französisch	Biologie	Religion	Mathe
8:40	Englisch	Musik	Geschichte	Physik	Mathe
9:40	Sport	Geschichte	Mathe	Französisch	Englisch
10:25	Sport	Mathe	Englisch	Französisch	Chemie
11:25	Religion	Physik	Erdkunde	Erdkunde	Musik
12:10	Sozialkunde	Chemie	Deutsch	Deutsch	Bio

In the curricula and teacher's qualification requirements it is visible that social studies is an interdisciplinary subject, or a mixed bag/salad bowl model, with elements coming from different fields of social sciences. In most cases the academic disciplines that the qualified social studies subject teacher has to study are political science and sociology, but also studies in law or in economy are common requirements. Some curricula are more based on sociology, some more on political science; jurisprudence does not appear much. Hence in social studies there is no commonly accepted core curriculum, such a distinct form of knowledge as in history or in physics, where the teacher can easily explain to students where historical knowledge and physical knowledge is derived from and how its validity is assessed. Following the terminology of Basil Bernstein (2000), it can be argued that social studies are less strongly classified than history, in terms of the demarcation line for what is the "proper" subject matter in relation to other subjects. This may be a myth, as the seemingly higher degree of homogeneity in history is a result of longstanding struggles and a kind of petrified political compromise. There is always a „heterodox“ history which is more or less marginalised or suppressed. This also holds for approaches of subject matter didactics of history. The lack of a clearly identifiable "homebase" in the academic disciplines of social sciences is perhaps one factor why social studies does not count among the most prestigious school subjects. This might also be a reason why public conflicts on the subject start with more partial, maybe second-rate questions about details of the subject matter, and denigrate the whole subject, instead of focusing on more fundamental questions about aims and perspectives in the subject.

3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES

Also when the call for papers to this special issue gave an outline to the contributors, the scope of possible, relevant perspectives was so wide that the reports are bound to have a lot of diversity, too. Thus there are differences between the country reports in what topics have been covered and what have been left out or in the margins. This probably reflects the actual concerns in social studies teaching in each country, and also the specialism of the authors. The diversity of multiple perspectives hopefully provides richness, however when summing up impressions and observations in the reports it is good to speak of differences between the countries cautiously because the authors may also have simply emphasised different things in their reports. With this caveat in mind, some differences will be discussed next.

3.1 Unified or diversifying?

To begin with, the countries discussed in this special issue are different in how much diversity there is, regarding curricula in social studies teaching. In the countries with federalist structures there is – in principle at least – space for regional variation in the curricula and syllabi.⁴ Such a space can, however, be diminished for example by way of introducing national exams for all students, as discussed in the Russian country report. In the countries where municipal autonomy is strong, local variation in the curricula and syllabi can be found, like in Finland (reported in JSSE 2019-4). At another level there is variation between the countries in upper secondary school study programs in social studies and in the opportunities for specialising in social scientific disciplines. In some countries, like Denmark and Sweden (the latter not reported in this issue), the upper secondary level education is divided in theoretical and vocational programs and the social studies syllabus differs according to the program.

Looking at the social studies curricula from a longitudinal perspective, continuities can be noticed that underline the stability and unity of the subject. That there is stability in the curriculum is not surprising: subjects like social studies rest on certain social ideals and notions of a good citizen that do not rapidly change. Sometimes some developments or events may bring about a need to emphasise such notions, like Republican virtues in France after the attack in the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (see the French report in this issue).

3.2 Cross-curricular issues or separate subject and domain?

One central difference between the countries is how much civic and citizenship education is taught in integrated cross-curricular themes or in a separate subject, and whether there is only one integrated or many separate social studies subjects. In the latest International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), in 2016, countries have been tabled according to how civic and citizenship education is arranged. The five alternatives provided in the survey questionnaire (Köhler et al. 2018, p. 80) have been that civic and citizenship education:

- is taught as a separate social studies subject,
- is taught in the context of some other subject, like history,
- is taught integrated into all subjects (cross-curricular themes),
- is taught as extra-curricular activity (clubs, student councils),
- is considered “the result of school experience as a whole”.

In the country reports in this special issue the three first alternatives above are present in different combinations.

It is also noteworthy that in some countries the name of the social studies subject is different in different school grades. In some countries (France, Spain) the name has been changed, so as to make it reflect better what the decision makers have seen as the expedient aims of teaching. In the Spanish country report it is also noted that a narrow vision of civic education has intertwined with policies that try to hinder the visibility of a core subject social studies, diluting its controversial contents into other areas of knowledge. This is an interesting observation because often in educational policy it has been rather the case that cultural conservative circles have supported traditional core subjects, as opposed to “suspect” cross-curricular themes that are seen as a progressive solution.

Cross-curricular themes appear common in social studies teaching in the countries discussed in this special issue, but mostly they co-exist with the separate social studies subject. As can be seen in the country reports, teaching of cross-curricular themes may sometimes cause tensions in school management if it is not clear who should take responsibility for teaching them, or what resources are available for this teaching. As pointed out in the Norwegian country report, there are risks that a cross-curricular theme belongs to all teachers but nobody really takes responsibility for it, and that there is conceptual confusion when a cross-curricular key concept like democracy or citizenship is given different meanings in different places in the curriculum.

3.4 Curriculum: Continuous spiral or isolated islands?

Some differences also exist between these countries in when social studies teaching starts in school. In the cases where social studies teaching starts in primary school, teaching seems to be either civic instruction or citizenship education. It can be argued that children are citizens now, not citizens-in-waiting, but the primary school civics or social studies curricula that are reported in this special issue do not seem to recognize such a notion of children's citizenship to the same degree. Social studies teaching in lower and in upper secondary school are more focused on knowledge about civic matters and skills of thinking analytically and critically about societal issues. Yet there are differences between the countries in how relevant that knowledge and those skills can be expected to be for a citizen who wants to act and participate in society, not only contemplate life in society.

3.5 Teaching for the test?

Further, a situation that differs between these countries is the place and content of national exams. National exams can often be high-stakes tests with a high backwash effect that influences, perhaps indirectly, the way teachers teach and students study a particular subject (see Au, 2017). How those exams are constructed, by whom, and how the results are used in selecting students for secondary or tertiary education, for example, may vary. A school subject may be included in the national exams as an obligatory or an optional exam, or it may not be included there at all. This has implications for the prestige of the subject in that subjects with an optional exam are easily seen as less important, as pointed out in the Danish country report, for example. Social studies seem often to belong to this category. On the other hand, even a merely optional exam can be regarded as a form of recognition for the subject.

3.6 Future trans-nationalization?

Closely related to national exams and the measurement of learning results, it is noteworthy that the role of the OECD and the European Union is also raised in some of the country reports. The OECD is well-known for the comparative studies it monitors, notably PISA and TIMSS. Their focus is on students' literacy and knowledge in mathematics and natural sciences, but also economic literacy is included in the PISA surveys. The influence of the OECD and the EU on the educational policy of individual countries is an important question because educational policy and the criteria of good teaching and learning results traditionally have been regarded as a matter of national decision-making. In these country reports, however, it appears that in some countries more than in others, trans-national policy recommendations have influenced national guidelines in the development of social studies teaching. National agencies of political education seem to play an important role in this process, like The European Wergeland Center based in Oslo, Norge, or the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Political Education) in Bonn, Germany, together with seven partners from France, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Austria, Slovenia, Poland and the Czech Republic for more than ten years now hosting the bi-annual NECE-conference (Networking European Citizenship Education, <http://www.nece-conference.eu/neces/>).

4 FURTHER/FUTURE QUESTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

4.1 Top down or bottom up? Need for qualitative classroom research

In the country reports it can be seen that research on social studies has focused particularly on qualitative analyses of curricular texts and textbooks and teaching materials, and on surveys on teaching methods and teaching styles. Also students' learning results have been studied, often as part of national surveys and tests, but also in international measurements that were mentioned earlier. What has been less researched is what goes on in the social studies classroom. Using the concept of John Goodlad (1979), it can be said there is research on the ideal (curriculum texts) and the formal (textbooks) curriculum, but not so much on the perceived (teachers' views) curriculum, and even less on the operational (classroom interactions) and the experienced (students' views) curriculum. Ethnographic approaches could give valuable insights into how students take on new content, what they find difficult or easy to understand or to accept and how teachers manage interactions with the students. Very importantly, such research could make visible what the topics addressed in social studies actually mean to our students on a personal level. Obviously, many shared interests exist with sociologists and political scientists who do research on young people's political and economic views and values.

It can also be argued that overviews of the current situation in social studies teaching and social studies education research across Europe – and beyond! – can ideally serve as a source of inspiration and a starting point for international research collaboration in this field. Obviously research on social studies teaching is a more difficult area to pin down than research on history teaching because social studies is a more diverse field in terms of its terminology, subject matter and range. What is counted as social studies teaching, in relation to cross-curricular themes like sustainable future? Despite such difficulties in demarcating the research area, international and comparative research on social studies would be important. Considering the diversity in the field, it may be easiest to first develop regional collaborative projects between countries that have more resemblance in traditions, solutions and social contexts, for example the post-communist or post-Yugoslav countries.

Most societies in Europe are faced with the same problems and challenges, related to ecological threats, social tensions and political polarisation. A shared understanding of what are the goals, what is being done, and what is the result in social studies teaching in different countries could hardly go against interests of educators who aim at their students' well-being. Decision-makers may sometimes be more difficult to convince, but robust knowledge is the foremost instrument that researchers have when trying to impact future development.

In most country reports a national association of teachers in the subject matter field is mentioned, sometimes even several of them exist and compete with each other (France). As has been shown, civics and social studies teachers have different backgrounds and they teach different combinations of subjects. They also specialise in different age groups of pupils in different ways, and for example in Norway those age groups are very much overlapping. Thus, social studies teachers may have different identities. Nevertheless, they have trans-nationally shared interests and challenges, like those mentioned in the context of research. There are supra-national European associations like Euroclio⁵, the European Association of History Teachers (www.euroclio.eu), or AEEE, the Association for European Economic Education (www.economicseducation.eu). The field of social science education, of course, would also benefit from a future European association for Social Science Education.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ We thank Amy Benzmann (Hamburg, Germany) for help with language edit.
- ² Among the European countries, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Belarus, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldavia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia, have not yet been presented in the JSSE country reports such. They would be valuable cases for the social studies educators to be acquainted with.
- ³ About the name of the subject, during editing of this issue, we observed a possible misunderstanding, which is difficult to avoid: the term social studies has a double meaning. It may be used in the sense of U.S. integrated subject, including Geography, History and Civics/Economy. Another use of the term relates to the Politics-Society-Economy-Law field of knowledge, when to avoid the notion of social **science** education (e.g. in primary school). This journal sometimes suffers from the same ambiguity of the terms.
- ⁴ Matters of conflict include, for example, Spain and its autonomous regions and the Catalanian case. In Germany, there is not one, but there could be 16 country reports due to the independent educational policy of the federalist states. This is the reason the report from Germany takes the perspective of *Critical* political education theory, which is only one among the various theoretical approaches in Germany.
- ⁵ Euroclio organized a remarkable book with comparative country reports on the state of the art of history education; see, Erdmann et al. (2011).