



Article

Teaching and learning in integrated social studies: What knowledge is most important for students to acquire?

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Keywords: Subject integration, social studies, grading, discourse of learning, knowledge conception

- Teaching shows patterns of different discourses of learning in varying degrees of integration
- When grading is introduced, the subject knowledge discourse turns more dominant.
- Students show greater engagement in higher degrees of integrated teaching directed by overarching curriculum objectives.
- Macro policies direct the characteristics of the teaching, but there are variations in the strength with which different policies are implemented.

Purpose: The purpose is to analyse how teaching and learning take place in integrated social studies teaching in relation to various curriculum goals and what consequences the teaching has for students' approaches to learning.

Design/methodology/approach: Ethnographic fieldwork is used in ten integrated thematic units conducted in four classes in four Swedish schools, with students in Years 5 and 6.

Findings: The grading in Year 6 contributes to the integrated teaching being more adapted and directed towards subject knowledge goals. Students are very committed and involved in higher degrees of integration and discourses of learning connected to overarching curriculum objectives and are more focused and performance-oriented when the subject knowledge discourse creates a dominant pattern.

Practical implications: Teaching in social studies should consist of the whole range of learning discourses, and how different knowledge conceptions can affect teaching and students' learning should also be considered

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1 INTRODUCTION

Social studies education occurs worldwide in different forms of educational policy and teaching, sometimes with the included subjects at differing degrees of integration. Subject integration, internationally often called curriculum integration, varies in both structure and scope (Brough, 2012; Ferguson-Patrick, Reynolds & Macqueen, 2018) but can be briefly described as when two or more school subjects are combined in the same teaching context.

Subject integration can be traced to Dewey's (e.g., 1956) view of democracy and its relation to teaching and learning. An idea commonly put forward is that subject integration in the social studies subjects provides a holistic view and could lead to greater student understanding of key societal issues and phenomena (Rennie, Venville & Wallace, 2012; Ferguson-Patrick et al., 2018). What the social studies subjects have in common, which can potentially be transferred to learners through integrated teaching, is often close to the definition of citizenship education (see Ross, 2006; Odenstad, 2016; Barton & Avery, 2016).

In many countries, including Sweden, there has, for many years, been an ongoing effort to improve students' learning outcomes. Part of this is increased emphasis on the individual subjects, not least regarding the social studies subjects (Evans, 2004; Strandler, 2017), which in Swedish nine-year compulsory school are civics, geography, history, and religious studies. This outcome orientation became particularly evident in Sweden with the introduction of the standards-based national curriculum, National Agency for Education (NAE), in 2011, which clearly emphasises the individual subjects and more specified subject content. In upper primary school (Years 4-6), this, for example, meant that end-of-term grading was introduced in Year 6, with knowledge requirements (standards) for each social studies subject. Thus, researchers (Claesson & Lindblad, 2013; Samuelsson, 2014) claimed that the NAE (2011) largely stipulates that teaching should take place in individual subjects. On the other hand, the NAE (2011) prescribes that the teacher should "organise and carry out the work so that the student has opportunities to work subject-integrated" (p. 8). However, Olovsson and Näsström (2018) showed that subject-integrated teaching takes place to a small extent in many Swedish schools in Years 4-6.

On the micro level, this study, conducted in daily classroom practice, investigates the consequences of macro¹ policies and structures (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). An important aspect of the study is to investigate how policy ordinances are handled, interpreted, and experienced at the classroom level based on the expressions of classroom actors (cf. Pollard et al. 2000). Therefore, through ethnographic explorations, this study offers a way to understand the impact of educational policies on classroom practice. This is also accomplished by relating classroom actions to overarching curriculum objectives and the common core of the social studies subjects. Researchers have shown that since the insertion of the NAE (2011), more measurable knowledge is dispersed in school practice, not least in social studies teaching, and more overarching knowledge, for example goals directed more towards "the common good" of society, risk being neglected (Adolfsson, 2018; Lundström, 2019; Wahlström, Adolfsson & Vogt, 2020).

Based on the above-described conditions, this study was conducted on subject-integrated teaching in the social studies subjects in Swedish upper primary school. The study was conducted through ethnographic fieldwork, during 2017-2020, including four classes in four schools, for a total of ten thematic units, with students in Years 5 and 6.

In Swedish upper primary school, the increased teaching focus on the individual social studies subjects, the more specified subject content, and the knowledge requirements to which the students' learning must be related are determined basically at a policy level by the implementation of educational reforms, powered by marketisation and standardisation (cf. Grammes, 2010). Bruen and Grammes (2014) have also drawn attention to an increasing international need for research on how teaching and learning are implemented in citizenship education and how they are experienced by students and teachers.

1.1 The purpose of the article:

The purpose of this article is to examine how teaching and learning take place in subject-integrated thematic units of social studies implemented over two school years in relation to discourses of learning of the Swedish national curriculum: personal fulfilment, citizenship, social inclusion or justice, and subject knowledge. This is being done to find out what kind of teaching is performed in relation to the various curriculum goals connected to social studies and what consequences the teaching has for students' approaches to learning.

2 BACKDROP AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Subject integration and social studies - Its origin and present status

Over the years, integrated teaching of the social studies subjects in Swedish compulsory school has been quite common, particularly in Years 1-6. The integrated teaching approach in Sweden is related to Dewey's (1956) ideas on the pedagogical approach, with learner centring and the development of skills for real-life societal use, focusing on the children and their interests instead of individual subjects (cf. Williams, 2017). Dewey (1944) specifically recognised the individual social studies subjects as constituting "a common topic, namely, the associated life of men" (p. 211).

Traces of these progressive pedagogical ideas are also found in the current national curriculum (NAE, 2011), which says that students should have the opportunity for subject-integrated teaching during their time in compulsory school. However, there are no central binding directives on how and when integration should be implemented in teaching; this is up to individual schools and teachers to decide. The Education Act (2010) also points out that if social studies teaching in upper primary school is predominantly subject integrated, a summarised grade can be taken in Year 6, although the knowledge requirements to which students' performances must be related are constructed in each individual subject.

This means that in the increasingly subject-separated context of Swedish upper primary school (Strandler, 2017), that grading of subject-integrated teaching becomes a difficult challenge for many, which contributes to the relative rarity of subject integration in many schools (Olovsson & Näsström, 2018). The standards-based Swedish national curriculum with syllabi in each subject and the role of the knowledge requirements which make assessment a key concept are described further and more in-depth, in Wahlström et al. (2020).

When viewed as a whole, or regarding their “common core”, the social studies subjects, often termed the humanities in the UK, are frequently described with similar formulations as those of Dewey (1944) in that they can provide overall knowledge for the development of the whole child to be able to participate in society as a committed, democratic citizen (cf. Ross, Vinson & Mathison, 2013; Barton & Avery, 2016; Cox, 2017). The common features of these subjects are very similar to certain parts of the overarching curriculum objectives, in Sweden termed “fundamental values and tasks of the school” and “overall goals and guidelines”, and constitute the first two parts of the NAE (2011). These overarching objectives do not have knowledge requirements to support assessment, but the objectives should be considered in teaching as a whole. Subject-integrated teaching in the social studies subjects for which the planning aims to take several of the subjects into account can thus have the potential to implicate the overarching curriculum objectives and connect to the common core of the subjects.

2.2 Integrating subjects

Integration can take place in many ways and can vary between schools and teachers (Wall & Leckie, 2017). Researchers (Fogarty, 1991; Bernstein, 2000; Applebee et al. 2007; Gresnigt et al. 2014) have used continuums when describing different degrees or complexities of integration. In these continuums, subject-centred approaches and student-centred approaches are opposites (Wall & Leckie, 2017). Gresnigt et al. (2014) claimed, however, that integration can take place in less complex ways and still be favourable to students’ learning. Moreover, researchers such as Applebee et al. (2007) and Fenwick, Minty, and Priestley (2013) concluded that it is important not to view subject-integrated and subject-separated teaching as opposites – what is preferred depends on the context.

Regarding social studies, Priestley (2009) asserted that a more integrated approach can enable connection-making and more engaging learning. Viewing social studies as a whole can be a great advantage when working with key societal issues (Rennie, Venville & Wallace, 2012; EAUDE, 2017), even though the teaching takes place with different degrees of integration and is sometimes subject-separated. Reasons for integration (McDowall & Hipkins, 2019) are that it provides opportunities for students to take part in real-world-connected issues and to develop 21st-century learning skills overall.

2.3 Social studies teaching – what is the rationale of knowledge?

The international educational policy trend towards more measurable school results is thought to complicate the possibility of making connections between the social studies subjects (Evans, 2004; Strandler, 2017). Ball (2003) discussed the concept of performativity, which implies that learning outcomes are considered essential in education. The NAE (2011) is in line with this on the grounds that a standards-based curriculum aims mainly to enhance students' academic achievement and social efficiency and a country's competitiveness (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2018). In Swedish compulsory school, the NAE (2011) has had consequences in practice, investigated specifically in Year 6 social studies, with changes in both teaching and learning in the direction of a practice highly permeated by standards-related activities and actions (Sundberg, 2018). This presents a risk that broader goals, which are more difficult to assess, will be subordinated (Wahlström et al. 2020). This means, according to Wahlström et al. (2020), that some of the key points encompassed in the common core of the social studies – for example, emphasising discussions about “the common good” and a democratic society – may be ignored.

According to teachers, the NAE (2011) also implies that certain teaching methods, such as project work and cross-disciplinary themes, may be excluded, as they are considered less suitable for monitoring students' knowledge in relation to subject-specific knowledge requirements (Sundberg, 2018). Adolfsson (2018), also building on social studies teaching in Swedish schools' Year 6, stated that subject matter and how this is managed by students with different abilities is what is assessed, and thus this often becomes the focus of teaching. The teachers' search for how each student handles the subject matter, through exploring questions related to the knowledge requirements, was termed “the new meaning of teaching” by Sundberg and Wahlström (2018), considering teaching as *exploration* as opposed to teaching that aims at students “knowing facts”. One explanation for the emergence of this new meaning may be that the social studies syllabi in NAE (2011) are subject-based but with an in-built logic – via the student abilities – on social efficiency (Wahlström et al. 2020).

Eaude (2017) advocated for humanities teaching that puts concepts and values at the forefront, particularly because these subjects constitute good conditions for the development and understanding of values (Cox, 2017). Thus, teaching and learning about values connects social studies with overarching curriculum objectives. In the Swedish context, it has been shown that overarching objectives are overshadowed by goals of subject knowledge when it comes to what is considered important to measure for a school to be considered successful (Lundström, 2019). Lundström (2019) showed this by dividing the NAE (2011) into four discourses of learning, see the division of discourses and example of goals below.

Example of goals in relation to the four discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019, p. 195)

The discourse of personal fulfilment

- All-round personal development of students
- A lifelong desire to learn
- Active, creative
- Discover their uniqueness
- Forming personal standpoints
- Development of a personal identity
- Self-development and personal growth
- Ability to communicate
- Creativity, curiosity and self-confidence
- Desire to explore their own ideas and solve problems
- Different forms of knowledge and experiences
- Harmonious development

The discourse of citizenship

- Respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based
- Tolerance
- Understanding of other people and the ability to empathise
- Sustainable development
- Knowledge of democratic principles
- Ability to work in democratic forms
- Exercise influence and take responsibility
- Living and working in society
- Ability to critically examine facts and relationships
- Take initiatives
- Express ethical standpoints
- Overall perspectives: historical, environmental, international and ethical

The discourse of social inclusion or social justice

- Education . . . should be equivalent, regardless of where in the country it is provided

- Teaching should be adapted to each pupil's circumstances and needs
- Understanding of cultural diversity
- Equal rights and opportunities for women and men
- Counteract traditional gender patterns
- Rejects the subjection of people to oppression and degrading treatment

The subject knowledge discourse

- Syllabi: aims of the subject, core content and knowledge requirements for different grades

Via performance indicators for school choice, (Lundström, 2019) concluded that three of these discourses can be attributed to overarching curriculum objectives: personal fulfilment, citizenship, and social inclusion or justice. However, regarding what counts as high quality in education, these discourses are dominated by the subject knowledge discourse (Lundström, 2019). The first three discourses, encompassing the overarching curriculum objectives (Lundström, 2019), to quite a large extent are related to the content of the social studies subjects. Overall, Lundström (2019) contributed to the discussion on what knowledge should be considered legitimate in the school system and claimed that the dominant performance culture means that knowledge about, for example, democracy and climate change risks being overlooked in school.

The four discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019) can also be connected to other approaches of dividing knowledge, for example, Deng and Luke's (2008) experiential, disciplinary and practical knowledge conceptions. The experiential knowledge conception (Deng & Luke, 2008) is connected to a way of looking at knowledge as experience-based. Knowledge is a process between the learner, the surrounding environment, and other learners. An important basis for teaching of such knowledge is students' experiences, questions, and interests. The disciplinary knowledge conception (Deng & Luke, 2008) is characterised by facts and concepts originating in a discipline. This kind of knowledge looks "inwards", towards the discipline, and is seen as objective, fixed and definite; knowledge according to this concept is not the subjective experiences of individuals. To relate this concept to the social studies subjects in NAE (2011), the boundaries between them and other subjects are quite steady, and they are overall rather closely connected to comparable academic disciplines, which signals disciplinary knowledge. The features of the practical knowledge conception (Deng & Luke, 2008) are about being able to do something via skills, such as kicking a ball, or solving a complicated theoretical problem.

3 METHOD²

3.1 Selection

Four classes, with students in Years 5 and 6, from four schools (Lake, Sea, Creek, River) participated in the study. At Lake and Sea, three thematic units each were investigated in 2017 and 2018, whereas at Creek and River, two units each were investigated in 2019 and 2020. Lake, Sea, and Creek are located in or near the same city in northern Sweden, and River is located in another northern city. Lake school, unlike the others, is situated in a small community surrounded by countryside, with some students commuting from smaller villages.

Initially, the schools and teachers were informed about the project, which was intended to be both a research and development project. A central idea behind the project was that the teachers should be given an opportunity to develop their social studies teaching based on the framework formulated by the researcher: It would consist of thematic units in the social studies subjects in which the teachers should plan and implement subject-integrated teaching. The subjects could be integrated to the extent and in the form that the teachers themselves decided. How the teaching was to be carried out was thus up to the teachers to decide, but the researcher functioned, in planning, as an optional sounding board for the teachers. Important prerequisites for the project were that there was no goal concerning the extent or complexity of the integration and that subject integration was not considered “better” than subject-separated teaching. It was instead assumed that the opportunities for favourable learning would be as copious as possible but at the same time and to the greatest possible extent, that situations in which integration could promote learning would be explored. If this at times, according to the teachers’ planning and implementation, would imply subject-separated teaching or a low degree of integration, then this also was an obvious parts of the thematic unit.

The students were 10-13 years old, and the number of students in the classes varied between 16 and 24 in Year 5 (see Table 1); at Creek and Lake schools, the number of students dropped slightly in Year 6. In the classes at Lake, River, and Sea, the majority of students had a Swedish background and were from residential areas. At Creek, about half of the students had an immigrant background, and the school is located in a neighbourhood with mixed housing. The four teachers involved at the beginning of the project were all women, with 6-25 years of teaching experience. At Lake, teacher changes took place between each unit, so a total of three teachers were involved, two of whom were men.

3.2 Implementation

The data collection was carried out in 2017-2020, through ten thematic units. The study comprised 70 observed lessons and several other researcher visits the schools: to present

the project, to interview students and teachers, to meet teachers, and to administer students' written reflections (see Table 1 for a detailed account of the implementation).

An ethnographic research approach was used in the study. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) emphasised that there is no uniform ethnographic research approach but that flexibility and adaptation, based on the local conditions of the settings, are important elements in ethnographic research. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) stated other features that are usually common to ethnographic research: It takes place in everyday contexts, more than one method is used, the research design is (to quite a low degree) established and specified in advance, few cases are involved, and the data analysis is interpretive.

A foundation of ethnographic research is that there is an aspiration to understand the context by capturing the experiences of the actors involved close to or in their specific cultures and through their statements and actions (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Walford, 2008). In the present study, when the same settings were visited two or three times over two years, the actors' expressions had changed between the different thematic units.

Regarding the time mode for the data collection, namely how much time was spent in the settings, it was based on the schedules of the classes' social studies lessons. This means that the time mode used can be compared with an interplay of recurrent and selective intermittent (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004) time modes. This enabled analysis in the form of comparisons and regarding changes. Based on the specific circumstances of this study, a particular advantage of having a flexible approach to the number of visits, which is a characteristic of selective intermittent time modes (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004), is that after one thematic unit, time was available to reflect on the collected data before the implementation of the next thematic unit.

Jeffrey and Troman (2011), in a study dealing with dilemmas and tensions in primary teachers' teaching practice, affected by structural influences, "saw ethnography as a relevant and appropriate methodology" (p. 486) and argued that observations and analysis of daily classroom practice at the micro level are connected to macro policies and structures. The studied classrooms can thus be seen as parts of a larger context: What happens in them is in various ways rooted in the macro level.

Table 1. The fieldworks, 2017-2020.

School and number of students in the classes	Thematic unit and time period for implementation	Observed lessons, number ³ and length	Collection methods ⁴	Involved subjects ⁵
Lake (Year 5: 16 students, 9 girls, 7 boys) (Year 6: 14 students, 7 g, 7 b)	1. UN and the children, autumn 2017	Eight lessons, 25-70 min.	-Classroom observations -Student (7) and teacher interviews, -Students' written reflections: 16 -Audio recordings -Written material	Geography Civics, To a lower extent: History Religious studies
	2. Civilisations, autumn 2018	Seven lessons, 40-50 min.	-Classroom observations -Student interviews: 5 -Written reflections: 12	History Civics Geography
	3. People's conditions and resources, spring 2019	Three lessons, 50 min.	-Classroom observations -Student interviews: 3, in group -Written reflections: 12	Civics Geography
Sea (Years 5 and 6: 24 students, 10 g, 14 b)	1. The global goals, autumn 2017	Eight lessons, 40-60 min.	-Classroom observations -Student interviews: 9 -Written reflections: 23	Civics Geography, To a lower extent: History Religious studies Music

	2. The Nordic countries, spring 2018	Fifteen lessons, 50-70 min.	-Classroom observations -Student interviews: 9 -Written reflections: 24	Geography, To a lower extent: Civics History
	3. The explorers and the world, autumn 2018	Seven lessons, 40-60 min.	-Classroom observations -Student interviews: 9, in pairs, and in group -Written reflections: 24	History Civics Geography Religious studies
Creek (Year 5: 22 students, 7 g, 15 b) (Year 6: 16 students, 6 g, 10 b)	1. National minorities, spring 2019	Seven lessons, 50-70 min.	-Classroom observations - Student interviews: 8, individual, in pairs, and in group -Written reflections: 21	History Civics Geography Religious studies
	2. Sweden in the 15 th and 16 th centuries and its contemporary traces, spring 2020	Seven lessons, 40-70 min.	-Classroom observations -No student interviews -Written reflections: 12	History, To a lower extent: Civics Geography Religious studies
River (Year 5: 18 students, 5 g, 13 b)	1. A time of power, spring 2019	Seven lessons, 50-70 min.	-Classroom observations	History, To a lower extent: Civics

Year 6: 19 students, 5 g, 14 b)			-Student interviews: 6, in pairs -Written reflections: 17.	Geography Religious studies Maths Swedish
	2. Save or waste, spring 2020	One lesson, 40 min	-Classroom observation -Audio recordings: 8 lessons -Teacher interviews, -Students' written reflections: 17	Civics, lower extent: Geography Religious studies Maths

The fieldwork included the methods listed in Table 1, and the methods were implemented as follows:

The *classroom observations* were performed with an approach similar to that of observer-as-participant (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Observational field notes were developed into a running protocol. *Semi-structured interviews* (Bryman, 2016) were conducted with students, in pairs or in groups, after each thematic unit. Teacher interviews were conducted before and in most cases after each thematic unit. *Students' written reflections* were completed after each thematic unit. *Informal conversations* with teachers took place largely after lessons. Some group discussions and other classroom communications were *audio recorded*. *Written material* consisted mainly of teaching material and working tasks.

The methods used in the fieldwork should be seen as connecting and reflecting different parts to enable the provision of perspective that is as holistic as possible. The interviews with students and teachers and informal conversations with the teachers have been linked to the observations and sound recordings in such a way that the interview questions and conversations have dealt with and followed up on what has occurred in the teaching. The students' written reflections were also a complement to the observations and interviews, allowing all students' voices be heard, even those who would rather write than talk about their thoughts. The student interviews and written reflections interacted in such a way that through follow-up questions, the interviews provided further opportunities for in-depth thought.

The ambition before the start of the fieldwork was to use the same data collection methods for all fieldwork. However, changing conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the data collection in the fieldwork for the last two schools, River and Creek,

had a slightly different nature. Since only one observation could be carried out at River and sound recordings of classroom practice were used instead, some dimensions of capturing classroom communication were lost. This lack of access to the field was attempted to be offset by a greater emphasis on conversations with the teacher about how the teaching was conducted. Further, interviews with the students could not be conducted at River and Creek, and this meant that greater emphasis was placed on the written reflections for the analysis. These changes affected the data and interpretations in such a way that the conditions for obtaining the same breadth and depth in the overall data collection and analysis were weakened, as the fieldwork methods at those schools could not be combined, based on the ethnographic approach, to the planned extent.

3.3 Method of analysis

The analysis was conducted in the form of data collection - analysis - data collection - analysis (Jeffrey & Troman, 2011); the term “spiralling insights” (Lacey, 1976) can be used to describe the process regarding the successive immersion in the material. In the analysis, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) three stages of thematic analysis (coding, thematisation, and refinement) were the main guiding principles. In the analysis of the overall material, comparisons across all ten thematic units were important for identifying and connecting key parts, which, illustrated with descriptions, citations, and extracts, constitute the findings of the study.

4 FINDINGS

In all schools, the thematic units were planned and carried out in terms of a varying number of social studies subjects’ core content based on the NAE (2011). Overall, the selected teaching content implied that the teaching could be related to the different discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019), connected to either overarching curriculum objectives or goals of subject knowledge, including knowledge requirements. All thematic units were considered to contain elements of both the mentioned categories but with more or less emphasis on one or the other.

The findings are separated into two parts, according to the two categories of discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019). For each part, there is an introductory general description related to the completed teaching and the discourses of learning. In the general description and subsequent examples of the classroom teaching, the actors’ experiences, actions and statements are described, expressed overall through classroom discussions, written reflections, interviews, and audio recordings. At the end of the findings section is a concluding analysis, which also relates to Deng and Luke’s (2008) knowledge conceptions.

4.1 Teaching and learning related to discourses of learning connected to overarching curriculum objectives

Teaching clearly connected to these discourses occurred in thematic units that could be considered more integrated and to a somewhat higher extent in Year 5. In statements, students described experiences related to values and societal issues. A student from Sea stated, “I’ve learned how much we have to change the world and a little bit about what you can do yourself”. Another Sea student said,

“I learned that it’s important to consume less; we can’t continue to live like this because we live as if we had four globes. I also think we who have houses, food, and money should help people who live in poor conditions”.

These statements indicate the students’ awareness of a worrying global situation, what might be causing the situation, and suggestions on what can be done to change the situation. The statements connect to the discourse of citizenship (Lundström, 2019) and, to goals such as respect for the environment, ability to empathise, and taking initiative but can at the same time be attributed to personal fulfilment such as forming personal standpoints and a desire to solve problems. In a discussion on how minorities have been badly treated, one Creek student reflected on subjection to degrading treatment, in the discourse of social inclusion or social justice (Lundström, 2019), by explaining his understanding of the word “prejudice”: “When you look at a person the first time, you think something”.



This picture shows the Sea school teacher’s and students’ summary on the classroom whiteboard, concerning methods, content and concepts, regarding the thematic unit of *The global goals*. This thematic unit had an emphasis on discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019) related to overarching curriculum objectives.

An observation with a similar meaning, seen in terms of the discourse of learning, was made during a lesson regarding human rights at Sea school: There are a number of points about human rights written on the smartboard. The “reading snake” goes around the class; this means that one student reads one point at a time, which they talk a little about under the guidance of the teacher, and then they move on to the next. They come to the point “All people have equal value”, and the teacher talks about people having different conditions for living a good life. A student raises her hand and starts talking about a woman she met at a hamburger restaurant.

“She’d some weird clothes. She’d several empty cans and walked around and took cans that people had just drunk out of. At first, I thought that she seemed scary, but then I saw that she was probably quite kind.”

This statement opened an extended class discussion on how to behave when one meets beggars, because another student mentioned a woman who used to sit outside the local grocery store. This developed, in a way, into a discussion regarding an ethical problem, with the teacher letting the discussion continue based on the students’ experiences and thoughts. The discourse of citizenship (Lundström, 2019) was particularly salient here in that students were given the opportunity to understand and show tolerance for people by becoming acquainted with and discussing different living conditions.

Another observation comprises a lesson at Creek in Year 5 about the Sámi (Sweden’s indigenous people), which begins a conversation among the whole class. One circumstance is that a girl in the class has a Sámi background. This is, in connection with the lesson, openly emphasised by the teacher. From this, the girl receives positive comments and appreciative pats on the back from classmates. The girl does not say much, but her facial expressions express appreciation that could indicate pride in her origin and its emphasis in class. The teacher is talking about how the Sámi have been treated historically by the Swedish state and connects this, through questions to the students, to what the “state” is and how Sweden is currently governed. While asking questions of the students, the teacher talks about Sweden’s colonisation of the Sámi country and discrimination against the people. When asked about the potential reasons for the discrimination historically, a student answers that it was about Sweden wanting more power. The teacher agrees and continues, while showing on a map, that Sweden wanted to expand its country to the north: “But who lived there already?” she asks, and several students answer, “The Sámi” simultaneously.

Further, in the same lesson, an episode from the film series “*The Testament of the Geographer*” (Sveriges utbildningsradio, 2012) is shown. The students have seen other films during the thematic unit, but they have never been as attentive as they are this time. In the film, the Sámi drum, which has great religious significance, appears. After the film, the class conversation continues: Some students show great fascination with the Sámi drum, and one student asks why the drum was used. The teacher says that at some point, others took the drums and smashed them, because those people wanted the Sámi to

become Christians. Several students react strongly when they hear that the drums were destroyed, and they raise their hands to their heads.

To explain the Sámi's situation, the teacher uses content from all four subjects in the conversation, and students' questions and thoughts also mean that she needs support from different subjects to describe the whole issue. The conclusion is that the subjects play a subordinated role in this lesson, while the Sámi come to the fore. The teaching is clearly directed towards the discourses (Lundström, 2019) connected to the overarching curriculum objectives: Citizenship in shape of for example understanding of other people and the ability to empathise and social inclusion and justice in the shape of understanding of cultural diversity and personal fulfilment in a way that teaching can contribute to forming a personal identity and standpoints. The teaching can thus be said to be close to the common core of the social studies subjects. The fact that one of the students has a Sámi background may also contribute to students' more in-depth understanding because it is part of their reality. Regarding assessment, there is no knowledge requirement in Year 6 specifically directed towards content about the Sámi and other national minorities, which can make students' performances regarding this content difficult to assess.

During the thematic units, both films and fiction books were used as teaching methods, which was appreciated by the students: "I probably learned best during films and when we discussed in class. In films, they explain clearly, and when we discuss with the whole class, you can ask questions if you don't understand something from the film" (Creek student). The films and fiction books often presented a structured, exciting story, with individual children's perspectives or living conditions as the main focus and a somewhat broader perspective than that of a single subject. This created opportunities for students to immerse themselves in anxious societal issues, to develop or maintain tolerance and respect for other human beings, much in line with the discourses of citizenship and social inclusion (Lundström, 2019).

In the thematic unit "The explorers and the world" at Sea, the teacher read a fiction book⁶ aloud for the students. The students became very committed to the book's content, which they could relate to other content in the unit because the main character is a street boy in Honduras, which once was a Spanish colony. During unit discussions, when the students reflected on people's different living conditions, the conversation covered concepts such as welfare and migration, which could be linked to the book's content. In this way, these concepts could be put into a "real-life" context, which might enable students to compare their own experiences or thoughts and to see others' perspectives. In view of this, and related to the work of Lundström (2019), the discourse of citizenship and the goal of "understanding of other people and the ability to empathise" was particularly evident.

On another occasion, when the class discussed communities that do not really function and what consequences this may imply, several students gave examples from the fiction book that demonstrated their thoughts. For example, in the book, an elderly lady gives advice to the boy (p. 58): "Go to the dump, she said. It's located far outside the city and is

huge. I worked there before I injured my hip and had walking difficulties. At the dump, you feel fine because that's where you make money." Based on this, the students reflected on child labour, how to live at a dump, diseases that can be spread, and waste sorting. The students also made connections to reports they had seen on TV, and someone had travelled to other countries and had seen people who seemed to be extremely poor. When students made these connections, the discourse (Lundström, 2019) of social inclusion or justice and the goal of "equal rights and opportunities", could particularly be distinguished.

4.2 Teaching and learning related to the subject knowledge discourse

Patterns of the subject knowledge discourse (Lundström, 2019) were abundant in the thematic units. Nevertheless, there is an overall tendency to a greater focus on goals of subject knowledge in Year 6, when grades are to be set. This means that knowledge in the individual subjects, instead of more overarching knowledge related to the subjects' common core, has a more prominent position in teaching. This knowledge is provided by the teachers to better identify and evaluate students' demonstrated knowledge, in relation to the knowledge requirements and grade levels.

In conjunction, there was a tendency, in terms of all students' reflections, for students to have a slightly more negative view of subject integration in Year 6.

"You learn a lot if it is blended, but if you blend too much, it becomes difficult to keep track of. Two subjects or so can be good to blend, but if there are too many, it'll be messy" (Lake student).

The somewhat less positive experiences of integration in the final units, related to all empirical material, could be due to the grading in Year 6: The students think it becomes "too messy" when several subjects are involved. The final units are also, in terms of the degree of integration, somewhat more adapted to form the basis for grading.

It is clear that the thematic units in Year 5 compared with those of Year 6 have a slightly different atmosphere in terms of the classroom actors' foci, even though this is expressed differently in different classrooms. The knowledge requirements overall are a clearer part of the classroom work, and several students testify to a more concentrated and cohesive atmosphere due to the upcoming grading.

If you get a lower grade, you may be disappointed. When the teacher comes by and listens when I talk in a group ... yes, I probably think about thinking a little more before I say something ... Is it smart to say this, or does he judge this as if I don't know what I'm talking about?" (Lake student).

According to this statement, the more focused teaching, with clearer subject knowledge and knowledge requirements, seems to have a dampening effect on students' free exploration and proposed thoughts on the content and instead makes them think about what seems appropriate to express based on the matter that will be assessed and graded.

Below, a couple of situations from classrooms are presented. The first situation was preceded by a review with the whole class in which the teacher via a PowerPoint presentation taught the subject knowledge that students would need to be able to communicate in group work.

The River class is working in groups of about three students. The task is to make a Venn diagram and sort out similarities and differences in power and who ruled in Sweden, comparing the Era of Great Power (a Swedish epoch during 1611-1718) and the present. In the diagram, the similarities and differences between past and present should be written. Students have a list of words, for example, “universal suffrage”, “government”, “council”, “democracy”, to include in the diagram. The following is an example of how the discussion could take place:

Student 1: The king had great power in those days, and there was not universal suffrage.

Student 2: The king has not much power nowadays, the only thing he does is to inaugurate things.

Student 3: Now the government has the power; back then, the king and the council had the power.

In this exercise, students receive support from the teacher’s review, the list of words and the Venn diagram, that is, support in showing their abilities that create a basis for assessment. The students alternately discuss core content from history and civics. The integration between history and civics can occur rather naturally because in this case, the core content and subject-specific knowledge requirements of the two subjects are similar but still so clearly separated that the subjects can be distinguished. This is thus an example of integrated teaching that could be a good basis for assessment of students’ subject knowledge, with respect to how the knowledge requirements are structured.

On many occasions when the subject knowledge discourse (Lundström, 2019) could be distinguished, the teaching followed a similar pattern, and this was something that occurred in similar ways in all schools: Teachers’ reviews of subject knowledge were followed by student work in pairs or in groups in which students could use the subject knowledge *practically*, and in different ways, train and show what they could *do* with the subject knowledge.

An example of such a situation is a lesson at Sea when students practice before a final test in a thematic unit, a test that will form the major basis for grading. During the unit, the students have been taught about historical conditions that led to areas on other continents being colonised by Europeans. The students then work in groups in which they will use their subject knowledge. They get two questions to discuss and answer: “What are the reasons Europeans started traveling outside Europe? What were the consequences of the journeys?” These questions can be quite clearly linked to the subject of history. In the discussions, the concept of colonisation comes up early, but the discussions also deal with

subject knowledge that can be attributed to civics and geography. The following are examples of the students' answers:

Reasons: "Those who conquered wanted more power and money. Scientists wanted more knowledge about what the world looked like. They wanted to spread the Christian faith. There were important natural resources that you could make money on."

Consequences: "Language and culture changed in the areas that were colonised. Many died of smallpox and other diseases. People became slaves, and slave trade arose."

Here, the students had the opportunity to show their subject knowledge in practice, directly aimed at the knowledge requirements in history – mainly "applying reasoning about the causes and consequences of social change, and people's living conditions and actions" (NAE 2011, p. 169). Still, this may imply subject integration to some degree, since it to some extent may be conducted in much the same way in civics, particularly regarding consequences – "describe relationships in different societal structures" (NAE, 2011, p. 195).

In another classroom situation, at River, a review about "money and salary" is carried out, which is clearly connected to the subject of social studies and the core content of "Personal finances and the relationships between work, income and consumption" (NAE 2011, p. 192). Several clearly civics-related concepts are reviewed, such as gross-salary, monthly salary, commission fee, and budget. Students get to think about the concepts in whole-class, for example, in the following manner:

Teacher, explaining the concept of a "commission fee": Imagine I'm a car salesman. I get some fixed salary and a commission fee on how many cars I sell. What happens to my salary when I have to pay my bills?

Student: One month you can earn a lot, but next month less.

Teacher: What do you do if you don't know how much money you make each month?

Student: You write down the most important things you have to pay each month.

In this example, the subject knowledge discourse (Lundström, 2019) can be distinguished. There are clear subject-based facts and concepts in this sequence with no subject integration, and the students are encouraged to show what they are able to do with their knowledge. According to knowledge requirements for civics (NAE, 2011), students must be able to "describe economic relationships" and "use concepts in a functional way". To elicit and monitor these student abilities, the teacher asks questions, students reply, and the teacher asks follow-up questions, often from a different angle, for the students to motivate and deepen their answers.

4.3 Concluding analysis

The descriptions of the teaching and students' approaches could thus be linked to the discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019), with a more distinct connection to overarching curriculum objectives and more distinct towards goals of subject knowledge, respectively. In Year 5, there was a tendency to place more emphasis on teaching directed towards

overarching objectives. In Year 6, in the final thematic units, there was arguably a certain emphasis on achieving goals of subject knowledge, particularly regarding the knowledge requirements, under the condition that students' knowledge should be assessed for grading.

Regarding the students' approaches related to the discourses of learning connected to overarching curriculum objectives (Lundström, 2019), the students, often in teaching with a higher degree of subject integration (Gresnigt et al. 2014), generally showed greater commitment and curiosity, and it also contributed to arousing their thoughts on how to help change certain circumstances in society. In relation to the subject knowledge discourse (Lundström, 2019), the students generally showed an increasing will to perform as well as possible, according to the knowledge requirements. However, some students who participated actively and curiously in the first mentioned teaching contexts were now more withdrawn and in some cases showed more disinterest and a lack of concentration. Something of a paradox, however, is that the students as a whole became somewhat less positive about subject-integrated teaching in Year 6, when grades were to be set.

Related to Deng and Luke's (2008) knowledge conceptions, the first part of the findings relate mainly to the experiential knowledge conception (Deng & Luke, 2008). These findings point to an emphasis on knowledge as a process in which students' everyday life experiences, questions and interests are of high importance. The presented examples point to teaching oriented towards students' active influence, with an outward look towards society. Students also show great enthusiasm for the content and participate in the lessons in a way that to a certain extent shows their ethical and moral positions on societal issues. However, this overarching, broader knowledge is more difficult to assess, as it to a small extent is related to knowledge requirements.

The second part of the findings shows teaching more distinct towards goals of subject knowledge (Lundström, 2019). The subject knowledge discourse can, in relation to these findings, with the support of Deng and Luke's (2008) knowledge conceptions, be divided into two parts, but interwoven – the ability, the practical conception, is merged with, but steered by the subject matter, the disciplinary conception. This means that the subject matter, albeit sometimes to some components integrated, and what one is able to do with it is emphasised (Adolfsson, 2018) to meet the knowledge requirements. This teaching approach fits well with the main purpose of a standards-based curricula and its ideas of academic achievement and social efficiency (cf. Adolfsson, 2018; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2018). In the classroom situations above, the combination of the two knowledge conceptions could be distinguished when students were asked to motivate their reasoning. The teacher is aware that these are the skills that should be graded. For the teacher, this approach can fulfil two, possibly simultaneous, functions – to let the student practice the abilities to be graded or to search for how well the students' abilities are developed (cf. *the new meaning of teaching*, Sundberg & Wahlström, 2018).

5 DISCUSSION

The investigated thematic units can to a varying degree be connected to discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019) and to knowledge conceptions (Deng & Luke, 2008). Regarding teaching with links to Deng and Luke's concepts, teaching towards goals of the discourses of learning connected to overarching curriculum objectives can be considered quite strongly connected to the experiential knowledge conception. This conception, also to some extent linked to the common core of social studies subjects, can contribute to the development of broader knowledge about society and the world (Adolfsson, 2018).

Adolfsson (2018) argued that this knowledge, in school practice, is subordinated other knowledge more focused on learning outcomes. In the present study, this is shown particularly in Year 6, when grades are to be set in close connection to the thematic units. In terms of the discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019), the adaptation of the construction of thematic units in Year 6 meant that there was a somewhat greater predominance of subject knowledge and, to a certain extent, that the subjects were clarified. This can be traced to the fact that teachers, when planning how the social studies subjects can be integrated, prioritise goals of subject knowledge, which must be graded – at the expense of the overarching curriculum objectives, as these rarely are clearly included in the knowledge to be graded (cf. Lundström, 2019; Wahlström et al. 2020).

In a Swedish study on Year 6 subject-separated social studies teaching in which disciplinary and practical knowledge conceptions (Deng & Luke, 2008) were dominant, Adolfsson (2018) argued for some flexibility in teaching and for teaching also to focus on experiential knowledge conceptions (Deng & Luke, 2008). The whole range of knowledge conceptions and discourses of learning is advocated by macro level policies through the NAE (2011), but despite this, and in many cases at the micro level, the subject knowledge discourse is superior. This is probably due to variations in the strength with which different curriculum reforms are implemented, exerted by other levels in the educational system. Grade reforms, compared with other reforms, have a fairly quickly impact in practice (Åsén, 2013). Grading has the power to control both content and approach in teaching, which has been perceived and practiced by educational policy makers (Stobart, 2008). The findings in this study regarding Year 6 indicate circumstances similar to those Adolfsson (2018) found, with quite a performance-oriented teaching approach, although overall, in Year 5 and 6, the present study shows how teaching still can be carried out with a fairly significant breadth of knowledge conceptions (Deng & Luke, 2008) and discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019).

Teaching and learning directed more towards subject knowledge (Lundström, 2019) could in the present study take the forms of a more subdued and concentrated atmosphere in class and of students' uncertainties about showing their abilities to the teacher but also, conversely, becoming more active and willing to participate to demonstrate their abilities. These approaches, connected to teachers' recurrent exploration of students' abilities, may be described as the new meaning of teaching (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2018). Another reflection is that when teaching was connected to discourses (Lundström, 2019) such as

citizenship and social inclusion or justice, the students became particularly interested and willing to participate in conversations. This approach to learning was visible regardless of the school and thematic unit and also concerning students who, on other occasions, showed concentration difficulties (cf. McDowall & Hipkins, 2019). Having a strong focus on what is to be assessed according to prescribed knowledge requirements was presented by Wahlström et al. (2020) as possibly leading to learning that can be recognised as instrumental. In that case, education is focused mainly on enhancing students' academic achievements, which is mainly intended to lead to social efficiency and the competitiveness of the individual and the country and somewhat less to educational needs with, for example, wider knowledge, and "the common good" in mind (cf. Wahlström et al. 2020).

In this study, subject-integrated teaching was carried out in different ways, with different degrees of integration and complexity (Gresnigt et al. (2014) and can be attributed to different discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019). The findings show that more complex subject integration often takes place with a greater focus on overarching curriculum objectives and with significant elements of an experiential knowledge conception (Deng & Luke, 2008). This may be because the content of the social studies subjects that best fit together may be connected to the subjects' common core in addition to the overarching curriculum objectives. However, it is important to point out that the teaching content selected by the teachers fits more or less well with overarching curriculum objectives respectively goals for subject knowledge. Discourses of learning related to the overarching curriculum objectives are also found, to various extents, to be encompassed in subject knowledge. However, some parts of the core content of the social studies subjects have, frankly, little connection to overarching curriculum objectives and can be difficult to connect to content in other subjects. In such cases, subject-separated teaching is, of course, preferable.

Overall, learning subject knowledge is highly important for students' future lives, but what could be considered is on which discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019) the emphasis should be put. Lundström (2019) claimed an excessive focus on measurable knowledge in schooling implies that the intentions of the Swedish school system regarding a democratic and equal society can be ignored. Lundström (2019) emphasised that more than subject knowledge is needed, especially in a time and reality where the idea of democracy is being challenged in various ways. "Such challenges call for schooling that emphasises broad goals, such as critical thinking, democratic values, creativity, equality and the development of broad human perspectives" (Lundström, 2019, p. 201).

6 CONCLUSION

From the teaching, in light of the varying degrees of integration of the social studies subjects, emerged patterns based on the ethnographic explorations and showing how the teaching and students' approaches may be affected by the character of the learning goals to be achieved. An implication for teaching practice, built on this study, is for teachers to

allow for the whole range of discourses of learning (Lundström, 2019). Further, it is recommendable for teachers to show awareness of the various knowledge conceptions (e.g. Deng & Luke, 2008), how dissimilarities in those relate to the way the teaching is carried out and how that can affect students' learning.

However, the question of "What knowledge is most important for students to acquire?" may remain – but now particularly addressed to other levels in the educational system, not least to policy makers.

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ENDNOTES

¹The concept of *macro* in this article, as used by Jeffrey and Troman (2011), refers to the state and political level in the education system that decides on educational policy and

reforms. The *micro* level refers to individual school- and classroom practice, where policy enactment takes place, i.e., the implementation of policies into practice. The macro level (in this paper; the Swedish government) intends to, for example, with decided assessment reforms, increase Swedish schools' and students' goal attainment. However, the reform implementation in the individual school and classroom practice can take place in different ways and with different consequences. Further elaborated accounts of the Swedish national policy context can be found in Strandler (2017) and Wahlström et al. (2020).

² The study is based on ethical principles, in agreement with the Swedish Research Council (2017).

³ In addition to the observed lessons, more lessons were included in some thematic units, (at Sea school, thematic units 2-3, Creek 2, Lake 1, River 1-2). This amounts to about 1-4 more lessons.

⁴ Audio recordings and written material were part of the empirical material in all thematic units, even though this is not stated in all columns.

⁵ A basis for determining which subjects were involved was the core content of each subject (NAE, 2011).

⁶ The teaching regarding the fiction book has been described more thoroughly, in Swedish, in:

Hedlund, A. & Olovsson, T.G. (2020). Upptäckarna och världen – ett ämnesintegrerat temaarbete [The explorers and the world – a subject-integrated thematic unit]. *SO-didaktik [Social studies didactics]*, 9, 76-89.

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