Editorial

# Ethnographies of social science education

**Katarina Blennow**
*Lund University*

**Tilman Grammes**
*Universität Hamburg*

This special issue is dedicated to ethnographies of social science education in schools across Europe. Contributions included in the volume reflect the diverse legacies of school and classroom ethnography in Austria, England, Germany, Norway, Poland, Spain and Sweden. The authors follow different disciplinary and national traditions in the development and use of ethnographic methodologies. They build on anthropological, sociological and educational research from different European and American schools of thought, but their contributions, based on first-hand observations, share a commitment to understanding how everyday school-based practices connect to and illuminate sociocultural and political processes.[1]

Ethnography is not just a set of methods or a way of writing research but an approach to conducting research. Some scholars go so far as to call it a lifestyle (see Johansson, 2010; Mills & Morton, 2013). Ethnography is a "deeply contextualized exploration of situated practices and cultural processes" (Harrison, 2018, p. 19). It can be described as bewildering, complicated, demanding, in-depth and time-consuming. In ethnographic research, places, people and behavior, which at first sight seem obvious and comprehensible, become complex, strange and multi-faceted. Through this process of "making the familiar strange" (Clifford, 1986), everyday life is understood as both process and structure.

A way to capture richness and complexity is long term engagement in the field, which we see in the majority of the papers of this issue. An extended amount of time makes it possible to capture ongoing processes of teaching and learning. However, some scholars are asking for renewed reflection on the importance of spending much time in the field, for instance in relation to the expanding research on on-line teaching (see Borgnakke, 2019).

Writing is pivotal in ethnographic research, as can be traced already in the etymology of the term from the Greek *Ethnos* (nation or people) and *Graphia* (writing). In ethnographic writing, description and analysis are intertwined. One way of defining the much-used term "thick description" is "layering meaning into closely observed details"' (Narayan, 2012, p. 8). Representing complexity is important, but also demanding. A feature of ethnographic research is the struggle to put even the incipient and imponderable into text.

Reading ethnographies should be an immersive reading experience. Due to the richness of data, vivid descriptions, and a holistic approach, ethnographies are well suited to widen one's perspective on social science education, for example by reading an older ethnographic study or an ethnography from a national culture or type of school with which one is less familiar.

## Power relations and school cultures

The first three papers focus their ethnographies on power relations in schools.

**Josefine Wagner'**s article *Flags, crucifix and language regimes* is based on eighteen months of multi-sited ethnographic research conducted in primary schools in Austria, Germany and Poland. In her extensive school-based ethnographic research, Wagner focused on how EU educational policy on social justice and inclusion is interpreted, practiced and contested in three different Central European contexts. Wagner centers her observations on state and religious symbolism - both physical and discursive - that mark the spaces of the schools in which she conducted her research. Interpreting her ethnographic data through geopolitical and historical framing, Wagner shows the pervasive power of exclusionary national narratives. These narratives challenge the expansive imaginary of belonging and citizenship that underlie principles of educational inclusion and are produced in the everyday life of schools. Wagner's article is an example of how deeply situated and localized school-based ethnographic research can shed light on the implementation of global policy agendas (Carney, 2008; Rubin & Cervinkova, 2020). Its multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) and multinational focus strengthens the impact of Wagner's findings and points to the generative potential of ethnography to provide critical insight into the realities of school communities impacted by transnational demographic and geopolitical changes that challenge the established lines dividing the local and the global (Dyrness & El-Haj, 2020).

Many classroom ethnographies focus on marginalized and groups that are considered excluded (Johansson, 2010). **Janna Lundberg**'s article *Mutual rejection*, however, is an ethnography of social science education at a Swedish upper secondary school with elite status. The article's focus is on interaction and power-relations. Lundberg has returned to the school and its social studies class repeatedly over a period of four years. The extended time frame allows for insights into the development of role taking and the changing distribution of roles in the classroom. Lundberg is able to capture a shift from the first

year, when the students were obedient and the teacher restricted their actions, to the end of the third year, at which time the students had become "masters of the game", controlling and correcting the teacher. The article provides rich and vivid descriptions of classroom practices at an elite school, where a silent and orderly school culture makes the researcher hyper-aware of her own body and how it contrasts with the dominant norms. Lundberg demonstrates how ethnographic work can be an "uncomfortable science" (Mills & Morton, 2013) in two ways. On the one hand, it exposes the bodily discomfort of the researcher during fieldwork; on the other hand, the results achieved through ethnographic methods can be uncomfortable in contrast to an idealized view of social studies teaching as promoting social justice.

Progressive education imagines itself as being based on agreeing rather than commanding. In this context, **Jürgen Budde**, **Lotta Hellberg** and **Nora Weuster** raise questions of *Contractualism in education*, as an element of democratic education. They analyze ethnographic material from an educational workshop on social learning with 8th grade students in a North German comprehensive school. Contractualism is an educational phenomenon that often uses behavioral contracts, which are pinned on classroom doors or in school hallways; other forms are learning agreements or so-called school time-out-rooms. Are such learning contracts tools for empowerment and accountability? Or does voluntary self-control function as a new governmental strategy of educational reform and attunement to control society? The article is a plea for a change of perspective in order to critically question the assumed dichotomous relation between power technology and educational reform progress. The point is not to understand the two phenomena as two sides of the same coin, which would still represent an opposition, but as a coherent constellation within a "flat ontology" (Schatzki, 2016). Contractualism can then be understood as an exercise in balancing external control and self-control.
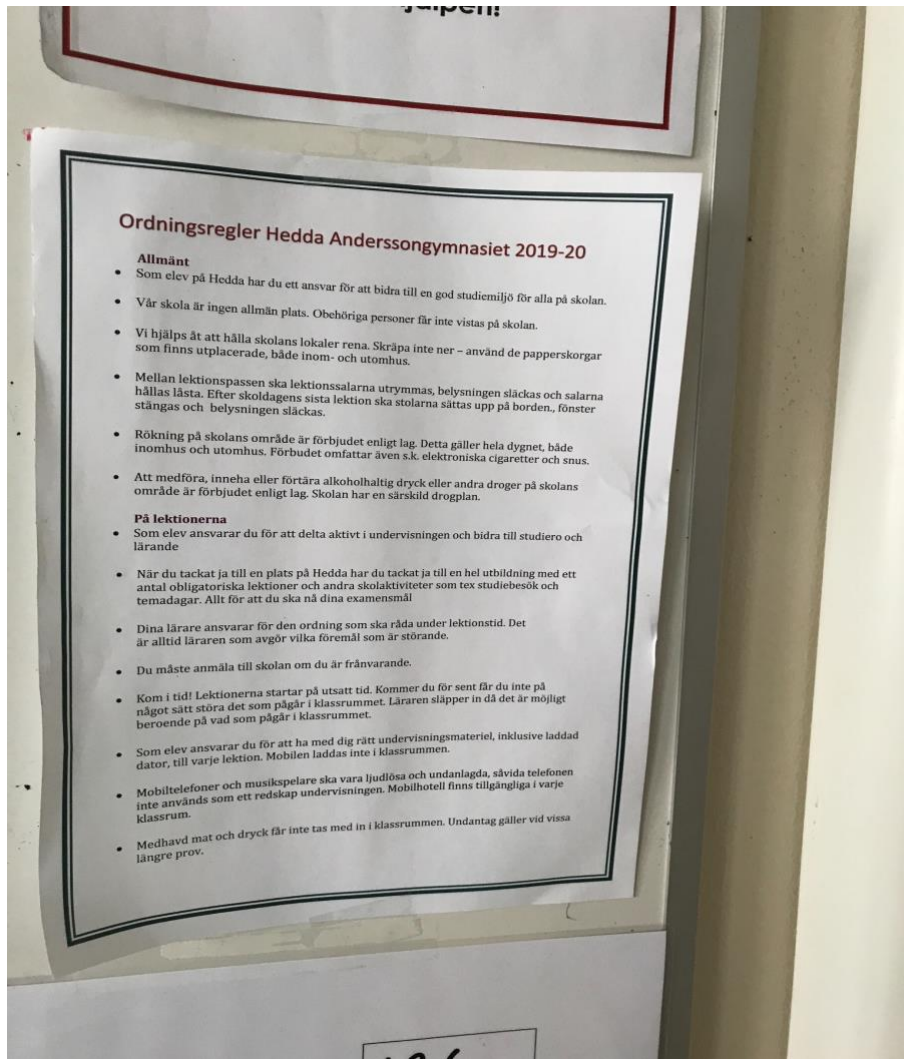
Ordningsregler Hedda Anderssongymnasiet 2019-20 (Rules of procedure. Hedda Andersson Senior High School 2019-20)

## Subject teaching in the civics classroom

The following three papers focus their ethnographies more on subject teaching in the civics classroom.

**May Jehle's** paper *Visual ethnography in classrooms* links the focus on subject matter teaching with power relations, represented here by the camera work itself. Camera work is defined as a methodology of permanent work on gazes to make social phenomena in the context of possible interpretative patterns sensorially visible (Mohn, 2009, p. 173). In doing video ethnography, researchers consciously work with their own "sensitivities and selectivity" (Mohn, 2009, p. 175). This takes place in the process of data collection, by conducting highly focused and selective camerawork, as well as in the further data processing, by cutting and editing the audiovisual material. The camera in this context becoming a kind of "corporate actor", another "student", observing what is going on. Jehle invites the reader to a unique situation, where civic education is at risk at a time of system

change – the process of transition and unification of Germany 1989/1990. Due to the highly dynamic process of transformation and the constant revisions of educational directives, it is unlikely that there existed an established teaching practice at the time. Jehle's case study is part of a larger investigation of twelve classroom observations of civics courses in East-, West-, and later unified Berlin from 1978 until 1993 (Jehle, 2022).

**Sarah Whitehouse'**s and **Verity Jones'** article *It makes me really angry* provides a microscopic insight into one teaching session in their longer ethnographic project focusing on climate education in schools in England. In their research, they merged their roles as ethnographic researchers and teachers. In addition to teaching, conducting classroom observations, and writing research diaries, they also elicited drawings from children, which are included as data in their analysis. Their research is unique in its focus on both pupils' and their own emotional engagement with themes related to the climate emergency. Whitehouse and Jones stress the need to allow feelings to play an explicit and important role in future pedagogies to help children and youth cope with eco-anxiety.

**Tord Göran Olovsson**'s paper on *Teaching and learning in integrated social studie*s in Sweden investigates how educational policies are handled, interpreted and experienced at classroom level. The young students find themselves at an important point of change in their school life; they are about to be graded for the very first time, which in Sweden happens in year six. By studying the teaching of thematic units in social studies in four classes over a period of two years, from the start of year five to the end of year six, Olovsson captures a change both in how the teaching is carried out and how it is experienced and approached by the students. Echoing Lundberg's article, this paper also shows the potential of spending an extended amount of time in the field, returning to the same classrooms over several years. Olovsson's results are closely related to him being able to observe that change. For instance, in year five, the students express curiosity and commitment when the teaching integrates subjects to a high degree and is related to curriculum discourses such as citizenship and social justice. In year six, when they are about to be graded, the students are less positive about subject integration. When grading is introduced, a subject-knowledge discourse achieves more prominence, and the behavior of the students in the classroom changes.

The ***Open Topic section*** includes **Ingvill Bjørnstad Åberg**'s contribution *Imagined sameness or imagined difference?* that frames a problem of egalitarianism in education in Norway, where equality is understood as sameness and leads to an evasion of cultural difference. Through an interview study, Åberg analyzes Norwegian social studies teachers' views about cultural difference among students and discusses how their views have implications for social studies teaching. Åberg's article is not ethnographic but addresses tensions that are often the focus of ethnographic research: The drawing of boundaries between 'us' and 'them', difference and exclusion, as well as feelings of discomfort in teaching. Åberg connects teachers' discomfort when talking about students' cultural and ethnic differences to a view of disrupted Norwegian sameness. Her article frames discomfort as unavoidable in transformative social studies education.

The so-called crisis in representation has been a steadily discussed methodological question and problem of theory in ethnography in general (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Lemke, 2021). The documentation of educational processes is a prerequisite for any ethnographic attempt. It must be admitted that long-term documentation of lesson unit sequences or projects in social science education is still scarce. An open JSSE rubric **lesson/project report** would like to close the gap.[2]

The project report by the Galician team **Roberto García Morís**, **Montserrat Muriano** and **Begona Bas** on *Our Space at the Heart of the Smallpox Vaccine Expedition: A service-learning project for social studies and citizenship education in Galicia (Spain),* led by the University of A Coruña, invites the reader to learning environments inside and outside Ramón Menéndez Pidal High School in La Coruña. Original student voices, written student material and a photo gallery evoke a sense of "being there" in the reader's mind. School subjects like geography, history and civics are integrated with the aim of education for development and global citizenship. The history of the 22 orphan children and their nurse Isabel Zendal - *Los ninos de la veruela* (Solar, 2017) - informs readers around Europe about a fascinating but largely unknown story from early epidemiology: the Balmis expedition (1803-1806) which took smallpox vaccination to south America and Asia – a true global curriculum content, the special relevance in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic is obvious.

Two book reviews add to the topic of classroom ethnographies. In accordance with the JSSE multi-language policy, they introduce research in Polish and German to a broader European audience. Firstly, **Marta Paczuska** reviews an ethnographic study of alternative educational institutions in Poland. It offers insight into how democracy is understood and practiced by communities that form democratic schools; bottom-up non-public educational institutions that have recently appeared across the Polish educational landscape. The schools practice a combination of simultaneous disconnection (through alternative practices) and connection (through sociopolitical architecture and some shared practices) with the mainstream school system through which they are defined. In the second book review, **Sören Torrau** refers to a single civics lesson in Saxonia/Germany that is a perfect example for a performative action in civics as the students reflect their voting preferences by voting twice, at the beginning and at the end of the lesson, and comparing their voting results. The study book presents eight qualitative research methods as approaches to the case lesson. Even if ethnography is not included as a separate methodological approach, the introductory lesson report *Zu Gast im Politikunterricht* [Visiting politics class] gives a fine example of the art of documentation.

# Ethnographies of social science education: outlook to future research perspectives

In the call for papers for this issue, we were looking for papers using ethnographic methodology to make regional or national practices of social science education in the classroom visible to readers in other countries. A search in ERIC, the U.S. online library of education research and information, renders 9543 results on "education" and "ethnography" but a mere 100-200 results when combining "ethnography" with "civics", "citizenship education" or "democratic education". The majority of the results are from the U.S. The international German educational bibliography www.fachportal-paedagogik.de reinforces this impression: there, the combination of "ethnography" and "civics" or "citizenship education" renders 111 results. We hope that this issue of the JSSE shows the relevance of ethnographic research to political education and that it will inspire future ethnographies of European social science education.

The contributions to this issue differ in their uses of ethnography and in their focus, but all offer intriguing insights into the everyday complexities of social science education. In line with the ethnographic approach of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, everyday teaching and learning is explored in a way that opens up a possibility of amazement (see Breidenstein et al., 2020). Connections from ethnographic research to democracy and political education can be drawn, for example, in the question of (the limitation) participation and the possibility of acquiring autonomy and community spirit. If the "primary object of political education in school has to be school itself" (Roloff, 1974, p. 58), what happens when students begin to learn and know explicitly what happens to them during the process of schooling? In line with perspectives from theories of subjectification (e.g. Judith Butler), subjects' ability to act can only be realized through the recognition of power relations. One question in social science teaching is how learning spaces and learning material could open reflective space into the power relations detected by ethnography.

## Detected power relations

Two examples of book length etnographies showing that the students have discovered the power relations they are subordinated to in school. Stefan Wellgraf's book Schule der Gefühle. Zur emotionalen Erfahrung von Minderwertigkeit in *neoliberalen Zeiten* (School of emotions. On emotional experiences of inferiority in neoliberal times) (2018) is an ethnography of a school in Berlin-Neukölln that captures students' emotional experiences of exclusion, but also their resistance through humor and anger. It offers deep insights into social learning processes. Through careful attention to detail and by attending the school in the way of a student, Wellgraf gives an engaging ethnographic account of a school trying to discipline its students. For instance, the school stresses the need for punctuality, diligence and collegiality in working life, when at the same time it signals to the students that they are *zukunftslos* (without future): their risk of ending up in

unemployment is considered imminent. Wellgraf's broad ethnographic gaze and careful, appreciative writing frame the students as neither thoughtless victims nor aggressive revolutionaries, but as complex characters. With regard to the students' emotions, Wellgraf points to the importance of interpreting them as political. The disciplinary measures of the school, for example the deployment of classroom rules and the use of training-rooms where students are sent if they obstruct the teaching, tend to depoliticize emotions by neglecting structural, societal circumstances as sparks of emotion. The students are made responsible for the disciplinary breaches and conflicts in the school (cf. Budde et al., this issue).

Reva Jaffe-Walter's book *Coercive concern: nationalism, liberalism, and the schooling of Muslim youth* (2016) about a Danish upper secondary school also represent students as complex characters. She shows that national concerns about immigrants are enacted in everyday practices in the school. Through "technologies of concern", policies and practices are "directed at transforming immigrants into disciplined subjects of the nation-state" (Jaffe-Walter, 2016, p. 6). The concern that is coercive in Jaffe-Walter's ethnography is, in particular, Danish teachers' unease regarding Muslim girls in their classes. The teachers see it as the school's task to liberalize these girls based on assumptions about their lives. These include a supposed negative influence of their families, ethnic enclaves and religious affiliation. The teachers also believe that sexual liberation will lead to integration. Jaffe-Walter's ethnography explores young people's complex experiences of navigating and negotiating an everyday where stereotypes of Muslim identities in Danish national policy and discourse are enacted in school.

## The ethnographer's gaze and social science education

Every social science lesson is a dynamic event where the classroom experience is being framed by not only teachers and students, but also the subject content. The subject content can be seen as actively shaping what is going on in the classroom. From a perspective that emphasizes performative subject matter didactics, the subject is furthermore created in interaction, namely in the encounter between teacher, students and content. The content shapes the relations in the classroom and the relations in the classroom shape the content - there is resonance between them, they affect and transform each other (see Rosa, 2019). This line of thought can fruitfully be used in ethnographic subject matter didactical research. A merging of ethnographic attention on interaction and relations with attention on the subject content is central in performative subject matter didactics. This is often challenging in classroom ethnography. The gaze of the ethnographer is typically drawn toward social interactions relating to power relations and differences, which can provide powerful experiences during fieldwork. However, such a focus threatens to lose sight of the performativity of the subject being taught. The intriguing ethnographical descriptions of power in micro interaction in social studies teaching in an upper secondary school with elite status (Lundberg) is connectable to the subject content and its role as a third actor in

the classroom.[3] How are the shifting power relations related to the content of the social studies subject? What are the particularities of studying micro-power in social studies compared to other subjects? How does the subject shape what is going on in the classroom? Grappling with those questions would be a venture into performative subject matter didactics where the subject content is an actor among the others.

For now, one last and special word of gratitude to all the contributors to this issue. We are confident that this publication will give insights into how everyday school-based practices connect to and illuminate sociocultural and political processes. We also hope that it will serve to develop discussions on ethnographic research in social science education.

## JOURNALS AND WEB RESOURCES

Ethnography and Education:
https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/reae20
Anthropology & Education Quarterly:
https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15481492
Council on Anthropology and Education:
https://cae.americananthro.org/
Oxford Ethnography and Education Conference:
http://www.ethnographyandeducation.org/conferences/
Oxford Bibliographies: Using Ethnography in Educational Research:
https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756810/obo-9780199756810-0208.xml
7th International Ethnography Conference, Faculty of Education at Europa Universität Flensburg:
https://www.uni-flensburg.de/?id=31029

## REFERENCES

Borgnakke, K. (2019). Ethnographic methods for researching online learning and e-pedagogy. In G. Noblit (Ed.). *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.542

Breidenstein, G., Hirschauer, S., Kalthoff, H. & Nieswand, B. (2020). *Ethnografie. Die Praxis der Feldforschung* [Ethnography. The practice of field research]. 3rd edition. Konstanz: UTB.

Carney, S. (2008). Negotiating policy in an age of globalization: Exploring educational "policyscapes" in Denmark, Nepal, and China. *Comparative Education Review, 53*(1), 63-88. doi: 10.1086/593152

Clifford, J., & Marcus, G.E. (Eds.). (1986). *Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clifford, J. (1986). Introduction: Partial truths. In J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dyrness, A., & Abu El-Haj, T. R. (2020). Reflections on the field: The democratic citizenship formation of transnational youth. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 51*(2), 165-177. https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12294

Harrison, A. K. (2018). *Ethnography.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Jaffe-Walter, R. (2016). *Coercive concern: nationalism, liberalism, and the schooling of Muslim youth.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Jehle, M. (2022). *Politische Bildung und Erziehung im Unterricht. Kontrastive Fallstudien anhand von Videoaufzeichnungen politischen Fachunterrichts in Ost-, West- und Gesamtberlin von 1978 bis 1993* [Civic education in class. Contrastive case studies based on video classroom observations in East-, West, and then unified Berlin from 1978 to 1993]. Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt. (forthcoming)

Johansson, T. (2010). Etnografi som teori, metod och livsstil [Ethnography as theory, method and way of life]. *Educare - Vetenskapliga Skrifter*, *1*, 7–29.

Kraus, A., Budde, J., Hietzge, M. C., & Wulf, C. (Eds.) (2021). *Handbuch schweigendes Wissen Erziehung, Bildung, Sozialisation und Lernen* [Handbook tacit knowledge. Education, bildung, socialization, learning]. (2nd edition). Weinheim: Beltz.

Lemke, C. (2021). *Ethnographie nach der "Krise der Repräsentation". Versuche in Anlehnung an Paul Rabinow und Bruno Latour. Skizzen einer pädagogischen Anthropologie des Zeitgenössischen* [Ethnography after the "crisis of representation". Experiments based on Paul Rabinow and Bruno Latour. Sketches of an educational anthropology of the contemporary]. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Macgilchrist, F. (2012). Global subjects: An ethnographic study of educational media production and forms of subjectivation. *Pragmatics, 22*(3), 417-445.

Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review Anthropology, 23*, 95-117.

Mills, D., & Morton, M. (2013). *Ethnography in education.* London: Sage.

Mohn, E. (2009). Permanent work on gazes. Video ethnography as an alternative methodology. In H. Knoblauch, B. Schnettler, J. Raab, & H.-G. Soeffner (Eds.), *Video analysis: Methodology and methods. Qualitative audiovisual data analysis in sociology* (pp. 173-180). Lausanne: Peter Lang.

Narayan, K. (2012). *Alive in the writing: crafting ethnography in the company of Chekhov.* Chicago, [Ill.]: University of Chicago Press.

Roloff, E.-A. (1974). *Erziehung zur Politik. Eine Einführung in die politische Didaktik* [Political education. An introduction to political didactics]. Volume 1: S. Göttingen: Otto Schwarz.

Rosa, H. (2019). *Resonance: a sociology of our relationship to the world.* Cambridge: Polity Press. [German: Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2019]

Rubin, B., & Cervinkova, H. (2020). Challenging silences: Democratic citizenship education and historical memory in Poland and Guatemala. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 51*(2), 178-194. https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12329

Schatzki, T. R. (2016). Practice theory as flat ontology. In G. Spaargaren, D. Weenink, & M. Lamers (Eds.), *Practice theory and research.* Florence: Taylor and Francis.

Solar, M. (2017). *Los niños de la viruela* [The smallpox children]. Madrid: Anaya.

Wellgraf, S. (2018). *Schule der Gefühle: Zur emotionalen Erfahrung von Minderwertigkeit in neoliberalen Zeiten* [School of feelings: On the emotional experience of inferiority in neoliberal times]. Bielefeld: Transcript.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

**Katarina Blennow**, PhD, is Associate Senior Lecturer at the Department of Educational Sciences, Lund University. Her main research interests are emotions in education, controversial issues, social science didactics and school cultures. Currently, she is co-leading the project 'Visions and Resistance – the Establishment of a new School in a Marketized Educational Landscape'.

**Tilman Grammes**, PhD, M.A. worked as a teacher in several schools in Germany and is professor at the Universität Hamburg in the faculty of educational science with special focus on social science didactics and democracy education. His research interest includes theory of social science education, interpretative lesson research, history and comparative study of cultures of citizenship education.

**ENDNOTES**

[1] JSSE has previously featured articles based on classroom ethnography. These include, to name a few: Qualitative Research – Voices from Social Science Classrooms (JSSE 2010-3), with participant observation in the article *Mark's Classroom* (by Per-Olof Erixon); Insights into Citizenship Classrooms. The Art of Documentation & Description (JSSE 2014-1), with e.g. *Practice as Prize*, reporting from two Primary Classrooms in Ireland (by Fionnuala Waldron, Brian Ruane and Rowan Oberman); or National Holidays and other Socio-Political Rituals in Schools (JSSE 2019-1), with *Our silent day*, following a white gay teacher exploring teacher agency in counter-socialization during the National Day of Silence (by Jenni Conrad). More entries can be found using the search function on the JSSE website. The most common methods in these mentioned articles are participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

[2] See for example the project report "Places of Remembrance": Spaces for Historical and Political Literacy. (https://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/855).

[3] The content, for instance a current newspaper source on climate policies represented as a worksheet with tasks, can be seen as 'frozen' social action in the sense that it is a didactical representation of the social action of actors/institutions outside of the classroom. This social action is tacit in the content (cf. *tacit knowledge* Kraus et al., 2021) and the task of the social science didactics is to unfold the tacit dimension. Methodologically this could be approached through ethnographic analysis of the processes through which teaching materials are created (see MacGilchrist, 2012), and ethnographical analysis capturing the interaction between students, teachers and content (as well as the tacit action that the teaching material represents).