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Article

# Trust as subject content: Developing students' reasoning on democracy through displacement

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**Keywords:** social science education, trust, citizenship, democracy, displacement

- In social science education, democracy is often portrayed superficially, emphasising institutions rather than active and critical citizenship perspectives.
- By displacing the subject content – from democracy itself to issues of trust – students' reasoning on democracy can be developed in important ways.
- Student development includes the abilities to: i) address the democratic system in more complex ways, ii) remain critically informed about democracy and politics, and iii) recognise one's own perspective as part of a democratic discussion with others.

**Purpose:** The article explores how the tension between embracing and scrutinising democracy can be productively overcome through social science teaching about democracy that focuses on trust as the subject content.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Empirical materials were collected through focus-group interviews before and after an inquiry-based teaching segment on trust, and the materials were analysed qualitatively in relation to three grounded themes.

**Findings:** It is argued that working with the displacement of subject content in inquiry-based teaching about democracy enhances the opportunities for students to deepen their knowledge about democracy while enabling them to critically scrutinise the democratic system.

**Research limitations/implications:** The article reports on a small-scale study of four classes in two upper-secondary schools in Sweden, which provides tentative observations and conclusions that should be investigated further in future research.

**Practical implications:** The article shows that trust as subject content can contribute to problematising students' understandings of democracy, and that the displacement of content can be important in formulating compelling questions and designing inquiries into democracy.



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Encouraging students to hold democratic values and teaching them to become critical and competent citizens is an important task assigned to schools (SNAE, 2011, 2019). However, research has identified challenges for teaching because some aspects of the assignment can be contradictory. For instance, socialising students to trust government institutions has been considered to potentially come into conflict with enhancing their ability to critically scrutinise those institutions (Kahne et al., 2006; Sandahl, 2020a; Tväråna, 2019). In addition, scholars and public opinion-makers have different views about what teaching about democracy and nurturing democratic citizens entails. One might ask, for instance, if it is enough to teach facts about the democratic system to enable students to cast their votes, or if nurturing democratic citizens requires more than that. These questions reflect a longstanding debate which includes different views on democracy and citizenship, and on teaching about and for democracy. Nevertheless, teachers must navigate between these various, and to a certain degree incompatible, approaches (see for instance Gustafsson, 2016; Lindmark, 2013; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

In this article, we report on a practice-oriented research project conducted in collaboration with upper-secondary school social science teachers from two schools in Sweden. The teachers planned and carried out an inquiry-based teaching segment about social and political trust and its function in democracies. Based on experiences from this project, we argue that tensions between encouraging democratic values *and* critical citizens, as well as improving students' knowledge about the democratic system *and* developing their ability to critically assess it, can be productively overcome in the classroom.

Research has suggested that inquiry-based teaching, in which students investigate social issues using scientific methods and concepts, can provide them with a deeper understanding of societal issues such as democracy (Holmberg et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2013; Sandahl, 2015, 2020a). Using *compelling questions* to invite students to conduct enquiries is an important part of this design. While previous research has discussed what makes a question compelling, little attention has been directed towards how the content at the heart of the question (in our case, *trust*) relates to the phenomenon that the students are supposed to be developing their knowledge about – here, democracy and its institutions. This article suggests that focusing on a topic that is related to, but not at the core of, the subject matter that students are to learn, may provide avenues to overcome the tensions inherent in teaching for democratic citizenship. We refer to this as *displacement*, inspired by Frigga Haug's (1987) practice of 'displacing' the topic under investigation in order to shed light on features of the phenomenon under scrutiny that might otherwise be taken for granted. We argue that working with displacement in inquiry-based teaching about democracy enhances the opportunities for students to deepen their knowledge about democracy, while enabling them to critically scrutinise the democratic system. Displacement tends to denaturalise what is taken for granted, and hence forces students to assess their previous understandings.

This article analyses focus-group interviews with upper-secondary students before and after a teaching segment on social and political trust. The aim is to explore how the tension between embracing and scrutinising democracy can be productively overcome through social science teaching about democracy that focuses on trust as its subject content. The article addresses the following research questions:

1. What differences can be identified in how the students discuss trust and democracy before and after the teaching?
2. How did the displacement to trust facilitate the students' ability to deal with the tensions between embracing and scrutinising democracy?

We present findings from the analysis in empirical sections that correspond to three qualitative themes that emerged from the material. These are referred to as *complicating the democratic system*, *reasoning about critical participation*, and *recognising other perspectives*.

## 2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Social science education research regarding democracy is often divided into research *about* democracy, *for* democracy and *through* democracy (Lundahl & Olson, 2013). As the third of these elements has a particular focus on practising democracy in the classroom, this strand will not be pursued in this article. Research *about* democracy suggests that democracy primarily focuses on what Carr (2008) labels as superficial representative democracy. There are few systematic studies of how democracy is dealt with in teaching, but a general agreement is that the formal structures of political institutions, constitutions and the political rights of citizens are most salient (Børhaug, 2008; Mintrop, 2002). Børhaug (2008) found that Norwegian teachers present democracy primarily as a representative system, and other research reports similar findings (see for instance Patterson et al., 2012). Studies of social science textbooks show that democracy is depicted from an institutional perspective, focusing on formal political rights. It has been argued that this approach legitimises rather than critically scrutinising societal institutions (Arensmeier, 2018; Børhaug, 2014; Hansen & Puustinen, 2021).

Research *for* democracy problematises how teaching provides students with knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities that benefit democracy. Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) mapping of democracy teaching in the USA connects such teaching to three conceptions of citizenship: (i) the 'personally responsible citizen' approach, which aims to encourage students to uphold the norms, laws and rules of the current system; (ii) the 'participatory citizen' approach, which promotes knowledgeable and active students who are familiarised with strategies for collective political agency; and (iii) the 'justice-oriented citizen' approach, which tries to craft more radical students who critically examine, address and oppose social, economic and political inequalities. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argue that all three approaches are necessary to nurture 'good' citizens. However,

they conclude that the first conception is the most prevalent. Gustafsson (2016; see also Arensmeier, 2018) has argued that this is particularly true for students in non-academic tracks, where low expectations result in encouraging students to become voters, rather than active participants.

Deliberation, described by Englund (2006, p. 506) as the 'mutual and carefully-balanced consideration of different alternatives', has been suggested as a remedy to orient teaching towards a more active citizenship ideal (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). The effectiveness of deliberative methods has, however, been debated. For instance, Persson et al. (2020) find that deliberation does not increase students' civic competence in the same way as political knowledge does (Persson et al., 2020).

A salient strand in social science education research argues for teaching based on disciplinary/academic methodology when dealing with democratic issues (Journell et al., 2015; Sandahl, 2015; see also Barton, 2017; Björklund, 2021). By engaging with content while actively using social scientific procedures (such as the use of theory and perspective-taking), students should be able to develop their capacity to analyse social issues (Parker et al., 2013; Sandahl, 2015, 2020b; Klinjistra et al., 2023). This approach is picked up in inquiry-based teaching. The inquiry approach has three important characteristics: a) it is organised around queries, b) students investigate various sources to answer the questions, and c) the teaching is designed 'backwards', i.e., teachers start by deciding what the students need to learn, and then design tasks that promote such learning (Swan et al., 2018; see also Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Despite the fact that this approach 'appear[s] to present not only a viable, but also a potentially preferable alternative to traditional lecture-based courses' (Barton & Avery, 2016, p. 1003), it is not practised to the same extent as it is promoted by educationalists (Saye, 2017).

Inquiry-based teaching focuses on the students, who participate in the construction of knowledge by using various sources to explore a topic (Swan et al., 2018). Three aspects are necessary for inquiry-based teaching to be successful. Firstly, teachers, as experts on investigating social phenomena, must guide students in order to avoid shallow understandings of complex problems (Holmberg et al., 2022; Saye, 2017). Secondly, the teaching must engage students and their preconceptions should be addressed. And thirdly, teaching must provide students with the tools and strategies necessary to investigate social phenomena, for instance by employing structured classroom discussions (Ashby et al., 2005; Saye & Brush, 2006), and/or templates and models (De La Paz et al., 2014; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Levstik & Smith, 1996).

A key aspect of inquiry is the importance of compelling questions. Swan et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of these questions' relevance in relation to the academic discipline, the curriculum and the students. Studies have shown that students are motivated by the use of authentic problems (Johansson, 2019; Levstik & Smith, 1996; Saye & Brush, 2002, evaluative questions (van Drie et al., 2006), or questions that can be perceived as controversial (Goldberg, 2013), or that raise ethical issues (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Saye & Brush, 2004).

Despite the benefits of inquiry, studies have shown that access to political and social capital affects students' activities and discussions (Rubin, 2007; Wood, 2013, 2014). This is in line with longstanding research highlighting the impact of socio-economic factors in education (Torney-Purta, 2002). Educational tracks (theoretical and vocational) are seen here as important aspects (Janmaat & Mons, 2023), as well as the role of gender, race and class when young people form their citizenship identities (Wood, 2013).

Despite the vast body of research on the kinds of questions that engage students, the issue of how compelling questions also steer students' attention towards certain content, and what role this plays in advancing their understanding, has yet to be addressed. This article explores how students' understanding of democracy is developed by displacing the compelling question onto trust. We argue that the displacement of content should be considered when constructing the compelling question and that this might also contribute to mitigating variations in students' backgrounds.

## 3 PROJECT BACKGROUND AND TEACHING DESIGN

This article is part of a research project that is centred around the issue of social and political trust, i.e., trust between individuals and groups and trust in political institutions (Warren, 2018, p. 75). Trust is considered important for personal and societal development (Newton et al., 2018), and for democracy (Putnam, 1993; Warren, 2018). Political science research has explored how trust is unevenly distributed across countries, regions and among social groups. Scandinavian countries are considered to have high levels of trust compared to other countries, and this is sometimes described as the 'Nordic gold' (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2020; Rothstein, 2005). Despite its increased centrality in research discussing democracy, trust is largely absent from curricula, syllabi and social science textbooks in Sweden. However, it does appear in media and information literacy, for example in relation to source criticism (Nygren et al., 2019).

This research project is organised around a teaching design in which trust, as subject content, was taught as part of the ordinary curriculum of the social science 2 course (Swedish: *samhällskunskap 2*), in the second year of upper-secondary school. The research team, consisting of two political scientists, two didactic scholars and four teachers, collaborated in developing the framework for a module of five to six weeks of inquiry-based teaching on social and political trust. The inquiry focused on trust as a societal phenomenon and used government agencies[1] as examples. The inquiries started with the compelling questions: 'Should you trust our government agencies?' (Tulip High), and 'Can Swedish society be strengthened through increased trust?' (Rose High).

During the course, students investigated what government agencies are, what they do

[1] We use the term 'government agency' to denote the Swedish term 'myndigheter'. This Swedish word is an umbrella term that includes a variety of agencies with the authority to make decisions affecting individual inhabitants, which are governed by law or government bills. Such 'myndigheter' are the police, immigration authorities, tax authorities, etc. Sometimes schools are also included under this umbrella (they are governed by laws and decrees, and have the authority to make decisions that affect individuals, e.g., grading).

and what might increase or decrease trust in them. Students also investigated levels of trust in society, and how trust in government agencies changed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The students were provided with a simple graphic model of 'the building blocks of trust' for theoretical scaffolding (see Holmberg & Weibull, 2013 for the content of this model). The model included six aspects of how trust is built as an interaction between citizens and government agencies (*ability, integrity, empathy, transparency, commonality of values* and *proximity*). The students used the model for exploring, analysing and discussing the authorities' activities and the implications for democracy. Other materials included cases related to the police, care facilities for disabled people, migration authorities and social insurance. The cases included decision-making dilemmas, such as: 'Should the police always write a ticket, regardless of mitigating circumstances?' or 'To what extent should the migration authority consider individual circumstances in their decision-making?' The elements of teaching are further contextualised in the results section.

The teaching segment consisted of 7–8 lessons conducted over 5–6 weeks. The teachers' role was to enable students to establish more complex understandings of the dynamics of trust, and to create links between trust and students' previous understandings of democracy. For the students, learning about trust also implied negotiating their own (mis)trust, and their experiences of actual encounters with the authorities in relation to how trust was taught. Hence, trust, as subject content in this teaching, was related both to factual knowledge and to values instilled in the students.

## 4 DISPLACEMENT THEORY

While conducting the teaching, we found that the theme of trust worked as a displacement for the students' learning about democracy. Displacement can be understood as a way of shifting perspectives by focusing on something that is related, but not entirely the 'same'. Displacement has been addressed by Frigga Haug (1987; Jansson et al., 2008), who argues that its aim can be described as the researcher's wish to denaturalise experiences in order to scrutinise what is taken for granted by the participants. Simply put, things which do not seem worthy of problematising may suddenly appear intriguing when looked at from another angle.

Displacement is not a new concept in education research. Scholars have used the idea of 'dislocatory moments' to analyse classroom practices that enable a simultaneous change in subjectivity and emancipation, hence promoting empowerment and change (Andersson, 2017). In discourse theory, a dislocation occurs when the structure of a discourse is changed. This may occur if a signifier from one field enters another, i.e., when a signifier is displaced. Dislocation may also occur if there is asynchrony within a field, so that structures that have previously been associated, become disassociated. Finally, dislocation may present itself as disharmony so that, for instance, what a government is supposed to do does not correspond with its performance (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001/1985). A dislocatory moment is described by Andersson as a 'moment that is "traumatic"' (2017, p.

648), which pitches the student into a state of confusion as old principles no longer appear to be applicable. Dislocatory moments are seen as promoting subjectivity and agency, because they enable the emancipation of subjects by providing moments when those subjects are not locked into old logics (Andersson, 2017).

Displacement has similarities with dislocatory moments in the sense that it includes a shift of perspective so that a phenomenon is seen from a different angle, or must be comprehended according to a new logic. However, it may not have the same destabilising effect, because it denotes an analytical practice – the intention of looking at something from a different angle – rather than constituting a change in itself. Our initial choice to enable students to study democracy through trust was based on the connection between political trust and democracy. Eventually, we realised that this focus shed light on new aspects of democracy. We then recognised this as a potentially important pedagogical aspect that needed further exploration. In this article, we argue that this displacement enables students to actively scrutinise the workings of the democratic system, while providing avenues for building new logics around the phenomenon of democracy, and reassessing the foundations of old ones.

## 5 METHODS AND MATERIALS

In the larger project, different empirical materials – such as observations of the teaching, student essays and a survey – were collected. However, this article draws upon focus-group interviews undertaken with students from each of the four classes before and after the teaching. The two schools (anonymised as *Tulip High* and *Rose High*) were located in one of the larger cities in Sweden and were actively chosen to be middle-range in terms of the grades needed for enrolment.[2] This was motivated by the need for well-functioning classes, while making the teaching design adaptable to most school contexts and not restricted to extremely high-achieving students. To ensure further variation we chose schools located in areas with different demographics. Rose High is located in a lower-middle-class/working-class area, with a large proportion of inhabitants with a family history of migrating to Sweden. Tulip High is located in an upper-middle-class area dominated by ethnically Swedish inhabitants.

Both schools can be described as popular and most students have actively chosen their school (Kallstenius, 2010). Both schools have about 1200 students, and the admission points for Tulip High are in the range 302–315 (out of 340) points in the Swedish admission system, and 150–270 points for Rose High (Upper Secondary Schools Admission Office in the Stockholm Region, 2018). Background data for the student populations at each school, which was collected through a survey, indicate differences in terms of self-perceived ethnic belonging. At Rose High, 38 % of the students reported that they identify as Swedish and another ethnicity, whereas only 7 % at Tulip High identified as Swedish and another

[2] Students can apply for enrolment in academic or vocational tracks, regardless of what grades they have achieved (as long as they pass). There are schools with academic tracks with both low and high admission points.

ethnicity. In addition, 91 % of the students at Tulip High identified as Swedish only, while 46 % of the students at Rose High identified as Swedish (numbers do not add up to 100 % as there were other options in these survey items). Another difference was that 80 % of the students' main carers had a higher (university) education at Tulip High, whereas only 36 % of the students' main carers had higher education at Rose High. Hence, the main carers' educational level was much higher at Tulip High.

All four classes were on an academic track programme and consisted of 32–34 students. The focus groups consisted of 6–8 students from each class, who were interviewed twice, once before and once after the teaching. The students were selected by their teachers. The selection was designed to create groups that were as diverse as possible. In total, eight focus-group interviews were conducted. Two researchers moderated the interviews, except for two occasions where only one researcher was present. The first interview session started off with an elicitation assignment (Barton, 2015), in which the students were divided into groups and asked to rank a number of government agencies and political and civil society actors[3] according to whom they trusted more. Their justifications and arguments for these rankings provided material for discussions about trust. The second session started with a question about what they had learnt during the teaching on trust, and continued with a discussion about trust and democracy. The researchers moderated the deliberations, posed probing questions, and directed the conversation. All the sessions were recorded and transcribed. The focus groups were conducted in Swedish and all quotations in this article have been translated by the authors.

The focus-group materials conveyed differences between the schools, which manifested in the students' examples, their use of language, and how interactions played out. While these differences are intriguing and will be reported in forthcoming works (see Johansson & Sandahl, 2023, in press; Jansson, fc), this article focuses on the similarities that we found in relation to how the students presented their reasoning after the teaching on trust, i.e., how their reasoning became more nuanced and grounded in knowledge about government agencies and democracy, between the first and second rounds of focus groups.

Our presentation of the results is organised according to three interrelated themes of changes found in the material. We refer to the first theme as *complicating the democratic system*, indicating that the students were able to address the democratic system in a more complex fashion after the teaching. The second theme is *reasoning about critical participation*, indicating that they were able to discuss the importance of everybody in society remaining critically informed about democracy and politics. Finally, the third theme is *recognising other perspectives*, indicating that the students were able to see themselves and their opinions as part of a democratic discussion with others who potentially held different views.

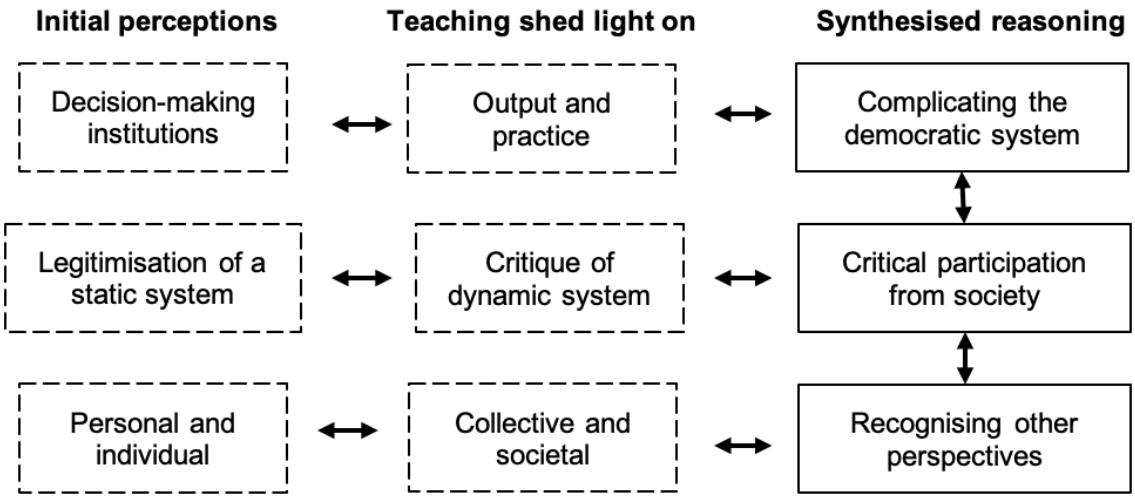
[3] The police, the courts, schools, universities, elected politicians and the media.

# 6 RESULTS

Figure 1 below presents a schematic view of how we interpret the changes in the students' reasoning. The first column describes students' perceptions of the democratic system as expressed before the teaching. They saw the democratic system as a set-up of decision-making institutions legitimised by a static set of democratic principles. Also, they described the democratic system as being something 'out there' which could be observed. The second column describes the new aspects of democracy to which the teaching gave rise. These included knowledge about government agencies and how their decision-making affects people on an everyday basis. In addition, the students encountered cases where government agencies had been criticised or where the students did not agree with the outcome of public decision-making. Finally, the displacement shed light on how all of a country's inhabitants are part of democracy. The third column describes our interpretation of how the students combined these new aspects of democracy with their previous perceptions and understandings, and how this developed their knowledge. We describe this as their synthesised reasoning after the teaching segment.

**Figure 1**

This figure illustrates changes in the students' reasoning before and after teaching. The right-hand column shows the students' synthesised reasoning as a combination of preconceptions and new insights. Vertical arrows indicate a dynamic relationship between the forms of reasoning.




## 6.1 Complicating the democratic system

When entering the room for the second focus group at Tulip High, one student spontaneously bursts out: 'I don't know about you, but I've learned a lot about government agencies. We never discussed it before' (Tulip 1:2). This exemplifies how exploring political trust has led to a shift in focus from thinking about how the ruling of the people is institutionally designed and supposed to work, to exploring the output of government agencies' decision-making. In this section, we show that this shift enabled the students to

revisit their previous knowledge and problematise their reasoning about the democratic system.

The fact that government agencies provided a novel object of study to the students became apparent when we asked what they had learned:

> S1: Well, I've heard about government agencies [...] but now I've learned more about how all these government agencies work to implement the decisions made in parliament. I have a new understanding of, well, the entire system.
>
> S2: And how it affects one's life… (Tulip High, 2:2)

This quote shows how the teaching changed students' views on the democratic system by shedding light on the output side of democracy. This indicates a shift from dealing with how the ruling of the people is technically and ideally organised to exploring what the democratic system actually produces, and how it affects everyday life.

In the focus groups conducted before the teaching, the trustworthiness of agencies was generally argued to be founded on their ability to make decisions based on objectivity and equal treatment. The students found individual judgements made by a civil servant to be an obstacle to these ideals because they implied bias. For instance, one student discussed how teachers award unjust grades:

> [W]hen it comes to grading, I believe that teachers are just normal people and they hold opinions about students. And, regardless of how nice a person and teacher you are, you will somehow have favourites. (Tulip High, 2:1)

Bias is one of the main concerns that emerged among the students during the first round of focus groups. In this vein, the case of the Swedish Board of Student Finance (CSN) – which distributes an equal cash benefit to all students in upper-secondary schools each month – was presented as an ideal: '[the amount of money] is the same for everyone, which makes it rather black and white' (Tulip High, 2:1). Furthermore, it was argued that the CSN's decisions were based on an objectively measurable foundation, i.e. students' presence in school.

After the teaching period, the students were much more sensitive to context and the needs of individuals affected by a decision. This gave rise to reflections about ethics, needs and 'getting the whole picture':

> The case about the migration agency. They didn't consider all of the information about her, and that's where it went wrong. (Rose High, 2:2)
>
> Some people in Sweden and their families are dependent on subsidies and if something goes wrong there, then it's much worse than if it goes wrong for someone who has a better situation…Like if they get child support[4] but still have a good salary…but for some people, child support is kind of the only thing they have to live on. So it's about the conditions, how much you depend on agencies,

[4] Child support is a cash benefit given to families with children under 16 which is not dependent on income.

> and how much you have contact with agencies. The more contact you have, the greater the risk that you encounter a mistake. So those who have more frequent contact perhaps have lower trust, because they experience more things going wrong. (Tulip High, 2:2)

These quotes show that the teaching had led students to reason more about how public decision-making and welfare reforms may be perceived differently depending on a person's situation, as well as the need for case-sensitive decisions. Hence, considering individual circumstances, which they previously regarded as reasons for not trusting agencies and as an illegitimate exercise of power, had become a complex discussion about various notions of justice and what can be considered legitimate principles for public decision-making.

Adding to the concerns about those affected by decisions, insights into the complexity of the position of civil servants, whose decision-making is constrained by regulations, were voiced:

> I think, in the case of the migration agency, even though we felt upset about the fact that they sent a child away, well it's their job, and they're only doing their job. Then if they don't do their job properly, it can be questioned, but in the end, their job is to send people away, so I can understand that aspect. (Rose High, 2:2)

This insight into the fact that a decision that may be morally upsetting can simultaneously be justified with reference to democratically determined rules paves the way for understanding that, even if a decision is correct, it does not always correspond to what one believes is morally right. This insight enables a more complex understanding of democracy. For instance, as one student put it: 'Not everyone will always feel the same way about an issue, even if you think you're improving something, someone else may think it's getting worse' (Rose High 2:2). Simply put, the will of the people does not correspond to the will of each individual. It should be added that the ways in which different students reached this conclusion differed. Students at Rose High with a family history of migrating to Sweden, who often testified to having experienced racism, were more aware from the beginning that the will of the majority was not the same as the will of each individual.

Accountability and responsibility were other political aspects that came up. Before the teaching, one student described how responsibility is considered to be distributed in the democratic system:

> We trust the courts. [... People working in the courts] have a long education, and we believe they will always work according to the law. And even if they make a ruling we don't agree with and believe is wrong, it's not the courts that are wrong, but the laws, and the laws are decided by politicians, not the judges or the lawyers. (Tulip High, 1:1)

According to this description, following the law means making a formally correct decision, and in addition, this exonerates judges and lawyers of responsibility. The statement is strongly grounded in how the law, the courts and the democratic system should ideally function. After the teaching, this was modified:

> [O]ften you blame politicians because they appoint agencies, and as soon as the agency commits a mistake, you trace it back to the politicians, and could they have stopped this or can they stop this from happening again sort of […] But I think that [politicians] do their best for what they think is best for society. (Tulip High, 1:2)

In this quote, the student acknowledges that it is neither straightforward nor easy to govern agencies so that the outcome corresponds to what was intended. This is an important insight for understanding that there is a discrepancy between what politicians are responsible for and what they can actually do.

Students' reasoning after the teaching demonstrates a synthesis of previous knowledge about how the institutional framework is constructed and should function, and the insights generated by the teaching segment's focus on government agencies and how their decisions affect people. This led the students to also consider different notions of justice. While the ideals of objectivity and 'equal for all' dominated the students' reasoning before the teaching, in the second round of focus groups they stressed the importance of considering individual circumstances and needs. In this process, they opened up the possibility that different notions of justice are legitimate in democratically sanctioned decision-making, depending on what kind of decision it is.

This section has argued that teaching about political trust led to a shift in focus. In learning about the authorities, students started to think about the output side of democracy and the implications that democratic governance has on the lives of themselves and their fellow inhabitants. This shift in focus encouraged the students to problematise features of the democratic system, such as political accountability and discrepancies between democratically decided rules and what is morally right. An important aspect of displacement hence seems to be that the displaced topic touches upon students' everyday lives and experiences with the phenomenon in question.

## 6.2 Reasoning about critical participation

At the beginning of the second round of focus groups, one student puts her finger on the importance of emphasising critical perspectives on society during teaching. This student explains that she is pleasantly surprised that the teaching has displayed weaknesses and problems in the democratic system. She continues:

> It's given me more confidence in school: 'Okay, but you're willing to show that the police can make mistakes and that the authorities can make mistakes' […], so in that way, I appreciate the work we've done, that it actually opened up space and

> tried to look at the situations for yourself. (Rose High, 1:2)

This reflection highlights that the focus on trust and government agencies has made students aware of the possibility of criticising the democratic system as part of teaching. In the quote, this is articulated in terms of having 'opened up space' and 'look at the situations for yourself'; that is, this teaching has enabled a critical view of democracy, rather than presenting and legitimising it as a normative ideal. Importantly, we found that using examples that opened up space for critically examining democracy tended to increase the students' trust. This was especially true for the students at Rose High. The teachers at Rose High also chose to include examples that the students could relate to their own experiences.

However, students at both schools had an intuitive sense of the double-sidedness of the democratic system. On the one hand, they expressed a basic trust in 'the system as a whole' and in objectivity as a position that it is possible for government institutions to reach, but, on the other hand, they were critical of both the system itself and the ability of individual representatives of that system to remain objective. It appears that the students had greater trust in agencies they had not yet encountered. Most students agreed that one important reason for flaws in the system comes down to incompetent or corrupt individuals. They concluded that there are always a few rotten eggs; for example, police officers who make trouble.

One important change in the students' perceptions involved their transformation from reasoning as 'system believers' to reasoning like 'system scrutineers'. Prior to the teaching, several students expressed trust in societal institutions and believed that, basically, the system functions appropriately. In addition, the students had faith in the system's ability to scrutinise its own authorities, for example regarding the judicial system.

> The decisions that are made, or the verdicts, in some ways are just, because otherwise there would be some sort of debate, and you can still appeal against a sentence. So that might feel safe – that you can appeal against the verdicts. (Tulip High, 1:1)

Perceptions like these were particularly common among students at Tulip High, who had less experience with government agencies. Many students at Rose High were more critical of the system and experienced it as being static and impossible to change. For instance, one student stated: 'it's the police who do these things [racial profiling in the suburbs] because they have their prejudices and they're the reason there is corruption' (Rose High, 2:1). This statement depicts a system in which individuals take action on their own initiative, and which is impossible to govern.

The teaching segment at Tulip High included a historical example, the Vipeholm experiments, which involved human experiments where intellectually disabled patients were fed sweets to cause dental caries. These experiments were sponsored by the sugar industry and the dentistry community, in an effort to determine whether carbohydrates affected the formation of cavities. The experiments assumed a blind trust in the authority

of the medical professions. Students referred to this as an example illustrating the need for scrutiny of institutions:

> A high level of trust is good, but you can't just trust blindly. And that's what happened so to speak, in Vipeholm. There was a really high level of trust and the activities at the institution were not reviewed at all. So I think that as long as you're aware of your own level of trust, and as long as you don't stop scrutinising things, I don't think the level of trust can become too high. (Tulip High, 1:2)

Rather than relying on the system's ability to scrutinise itself, this student highlights the individual responsibility to scrutinise society. This strong belief in the individual's ability to make these assessments could not, however, be found at Rose High, where students, often with reference to their own experiences, seemed less inclined to believe that their opinions would be listened to.

Another aspect that motivated a critical approach to society was found in the way the teaching segment gave rise to reflections upon the fact that government agencies and other actors in the democratic arena are populated by individuals, with their own opinions and agendas, although they are governed by the rules of the agency. While students previously discussed this as corruption, in the second round of focus groups it was articulated as a reason for citizens to maintain a critical approach:

> We need to consider the fact that journalists are only people, and they can make mistakes. It can be a good idea to read critically and see if there's something that doesn't feel logical, and then you can check it out on your own to find out if it's correct. (Tulip High, 1:2)

Recognising that individual professionals can make mistakes, this student addresses the responsibility of all members of society to relate critically to information and to the system. This feature was apparent in both schools, and was often pointed out with reference to information in the media.

Another aspect of understanding that the system is made up of individuals was the insight that, despite the fact that individuals can make mistakes or fail to follow their duty, the system as such can still be argued to work: '[The] courts, it's about laws and it's much bigger, about the state' (Rose High, 2:1). This indicates a transition from regarding individual officers as being independent of the system, to understanding that all individuals act *within* a system. Individual officials act within various structures, which include laws and rules. When students become able to shift perspectives, they can recognise, for example, that individual police officers can act independently and make their own assessments of complex situations, while simultaneously being constrained by formal structures like the law, as well as under the influence of implicit structures like racism.

One teacher used a case from real life to illustrate how citizens run the risk of not being treated equally, for instance by the police, and how this impacts upon citizens' trust. In the extract below, a student reasons about the individual who was let off with a warning after

a traffic offence – perhaps because he is a middle-aged white man:

> If the police had done their job, they would have arrested the guy because he was kind of guilty, but when they let him go he felt that they empathised with him. If you're an individual who is in a minority and who is often offended, and you know that other people are treated like this [let off despite being guilty], you can think that you [also want to be treated that way]. So, if the system could be regulated [to be non-discriminatory] from the start, then you could create trust in the great scheme of things and how it develops. (Tulip High, 2:1)

This quote shows that, not only does the teaching case give rise to a critical stance that problematises the role and function of government agencies, but the student also comes up with a solution which features her faith in the democratic system and its ability to change and govern its officials.

The teaching about trust led to changes in the students' perceptions, and this resulted in a shift from regarding the democratic system as being largely static, where citizens could either legitimise the system or dismiss it, to understanding it as being dynamic, and possible to scrutinise, influence and change through critical engagement. Even though there were variations between different students in terms of the extent of this possibility, we argue that the notion of society being dynamic rather than static was made available for them to consider. Displacing the teaching content to trust necessitates the use of cases in which political trust is at stake. This inevitably leads to using cases where government agencies may be portrayed as flawed. In addition, many students have personal experiences of the system being flawed, for example from school. The results show that opening up teaching for critique of the democratic system does not mean that students lose faith in the system; rather, it forces them to reflect upon the necessity of scrutiny and to start thinking about how the flaws can be mitigated or resolved. Our results also indicate that highlighting problems and flaws in the democratic system increases rather than decreases the students' trust in democracy.

### 6.3 Recognising other perspectives

One important aspect of democracy that the students touched upon in the focus groups is the relation between individual and societal perspectives/experiences. By talking about trust, students become aware of the perspectives of others – that a society consists of people with differentiated experiences and that all of these experiences must be considered. Hence, in order to create a collective level, the perspectives of others need to be recognised. One student illustrates this insight in the second round of focus groups when, using the example of *Black Lives Matter*, he contrasts his own experience with the experiences of others:

> I mean… I haven't experienced anything that makes me distrust, say, the police. But if you're an African-American in the USA and you grow up in a

> neighbourhood with really bad schools and where the government agencies don't help you and the police … How should I put it? Police brutality, you know… Then, I think that you, and many around you have experiences that make your level of trust really low. I really think that your own experiences matter, and for people around you as well. (Tulip High, 2:2)

At the outset, the students often discussed their own experiences in relation to trust or mistrust, but they rarely touched upon the perspectives and experiences of others. After the teaching, their reasoning was more problematising in the sense that they discussed trust at a societal level with more substantiated examples involving abstract reasoning, and gave examples of how things could be experienced from the perspectives of others. The synthesised understanding that students achieved consisted of recognising that their own convictions were in fact one particular perspective, and that others may view things differently.

When students began to reason about trust in their conversations before the teaching segment, they repeatedly started from their own personal experiences and gave concrete examples from their own everyday lives. The following quote shows a typical line of reasoning before teaching:

> I'm not comfortable talking about myself so I'll talk about the experiences of a friend of mine who told me this. He lived in a very negative area – you know, segregated… He was just an ordinary guy at school and the school was very violent with fights and stuff and people started calling him a psycho and called the police all the time just to mess with him. And the police came and didn't want to listen to him and his side of the story, so… […] He almost ended up in prison for everything that happened… It's really upsetting to me and that's why I don't trust the police. (Rose High, 1:1)

This student discusses trust on the basis of a concrete event that she did not experience herself but which provided her with a reason why the police should be mistrusted. Several such concrete examples were given during the focus groups when students wanted to substantiate their claims for why governmental institutions, such as the courts, the police or schools, should not be trusted. In many cases, students repeatedly returned to their own experiences, or to the experiences of someone close to them. However, the students at Tulip High had little experience of dealing with governmental institutions and had difficulties giving examples from lived experience. Consequently, these students 'had no reason to mistrust' institutions like the police, and they also expressed their own views on trust in terms such as 'normal' or 'natural' to a greater extent than the students at Rose High. Altogether, this focus on personal experience, or lack thereof, tended to lead students into reasoning that personal experiences are the most important perspective, or to unproblematically generalise their own (lack) of experience as representative of everyone.

After the teaching, examples of personal experiences did surface, but it was clear that

the students had other, more abstract, substantiated and general examples to turn to. This did not mean that they dismissed their prior understandings, but rather that they were able to compare them with facts or with others' experiences, which were represented in the teaching material. One student recalled a discussion about trust that she had with her mother during the teaching period. When her mother cautioned her about trusting others too much, she presented another perspective on the issue:

> I talked to my mother about democracy and trust and she was like… […] 'You're a girl – you need to be careful, you need to [take precautions], you can't trust in everything and everybody' – not that she's been hung up on that, and I've always been free to trust people and it's always been [important for me] to be careful and not trust everybody. But I explained to her about trust and how it can help people to… sort of… function in groups and be calm and secure… […] We talked a lot about that. (Rose High, 1:2)

For this particular student, her understanding of trust had shifted from concrete examples (such as her mother's warnings) to a more abstract level of reasoning when talking about trust. This is not about primarily using everyday experiences to draw conclusions, but rather about understanding trust as a concept that shines new light on such experiences.

Several students gave examples that displayed a similar shift. One such example was their use of theoretical building blocks when reasoning about trust. Students also gave proof of a more balanced view where their perspectives, informed by their own experiences, were nuanced in relation to other possible views. This student reflected upon the differences in trust levels among people:

> I feel that I have rather [a lot of] trust in society, but I also feel that it… to start with… is about your parents and the privileges you have, that you're well-off like me. That you have a good school and trust the system. But if you have poor parents or live in a less well-off neighbourhood in general and how your parents see society, I think the level of trust can go down. […] It's about how your life is and also… [the teacher] brought that up – that many young people with less money and fewer opportunities have lower levels of trust while those with lots of money and who are well-off have higher levels of trust. So, it has to do with what person you are and what general view you have – you know, like what opportunities do I have and what chances of succeeding do I have and [so on]. That I'm being well-treated. (Tulip High, 2:2)

This student is reasoning about his privileged position and the fact that his personal reasons for trusting the system might not be the only legitimate way to argue. Rather, he has gained insights that different experiences result in different conclusions regarding trust.

As previously stated, students had different initial positions in relation to the role of society and the democratic system. Some described strong negative personal experiences

of the police, which had led to a deep distrust, while others had the opposite experience and a fundamental trust in the police. The teaching did not eradicate these differences, but the students did become able to critically negotiate and maintain their different perspectives; for example, when discussing corruption and the role of the media in scrutinising government agencies like the police:

> S1: I mean, the media [...] only shows the bad side of the police. Like when young people are sharing pictures and videos of a police officer hitting someone and then everyone hates the police. But no one really knows the context. [...]
> S2: My opinion is the opposite of yours. The police are really corrupt and it's not shown by the media and the courts have to clear everything up. (Rose High, 2:2)

This shift, from a personal and individual level of reasoning towards reasoning on a societal and more abstract and general level, is important in several ways. It gives students an insight that personal experiences are important, but that they need to contrast these with the perspectives of others – thus seeing democracy as more than the sum of their own individual experiences. Also, it provides an opportunity to make one's own perspectives visible in contrast to other legitimate perspectives. Furthermore, it gives insight into the plurality of democratic societies and the reality that all experiences need to be taken into account in order to understand and *discuss* social justice issues and their implications for democratic societies. As members of society, we are all different, and teaching needs to address those differences and discuss possible ways forward. We argue that this shift in reasoning demonstrates a seed of understanding that an important aspect of democracy is constituted by a discussion in which all voices and experiences should be heard, before making decisions. Hence, the results highlight the importance of deliberation in a democracy, but, perhaps more importantly, they underline a democratic ethos, where the consideration of different experiences and conditions among equals is stressed in teaching. The displacement to trust requires the teaching to oscillate between individuals, groups and society at large, and this can enable students to progress from the individual level towards a collective, or social, level, where citizens' varying conditions become apparent.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

This article has made use of materials collected in a collaborative project, in which social science teachers developed and performed an inquiry-based teaching segment on trust enabling students to learn about democracy. The article has shown that the students' reasoning on democracy had developed after participating in the teaching. We have argued that the displacement of the subject content towards trust, rather than political institutions, enabled the students to view democracy from new perspectives and that the approach developed their reasoning. In this conclusion, we first summarise these results. Then, we elaborate our argument that the displacement of subject content is beneficial for learning and that it can be fruitful to consider this approach when formulating compelling

questions for inquiries. Finally, we outline some of the benefits of displacing content and how the approach contributes to overcoming the tension between encouraging students to hold democratic values and teaching for critical citizenship.

Our results indicate that the students' reasoning on democracy was developed in three distinct ways when the subject content was displaced. Even though students' previous experiences, socio-economic conditions and group belongings affected their learning patterns, we argue that there were similarities in how their deliberations on democracy changed after the teaching module on trust. Firstly, social science teaching about trust tends to direct the subject content towards including examples from the output side of democracy. Here, the teaching segment led the students to understand that the workings of the democratic system are more complex than they seem when just looking at its formal architecture and how it is motivated. The students' reasoning reveals that the teaching made them think about what notions of justice can motivate government agencies' decision-making, about the difficulties of governing agencies populated by individuals and about how this impacts upon issues of political accountability. Secondly, the teaching encouraged the students towards an understanding of the democratic system as being dynamic and possible to change through critical scrutiny and engagement. Importantly, pointing out flaws in the democratic system increases, rather than decreases, students' trust in democracy. Thirdly, teaching on trust made it possible for students to contrast their own everyday experiences with the perspectives of others. By discussing trust, students became able to move from an individual and personal level to an abstract and general level, thus recognising that there are several legitimate positions rooted in different experiences. This, in turn, enabled them to see that there are 'different windows' from which society can be viewed, and that these viewpoints matter.

Thus, the displacement of content, from a traditional approach focusing on institutional settings to one that discusses the importance of trust for democracy, enabled the implementation of a teaching design that took the students beyond superficial descriptions of representative democracy (Carr, 2008) and opened up space for students to identify different ideas about citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Consequently, we argue that the displacement enabled the social science teachers to deepen the students' democratic reasoning beyond the simplified understandings that often characterise democracy education (Børhaug, 2008; Carr, 2008). A key element in achieving these developments in the students' reasoning was the use of disciplinary, or academic, methodology when dealing with trust as content (Journell et al., 2015; Sandahl, 2015; Barton, 2017; Björklund, 2021, Klijnstra et al., 2023). As the students inquired into issues of trust, they employed theoretical frameworks and practised perspective-taking in order to develop their academic reasoning, while also orienting towards a more active and critical citizenship ideal (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

As we argued in the theory section, displacement includes the process of choosing a topic that lies outside the core of what the students are learning about, but this topic must also be related to the main object of study. During the analysis, we came to realise that the

chosen content also had to have certain qualities. In studying trust in order to problematise democracy, we found that connecting it to experiences in the students' everyday world was an important quality of teaching about trust. This helped the students to realise the difference between correctly made democratic decisions and what they thought was morally right. It also helped them to appreciate their own role as part of a democratic society and to see that their own opinions are in fact not shared by everyone.

Furthermore, the topic of trust with a focus on government agencies led the teachers to discuss and use materials that revealed features of the democratic system that might reduce trust. This led to problems and flaws in the democratic system becoming visible, and thus the students became aware of democratic dilemmas and complications. Pointing to flaws not only enabled students to reflect upon democratic problems, but also forced them to think about solutions, and what they themselves could contribute. Hence, we found that openly exposing and discussing problems made students think of democracy not as static, but as something that it is possible to change, and this realisation also enhanced their trust. These observations of the function of the displacement of subject content can contribute to the process of formulating compelling questions (Swan et al., 2018) that can motivate students through their authenticity (Saye & Brush, 2002; Johansson, 2019), and possibly by being controversial (Goldberg, 2013), and in designing inquiries in social science teaching on democracy.

An important aspect is that teaching the content should include opportunities for students to reflect upon their own opinions in relation to others. The fact that we found evidence of students assessing their own opinions based on the insight that others may think differently, and coming to the realisation that different opinions may also be founded on having different experiences and living in different conditions, is one of the most promising findings of this article because it indicates a strengthening of the students' democratic ethos. We find this important because such learning processes might also contribute to mitigating segregation and inequalities based on gender, class and ethnicity.

In the introduction, we argued that the tension between encouraging democratic values and teaching for critical citizenship could be productively overcome in the classroom. In the article, we have shown how the students' reasoning developed after the teaching in ways that answer to different ideals of democracy. The knowledge about the democratic system they demonstrated became more complex and nuanced. However, this did not weaken their belief in the democratic system, but rather strengthened it as they became aware of their own abilities as citizens, as well as the importance of deliberation as a consequence of realising differences in conditions, experiences and opinions.

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