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Article

Controversial issues in Norwegian social science classrooms

Anders G. Kjøstvedt, Evy Jøsok

Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

Keywords: political efficacy, controversial issues, democratic participation, social science didactics, civic education

Highlights
– Research discusses how civic education may alleviate social inequality in political efficacy.
– Openness towards and awareness of controversial issues may play an important role.
– Teachers show significant differences when interpreting what makes an issue controversial.
– The political and epistemic interpretation seems more influential than the emotional criteria.

Purpose: The aim of the article is to contribute to an overall discussion of how civic education may influence the political efficacy of adolescents, with specific emphasis on social equalisation. We analyse how the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education may contribute towards increased social equalisation in political efficacy.

Design/methodology/approach: Our study follows a qualitative research design and is based on semi-structured interviews with social science teachers in Norwegian lower-secondary schools. Our contribution is influenced by extensive quantitative research, on which we seek to expand through qualitative exploration.

Findings: Our main finding is that the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education does not in itself contribute towards social equalisation in political efficacy, but that more openness towards and different understandings of controversial issues that are included may potentially do so.

Research limitations/implications: The scope of our study is limited by its size, but it should give some direction for further research.

Practical implications: We suggest that teachers may benefit from approaching controversial issues in a less personal way, favouring epistemic and political criteria rather than emotional ones.

Corresponding author:
Anders Kjøstvedt, P.O. Box 4, St Olavs Plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway
E-Mail: angrkj@oslomet.no

Evy Jøsok, P.O Box 4, St Olavs Plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway
E-Mail : evjo@oslomet.no

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1 INTRODUCTION

Despite the significant strengths and benefits of a democratic society (Gerring et al., 2022), in recent years, there have been many indications that, on a global scale, the world is becoming less democratic (V-Dem Institute, 2023). Simultaneously, we are also experiencing a decline in political participation within democratic societies (Dalton, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), with the added challenge that participation in democratic processes is increasingly determined by social background (Dalton, 2017; Levinson, 2012). Turning this development around towards broad democratic participation is not only necessary to deal with the challenges faced in modern societies but also to maintain and reinvigorate democratic legitimacy itself (Held, 2006). Civic education plays an important – and perhaps increasingly important – role in preparing adolescents for political participation, whatever their background (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019; Veugelers, 2021).

In recent years, several researchers have identified internal political efficacy as a decisive factor in preparing students for political and democratic participation (Blaskó et al., 2019; Isac et al., 2014; Vecchione et al., 2014), concluding that students' individual political efficacy is more important in determining future democratic participation than knowledge, values and attitudes. Unsurprisingly, there is no shortage of researchers suggesting that the development of political efficacy should be strengthened through civic education (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015; Maurissen, 2020; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015), with several studies arguing that civic education may indeed be able to strengthen students' political efficacy (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019; Hoskins et al., 2016). However, some studies also show a strong connection between the social background of the students and their political efficacy (Hoskins et al., 2016; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Schulz et al., 2018; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015). Consequently, there may be a significant risk that an excessively one-sided focus on increasing the political efficacy of students could further enhance existing social differences in democratic participation.

The purpose of this article is to explore how civic education may contribute to the alleviation of inequalities in political efficacy. Based on empirical data from interviews with social science teachers in Norwegian lower-secondary schools, we discuss how the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education may contribute towards reducing the significance of the students' background for their political efficacy. Although we cannot draw any causal conclusions, our research indicates that teachers' openness towards and understanding of controversial issues may have some bearing on their ability to alleviate the significance of the students' social background for their political efficacy. As Kosberg and Grevle (2022) have shown, research on political efficacy and its development through civic education is almost exclusively quantitative. With our qualitative and didactic approach, expanding on the insights quantitative studies have provided, our aim is to contribute towards a more practice-oriented approach.

Several researchers have argued that the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education is not only natural but also essential and necessary for this education to be successful (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Ljunggren et al., 2015a; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Zimmermann & Robertson, 2017). In particular, emphasis is placed on the importance of including controversial issues in open discussion within the structured environment of the classroom (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Ljunggren et al., 2015a). In this article, we add to these understandings by exploring how the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education may contribute to compensating for how the students' social background influences their political efficacy.

Our case study is based on interviews with 16 social science teachers in four carefully selected lower-secondary schools in Norway. The Norwegian results in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) reveal that internal political efficacy is the leading denominator in determining intended future political participation among youth and that this efficacy is closely connected to fundamental social categories: students with high socioeconomic status (SES) and girls have significantly greater political efficacy than other students (Huang et al., 2017; Ødegård & Svagård, 2018).[1] In structuring our study, we used the background data from the ICCS 2016 study to identify schools that were able to compensate for the students' social background in developing their political efficacy, allowing us to compare and contrast the civic education teaching at these schools with those that were not able to compensate. To facilitate our overall discussion, we formulated a set of research questions based on the inclusion of controversial issues, where the sample of informants was determined by their school's ability to compensate for the students' social background. Each of these research questions addresses distinct and delimited aspects of our research topic, but they should not be regarded as completely separate but rather as reciprocal and complementary.

- RQ1: What is the social science teachers' reasoning for including controversial issues in their civic education teaching?
- RQ2: What – if any – controversial issues do the social science teachers exclude from their civic education teaching, and how do they argue for their choices?
- RQ3: Which criteria do social science teachers apply when identifying issues as controversial?

We begin our article with a thorough review of international research on political efficacy and the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education. Following methodological descriptions, we analyse our data to answer our research questions, closing with a discussion of the potential impact of the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education and how this may compensate for how social backgrounds influence the internal political efficacy of adolescents.

2 POLITICAL EFFICACY AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

2.1 The importance of political efficacy

The importance of political efficacy – the individual's self-confidence in being able to participate in democratic processes (Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015) – for democratic participation has been the outcome of several quantitative studies.

In their major study comparing ICCS 2016 results from 13 European countries, Blaskó et al. (2019) found that political efficacy is an important predictor of political engagement and participation. Similar results were found by Isac et al. (2014) in a major study that included 31 countries. Numerous studies in countries as diverse as Ireland (Gilleece & Cosgrove, 2012), Italy (Manganelli et al., 2015), Chile (Loreto Martínez et al., 2020), Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand (Kuang et al., 2018) and Norway (Ødegård & Svagård, 2018), all conclude that there is a strong and positive correlation between political efficacy and expected political participation. Unsurprisingly, given the positive effects of political efficacy on political participation, there is no shortage of

[1] Although the initial Norwegian results from the recent ICCS 2022-study have been published (Storstad et al., 2023), the connection between the students' internal political efficacy and their expected democratic participation has not yet been analysed. However, the initial results indicate that there are only minor changes in the internal political efficacy of Norwegian youth, compared to the 2016 results (Storstad et al., 2023).

researchers who recommend that schools and basic education should develop internal political efficacy among the youth: Blaskó et al. (2019); Claes et al. (2017); Gilleece and Cosgrove (2012); Ødegård and Svagård (2018); Loreto Martínez et al. (2020); Knowles and McCafferty-Wright (2015); Isac et al. (2014) and Maurissen (2020).

According to Torney-Purta (2002), Beaumont (2011) and Sohl and Arensmeier (2015), political efficacy may indeed be developed through civic education in school. Pasek et al. (2008) have shown that political discussion in the classroom, concerned with solving problems that can be related to the students, may contribute to increasing their political efficacy. Likewise, social learning experiences, such as political role play, may lead to students experiencing increased efficacy (Levy, 2018). Additionally, there is a clear association between experiencing an open-classroom climate and the development of political efficacy (Claes et al., 2017; Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015).

However, a challenging aspect of political efficacy as a guiding principle for civic education is that there is a significant correlation with social status and other social categories, especially gender. In their major review study, incorporating comparable survey results across 46 countries spanning two decades, Oser et al. (2023) recently found that both income and education levels significantly impact both internal and external political efficacy. This correlation has been confirmed by several previous studies (Cohen et al., 2001; Lambert et al., 1986; Pokropek et al., 2017), with other studies showing that low socioeconomic status correlates with low internal political efficacy (Marx & Nguyen, 2016). Additionally, Oser et al. (2023) conclude that there is a significant gender gap in political efficacy, specifically in internal political efficacy, with no difference to speak of for external political efficacy. This gender gap has been shown in many different contexts and over time (Arens & Watermann, 2017; Barber & Torney-Purta, 2009; Preece, 2016; Wolak, 2020).

The impact of social background on political efficacy is troubling, as it may concentrate democratic participation among certain groups. Even if civic education may very well increase political efficacy, we know that *access* to this kind of civic education is in itself dependent on social background, making it less likely that students from low-SES families actually receive this kind of education (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019; Hoskins et al., 2016; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). However, civic education may also contribute towards compensating for social differences in political efficacy, as disadvantaged students may benefit more from civic education than other students (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019). This is also the case in the Nordic countries, as Hoskins et al. (2021) have shown that civic education may have a compensatory effect, although access to civic education is unequal, both *within* schools and *between* schools.

The importance of socioeconomic status and gender for political efficacy is also significant in the Norwegian case, from which we draw our empirical data (Huang et al., 2017; Ødegård & Svagård, 2018). Although the gender difference is the opposite of that seen in other countries, as girls have higher political efficacy than boys among Norwegian adolescents, the challenge for civic educators in schools is exactly the same: potential social inequality in democratic participation.

3 CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN CIVIC EDUCATION

The importance of controversial issues in civic education

In research literature advocating the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education, there is particular emphasis on the importance of subjecting controversial societal issues to open classroom discussions (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Ljunggren et al., 2015b; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Zimmermann & Robertson, 2017). For Hess (2009, p. 12), there is an “intrinsic

and crucial connection" between discussing controversial issues as part of civic education and a healthy democratic society. According to her research, taking authentic and contentious societal issues seriously shows students that there is a natural diversity in society, and by discussing such issues, students not only generate content knowledge but also become more tolerant and receptive towards other viewpoints than their own. Engaging with controversial issues in an educational setting also shows the value of political disagreement and compromise and might strengthen the students' democratic values and political and civic engagement. The role of education in discussing controversial issues is particularly important at a time when open-minded and respected political debate is lacking in society in general (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Whilst Hess' research is drawn from a specifically American context, we see distinct similarities in Scandinavian research literature. Ljunggren et al. (2015b) share the evaluation of the importance of discussing controversial issues in civic education, arguing that this strengthens the students' content knowledge and enables them to review their own perspectives and arguments. For Ljunggren (2015), the classroom should take on the role of a shared, public space in which controversial issues can be introduced and discussed, allowing students to be confronted with perspectives and opinions that are not necessarily their own. This becomes even more important in a society that is increasingly individualistic, with little opportunity to engage in similar discussions in adult life. Liljestrand (2015) underscores the importance of discussions such as these being deliberate in nature, where different opinions are taken seriously and respected, with the teacher playing a key role in facilitating this. In her study of curriculum changes in Sweden, A. Larsson (2019) found that different school subjects address controversial issues differently. While religious education in Sweden has moved towards a life-oriented approach, attempting to connect with students' own personal experiences, social studies emphasises current events and issues.

In a study based on interviews with 80 social science teachers in Swedish lower-secondary schools, A. Larsson and L. Larsson (2021) concluded that the teachers integrated current societal issues with curriculum objectives through their inclusion of controversial issues in their teaching. However, A. Larsson and L. Larsson argue that existing conceptual and pedagogical theories concerning the teaching of controversial issues need to be further developed to encompass more fully what transpires among students and in the everyday classroom setting. This development is essential to ensure that students experience the teaching as pertinent and authentic. Similarly, in the Norwegian context, social science teachers do include controversial issues in their teaching, although they have tended to avoid very sensitive and potentially conflicting issues, such as the July 2011 terror attacks (Anker & von der Lippe, 2015) and global inequality (Eriksen, 2018). As Sætra (2021) has argued, Norwegian teachers tend to emphasise the construction of a good and safe learning environment as a prerequisite for discussing controversial issues, whilst Andresen (2020) has shown that Norwegian teachers face several obstacles when including controversial issues, such as noise and unrest, lack of time, and that the classes' composition influences the teachers' decisions on whether to generate debate and discussion of controversial issues or not Additionally, teachers experience that working with subject matter that covers the learning objectives of the curriculum often takes precedence because that is what students are tested on in exams. A recent analysis of resources available to Norwegian social science teachers on how to address controversial topics in civic education has shown that they tend to close, rather than open, the controversial issues discussed, making teachers lean towards "politically correct" statements rather than seeking to deal with differences of opinion (Samnøy, 2022).

Theoretical framework: what makes an issue controversial?

In this article, we make use of the criterion of debate of controversial issues as an interpretive framework for our empirical data. Despite the broad consensus on the importance of including controversial issues in civic education, there is little to no agreement on what really makes an issue controversial. Research literature on the use of controversial issues in education is, therefore, to a great extent, oriented around criteria for what makes various topics and questions controversial. We will briefly introduce the four dominant interpretations of what makes an issue controversial, as these criteria may prove helpful in analysing how social science teachers include controversial issues in their civic education teaching.

According to the behaviourist criterion, it is sufficient that there is disagreement on an issue for it to be regarded as controversial (Yacek, 2018). The strength of such an approach is that it is quite intuitive and adapted to changing contexts, with Hess and McAvoy (2015) also pointing out that what people actually disagree on is taken seriously in this approach. The challenge with such an approach is that it can make absolutely all questions about which there are differing opinions controversial, including whether the Earth is flat or not, leaving it with very little explanatory power.

The epistemic criterion was originally formulated as a critique of the behaviourist approach and is decided by disagreements in society, where the opposing views on each side are based on factual knowledge and rational argumentation. For an issue to be described as controversial, there must, therefore, be a rationale and arguments on different sides of the debate (Dearden, 1981; Hand, 2008, 2013; Yacek, 2018).

A third understanding of what constitutes a controversial issue is the political criterion. This approach is based on issues that are deeply divisive in society and which have conflicting explanations and solutions based on different values and political viewpoints. This criterion clearly differs from the behaviourist criterion in that it insists on ideological differences, although only if these ideological positions do not conflict with fundamental values in a democratic society (Stradling, 1984; Yacek, 2018). For Hess and McAvoy (2015), it is not sufficient for an issue to be divisive; it must also have societal relevance so that it becomes “politically authentic”.

The fourth and final approach is the emotional criterion. Using this criterion, we understand controversial issues as those that provoke strong emotions and that create divisions in society. The Council of Europe’s understanding of controversial issues emphasises precisely this criterion (Kerr & Huddleston, 2016).

The distinctions between the various criteria are not absolute, and a controversial issue – depending on the context and how the issue is dealt with – can be understood as controversial according to several criteria. As an example, the question of Norwegian membership in the European Union can be regarded as a controversial issue based on the emotional criterion, as it may provoke strong sentiments on opposing sides. However, if the question of Norwegian EU membership is to be treated comprehensively, it cannot be reduced to a purely emotional issue. It may also be regarded as controversial based on both the epistemic and political criteria.

4 METHOD

The article is based on a qualitative interview study consisting of interviews with 16 social science teachers in four carefully selected Norwegian lower-secondary schools. To discuss how civic education may contribute towards compensating for the impact of social background on the students’ political efficacy, we used background data from the Norwegian ICCS 2016 study to identify two

lower-secondary schools that break the Norwegian national trend in that minority-language students and boys reported higher political efficacy than majority-language students and girls, respectively. As the ICCS 2016 study does not track the relations between the students' political efficacy and their socio-economic status at the school level, but only at the national level, we were unable to use this variable in our sampling of schools.

Eight of the 16 teachers we interviewed taught at the schools that break the national trend, which we refer to as schools U1 and U2. As Table 1 shows, we also used the same background data to identify our contrast schools (schools K1 and K2), which do not break the national trend, i.e., where girls have higher political efficacy than boys and students with a majority-language background rank higher than those with a minority-language background. The remaining eight teachers interviewed taught at these schools.

It is important to note that the students at the U schools do not necessarily report higher political efficacy than the students at the K schools, but that the schools are reportedly able to break the national trend for the influence of background variables, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Student political efficacy at the four lower-secondary schools in the study

School	U1	U2	K1	K2
Political efficacy among minority-language students	55.4	59.4	43.5	47.59
Political efficacy among majority-language students	50.8	53.7	52.7	51.42
Political efficacy among boys	55.1	55.4	48.3	46.46
Political efficacy among girls	51.6	53.1	55.2	54.03

According to the national curricula for Norwegian basic education, civic education is a responsibility shared among all school subjects (Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, 2017). However, the decision to interview social science teachers was an easy one, as this school subject, which is taught at all levels (years 1–10), is given major responsibility for civic education within the Norwegian school system (Löfström & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2022; Solhaug et al., 2022). In Norwegian lower-secondary schools, social science consists of three subject areas: human geography, social science and history. The subject has an instructional framework of three hours per week in lower-secondary school (years 8–10). Students cannot be selected for a written exam in the subject, but some may be selected for an oral exam in year 10.

All the 16 teachers we interviewed taught social science in year 9 (see the overview in Table 2). As researchers, we identified the schools from which we wanted to interview teachers, but we had no bearing on which teachers were made available to us. We only asked to have the opportunity to interview both women and men, and that there was variation in the teachers' work experience. In total, we interviewed seven women and nine men, whose work experience ranged from 1 to 25 years, with most of the teachers having more than 10 years of social science teaching experience. All the teachers interviewed had relevant education in their field.

Table 2. Overview of schools and social science teachers in the study

School U1	School U2	School K1	School K2
Semi-urban	Urban	Urban	Semi-urban
Buskerud County	Oslo County	Akershus County	Rogaland County
5 teachers (U1a, U1b, U1c, U1d and U1e)	3 teachers (U2a, U2b, U2c)	5 teachers (K1a, K1b, K1c, K1d, K1e)	3 teachers (K2a, K2b, K2c)

When developing the interview guide, we adopted a broad approach due to the uncertainty regarding potential differences between U and K schools. The guide was structured into three main sections. The first section collected background information, including the students' composition at the school, the teachers' respective educational backgrounds, their experience, and their perspectives on teaching related to the curricula. The second section contained questions anchored in various perspectives on democracy and citizenship. The third section focused on the implementation of democracy and citizenship education in the classroom, covering teachers' views and practices related to classroom discussions, conversations and debates, the content of their teaching, student motivation, and general teaching methods.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom in January-February 2021; face-to-face and via Zoom in November and December 2021; and via Zoom in March-April 2022. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately one hour. All the teachers were interviewed individually.

Following transcription, the interviews were coded and organised into an Excel spreadsheet. Teachers from both U and K schools were listed on the y-axis. Through an inductive analysis of the data, we established theoretical categories on the x-axis, such as the emphasis on democracy education, underlying views on citizenship, the focal content of democracy and citizenship education, student engagement, classroom discussion dynamics, and the methods employed both inside and outside the classroom.

With the spreadsheet completed, we conducted a systematic analysis to identify distinctions between the teachers from U and K schools. We examined whether they utilised different content, employed varying methods, or aligned with distinct theoretical frameworks in their perspectives on democracy. Through multiple iterations, a pattern emerged concerning controversial topics.

We then went back to the teacher interviews for a detailed review. We created a comprehensive Excel spreadsheet where theoretical typologies for controversial topics were systematically incorporated, and after careful consideration, statements by the teachers were placed in alignment with the typologies. These included epistemic, behaviourist, political and emotional perspectives on controversial issues, as well as consideration of what teachers chose to exclude from or include in their discussions concerning controversial issues and whether these topics were introduced by the teacher or the student. Additionally, we included several categories related to didactic reasoning and teaching methods concerning teaching controversial issues.

Interviewing teachers on their inclusion of controversial issues in civic education teaching was challenging, and in particular analysing their use of criteria for understanding controversial issues. First of all, the teachers did not refer to the criteria used in the research literature, leaving it to the subjective interpretation of the authors to analyse their answers in relation to the established criteria. Secondly, as the teachers mentioned one or more controversial issues they had included in their civic education teaching, we did not necessarily have sufficient information to know for sure how the issue was dealt with, making it difficult to determine whether it was understood according to the behaviourist, epistemic, political or emotional criteria. When we assess the teachers' understanding of what makes an issue controversial, this is based on both the specific controversial issues the teachers said they included in their civic education teaching and the contextual insight the teachers gave us in the interviews.

The study's findings suggest a possible connection between how teachers handle controversial issues in the classroom and students' political efficacy. This pattern can and should be discussed, as it is difficult to rule out other possible explanations for the observed connection. The differences between U and K schools might be random. Other factors, such as differences between teachers

rather than schools, could explain these variations. Additionally, the characteristics of the schools and their contexts might also play a role.

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we present an overview of our findings, structured around our research questions.

RQ1: What is the social science teachers' reasoning for including controversial issues in their civic education teaching?

We quickly identified a main pattern in our data, which was similar across the U and K schools, as all the teachers gave examples of how they included controversial issues in their civic education teaching. Including controversial issues seemed to be a natural element for the teachers, and none of them distanced themselves from this. When we asked teachers for their reasons for doing this, we also discovered similarities. The teachers did this because they regarded it as an integral aspect of fulfilling their role as providers of civic education and preparing their students for participation in a democratic society. Importantly, all the teachers made explicit the close relationship between discussing controversial issues and preparing students for future democratic participation. Several teachers gave examples of controversial issues that they had recently included in their civic education teaching, and we find it interesting that there was great concurrence on which controversial issues the teachers said they had included in their social science teaching. Bearing in mind that the interviews were conducted in late autumn of 2021, typical examples of controversial issues the teachers had included were the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the wearing of religious headwear, abortion, the death penalty, assisted suicide, racism and discrimination, and various issues related to immigration and integration, as well as several different perspectives in the wake of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the United States, such as structural racism and the divisive history of the Transatlantic slave trade. Overall, we gained the impression that the teachers sought to connect controversial issues to what engaged the students or to what was dominant in the news.

Expanding on the importance of controversial issues in civic education, the teachers valued the facilitation of classroom discussions as a very important aspect of their civic education teaching, as this gave the students a platform from which to develop their ability to formulate opinions, express them in class, and respect and tolerate the opinions of their peers. As one teacher said, it is important "to be able to see things from many perspectives", a sentiment shared by the other teachers. Several of the teachers informed us that they frequently took up positions that were contrary to the dominating opinions of the class to challenge the students in their opinions. As one teacher explained, he quite often "expresses the viewpoint few students share (…), seeking to confront the consensus of the classroom". These are the kinds of democratic competences the social science teachers value most in their civic education teaching, as they regard taking part in classroom discussions as preparing the students for democratic participation. As a result, the teachers saw it as the main task of their civic education teaching to create an open classroom atmosphere in which all students felt comfortable and able to take part in discussions. Learning how to debate without becoming unreasonable is an important aspect of this, and as one teacher expressed it: "As long as [the students] are able to argue well and avoid becoming too personal, but rather stick to the case at hand." The teachers valued the discussion of controversial issues as an essential and natural part of developing these competences, and the teachers particularly underscored the capacity of controversial issues to expose contrary opinions and different viewpoints.

One interesting observation, which also ran across all the sample schools, was the teachers' persistent attempts to facilitate classroom discussion in order to remedy the students' lack of belief in their ability to express themselves and to stand by and argue their position when faced with counterarguments and contrasting opinions. The teachers described classrooms where the students' desire for and ability to express opinions varied widely and that it was challenging that only a few students were willing to express their opinions in class. According to the teachers, this reluctance and the unwillingness of many students to stand by and argue their position when faced with counterarguments and contrasting opinions were the main obstacles to the students becoming active democratic citizens. Consequently, the teachers considered it necessary to develop the students' self-esteem, as Teacher U1a said, to help the students "express themselves and be brave". The teachers were continuously searching for ways to involve more students in classroom discussions, and a preferred method was to initiate discussions in pairs or small groups in preparation for discussion in full class. A different approach was to facilitate arranged debates, where the students prepared specific viewpoints, such as representing a political party. Fundamentally, orchestrating classroom discussions, including discussing questions the teachers perceived as controversial, was a way for the teachers to develop the students' confidence and ability to express themselves in plenary. On the one hand, through such discussions, teachers wanted to create a sense of security and develop student engagement. On the other hand, they sought to facilitate open discussion, from which different opinions and points of view emerged, which, in turn, could help the students develop their ability to respect opinions other than their own. In all of this, discussing controversial issues was seen as absolutely vital, and there were no differences between the U and K school teachers in this respect.

RQ2: What – if any – controversial issues do the social science teachers exclude from their civic education teaching, and how do they argue for their choices?

Given the similarities described above, the differences between the U and K school teachers are all the more striking when it comes to how they reflect on what controversial issues to include or not. Indeed, one of the study's main findings is that we can identify a clear distinction between the U and K schools in terms of how open and aware social science teachers are towards working on controversial issues in the classroom. This distinction is most evident in the teachers' reflections on what controversial issues they believe they can – or cannot – include as part of their civic education teaching. Teachers at U schools are far more open to including what they themselves believe to be controversial issues, even when they feel that this can create unrest and tension in the classroom. For example, Teacher U1c stated categorically that there were no topics that could not be discussed in his lessons, while Teacher U2c said that "virtually anything can be introduced and should in a way be introduced [in the classroom]". The K schools' teachers, on the other hand, were far more reserved about bringing what they themselves considered controversial issues into their social science teaching. Teacher K1c, for example, would avoid all discussion of "religion, ethnicity, and economics". The teachers at the U schools clearly stated that there were no topics or questions they sought to avoid in their teaching, while for comparison, only two of eight teachers at K schools said the same.

K schools' teachers identified issues that they perceived as too controversial to be discussed in their classrooms to a far greater extent than teachers at the U schools. By far, the most important reason for this was the teachers' desire to avoid students experiencing personal discomfort or that they should be offended by controversial issues. Two of the teachers explicitly stated that if some

of their students might be personally affected by an issue, it had to be avoided as a topic for discussion. In this respect, they were in line with their colleague K1c, who said: "I will try to steer a discussion [away from the controversial] if there is anything that could trigger discomfort in my class." Specifically, the same teacher cited homosexuality as an example of a topic that could cause discomfort and, therefore, had to be avoided as a topic for classroom discussion, arguing that "if I were homosexual, I might find it a little uncomfortable that my sexual orientation was subjected to public debate". This teacher does not explain what this "public debate" might consist of, but the key point here is that it is taken for granted that any classroom discussion that concerns homosexuality must necessarily be invasive or offensive to an imaginary student.

Some teachers at K schools argued that they were more open to friction in classroom discussions, but they nevertheless emphasised that this must occur "without stepping on any toes". The two (out of eight) K teachers who believed there were no issues that were too controversial to be discussed in the classroom nevertheless made some clear reservations in this respect. Teacher K1e, who was the teacher at the K schools most open to discussing almost everything in his classes, also pointed out that the student body at the school where he taught was very homogeneous: "But I've never had anyone like that, what to say, a bit like that... I've kind of never had anyone like that [hesitates] Jew-hatred or conspiracy type of thing." In our analysis, it seems that the teacher believed that since there were no strong antagonisms or disagreements within the class, anything could be discussed. It is thus the teacher's expectation of the absence of students' personal discomfort that is the deciding factor for the teacher's inclusion of controversial issues. This is stated even more clearly by one of his colleagues, who points out that they are "lucky" with the homogenous classes at his school, as this does not provide fertile ground for major controversies: "But it is clear that if I sat with half (...) [the] class from a religion and... We're pretty lucky in that regard here, then. We get away with some issues that you have in other classrooms in Norway." In other words, it is the composition of the classroom and the teacher's desire to avoid personal discomfort among the students that determines what can and cannot be included in terms of controversial issues.

The teachers from the U schools all agreed that they did not consider any issue too controversial to be discussed among the students in the classroom. In our view, the reasons given for this show how their approach to controversial issues clearly differs from the K school teachers' approach. The U school teachers differed from their colleagues in terms of their inclusion of controversial issues that might be perceived as unpleasant or potentially offensive. Several of the teachers from the U schools emphasised the need for perspectives and opinions that a teacher described as "a little edgy" (Teacher U1c) to have a natural place in such discussions. There was no desire on the part of the teachers to create an unpleasant and unsafe environment in class, and they made no attempt to actively provoke such statements, but they did recognise that such statements existed among the students and that they were occasionally expressed, for a wide range of reasons. Several of the U teachers (U1c, U1e, U2c) therefore specifically emphasised the importance of allowing the classroom to be an arena where students could test opinions or expressions they might have picked up from elsewhere, either at home or in social media, among their fellow students, but also to a trustworthy authoritative figure such as the teacher. As one teacher said:

> And then some pretty strong opinions come out in some (...) I don't know if it's opinions or if it's kind of like provocative statements they've heard or things they're hearing. I perceive it more as like, 'I'm not sure how I feel about this, I want to test it a little bit. Say it out loud'. (...) And then I think it's really important that it's taken seriously, then, that it's not just dismissed. Because then they haven't really gotten an answer. (Teacher U1c)

This teacher emphasised the importance of eliciting potentially controversial opinions the students might have so that they could be discussed, understood and potentially recalibrated. Teacher U2c expressed a similar opinion, arguing that the goal of allowing this was "that such opinions can be reflected on and confronted" (Teacher U2c). For Teacher U1e, this meant that the school should give students an opportunity to debate issues they were confronted with and influenced by, regardless of other social arenas:

> They are discussed in other contexts where the students are, then school must be an arena where various things can be discussed in more orderly and controlled forms. The classroom must be a place for the exchange of opinions also about controversial and possibly hurtful things because students need a place to explore these. (Teacher U1e)

The teachers at the U schools acknowledged that including a wide array of controversial issues in their civic education teaching might lead to unrest and that students might express themselves in ways that other students perceived as provocative and hurtful. However, they also argued that these challenges should not in themselves limit how controversial issues were included in civic education teaching. As one of the teachers at school U2 argued, controversial issues were often perceived and experienced differently, citing the school's high level of cultural and socioeconomic diversity:

> Obviously, there are some things you know can be tougher to talk about for some than for others. I think it's important that we know about and recognise that. That there are some things that are more hurtful to some than others. I think this is also important to keep in mind, but it shouldn't limit the fact that I can talk about something anyway, and I hope it doesn't for others, either. (Teacher U2C)

In our opinion, and as these quotes provide examples, we identify a more open and deliberate approach to the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education teaching among the teachers at the U1 and U2 schools. However, this does not mean that these teachers are never reluctant to teach topics that they themselves perceive as challenging or controversial. For example, Teacher U2a told us that she found classroom discussion of issues related to pornography difficult. She assumed that this was a subject that was already present in the students' everyday lives but that she herself did not have the necessary factual knowledge to facilitate an open classroom discussion on the topic in a satisfactory manner, fearing that any discussion would be reduced to "nonsense" (Teacher U2a). Importantly, the teacher was not reluctant to discuss this topic because she was afraid of offending the students, but because she was concerned about her own lack of knowledge and insight and had made arrangements for another member of the school's staff to teach this topic. Another teacher at the same school, U2b, admitted that discussing racism was "terribly difficult". The teacher was afraid of "getting lost in concepts" and found it particularly challenging to know "how [she] should tolerate different statements". She was also concerned about whether she would be able to structure the classroom discussions on racism and discrimination so that no one felt discriminated against or singled out but rather experienced inclusion and understanding. The teacher had similar concerns about discussing issues related to drugs and other intoxicants but was nevertheless adamant that neither of these topics should be avoided in her classroom, even if the teacher herself found them challenging and controversial. In order to counter what she perceived as her own lack of didactic competences, the teacher decided to educate herself in order to improve her own teaching.

The point we would like to make here is that when the teachers at the U schools encountered issues they did not feel competent enough to teach and which they perceived as controversial, they chose different strategies than avoidance. It is significant that we did not find similar reflections in the interviews with teachers working in the K schools.

Our analysis of the interview material clearly indicates that the teachers at the U schools and the K schools were both concerned about the composition of the students in their classes. The overall difference was that for K school teachers, the composition clearly limited *what kind of* controversial issues might be included in civic education teaching, while for the U school teachers, it determined *in what ways* controversial issues were included.

RQ3: What criteria do social science teachers apply when identifying issues as controversial?

As presented above in the section discussing RQ1, all the teachers agreed that it was necessary and vital to include controversial issues in civic education teaching, and they all gave examples of controversial issues they had recently included in their civic education teaching. In doing so, it seems that the inclusion of controversial issues as such may not explain the differences between the U and K schools. Nor does it seem that the two types of schools are distinguished by which controversial issues were included in civic education teaching. However, and this is the study's second major finding, there seems to be a distinct difference in how these same controversial issues are perceived by the social science teachers, i.e., their perceptions of *what exactly makes the issues controversial.* In other words, whether they were understood as controversial based on behaviouristic and epistemic, political or emotional criteria. When we analyse the teachers' reflections, with examples given below, it is our interpretation that the teachers at the U schools tended to emphasise epistemic and political criteria, whilst the K schoolteachers maintained the emotional criterion before the others.

Turning briefly to the examples discussed under RQ2 above, we saw that several teachers from U schools reflected upon topics that they perceived as controversial and which they did not feel sufficiently competent to teach. Importantly, the teachers handled the issue by expanding their own factual knowledge and didactic competence rather than succumbing to avoidance of the issue outright, fearing that this might emotionally upset the students. In our view, this is an understanding of controversial issues that embodies the epistemic and political criteria outlined earlier in this article.

Another example of how teachers at the U schools understood controversial issues through the epistemic and political criteria was Teacher U1a's handling of the "gender equality in Islam" topic that, according to the teacher, created engagement and strong emotions in her classroom. One student expressed quite strongly that there was gender equality in Muslim communities and was frequently challenged by another student who was equally opinionated that real equality was not possible in societies strongly influenced by Islam. To help resolve this potential conflict, the teacher challenged them both to find valid arguments for their views and armed with these arguments, both students continued to passionately argue their standpoints. It matters less that both these engaged students only found arguments that reinforced their existing views, making them even more entrenched in their opinions. What is more important is that they at least identified valid arguments that could be recognised and discussed and that were detached from their own personal and subjective convictions. We thus interpret the teacher's approach to this contentious and controversial issue as adherence to epistemic criteria since the teacher helped the students avoid remaining in an emotional understanding of the issue.

Among the teachers who most clearly stated the importance of regarding controversial issues according to the epistemic or political criteria is Teacher U1e. When discussing his view that the bar should be high for what could and should be discussed in the classroom and for specifically avoiding students feeling personally violated, he argued that a discussion of controversial issues could be rooted in issues and opinions decisively outside the classroom: "[W]e don't have to discuss 'this is my opinion', but we could discuss 'this is the opinion of this group'. (…) Hence, we move [the discussion] towards a professional level and away from the subjective."

K school teachers, on the other hand, took a very different approach to what makes an issue controversial. As mentioned earlier, Teacher K1c seeks to avoid all classroom discussions of "religion, ethnicity, and economics". As far as social science terminology goes, neither religion, ethnicity, nor economics are controversial in themselves, but in the interview, we learned that this teacher wanted to avoid all discussion of these topics, as he feared that some students might feel insecure or take it too personally. Consequently, all kinds of discussions related to religion, ethnicity, and economics were understood by this teacher as being too emotionally challenging for his students, and at no point did he reflect on alternative understandings of controversial issues: they could only be understood emotionally. Another example was given by Teacher K2b, who himself identified issues related to transsexuality as controversial issues he needed to avoid in classroom discussions. In our interpretation, issues related to transgender rights and equality can be understood as controversial issues using both the political and the epistemic criteria, but since this teacher so clearly put a lid on all discussions related to transsexuality because he wanted to avoid discomfort among students, it is reasonable to assume that he primarily considered this a controversial issue in terms of its potentially emotional nature.

6 CLOSING DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education may aid social science teachers in compensating for how social background influences the political efficacy of students. Despite the limitations of our study, as we may, of course, not point out any causal effects, our research points towards two important insights that should be explored further: Firstly, *openness* and *awareness* towards the inclusion of controversial issues in civic education in social science may contribute to compensating for the significance of social background for the internal political efficacy of students. Secondly, teaching based on an understanding of controversial issues in light of the *political* and *epistemic* criteria for what makes an issue controversial, rather than the *emotional* criterion, may further contribute to this compensation.

Importantly, and this is something we wish to express quite clearly, it is not the inclusion of controversial issues *in itself* that seems to make a difference. Nor can we make a simple distinction between social science teachers who include controversial issues in their civic education teaching and those who do not, or conclude that the more controversial issues are included, the better equipped social science teachers will be to compensate for the social background of their students. This absence of a simple black-and-white distinction between the use or non-use of controversial issues helps to underscore our findings. The difference has more to do with taking the students and their need for clarity and insight on important and contentious social issues seriously instead of shutting such issues away from the classroom.

We can only hypothesise about why more openness towards and awareness of including controversial issues as part of their civic education teaching contributes to enabling social science teachers to compensate for how social background influences the internal political efficacy of their

students. One argument raised by various teachers in this study is the authenticity that the inclusion of controversial issues may bring to classroom discussions. The fact that teachers take seriously what students themselves recognise as important, helping the students to be both more knowledgeable and to see different perspectives on topics that they are confronted with in other settings, may strengthen students' belief that their opinions and experiences matter. This interpretation is in line with previous research in a Nordic school context (Ljunggren, 2015). Another possibility is the openness that controversial issues bring to the table. Discussing actual controversial issues on which there is genuine disagreement in societal contexts that are recognisable to the students may enhance the students' impression that societal issues may be influenced and changed, which in turn may strengthen the students' political efficacy. The importance of authenticity and openness for student engagement and participation is well-established (Ruddock & Fielding, 2006), but it should not be taken for granted when including controversial issues in civic education teaching.

Emotions are closely linked to controversial issues in one way or another. However, the reason we argue for the importance of an epistemic or political approach in the classroom is twofold. Firstly, it is based on the fact that it seems to be easier for the teachers to teach the subject if they take a more fact-based or academic starting point rather than an emotional one. Secondly, several educational researchers (Ljunggren, 2015; Tväråna, 2018, 2019;) argue that it is not sufficient to work with questions that students experience as open and undecided since it is also crucial that the students' subjective opinions and personal identifications are not given too dominant a position when such questions are discussed and processed in the classroom, as this deprives them of the opportunity for critical thinking. The goal should not be for the students to exclusively engage in discussion based on their individual identities and personal emotions; the goal is rather for the students to become aware that dilemmas and undecided controversial issues exist – and may be impacted and changed.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Anders G. Kjøstvedt is an Associate Professor at the Department of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education at the Oslo Metropolitan University, where he teaches History and History Didactics. Kjøstvedt recently took part in the DEMOCIT-project, funded by the Research Council of Norway, which focused on how Norwegian adolescents develop their political efficacy, and how civic education in school may help alleviating social inequalities in political efficacy.

Evy Jøsok is an Associate Professor at the Department of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education at the Oslo Metropolitan University, where she teaches Social Studies and Social Studies Didactics. Jøsok recently took part in the DEMOCIT-project, funded by the Research Council of Norway, which focused on how Norwegian adolescents develop their political efficacy, and how civic education in school may help alleviating social inequalities in political efficacy.