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Student Motivation for Social Studies – Existential Exploration or Critical Engagement*

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- Student motivation for schooling can be high in some subjects and lower in others.
- Little is known about what motivates students for social studies.
- Students are found to be motivated for social studies because social studies offers more possibilities for student self-regulation.
- Students are motivated by the room for subjective, emotional engagement in social studies.
- Students are motivated by subject matter content that concerns them directly or that evoke emotions.

Purpose: To understand what motivates students for social studies.

Design: Social studies as a school subject is defined in terms of its contents (knowledge, skills, values), by its teaching methods and by the organisational regulation of how students and teachers should engage in the subject. Student motivation for these components of social studies was examined in interviews with 26 students in optional social studies courses, and the results were analysed in a theoretical framework of motivation theory.

Findings: The aspects of social studies most clearly seen as motivating for students is that social studies offers more possibilities for student self-regulation, and that it provides an arena for subjective, emotional engagement. Students are also motivated by subject matter content that concerns them directly or that evoke emotions.

Limitations: The data material only covers 26 students in optional courses in Norway. Further studies across countries, comparing optional and compulsory courses, are needed. Broader data are also needed.

Implications: Didactical models and advice must take these student interests into account, as these are among the pre-conditions students bring into the classroom. At the same time there is an urgent need to develop ideas on how to link these self-reflective, subjective student perspectives to social, economic and political structures and processes.

Keywords:

Social studies, student motivation, Norway, upper secondary school, self-reflexivity

* Mona Langø also participated valuably in the project.

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1 Introduction

From a late modernity perspective, how young people see what they do as meaningful and worth the effort is increasingly important (Giddens 1994). Authority and tradition will not suffice as impetus to complete and engage in education. When students are not motivated for school, it will lead to difficulties for teaching, low learning outcomes and sometimes even to dropout. However, motivation may vary from one school subject to another. School subjects have their own justifications and rationales (Børhaug, Fenner & Aase, 2005). Thus, in order to understand how students relate to school, motivation for different subjects are important research topics. In this paper the focus is on social studies, and the research question is what motivates students in upper secondary school in optional social studies course, i.e. what motivates them to stay, to complete and to make an effort. Broadly speaking, we may label this the general motivation for the subject. Furthermore, understanding motivations for social studies is also a basis for discussing the contents, progression and teaching methods of the subject.

It will be argued below that a broad range of factors may influence student motivation, and we have few specific hypotheses developed in previous research. This calls for an exploratory design. 24 Norwegian students in upper secondary schools were interviewed in semi-structured interviews looking for how they felt about social studies and why they chose to do at least some efforts in their social studies subject.

2 Social studies

The Norwegian educational system is made up of a voluntary Early Childhood Education and Care service from year one to the year the child reaches the age of six, which is the age compulsory schooling starts. Compulsory schooling is completed after 10 years, and during those years social studies are combined with history and geography in a broad school subject about society. Following compulsory schooling, all Norwegians are entitled to upper secondary education, and this is where educational specialisation starts. Upper secondary education has some subjects that are compulsory for all students, no matter their choice of specialization, and some optional subjects. The optional subjects dominate the two final years of upper secondary education, and one group of optional subjects are varieties of social studies. First, there is a subject called Politics and Human Rights. Next, there is Sociology and Anthropology, and finally Social issues, which is mainly concerned with socialisation, culture and welfare.

Compared to other optional subjects, these three are quite popular, even if the pressure and campaigns in the educational system for a long time have encouraged students to choose differently, i.e. to choose science and mathematics (Skarpenes & Nilsen, 2014). However, levels of motivation for engaging in the subject are uncertain, and seem to vary quite a lot. In as far as students do find social studies motivating, what are the reasons?

Student motivation for schooling in general seems to decrease with increasing age (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; 2011; Ministry of Education and Research, 2011; 2013). Motivational problems become apparent in particular when students enter upper secondary education, which is optional. The dropout rate is close to 30% 5 years after starting upper secondary school, and is considered a major problem (Directorate of education 2014). There are arguments that the concern about the dropout-rate is exaggerated. Because dropout is measured already after 5 years, it misses out that most of these 30% do complete their training some years later, and in most cases, those who do not complete at all also manage to get a job (Skarpenes & Nilsen, 2014; Vogt, 2017). Still, not all students are equally motivated for schooling, and the permanent or periodical dropout is an indication of this. Processes of failure that lead to dropping out starts at primary school (Nordahl & Sunnevåg, 2008). Students who do well early on continue to do so, and maintain higher levels of motivation and have higher completion rates in higher education (Frøseth & Markussen, 2009; Frønes og Strømme, 2010). «This shows that success is reproduced in the educational system» (Frøseth & Markussen in Markussen 2009, p. 90). Thus, motivation is established or undermined early and is maintained. (Wollscheid 2010, p. 12). The actual dropout, however occurs only at upper secondary level when schooling is not compulsory (Nordahl & Overland 2013:16).

Norwegian research on student motivation at school has mainly studied primary schooling. Psychological and pedagogical approaches dominate this body of research, which has highlighted the role of the teacher as well as the learning environment (Ministry of Education and Research 2013:76). Social integration and belonging, the relation to the teachers and student self-esteem are also important for maintaining motivation for schooling (Skaalvik og Skaalvik, 2009). Student data confirm the pivotal role of the teacher for motivating students (Skaar, Viblemo & Skaalvik, 2008, p. 46). Differentiated teaching, supporting teachers and a learning oriented environment at school are found to be important (Skaalvik og Skaalvik 2011:55). Throndsen (2011) has studied how evaluation systematically geared to promote learning influenced motivation, but found few effects.

This research relate to schooling in general, and ignores that students can be motivated for some subjects and not others. Students are found to be motivated to learn when they «think that school activities are meaningful» (Brophy, 1988 in Woolfolk 2014, p. 299). Woolfolk continues by arguing:

> "When Walter Vispoel and James Ausing (1995) observed over 200 students at lower secondary schools, low interest in the subject itself was the most common explanation for school failure. When students themselves were asked to explain why they succeeded, interest was the most frequent explanation." (2014, p. 287).

However, research on how different school subjects motivate or do not motivate and why is scarce. Wæge (2007) has studied motivation for math, and found that exploratory teaching methods increase motivation for math. Larsen and Friche (2017) analyses how student strategies for education intersect with gendering processes in ways that regulate motivation for mathematics.

There are some studies of motivation and interest for social studies, but they cover only some motivational factors. Hovdenakk found that students in lower secondary school were particularly interested in social studies and religion because these subjects could be related to themselves and how the world influenced them (Hovdenakk, 2014). Not least, global issues were of interest to them. Sandahl (2013) found that Swedish students in upper secondary school were motivated by their interest in major political and transnational problems, but that motivation declined as they gradually understood the complexity of problems and how difficult it is to address major social, economic and political problems. Sandahl points out that «Here we are facing a didactic challenge for teachers to navigate between giving a fair view of the world while not creating a sense that there is no point in trying to do anything» (ibid). Krammning (2017) makes the same observation in her dissertation from Sweden; students in upper secondary school turn away from global environmental challenges because the problems are overwhelming. There is thus an urgent need to examine more closely, what makes social studies – and other subjects – motivating to students.

3 Motivational factors and social studies

Much of the research referred to above is informed by motivation theory, in which the distinction between intrinsic and external motivation is important. These may both be understood in various ways, (see Covington & Mueller, 2001), but external motivation implies some sort of reward other than the task itself, be it symbolic or material. (Covington & Mueller, 2001). In order for external rewards to motivate, the rewards have to be seen as attractive, the conditions for attaining them have to be clearly understood and getting the rewards has to depend on results the student can control. Approval, grades and access to higher education are crucial rewards in schools. Both rewards and negative sanctions equally have to predictable.

Intrinsic motivation can be explained as the search for interesting tasks, doing activities for the sake of the activity itself or out of curiosity. A key element is that the motivation is to be found in the action itself because it is interesting, exciting, or meaningful. From a subject matter didactical perspective, one would argue that the substantial or material contents of a school subject is the most meaningful part of it. Concerning social studies, it would be assumed that understanding the wide world is interesting in itself, or from a critical perspective, that understanding how social institutions function, assess them

critically and try to change them is the primary meaning of social studies (Børhaug, 2014). Didactical theory would also underline that for a subject matter to make sense and be meaningful; it has to be related to prior knowledge structures and skills (Haste & Torney-Purta, 1992; McGraw, 2000). Learning is not passive absorption of meaningless bits and pieces of information. It is active appropriation of new understanding in a way that makes sense for the learning person based on his or her preconditions and prior understanding.

Deci and Ryans much quoted theory of motivation as self-determination is less focused on actual contents (Ryan & Deci, 2000). They point out autonomous learning, competence development, i.e. the motivation of being challenged, struggle to understand and finally to master something new and social belonging as the three core issues in motivation. Manger (2013:146) also underlines that intrinsic motivation is related to mastery of something new. Mastery can be about concepts, data and models or about skills. Summing up, six key motivational elements are:

- expectations and sanctions
- subject matter contents and skills as meaningful
- learning based on prior knowledge
- autonomy
- competence development and mastery
- social inclusion

Based on this framework about motivation, we have to understand the school subject – which is what motivates or not – in broad terms. I.e. the school subject is marked by its conceptual contents, by the skills it contains, by its basic rationale or value basis and by the more specific values and attitudes it includes. A range of different teaching and evaluation methods also marks a school subject, and it is characterized by some kind of progression over time.

However, we have to expand our understanding of the school subject to grasp how these motivational factors may work or not. The school subject is embedded in an organizational structure. There are organizational regulations about how the subject should transmitted and how students are required to act when taking a course. Such frameworks are in in many respects the same for an entire school, and even the educational system as a whole. Nevertheless, they may also vary, for instance from one subject to another, and from one teacher to another.

Organization may mean formal structure, in which official objectives are sought realized by means of formal rules that define and coordinate action (Scott, 1992). Any subject will be framed by such rules that define required student behaviour and not least important, they regulate how rewards will be distributed. This framework can represent very strict and detailed regulation or imply discretion to students. It can support cooperation among students or individual work and competition. Ball has in his book «The micro-politics of schools» (Ball, 1987) argued that schools can also be regarded as political systems, in which interest maximizing individuals and groups compete for resources. Student behaviour cannot be reduced to learning and rule following, it also involves strategic behaviour to maximize preferences. How students define their interests is an empirical question. They may have interest definitions about learning as much as possible or just enough to pass. They may have interests in how learning should take place and in how learning should be combined with other projects, activities and needs they see as important in everyday life.

The question of what makes social studies meaningful for students is therefore a matter of how students find subject matter contents, skills and teaching methods motivating. It is further a matter about how the formal and political structure in the social science classrooms are seen as meaningful and adapted to student interests and needs.

What to expect? Theories of globalization point out that the world is increasingly interconnected (Burnouf, 2004). Late modernity perspectives argue that young people less than before accept and adhere to well-known narratives. A global, critical perspective is thus to be expected, in which young people are motivated to study global issues in a critical, exploratory and autonomous way. In a

globalised world students are interested in the big questions and issues, and social studies probably offer better opportunities to stimulate this than many other subjects do (Øia, 1995; Hovdenakk, 2014).We will label this *the global citizen assumption*, i.e. students are motivated by big issues. Social studies offer good opportunities to work with real social and political problems that are accessible online (Sandahl, 2013).

Quite to the contrary, programs and projects aiming at reducing drop out has typically focused on smaller groups, close follow up and cooperative processes in class (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2009; 2011; Borgund 2015; Baklien, Bratt & Gotaas 2004; Høst, 2011). It is reasonable to expect that social studies offer good opportunities to work this way, for instance in groups, projects and dialogue based teaching. We may label this a *social inclusion assumption*, concerning in particular organisational and teaching methodical aspects of the subject. I.e. students are motivated by social inclusion, group work and close surveillance from teacher and peers.

Ziehe and Stubenrauch (2008) point out that students are using school subjects as a way to build their own identity as opposed to simply inherit elements of culture, opinions etc. In this phase of life students tend to break free from institutionalized norms and focus on themselves (ibid). This is what Anthony Giddens (1994) calls the self-reflexive project, where people use a lot of time creating their own life. In line with this, it is natural to think that students may be more motivated in subjects and contents that they see as meaningful to their self-building project. We label this the *self-reflexive assumption*, i.e. students are motivated by social studies in as far as it allows them to reflect upon themselves and develop their own identity.

4 Methods of research

Six upper secondary schools were contacted in august 2015. The schools were strategically chosen based on the idea that they should represent a cross section of upper secondary schools. The schools are located in different areas, with different size and with different inlet sections. In cooperation with the school management, teachers in social studies at all schools were invited to participate in the project. Students with different levels of interest were selected in cooperation with these teachers. The reason for the selection was an expectation of finding variety if students were selected based on the variance in degrees of commitment and effort. The students were informed about the project in writing and the interviews with the students were based on student consent, without the teacher present. In total 24 students were interviewed in semi-structured interviews, about why they had chosen the subject, what they were interested in, what rules they met in social studies, how they worked and what they saw as interesting and motivating in terms of contents, skills and teaching methods.

The approach is not to examine the entire school subject and ask which parts are motivating and which parts are not. Students were asked what they saw as rewarding some way or another. Thus, the data cannot describe the subjects, only which elements of them the students saw as motivating. The material is not representative for upper secondary school as such, and it could also well be that if students in the compulsory social studies subjects that come before these optional courses had been interviewed, the results would have been different. However, the interviewed students meet the optional courses with a history from earlier social studies courses and they are older and probably more reflected on what they like about various subjects. Thus, these findings will be interesting also for social studies in general.

5 Analysis

The material was fully transcribed and systematized by means of NVivo. The findings concerning the organizational framework will be presented first, and next the findings concerning the subject matter and teaching methods in relation to the various concepts of motivation.

5.1 The organisational framework

The formal framework regulating students by rules and sanctions is in many respects the same across subjects. On the other hand, rules are also operative through the school subjects and rules may vary

from one subject to the other. Thus, we ask what formal rules regulate student activity in social studies? For instance, are there rules requiring weekly reading and other work? Are there rules concerning activity in class? What sanctions are involved? How do students define their preferences and how can they act strategically to secure them in social studies?

The overall picture is that in social studies classes there are very few rules, at least the students say that there are few rules. One of them says plainly that «Well, I think – I don't think the teacher has had any clear rules at all». Other students do report rules, but they all point out that the rules are rather few.

Nevertheless, some rules can be found. First of all, there are rules in all schools to the effect that when students are late, do not hand in assignments or are too much absent, they will be formally reported, and if there are many such formal reports – approximately 8-10 over a year - the grading of general behaviour by the end of the term will be affected. This grade does not count when competing for access to higher education, and can be improved the next term if there are fewer reports then. In other words, the consequences will materialize only by the end of the last term, and they are not very serious. Second, if students are absent when there is a test, they risk not being graded in the subject, thus not passing it, but there are warnings and second chances to take the tests. These rules concern all subjects.

What about the rules particular to social studies classes? Rules concerning not paying attention to the teaching are quite loose and only partially applied. Most students explain that in spite of some efforts from the teacher to keep computers and cell phones away from the students' attention, at least early in the term, students are in practice left alone to make the choice of surfing on the internet, communicating with friends or follow the teaching. Several students add that in math and science this is much stricter. There is some variation at this point; some teachers try to keep a stricter regime than others do, in particular concerning phones.

Concerning teachers who attempt to regulate use of computers and phones, the students say that there are rules, but that these are observed only at the beginning of the semester, this goes in particular for rules about computers, as the following quotes suggest:

> "Everybody are allowed to sit with their computer up, and then everybody can do what they want."

> "(..) only this morning I came into the class room and it was «close down the computers», and than after half an hour all the computers are up again."

> "It is very liberal. This is the case in most social studies subjects, at least when compared with math and science (…). It is about you being independent and you have to know when to use the computer or not. I think the only thing the teacher stops is if we start watching movies, or if he is presenting something very important."

In particular computers are difficult to control because teachers are expected to use them in class by the national curriculum which requires use of information technology. In fact, at upper secondary school students are obliged to have a computer, and they are offered it at a lower price when they start at upper secondary school. They also get funding for the purchase through grants distributed through the three years they are in school, in addition to technical support. Digital literacy is defined as equally important as reading and writing, and therefore computers are difficult to keep out of the classroom.

This freedom to pay attention or not has profound effects on daily life in class, making many students part time participants. One student describes a typical lesson in social issues like this:

> "(The typical lesson) is, I guess, that the teacher stands in front presenting, he has a power point presentation which he explains and talks about. Half the class is on facebook and things like that and do not pay attention. The other half watches, and perhaps they pay attention and take notes and stuff. And if he asks a question, maybe one or two raise their hand to answer."

The students tend to see this as an advantage, making the subject better. It is a comparative advantage of the social studies. In math, some of them point out, rules are stricter. Referring to both Norwegian and international research, Berg et al. find that student use of online computers as a means to escape from classroom activities are widespread in both science and Norwegian (2014).

Even though the students realize that the good student pays attention all the time, they clearly understand social studies as a subject where this does not apply and where the student role is one of self-regulated participation. And that is a good reason for taking the subject. It can be combined with other things, in particular activities on the internet: "Right now it is a bit stressing, but manageable stress, I would say. That is – you can choose if you want to stress a lot and have good grades or if you might not feel like you want to stress."

This rather loose organizational structure requires self-regulation. The option to drop in and out of what goes on in class is a matter of choice. This very self-regulation is pointed out by the students as positive, as one of them says:

> "I feel that it works very well. Because sociology is not that difficult to understand so that if you have missed something, you catch up by means of your own reading. Compared to other subjects where you need an explanation. I believe the teacher thinks we have to make those decisions ourselves."

The importance of autonomy is clearly seen in statements like this. The reasons why students think of socal studies as a subject of self-regulated student actvity are first, as mentioned, the rules in class, but also the nature of the subject itself. One student says about choosing the subject: «And it's more my type of subject, so that you don't have to study a lot because it's like it's coming more naturally to me and it's more logically».

Of course, some students choose to pay attention all the time. One points out that «I am very hardworking, I do what the teacher says. Anyhow, I would like to have good results. I work hard to reach my objectives. I have very high objectives for myself».

However, this is a choice, and particularly so in social studies. The choice of how much activity students should mobilize is by the students described as general tendencies and strategies. They make their own approach for the subjects they have. For instance, they may increase levels of activity if they believe they are in the middle between two grades.

Some students reduce their input to a minimum, but the subject allows them to follow even at a low level of activity. One of them says that "In the beginning I paid quite close attention during presentations. And now – I only quick-read before the tests. I do not pay attention in class at all. So, I read three days before a test, and them I'm done."

Another student does not choose not to pay attention, but actively choose to do other things: «In this subject it is much more fun to watch series than to read. It is much more interesting»

They seem to understand social studies as a subject where one can perform at this low level, and still have a grade. However, there seems to be some difference here between the subjects. The belief that one can "surf" through is more common among the students in sociology. The students in politics and human rights and in social issues tell a slightly different story. Most of them report that the requirements and expectations are a lot higher and that they see this as difficult to manage. What they all have in common is that they believe that in other subjects this type of low performance is not possible, due to rules of constant attention and the nature of the subject content, which also requires constant attention and effort.

However, self-regulation does not mean chaos. Students say that they are obliged to be quiet, directly disturbing the teacher is not accepted. However, apart from this, the rules underline that students are free to ignore what goes on in the classroom, or to switch their attention back and forth between classroom and the digital world, as long as they do so quietly.

The most powerful rule is that the teacher grades and the grades define future options for education. Students are graded and they know that these grades will affect their future possibilities to enter popular higher education programs. How the students distribute attention and energy in order to obtain

grades is very much left to the students themselves. The formal arrangement that allows students to choose subjects of course also allows autonomous student action, which counters teachers' grading power to some extent. Students explain that they expected social studies to be easy, and many chose it for that reason. This kind of strategic behaviour is also evident in other ways. One student says that Law was a very, very exciting subject, but he changed to social studies in order to get better grades. One student dropped one big, difficult subject and switched to two smaller, easier ones, in order to improve the average grade, which is what will decide access to higher education. The students know what averages are needed for what they wish to study, they know the average they had achieved at the time when they were interviewed and they regulate their efforts in social studies depending on what average they aim for.

The organizational aspects of social studies are characterized by very low levels of external motivation by means of control and sanctions, except for grading. On the other hand, motivation by allowing for autonomy is very clearly pronounced – and the students seem confident that they are capable to self-regulate. Finally, some of the students point out that self-regulation is manageable because of the nature of the subject, where they can use their own knowledge. This is important for competence motivation as they see themselves as mastering the subject by their own devices.

5.2 Subject content, skills and teaching methods

Some say that the subject has proved to be more demanding than they expected. However, there are also students who state that social studies are easy. Different experiences in this regard are probably related also to different levels of knowledge at the outset. However, it is a subject which is manageable for most, even if it is more demanding than expected. This is by quite many students related to the nature of the subject itself. It does not require mastery of very precise knowledge. This understanding of the subject can be seen in the answer that a student gives to the question of what to do when faced with a difficult assignment.

> "That is the real reason why social studies are quite fun, because even though you cannot guess what it is (the answer), you can discuss your way around it, sort of. Because the different themes are related to each other."

Several students point out that it is important to them that because social studies is easier, it gives a better feeling of mastery: «The fact that it is not too difficult makes is more motivating to work with."

To some students the subject is attractive because knowledge in social studies is something intuitive. It is not very factual or precise. One student says it like this:

> "I am the kind of person who has some information from earlier on, and then I use what I have to discuss my way to it (an answer to an assignment). I have never been particularly good at memorizing or reading, but I just do it naturally well in social studies."

Also other students point out that the subject does not require specific subject matter knowledge. "You don't have to read to get a good grade. You just watch what happens in the world, which you do anyway." This experience with the subject content is motivating both as it can be mastered, and because it allows them to use their own skills and prior knowledge.

However, an important finding is that these students, who, as indicated above, are at quite different levels, also find the subject as such interesting and meaningful. When elaborating, the students point out both skills and contents. Concerning the former, students above all emphasize discussions as a skill that is important in social studies and that they like. Discussions are positively evaluated for several reasons. First, quite many stress that discussion is about expressing subjective opinions, as illustrated in the following quotations.

> "And in discussion opinions are central. So you have to dare to think, often differently, or at least bring out what your opinion is and not be afraid to have an opinion."

> "You are not going to be very good in this subject without having opinions of your own, because then all you can do is to reiterate pure facts. So you must speculate and conclude why it is good or why it is bad, how this could happen and things like that."

Many of the students underline that all the discussions where personal opinions are allowed in the subject is something they like and are engaged in. Some explicitly state this to be a quality that distinguishes social studies from other subjects: «To be able to formulate your own opinion instead of knowing all these formulas and stuff – that is much more interesting to me». Right answers are not as interesting as figuring out yourself:

> "In science and the like, there is a right answer, but here you can - you can discuss and you can arrive at your answers on your own. There is no right answer. Mostly, at least. And then I like to listen to the opinions and points of views of others."

An additional motivation is that classroom discussions are entertaining and fun to watch and participate in: "People think it is more fun to come (to the classes) when they know that there will be discussions."

When young people have such a need to formulate opinions and to express them, it is also about identity development. Opinions are identity markers and by experimenting with having different opinions, teenagers explore who they are and how they want to be (Lauvdal & Winger, 1989). Some of the students are conscious that discussions have this function for them, as expressed by one of them:

> "In social studies and in sociology and these subjects, I think it is great fun to arrive at logical answers and figure out your own opinions. I think you can find out a lot about yourself in subjects like this. Where you stand in relation to others."

Another quite consistent finding is that the students stress the emotional aspect of the debates they have in social studies, as this quotation illustrates:

> "Tuesday, and then a guy said that sometimes girls say they have been raped when in reality they just regret having had sex. Then I got so mad! As did many others in the class. So then I discussed for a long time."

When exemplifying what issues and questions they like to discuss and have opinions about, they point out sex, sexual harassment, circumcision of boys and girls, sexual and romantic relations, marrying, beauty ideals, forced marriages, gay rights, human suffering in wars, refugee crisis, and the role of religion and culture in such issues. In other words, issues that provoke emotions that raise ethical considerations and/or that concern the students themselves. For a few of them, these discussions and the emotions they bring about also lead them to engage in political activities, notably on the internet.

Still, other students emphasize more strongly that discussions have to be objective and take into consideration the concepts, principles and facts of social studies. It could be that until these final years of secondary education, classroom debates in social studies had been subjective and emotional, but that this changes in these optional, final subjects. Now, there are new standards for discussions: «Last year (in compulsory social studies) you could write your opinion and whatever you wanted to, but now it is more «you have to write THAT» - you have to be entirely correct». However, such correct discussions do not supplant expressive and subjective debates, the point is that they should merge: «That you have to use theories independently is the most difficult part. You have to discuss – and be very adult in your arguments».

In short, discussions are motivating because they have qualities that relate the discussions to the students themselves; they are about subjective opinions and about finding out who you are, they evoke emotions and they are about young people. The type of content they find stimulating is themselves and their relations.

When asked about what social studies topics and issues they find interesting, no matter if these issues are being discussed or not, the same issues that they like to discuss reappear. They want to learn about what concerns themselves and other young people. In line with this, politics is the least engaging topic, according to the students. They are not interested in political and economic systems, but in people, preferably people like themselves. Many statements underline this, such as:

"It was interesting, and what we learned was what you would find in daily life situations."

"You recognize what is being said, all the norms and everything that happens in daily life."

When asked about why specialize in social studies, one student replied:

"Because I am concerned with people, and how people and society function together (…). I think it is important that we all learn about society we live in as we all participate, so it would help us all. This interests me a lot."

These quotations suggest that the subject content is very important, because it has an existential meaning for quite many of the students. It is about understanding oneself and other human beings. Some of them articulate this existential meaning very explicitly: "Last year we had about «My identity», and then we wrote a text about it and it was like – I discovered new aspects of myself that I had never reflected over (…). I for my part I found that very interesting."

Again, some of the students note that this is what makes social studies different from other subjects, in particular science:

"I don't like science and then – I like to work with people and I am very oral. (….) Understanding things in depth and understand why society is the way it is. That interests me."

As this quotation indicates, society is there, but as something that influences what is interesting, i.e. themselves. Still, a few also say that understanding society in general is important. One say that it is interesting to learn about how the economy works, but in total, the students are not concerned with the major structural and global problems as such, but with individuals such as themselves.

Social studies is also relevant to the students because it is useful. Several different notions of what useful means can be found, some argue that it is useful because it enables them to understand the news. Some of these students also see politics as useful: «It is perhaps more exciting to learn about foreign policy, because much of it can be seen again on the news». Or in debates elsewhere in society:

"You learn how things are, sort of – how things function in the world and I think this will come in handy – like when you meet people and they talk about things, then it is nice to be able to take part in the conversation and have something smart to say."

However, this utilitarian notion is most often related to what is useful in everyday life: "Social studies and law are the two most important and practical subjects we have because here you get to know (…..) I use some of those techniques we learn in sociology and social issues."

Again, this aspect of social studies is contrasted to science and describes social studies as something that one may «integrate in daily life in another way than atoms and molecules, which you don't see have a place in everyday life». Some students describe social studies almost as life guidance:

> We've just had about living together and marriage and stuff, and perhaps it sounds a bit "…must we learn about that?" But at the same time, it is important, because these are important things in our own live and things that are actually useful.

As pointed out above, there is ample research that shows that students are motivated by varied teaching methods and by constructive feedback on how they perform and may improve. The data material reflects this, and the students are concerned with both variation and feedback. They seem more content with the feedback than with the variation. Concerning influencing the work and contents in class, there are few examples that the students are involved in this, which is noteworthy as they are almost adult, 17-18 years old. On the other hand, there is not much complaining about the lack of influence. The major room for self-regulation probably reduces the need for co-influence.

6 Closing discussion

Social studies, as most of the students experience these subjects, have a combination of important characteristics that are important in a motivational perspective. First, an organisational framework that allows and even requires student self-regulation marks it. This seems to mark social studies more than other school subjects, at least the students seem to think so. Some of them are drawn to social studies for that reason. This means that external motivations of rewards and punishments are not very prominent, whereas the autonomy of self-regulation seem to attract students.

Second, social studies give more space for the students to use themselves and their own prior knowledge and resources, not least in discussions. This clearly has to do with mastery and experiencing competence, but also with autonomy and acknowledgement.

Third, students underline that social studies is interesting and motivating because of its contents. I.e. because, more than other subjects, social studies is about themselves. It has ample space for their emotions and subjective opinions and engagement. It is a subject to discover who you are. Social studies contains issues that are about the students and their relations themselves. It is even useful. For most of the students, social structures and processes are not interesting in themselves, but in as far as they affect the students directly. To some extent, the students point at more scientific aspects such as mastering concepts and understanding macro structures. To some, this academic interest is motivating. But this is not the dominant motivational force among these students.

Even though there are nuances, these dominant tendencies in the material make social studies suited to the late modern, self-reflexive student. Self-regulation, acknowledgement of students' own knowledge and skills, and the existential components of social studies contents, i.e. that the subject is about the students themselves, all point in that direction.

The globally oriented, or at least politically orientated student is hardly visible in the material at all. Regarding the third option, the student who is motivated by social inclusion, the results are more mixed. On one hand, they relate to each other, and being part of a debating class is clearly a motivation. It could be assumed that such discussions are only possible in a socially including and accepting classroom climate. On the other hand, their depiction of discussions is quite confrontational. Some of them also point out that sometimes they are afraid to make fools of themselves by saying something wrong. In short, social inclusion is hardly what these students find rewarding in social studies, but it is perhaps a condition for the factors that are really motivating.

There seems to be a difference, though, between Politics and Human Rights on the one hand, and Social Issues as well as Sociology and Anthropology on the other. Particularly the two latter focuses on issues students recognize from their daily lives.

This micro and expressive orientation of these subjects is hardly founded in the national curriculum, which underlines macro structures and processes more strongly. However, any teacher will have to

respect the starting point of students, and in as far as teachers have a choice in what to emphasise and how, students like this could represent a pressure on these subjects towards micro existentialism. The micro interests of the students are quite systematic. On the other hand, the topics of interest to these students can be developed in a broader, more structural direction, and this is perhaps the challenge to didactical developments; how to start from these micro orientations to broader social analysis?

It is commonly argued that social studies are far too concerned with rote learning and factual knowledge that are irrelevant to students (Solhaug & Børhaug, 2012; Stray, 2011). These findings suggest that the students agree that specific facts are irrelevant. On the other hand, the findings also suggest that at the formal rote learning is not completely dominating in these subjects. These subjects relate to the daily life and existential needs of students at least to some extent. There is enough space for self-reflexivity to make the subjects motivating.

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