



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

# Democracy and Controversial Issues: Preparing students to become global citizens

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## Summary

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## Abstract

In an attempt to make tomorrow's generation more democratic and critically aware, Skolverket has given clear instructions of including discussions related to controversial issues in classroom teachings. The thesis has both teachers' and students' perspectives of how conscious they are about using this tool. Inclusion of controversial issues in teaching democracy has many advantages. But what about limitations?

Controversial issues have in common that they can lead to disagreement, strong feelings, and opinions. Politics, religion, different traditions, racism, honour killing, sexuality, discrimination, violent extremism, and equality are some examples of controversial issues mentioned by Skolverket (2022).

Our study aims to understand how democracy can be taught to students using controversial issues and if Swedish school teachers are equipped to do this. We have used a number of previous studies and some unstructured interviews with both students and teachers to compare and investigate the expected outcomes and the ground realities.

It can be said that Swedish students, to a certain extent, are aware about the importance of democracy in today's world and that their voices, especially when it comes to controversial issues plays a crucial role. However more research needs to be done to see how every subject teacher can include teaching of 'controversial issues', which are inseparable part of human lives, and which promotes critical thinking an aspect much needed for an all-round development of students.

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## Introduction

What is right and what is wrong? Whose side of the story shall we listen to? How to deal with opinions that are contradictory to the democratic goals of the Swedish school? Are discussions about controversial issues helping students in becoming democratic citizens?

Awareness among young people, about what democracy is and how it is practised, is crucial for Swedish society and the development of our country and the whole world. Sweden, which has been a democracy for a long time needs to lead by example.

It stands in the Swedish constitution that we shall have free and fair elections; you are allowed to love whoever you want to love, and you are free to join any organisation or association you would like to (Rikstagen, Fira demokratin, 2022). The freedom to live your life the way you want as long as you don't hurt other people is fundamental for Swedish society.

In the thesis we are discussing an English translation of the Swedish Curriculum that was published in 2013 by Skolverket, the Swedish National Agency for Education. It has the same content as in the Swedish version i.e., Läroplan (Gyll) för gymnasieskolan. We are referring to it as curriculum or the Swedish curriculum.

In the Swedish curriculum for the upper secondary school, the first sentence says: "The national school system is based on democratic foundations." Further down in the same paragraph: "Education should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based (Skolverket, 2013)."

And on the next page in the curriculum under the headline: Rights and obligations

It is not in itself sufficient that education imparts knowledge of fundamental democratic values. It must also be carried out using democratic working methods and develop the students' ability and willingness to take personal responsibility and participate actively in societal life. Opportunities for students to exercise influence over their education and take responsibility for their studies requires that the school clarifies the goals of education, its contents and working forms, as well as the rights and obligations that students have (Skolverket, 2013).

One goal after attending school for 13 years is to understand how democratic decision-making is performed and actioned. Another goal is to respect the intrinsic value and integrity of other people (Skolverket, 2013).

Reading the Swedish curriculum (2013), we understand that the Swedish government has high expectations regarding what the school, its teachers, other staff, and all students should be able to achieve.

- How does this match our reality?
- Are the goals about democracy, equality and understanding of human rights carried out?

Before we go further ahead, we would like to explain what controversial issues can be. Is there a definition of controversial issues? The answer to this question is that it depends on. It depends on where in the world you are. What's happening in the world around you. Which group you identify yourself with. It depends on the time-period you live in.

Larsson and Lindström (2020) writes that there is no general accepted definition of controversial issue in the research literature. Many have though tried to define controversial issues for example Council of Europe (2016 p.7) writes about it as: "issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society". In the online version of the Cambridge Dictionary (2022) they define controversial as "causing disagreement or discussion". In the book *Teaching Controversial Issues* (Stradling, Noctor & Baines, 1984 p.2) they define the term controversial issue as "for those problems and disputes which may divide society and for which significant groups within the society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values. Such disputes may be about:

- What has happened
- The causes of the present situation
- The desirable end to a work towards
- The appropriate course of action to be taken
- The likely effect of that action."

Some controversial issues may involve all the things stated above.

Skolverket (2022) writes on its website that what is considered as controversial depends on the situation and experiences. Controversial issues have in common that they can lead to disagreement, strong feelings, and opinions. Politics, religion, different traditions, racism, honour killing, sexuality, discrimination, violent extremism, and equality are some examples of controversial issues mentioned by Skolverket (2022).

In classrooms students from different backgrounds and experiences meet each other. What is controversial and hard to discuss in one classroom may not be difficult in another. Every controversial issue has a dimension of uncertainty, which means that there is not a simple formula to follow by gaining more knowledge. Both teachers and students need to learn how to discuss and argue so that it leads to the development of one's own point of view in a way to deepen one's understanding and arguments. (Flensner, Larsson & Säljö, 2021)

We are both interested in democracy and in the beginning of this course it was our interest in democracy that brought us together. One of our teachers matched us thanks to that we both has expressed a similar potential research topics in a form that all students in our course filled in.

After the first meeting we started expanding our research ideas. Some ideas that we discussed were: What are democratic teaching styles in the classroom? Do teachers have enough knowledge of human rights? How are schools planning to include the new subject sexuality, consent, and relationship in the current subjects? Are teachers aware of how they include human rights in the classroom?

When we formulated our research questions in the beginning of this project it became clear that we were not interested in measuring anything as in how often or how many times something has happened in upper secondary education. We were interested in listening to students' and teachers' experiences regarding democracy in school, both how it's practised and taught.

There were personal experiences of a poorly handled discussion about equality during our work-based learning (also known as VFU in Swedish) that opened our eyes. We noticed how it could grow into big problems if not dealt with by the school.

If there is a controversial issue that is not dealt with it can grow into a long-term problem. Students will continue to talk about the problem after the class, students can be bullied and harassed online, the relationship between teachers and students can be hurt, and it can be difficult to bring up other controversial issues in the classroom in the future.

Everyone from the National Agency for Education, the European Council to the United Nations speaks about democracy and its necessity for the prosperity of life in this beautiful world. But how do we intend to achieve this when on one side we are forced to go through the greedy political motives of some powerful leaders and on the other side we are bound to uncertainties like pandemics or other man-made crises.

Our research topic is inspired by the philosophies of Martha Nussbaum<sup>1</sup> and Gert Biesta<sup>2</sup> in which they discuss the importance of democracy in education. Nussbaum (2010) puts forward that teaching democracy, which preferably is done through arts and humanities faculties, is not given priority. Democracy needs global citizens and not just useful machines who cannot rationalise, neither for themselves nor for others.

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum is an American philosopher and the current Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> Gert Biesta is a Professor of Public Education in the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, Maynooth University, Ireland, and Professor of Educational Theory and Pedagogy & deputy head of the Institute for Education, Teaching and Leadership at the Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, UK. <https://www.gertbiesta.com>

## Research questions

The study aims to investigate how democracy is experienced and learned by students aged 15-19 attending upper secondary school in Sweden. We also listened to teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding democracy.

By democracy we mean, how students are taught about both political and social democracy and how it's practised in their school and in the classroom.

Political democracy means the democracy related to a nation's politics like rights of voting, how a country is democratically run, different political parties functioning in that nation their agendas and various other things including world political history like which king ruled which nation and the duration of dynasty and so on. On the other hand, social democracy is about knowing/learning 'how to act responsibly as a democratic social being'. It also means to be aware of different types of social values or norms and respecting them (Riksdagen, 2022).

Council of Europe works as an agent to strengthen our democracy in Europe. In their training pack about controversial issues, they say:

“Learning how to engage in dialogue with people whose values are different from one's own and to respect them is central to the democratic process and essential for the protection and strengthening of democracy and for fostering a culture of human rights (Council of Europe, 2016 p7).”

When learning democracy in school one important aspect is to learn how to approach and discuss controversial issues. It's about having a 'learning by doing' approach to learning. In the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2013) it says that “students should have the ability to critically examine and assess what they see, hear and read in order to be able to discuss and take a view on different issues concerning life and values”.

Therefore, we seek to explore the following research questions:

- How are students learning about democracy in relation to controversial issues?
- How are students and teachers handling controversial issues in and outside the classroom?

Education is that process by which thought is opened out of the soul, and associated with outward things, is reflected upon itself, and thus made conscious of their reality and shape. Bronson Alcott, Massachusetts educator, c. 1850. Nussbaum (2010)

## Previous research

Previous research discusses controversial issues, democracy and how these are related to education in numerous ways.

### Classroom atmosphere and democracy

On the other hand, you don't want to make it too easy to not speak up because it might silence you forever. You know you might think of yourself as someone who doesn't speak up, and if that's confirmed by the teacher saying, oh yeah, you don't have to.

**Ingela, teacher**

In the publication, *Participation in the classroom* (2016) by Skolverket, The Swedish National Agency for Education, they suggest that a classroom environment that is tolerant and permissive, helps students in making their voice heard. If the class has an open environment where all opinions are allowed to be discussed and where the students have time to reflect on issues it will have a huge impact on the development of the student's own democratic skills.

A big part of the time when students and teachers can practice democracy takes place in the classroom. One way democracy can be seen in the classroom is by participating in the process of how to learn about a new subject and how the examination should look like. It can also be in the form of having respectful dialogue about complex and controversial issues. There are plenty of ways to practice democracy in the classroom (Skolverket, 2016).

### What are controversial issues?

According to Larsson and Lindström (2020) no general definition is stated about controversial issues in research literature, but it contains emotional, cognitive, and evaluative elements. In the sphere of education, controversial issues are dealt with as per the fundamental aim of a particular subject or general education.

For example, the emotional perspective of controversial issues: if the principal aim of education is to provide a safe learning environment to students, then they are not exposed to threatening content. Whereas in a cognitive perspective of controversial issues, students are given chances to develop critical thinking and make rational arguments. Disagreements are not necessarily involved. Rationally competing theories about an 'issue' decides if it is controversial or not. Controversial issues cannot be generalised on larger scales as they tend to have different meanings depending upon the societal values and norms. For instance, teaching 'religion' in a secular background raises criticism against such a type of education (Larsson & Lindström, 2020).

However, according to a Swedish teacher as pointed out in Larsson and Lindström (2020) this helps students in developing a deeper understanding of themselves and others in a multicultural



society. The researchers continue to explain Beutelsbach consensus<sup>3</sup>. “It consists of three general principles, which can be summarised as follows:

“(a) it is not permitted to overwhelm the students or prevent them from forming their own opinions, (b) controversial issues must be taught as controversial, and (c) it is important to recognise the students’ personal interests (Larsson and Lindström, 2020, p.4).”

Controversial issues can further be divided into internal and external. Internal controversial issues are those issues which a person is dealing with within oneself, whereas external controversial issues are those which humans deal with at societal levels.

However, controversial issues like racism and discrimination are not dealt with in classroom discussions because "there are no rational ways of justifying these practices." An issue is controversial because some speak for it, and some speak against it. Racism or discrimination is not considered as controversial in that way (Larsson and Lindström, 2020).

In a podcast about democracy, Demokratiresan (2020), we came across an episode where they spoke about a training pack that was developed by the Council of Europe. We searched for the training document and found it online. The pack is designed to support and promote teaching of controversial issues in schools (Council of Europe, 2016).

Several horrible incidents like the 2011 London riots, the 2011 Norway attacks by Anders Behring Breivik who killed 77 people and the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris 2015 are the background to why this development programme for teachers is needed now. These incidents have prompted Council of Europe to review how schools address controversial issues.

There is a growing consensus that democratic citizenship, respect for human rights and intercultural understanding are learned more effectively through “doing” rather than “knowing”, in the sense of just accumulating facts. As a result, curricula for democratic citizenship and human rights education across Europe have been opened up to new, unpredictable, and controversial types of teaching content (Council of Europe, 2016, p7).

In the training pack one can read about previous studies and how the topic is taught in different countries. How a topic is approached depends on the context and a regions history.

They promote the idea of creating a safe space in the classroom. A space where one can explore new topics and issues that affects one.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 The Beutelsbach Consensus constitutes a kind of minimum standard of civic (Politische Bildung) and religious education (Religionsunterricht) in Germany. It was developed in the frame of a conference at a small town called Beutelsbach to reanimate the exchange of different didactic schools after a period of deep conflicts. The Beutelsbach Consensus remains of high importance today.

The challenges of teaching controversial issues come under five broad headings.

- a. Teaching style
  - b. Protecting student sensitivities
  - c. Classroom climate and control
  - d. Lack of expert knowledge
  - e. Dealing with spontaneous questions and remarks
- (Council of Europe, 2016, p.16).

### **Teaching about Human Rights is a part of teaching democracy**

Isenström (2020) explains how teachers' perspective plays an important role in shaping awareness about human rights among students. According to her, different rationalities adopted by teachers have long term effects:

- 1) If children (young) are considered incompetent, teaching and learning about human rights is restricted.
- 2) If children are considered mature and makers of their own future, teaching & learning about human rights is already promoted.

Isenström (2020) continues to say that teaching and learning of human rights occurs simultaneously with the regular curricula. Rights-teaching<sup>4</sup> mentalities promote rights-learning, rights conscious attitudes and behaviour. It also enhances self-conception as a rights-holder. If teachers are aware and have rights-teaching mentality and techniques, it will enhance rights-subject position (privileged rights).

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<sup>4</sup> Rights-teaching mentalities can be explained as teachers' willingness to teach about Human Rights. In such a case where teachers are willing to teach about Human Rights, they will develop a mentality that supports Rights teaching and learning attitudes or mentalities according to Isenström (2020).

## **Teaching about democracy and discussion of controversial issues goes hand in hand**

According to Carla Marschall, Director of Teaching and Learning, United World College South East Asia, a classroom can be characterized as democratic if it showcases the following:

High-trust relationships and shared power between teachers and students, high degree of student voice and agency, respect for children's ideas and contributions, Intentional sharing of diverse perspectives, including those about challenging issues, Use of dialogue and group decision-making, often through protocols, Development of the whole self, including students' critical consciousness (Carla Marschall, 2021).

Edda Sant, a Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, points out that equality is promoted by creating safer environments for the discussions of controversial issues and teaching students about respecting each other, irrespective of other's views, both in and outside of classrooms (Sant, 2019).

## **Theoretical framework**

In the beginning of the research project, we read many articles and wanted to find out about previous research in democracy in education. Our work and research ideas are inspired by the philosophies of Gert Biesta and Martha Nussbaum, and we have chosen to use them as our theoretical framework.

Gert Biesta (2004) discusses democracy for education and starts out saying that ever since the start of the polis in Athens, intellectual thinkers have been concerned about what kind of education is best to prepare people for participation in their society: *demos* meaning people and *kratos* meaning ruling.

In Sweden and in many other Western democratic societies the history of public education can be seen as a way of creating democratic citizens while they climb up the educational ladder. Education is seen as a public good and belongs to everyone, education is not seen as a private matter.

How you take on democracy in education depends on where you are in your democratic development. Young and emergent democracies see education as an important factor to develop a democratic society. Old and established democratic countries often call on the risk that young people will forget how important it is to keep our current democracy. For instance, in England, they introduced compulsory citizenship education in secondary schools in 2001 (Biesta, 2004).

Another reason why many countries are concerned about the relationship between education and democracy is the increasing privatisation of many schools. It can mean that the government lose the democratic control in the society ((see e.g., Apple 1993, 2002, for the USA; Englund 1994, for Sweden) Biesta, 2004).

Biesta, (2004), argues that we shall see democracy as an educational problem. By doing that it helps us to get away from the common way of understanding the role of education, as in when education is mostly seen as a tool that helps us achieve democracy. And then if we fail to bring about democracy, we can always blame our educational system and our teachers.

To interpret democracy as an educational problem can also promote a more realistic way about what education can do for our democracy, and what it won't be able to do. It will also raise important questions about the current quality of the democratic education and our educational understanding of democracy. How good is the quality of democratic life and democratic culture within and outside our schools? (Biesta, 2004)

### **Education for democracy or through democracy**

It's common to think that the most important role of school is to prepare our children and 'newcomers' for their future so they all can participate in our democratic society. This could mean that the students get an understanding about how our society works and how it's built on democratic values (Biesta, 2004).

Another way to teach democracy is to do it through democracy in the school. Students learn from the situations they go through and what happens in their daily life.

Biesta (2004) quotes Apple and Beane (1995 p.103) where they write about the everyday realities that educators give attention to in school: “These stories remind us that the most powerful meaning of democracy is formed not in glossy political rhetoric, but in the details of everyday lives.”

Biesta’s conclusion (2004) of his research is that it is an illusion to believe that our school can produce democratic citizens. Who we become, is more complex and depends on how we as citizens are able to act in school and in our society.

Schools can’t through education itself save our democracy. They can only support our common society where you as an individual are allowed to act and participate in the world, you live in (Biesta, 2004).

### **Why democracy in education**

Nussbaum argues that it is through the inclusion of faculties like humanities and arts in education that we as educators or policy makers can bring democracy in education. Moreover, it is important to consider the emergency of teaching democracy so that it can shape tomorrow’s democratic world. One way of developing democratic conscious mind which Nussbaum emphasises is by teaching students about “critical thinking, imaginative skills, and empathetic understanding (Nussbaum, 2010).”

What does a youth have to say about the profit-making system of education? How are we preparing them to face the harsh realities of today’s world? It can certainly not be without the sense of having a democratically awakened mind. And only such a person who has an ability of self-criticism, who understands and takes steps for the betterment of one and all is a democratic and global citizen (Nussbaum, 2009).

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.

—Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 (Nussbaum, 2010)

## **Method**

Time runs extremely fast when you only have about ten weeks to finish a bachelor thesis. Suddenly it was Easter holiday in Sweden, and we hesitated whether we would be able to find any students or teachers to talk to during that week.

We wanted to avoid interviewing students who we knew already. By chance we went for a walk next to a shopping centre and started looking for young people who could fit into the age group between 15-19 years old. It turned out to be our lucky day. We found three interviewees that day. The next day we had the same approach and found three more students aged 18-19 to interview.

The students were conveniently available to participate in our study, so we used a convenience sampling method. The convenience sampling will limit the generalisability of our research, but we are not seeking for generalisable pattern as we would in a quantitative study. Our research is making connections to previous research and theory and that will make it applicable and helpful to use for a wider audience. (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

### **The conduct of interviews**

The first two interviews took place in a coffee shop. The students were relaxed and were not in a hurry. We sat down and told them about us, what we were studying and the purpose of our research project. All participants signed a consent form. The interviews were recorded.

We had prepared some questions that we had in mind before we started the semi-structured interviews. Then we asked our informants to explain and expand upon certain topics. We asked questions about how democracy is taught, practised and how the students feel that they can participate and influence their education. See appendix for some examples of questions.

During our work-based learning (WBL), in Swedish VFU, we got many wonderful chances to observe and teach students and through which we had a rough idea about students' knowledge of democracy. So, while we were planning for interviews, we were also reflecting on our own experiences related to such issues in our respective schools. In addition, WBL helped us in exploring the idea of democracy in education in much detail.

### **The empirical material**

Our empirical material consists of nine interviews. Six interviews with students and three with teachers. In two of the interviews with students there were two interviewees participating. We have changed the name of all participants.

## **Students**

Anna, 16

A woman who goes to a smaller Vocational high school, an education that focuses on learning practical skills. 1<sup>st</sup> year student.

Bianca 18 and Emelie 17

During the second interview we spoke to two women who attend a traditional educational program, Natural science program, at a kind of boarding school. 2<sup>nd</sup> year student.

Carl, 18 and Johan, 18

The third interview was with two male students who were about to graduate from the social science program in one and a half months. 3<sup>rd</sup> year.

Daniel, 18.

We met our sixth interviewee at a coffee shop and sat down next to him. He was about to graduate from the Economics programme. 3<sup>rd</sup> year.

We had an interest in listening to stories from people with an immigrant background to learn what they thought about democracy in school. We have both been studying and living in other countries and know how it feels to be a newcomer. Neha, who is from India, has lived in Sweden for three years and Sofie has lived and worked in the UK. By asking an acquaintance with a large network we got in contact with two students from Syria who both have lived in Sweden for less than five years.

Ezaz, 19

Our fifth interview was with a male student who had lived in Sweden for three years. During his first years in Sweden, he went to upper secondary school, and is now studying Natural science program at Komvux (upper secondary school for adults).

Fariza, 18

The last student interview was with a woman who had lived in Sweden for five years. She studies the Aesthetic program. 2<sup>nd</sup> year.

To find eight students to talk to, was the easy part of the research. It was much trickier to find teachers to interview. Many schools don't have the names of the teachers on their websites. We were contemplating if we should email some headmasters and ask them to ask their teachers if they would like to be interviewed.

One of the limitations to our study was time. It would endanger our research to depend upon headmasters asking teachers if they would like to participate and then asking them to get back to us.

We also posted a request for interviewees in a large Facebook group for teachers. We got zero interaction from that and after two days the administrator of the group deleted our post. The group didn't allow students to ask teachers to participate in research for thesis projects. An observation we made was that many Facebook groups for teachers have a rule that they don't allow students to ask for help with research.

In the end we used our own network. We asked people we know well if they could recommend any teachers who teach in upper secondary school. Fortunately, they did.

## **Teachers**

Gustav

The first teacher we interviewed had taught for many years in different regions and schools. He had a lot of experience and it felt as if we got insight into at least five different schools and how they approached democracy when talking to him.

Hugo

The second teacher, also male, had worked for over 15 years at the same school.

Ingela

Our third interview was with a female teacher who had worked at the same school for 17 years.

Two of the teacher interviews were conducted at the schools and one was online using Google Meet. During the online interview one of us had a cold and we thought it was better to do the third interview online instead of postponing it for another week.

Before the interviews with the teachers, we prepared ourselves by reading through parts of the training pack that's been published by the Council of Europe (20). It gave us an overall idea of particular problems that teachers potentially can have.

After these interviews we had enough material to go through and analyse. Our research is a phenomenological study that explores our interviewees experiences. (Denscombe, 2021) This led us into using Braun and Clarke (2019) article about thematic analysis and their approach getting know our data and how to structure it.

After the interviews we used a transcription software to help us write out the interviews and then we sat and corrected the automated text. All interviews took between 20-60 minutes.

We wanted to get to know the data better and we both listened and read the interviews again. Then the next step was to find patterns in the interviews. Victoria Clarke (2022) shares how to use thematic analysis on her YouTube-channel and there we got the idea of using imaginative buckets for our data.



Each theme got their own little bucket. Some of the themes that emerges from interviewing students were, avoiding sensitive topics, human rights in education, the need for teacher to be neutral, controversial issues, student participation, student council and what motivates students.

Themes that emerged after the teacher interviews were, how students can influence their school environment, student councils, how to prepare for a controversial topic/issue, respect for others, time and stress and council schools versus private schools.

We printed our data organised into themes. We put all papers on the floor and started to read and pick out the quotes we thought would help us to use to share our research and create a narrative.

After discussing the themes that emerged, we chose to focus on controversial issues in our empirical research. The data we have gathered would be enough to publish a longer thesis, but we have limited the data we share here to be able to finish the study before the summer.

We have translated the quotes ourselves that are used in the empirical analysis.

## **Interviews and empirical analysis**

Before we started the interviews, we told our interviewees the importance for us to listen to their stories. By listening, our aim was to get a clearer picture of what students think of their education in what democracy is and how it is practised in their school. In this summary of our findings, we will bring you their perspective of democracy in school.

When we talked to students and asked them what democracy means to them, they immediately relate it to the outer world (present and past both). Students relate democracy as an outer factor associated with history or current political affairs. It is interesting to know that students understand the importance of democracy and that the failure of which can have negative consequences. At individual levels they relate democracy to the way of behaving in a class or in general.

### **Learning by doing**

All students told us that they had been going through what democracy in civics, a multidisciplinary subject which includes content from political science, sociology, and economics. Learning about what democracy is and stands for is part of the Swedish curriculum. When we were going through the interviews there was a theme in our analysis about what students were taught in civics. We have chosen to not focus on that in our analysis.

### **Controversial issues – discussions in action**

Our first interviewee said:

We have a very feministic person in our class, she is my best friend. Every time that a person, especially a guy, says something that she doesn't like she will express her opinions in a strict way. She really says against him...she says great things that not even I understand actually... Lots of feminism, a lot of talk about it and equality too.

**Anna,16**

Every time they start an argument about feminism in their class there is a chance for learning about human rights and democracy. What does gender equality mean? What does solidarity between people mean? Who has right to what?

We asked Anna if she thinks the male classmate is pro human rights and if everyone has the rights. Her reply: "No... no, I think he thinks that men have more rights to some things, as in the past when women had no rights. Yes, and so on, [he] still believes in that." How the teacher and other adults reacts in these situations are mini statements about how they and the school view human right and democracy.

There is a need to remind everyone what human rights are about and what they stand for on a regular basis. The Education Act says that school should “influence and stimulate students to embrace our fundamental democratic values”. (Skolverket, 2013)

Biesta (2014) points out that it is in the details of everyday life that the most powerful meaning of democracy is formed. Every situation, event and discussion can shape our understanding of democracy and how it practiced.

Anna says that she doesn't understand all her friend's arguments, it can mean that her friend has developed a deep knowledge about feminism. In a situation like this the mentor of the class and other teachers can set up as a goal to deepen all student's knowledge about equal rights. Then more students in the class will be able to participate in the next debate about feminism or a similar topic and more will learn from the discussion.

Anna used to be a quiet student in her old class before starting upper secondary school. In a new context with new classmates, she dares to speak up. When she talks about this it feels as if she is a ton lighter now, as if her inability to speak up in her old class was a heavy weight on her shoulders leaving her in the shadow of her real self. To create space for everyone to be able to participate in the classroom is hugely important to be able to learn by having controversial issues (Skolverket, 2016)

Whether or not a student dare to speak up and have a conversation about a sensitive issue in their class has a lot to do with the atmosphere in the class. The relationship with the teacher also matters a lot. Daniel said: “If you are confident in the relationship you have to your teacher it's always easier to talk about things.”

When we are talking to Daniel, he expressed himself as someone who always want to create space for everyone to express themselves and have their say. He suggests that you can meet halfway so “everyone will be reasonably happy”. To let everyone talk and have their say is a process. We both know from our own experience in life that democracy takes time. You need to listen, try to understand other perspectives than your own. Nussbaum's theory says that our believes are deeply rooted and it may take more than one effort to get someone to change perspective, or at least listen and try to understand other people's view. Timing can be critical in a discussion about a controversial issue. Something may have happened in the school context or the news that makes people change their mind. Another big factor is time. Do we have enough minutes or hours to talk about the issue now? If not now, shall we postpone the discussion? Or is it easier to just leave it.

## **Respect - a complicated word**

To know how to show respect to others will help students to engage in a democratic dialogue. One of the teachers we spoke to, Gustav, gives an answer which indicates that there is a lot of effort put into learning to show respect for each other.

Everyone that works in school participates in that work and we talk about it [respect] between us, teachers, and management. Everyone that works here has the same approach to students...so they should get that with them at the school, in all subjects, it should spread to everyone. I can't say how it works [everywhere]...I can only share what I do myself. It seems to work. We hardly have any problems with people being mean to each other.

### **Gustav, teacher**

To express yourself and share what you believe in matters for democracy. In the Swedish Curriculum it says that students "should develop their willingness to actively contribute to a deeper democracy in working and societal life and strengthen confidence in their own ability to individually and together". To show each other respect and not being mean or making fun of others will help you to promote democracy. A different way to use the word respect is to demand respect, then there is a risk that you may not deepen our democracy if you tell others that they must respect you and there is little room for negotiation. Ezaz described democracy as in "show respect to others... sort of learning to not cross the line". He points out that you have the right to your own beliefs and that nobody has the right to change you if you don't want to.

Ezaz is relaxed when he tells us his story of how he experienced the Swedish school system. He has had both good and bad experiences. He has lived in Sweden for three years and his goal is to become a medical doctor. One of his experiences that stuck out was when he was held accountable by a fellow student regarding problems with equality between men and women in his home country Syria.

During a lesson the other student asked him out loud with an aggressive tone why women have no rights and have to stay at home in Syria. Ezaz is new in Sweden and there is an interpreter who translate what the other student just said to him. There is a dispute between them. Their teacher tries to calm down the situation, but she can't stop the other student, he keeps arguing. Ezaz tries to answer, but he has no success. He leaves the classroom, and the teacher follows him out in the corridor. Ezaz is upset and says he wants to talk to the headmaster. "You didn't say anything when the other student was screaming at me."

In the end the teacher gets the other student to sit down and apology to Ezaz and Ezaz feels ok with that. The situation made him confused, was this normal or not? Why didn't the teacher do more to solve the situation? If there wouldn't have been for the language barrier, he would have continued the discussion.

This situation shows that the teacher lacked skills in handling the situation, it is an unusual event in a class. But there is always a chance that new sensitive controversial issues will be brought up.

There is always a risk that someone may be hurt if you discuss a controversial issue. Anna tells us that the school act quickly if there is an issue: “No, it uses to heal quickly, and at my school they address the issues as soon as possible. [Teacher says] As in: please can you come into my office for a chat?”

The teachers try to understand what happened as soon as they can. They demonstrate leadership by not leaving a problem to potentially grow bigger or creating a problem in a break.

Gustav one of the teachers shares an experience when he lost control in a class.

Yes, but it's only if anyone offends someone else. Otherwise, we discuss all kinds of sensitive topics. It's an advantage if we have discussions and that we all don't think alike...I've been a teacher for 15 years and it's really only happened once that I had to stop a lesson and go to the headmaster and say, this doesn't work. It happened because there were things coming up and there was not a good classroom environment and we had to take action in that group. But it's the only time in 15 years. We used to be able to discuss respectfully. What we did was to divide the group into two smaller and one adult in each group. In class they were screaming, and it was messy and not good. With 15 students and one teacher it got calmer, and we had a good environment again.

**Gustav, teacher**

To have a process in place help you when there is an urgent problem in a class. In Gustav's example they quickly made sure that they could continue the discussion. To keep tolerant and non-judgmental atmosphere helps when you are in a discussion, and more students dare to make their voice heard (Skolverket, 2016).

To strengthen your confidence and be able to speak up for yourself and influence others are key skills in the work to deepen our democracy. One way of doing that is to share your thoughts and concerns with others and to say stop or no to something that may hurt you.

### **What happens when you talk about a sensitive topic?**

Well, in class? I would say it depends on. Of course, some are immature and laugh a bit and they may not know how to behave. Then there are others who actively ask questions and want to know more to gain a better understanding, and then there are others that are offended then they will probably tell the teacher, or at least then do in my class. – This subject is very sensitive for me. Can you please talk about it in this way instead? In my class there are mostly women and women's rights are for example [a sensitive topic].

**Daniel, 18**

Here is an example of a student sharing a concern. How that is received by the teacher will influence her or his confidence. If the teacher's listen and show that they understand the student's concern then they are more likely to speak up again, and maybe not only for themselves, but also for other people's interest. To be able to care and show empathy for others who may not be able to speak up matters to all of us, and that is one thing that there always will be a need to do.

Nobody dares to start a hectic debate because a teacher says this or that, well, you don't dig that deep into the topics, but you get more of a general understanding, and you let each other talk and so. It's very respectful, you let everyone speak.

**Carl, 18**

When talking to Carl it seems to us as if his school and class have found a way of working in a respectful way. He says: "all students know this is a lesson... education and we know that the teachers are there to teach us and all teachers are great." They have a framework in place and know that there are informal rules that they are expected to adhere to. When we talk to Carl he has only a few months left of upper secondary school, he knows the etiquette and that you don't go outside the invisible protocol when it comes discussions in the classroom. It makes us wonder if this respectful behavior was there from the beginning? If we would have met him two years ago when they were about to finish their first year, would he have said the same thing then? From my (Sofie) personal experience I've seen many students in a first-year class argue about controversial issues, and the debate continues online and on and off for a few weeks. From my experience it's likely that there are more respectful conversations among third year students.

### **Preparing for a controversial issue**

When we talked to Fariza, she told us about a recent lecture with an invited speaker. To prepare the students for the lesson they have watched the news and studied the Holocaust.

We have actually had a lecture about the Nazi and what was happening in Germany and how we can link it to Ukraine, and we all spoke freely. We also had a man whose father was in the Second World War, so he told us about that his brother died and was killed by the Nazis only because they were Jewish. So, we talk freely and especially with the teacher we have. You can always say I'm sorry and apologise even if some agree and some don't, particularly in subjects like history, religion you have quite a lot of space to talk. And we had watched the news and read about the Holocaust before we had the lecture.

**Fariza, 18**

In this way the students get a deeper understanding of the current situation, and a personal story makes it easier to remember and learn about the topic. Fariza says that you can always apologise and say I'm sorry. It indicates that you can think out loud without feeling as if you are going to be punished. By testing their arguments and thoughts the students are learning to see the

perspective of different sides of the problem and they are learning about their norms and values through discussing a sensitive topic. According to the Swedish Curriculum (Skolverket, 2013) the teacher should “openly discuss and together with the students analyse different values, views and problems, and the consequences of these.” This example shares how to prepare and educate a class to better understand a big and complex issue.

It is on our duty to be versatile and objective... but at the same time extreme opinions as in, we as a school are against antisemitism, racism or, yes, things like these, we are obviously against them, so not so versatile. It's not as if we are trying to figure out 100 good things with Nazism.

**Gustav, teacher**

I and my colleagues and the whole system have it in our backbone. We breath democracy more or less... Even if we don't actively work with democracy we know, we know how to position ourselves next to democracy. There is a distinct concept regarding how it [democracy] shall be practiced.

**Hugo, teacher**

Both Gustav and Hugo have both worked as teachers for over 15 years and they just know within themselves how it works. Both probably have a lot of unspoken knowledge about democracy.

Ingela said that she was not afraid of losing the job in regard to dealing with controversial issues, but instead for students "how a topic can negatively affect classroom atmosphere and or create tensions among students." What can we say about teaching and practising democracy when a teacher herself is afraid of doing something in a school?

### **How is democracy practised in school?**

Democracy is carried out in school, but not in the best way and it depends on which teacher, which class, which students... Maybe some teachers want to focus that we shall listen to both female and male voices and that everyone should have their say... and some may not think that it is important at all. So, it depends on...

**Fariza, 18**

In the Swedish Education Act that is clear children and students should be able to have some influence over their education. (Skollagen 4 kap, 9§)

But after listening to students, we hear that there is not that many areas they can influence. The schools have some kind of student council, and they can be part of the group that plan the lunch menu and how you should look after the school building, as in cleaning and where you hang out. But no students tell us about how they are invited to influence how their education is planned and executed. Maybe it's because they don't know how to do it. Or the teachers may think that it enough for the students to be able to move an assignment from one week to another if they have too many submissions to complete. “If we have two submissions on Monday and

Friday and if there is a third deadline on Friday, we can ask the teacher if we can move it to the next week.”, Carl, 18.

### **Classrooms are democratic fields**

Although students understand the way of behaving in a class via respecting each other, listening to each other etc, there is an absence or lack of consciousness about democracy at micro level in their school.

The idea that teachers have to include democracy as a part of their regular teaching, no matter what the subject is, is not communicated to students. However, it is practised throughout Swedish schools via different ways of conducting daily school life for e.g., student influence in deciding over their learning goals or through electing student representatives etc.

If we talk about subject specific possibilities of teaching democracy, then languages play an important role along with Civics. Teachers have greater chances of involving students in understanding the deeper meaning of democracy and developing critical thinking about it. This is exactly what Nussbaum (2009) refers to in her article “Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities” that when students start thinking about what’s happening in and around their society in other words students starts developing metacognitive skills and hence develop empathy and which in turn helps students in becoming more democratically conscious citizens.

To be able to connect to other’s stories (many times of suppression or injustice) also motivates them to think about possible solutions. Taking up global issues like racism or suppression of human rights, for instance Ingela mentioned they used Malala’s speeches in her class.

Ingela says that it helps to make the students reflect: “On their own lives and their own role and talk about their own experiences.” Discussing controversial issues actually allows the students to see or experience how they as an individual differ from others. And here comes the crucial role played by teachers. Teachers have to make sure that students learn to express their views confidently and without fear and create or identify oneself and on the other hand also understand the meaning of or experience a sense of belongingness (to a group or country or culture etc).

Other part is to make students understand how to express themselves without getting into conflict or hurting others. Whereas also learn to respect the difference of opinion or those who disagree. Gentle reminders may be set to inculcate the habit of listening, waiting for one’s turn and respecting others and their ideas. Ingela said: “words are discriminating too”. Teachers' part doesn’t end with a successful conduction of discussion but continues thereafter with the emphasis of agreement of not arriving at a conclusion. It’s not like every discussion ends without a clear right answer but there’s no compulsion either.



## Discussion

We found that teachers and students do discuss controversial issues in upper secondary school. However, it's not done in a conscious way.

Despite that it's mostly in civics that you are discussing controversial issues, democracy and human rights, teachers in all subjects can involve controversial issues in their subjects.

Some teachers are actively including teaching and discussions of controversial issues, for instance did Fariza's teacher include the current Ukraine invasion which helps students to develop critical thinking about society and what's happening in and around the world.

The debates about controversial issues in the news and social media are intense and it can be difficult to understand the different perspectives. Looking at the news landscape there is no sign it's going to be less news and debates. To be able to be critical about an issue is important for us to be able to keep, strengthen and deepen our democracy. Biesta (2004) argues that we need to keep a high quality of democratic life and democratic culture to be able to keep living in a working democracy.

To discuss controversial issues is a way to develop your democratic skills and awareness. It would be useful for students to do this with an awareness in mind that they do this with the intention of learning how to get a deeper understanding of democracy.

Having discussions about controversial issues will help students to become more critically thoughtful and critical about societal norms.

Teachers are encouraged by the Education Act (Skollagen, 2010) and other policy documents such as the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2013) to invite the students to discuss controversial issues in the classroom. There are plenty of controversial issues that you can bring up in school.

If the issues are brought up or not depends on many factors such as traditions and culture of the school as well as the individual teacher. If you search for "kontroversiella frågor" at Skolverkets website you are suggested to look at eleven different pages about the topic. So Skolverket is encouraging teachers and school leaders to bring in more controversial issues. One of the web pages with general content about how you can get support developing the democratic assignment says that "the dialogue often plays an important role and that it's crucial that teachers don't avoid teaching about controversial issues (Skolverket, 2022)."

In the end of the webpage, it says that the headmaster, among one million other things, should follow up and check if the teachers have appropriate training and knowledge to handle a sensitive and controversial discussion. If not, the headmaster should offer training to the staff that's in need of that.

It's of great importance that there is a holistic view of and strategy for the work that matters for the Swedish school's democracy assignment. Otherwise, there is a risk that the education is unequal and that it is up to each teacher to include controversial issues or not. The execution of the democracy assignment can be affected by lack of competence and lack of common understanding (Skolverket, 2021).

There is a risk that the headmaster may have to prioritise many other tasks at the school, and that the mission of practising democracy by discussing controversial issues is forgotten. Nussbaum (2009) writes about the importance of teaching democracy to maintain peace globally. This goal is applicable to maintain peace locally and between different groups of people as well. It is when we are listening with a purpose to show that we want to understand the argument of the other side that we can continue the discussion.

In an ideal world the Swedish school should be equal for everyone. We shall all learn about democracy and how to discuss a controversial issue in a respectful way. During the beginning of our research we listened to an interview at Skolverkets YouTube-channel (2022) where Peter Fredriksson, Secretary General of Skolverket. He says: "democracy must be brought alive in the school so that students get access to the same conditions" ... "many students see the lack of equivalence themselves". He refers to the problem that schools don't have the same basic conditions, one example he mentions is that many schools employ teachers without any appropriate education. Students know that and know that it is a lie that all students should have access to education on equal terms. Because they don't.

In Sweden many schools have put into a system of employing teachers without a teacher licence, many are not even about to soon finish their teacher education, they may not even have any academic background at all. The school gives the teacher a 6-12-month contract and hopes that it will turn out ok.

Will a non-trained teacher be able to work towards the Swedish Curriculums democracy assignment as proficient as a trained teacher? Will they be able to use controversial issues as a tool to teach democracy? Maybe. Maybe not.

Biesta (2004) writes that it's common to look at school as a tool to achieve democracy, and if we fail to do that we can blame the educational system and its teachers. There are big problems with a non-equal school because it makes it hard to achieve all goals in the Swedish curriculum. There is a quality difference in how democracy is taught in the Swedish school, as the example above shows. Political "nonsense" that is not linked to our reality doesn't matter, but what school staff and teachers do every day does.

In our interviews we found that issues like racism and discriminations are taught as a part of controversial issues so that students may develop empathy for sufferers and hence refrain oneself from such evil practices. One of the teachers we interviewed stated that they follow

Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2013) for teaching in the classes (as discussed earlier it is stated clearly in the Swedish curriculum that democracy should be taught) and so teachers take up subjects like current affairs and through which controversial issues are also discussed.

Some teachers have a greater chance of discussing controversial issues in her/his class but all teachers irrespective of their subjects should try to help students in developing their thoughts about the world and promote critical thinking. Nussbaum (2010) argues that we should include subjects like humanities and arts to bring in more democracy in education. Yes, we agree with that. Ingela mentioned that she uses different books and speeches with a focus on democracy when she teaches English. All subjects can include controversial issues in education. There are controversies and debates in most topics, and it can help make the topic more interesting. There is also the benefit of blending controversial issues as one more educational and learning strategy.

Hugo, one of the teachers, said that they try to discuss everything possible which is relevant for students' school or social life. And that it is possible that an individual or a group has faced discrimination. Hence, they do talk about this. These issues, racism and discrimination are visibly present in the world, and they need to be highlighted. In Larsson and Lindström, (2020) we read that they didn't define racism and discrimination as possible controversial issues. But we think it's necessary to be more flexible and include the topics you as a teacher think is important to discuss. Another example is regarding vaccines. Covid vaccines were preferably given to the rich countries first. Poor countries remained unvaccinated for a much longer time. So, even though no one speaks in favour of it, discrimination or racism, it is happening.<sup>5</sup>

In the training pack published by the Council of Europe (2016) they point out that one of the potential hinders to discuss controversial issues is that the teacher may lose control over the situation. After our interviews with the students, it seems as if most of them have learned the rules of respecting and listening to others. Anna, first year student, mentioned that they discuss feminism and equality in the class on a regular basis. These discussions could potentially be damaging, they can hurt the relationship and trust that the teacher has built up to the class.

Ingela's fear about heating arguments or escalations of tensions among students also emphasises the urgent need of implementing controversial issues as a part of conscious teaching and learning and preparing teachers with efficient pedagogical tools for taking up such issues in the classrooms without any fear. In fact, we can't stress enough the importance of introducing practising this already from infant education as iterated by the Council of Europe (2016).

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<sup>5</sup> Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna make \$1,000 profit every second while the world's poorest countries remain largely unvaccinated. Did Pfizer, BioNTech & Moderna prioritise their Wuhan virus vaccine supplies to rich countries to make billions in profits? A report has claimed that the companies are making \$1000 per second in profits from their shots. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/pfizer-biontech-and-moderna-making-1000-profit-every-second-while-world-s-poorest>

Controversial issues have many faces: students may behave and express themselves differently in front of different teachers. As well as what is a difficult conversation about a controversial issue in one class may work in another (Flensner, Larsson & Säljö, 2021).

Teachers play an important role and personal relationships matter a lot! Can we then say that discussing controversial issues strengthens democracy?

Yes, we would say that students evolve as human beings as well as global citizens.

### **Development stages when discussing controversial issues**

- 1) Expressing thoughts and ideas  developing language skills.
- 2) Listening to others' view  learning to respect differences and people.
- 3) Developing critical thinking: what's the issue, how it can be tackled and why it needs to be solved...emphasising "for the establishment of democracy".
- 4) Leading to all round development of students.

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## Appendices

### **Student interviews:**

We started all the interviews with some quick questions.

For example: How many people are you in your class?

Then we explained more about our research and why we thought the topic of democracy is interesting.

More specific questions were:

How have you learned about democracy in school?

Have you been discussing any controversial issues in your class?

If yes, how was the discussion?

Have you learned about human rights in any subjects?

Do you have any examples of when you have had a task or assignment that includes any angles of democracy and human rights?

How we continued the interviews depended on the answers we got.

### **Teacher questions:**

How is democracy included in education?

A teacher is not neutral when discussing controversial issues. What's your personal take on that?

Does the school have a guide or policy on how you all should teach democracy?

There is a new curriculum launching 1 July 2022. Are you and your colleagues preparing for that?

One new subject is sexuality, consent, and relationships. Are you involved in how to include that in the subjects you teach?

When students start upper secondary school are they informed of their rights and obligations?

What do you do if there is any kind of trouble in a class? Who shall help you out?

How do you prepare for a lesson that will contain any controversial issues?

Are you ever afraid of bringing up sensitive topics in your classrooms?