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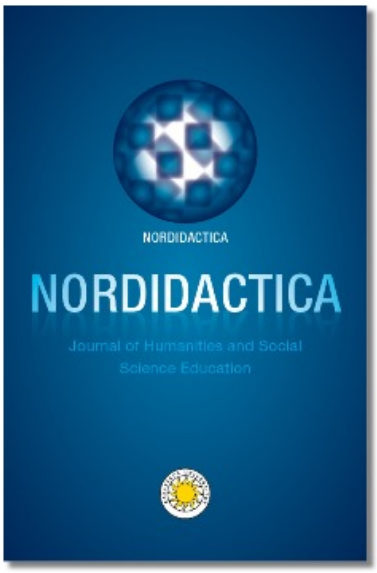

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"Social Issues Open up Social Studies": Upper Secondary Teachers' Conceptions of, and Didactical Reflections upon the Subject

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Abstract: This article identifies and discusses conceptions of the Swedish school subject social studies in upper secondary school through an empirical study consisting of qualitative interviews with seven teachers of social studies. The curriculum declares that teaching social studies shall be done with "social issues as the point of departure". The analysis focuses on the teachers' didactical reflections on the subject specific concept of social issues in relation to their own teaching practice. Conclusions that are made are that the approach of teaching social studies with 'social issues as the point of departure' leads to conceptions of social studies as being a subject that is open to the unexpected and that transcends its borders, and with its purpose seen as its content, or put differently: the 'what' defined through, or as, its 'why'. It seems more relevant to discuss what the social issues, as a didactical concept, do *to the subject rather than what they* are. *The very quest for a certain core in the subject is being challenged. A reflection on these results leads to a discussion on the potential intrinsic value of social issues in teaching social studies.*

KEYWORDS: SOCIAL STUDIES, SOCIAL ISSUES, DIDACTICS, TEACHING, UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Introduction – a point of departure

This article aims to identify and discuss upper secondary school teachers' conceptions of the Swedish school subject social studies by way of the concept *social issues* as reflected upon by teachers. This aim derives from previous didactical research that mainly focused on the content of the subjects, addressing the so-called 'what'-question and/or the very purpose or function of the subject in school, the so-called 'why'-question. In didactical theory of the German tradition, which has had a great impact on subject didactics in Sweden, the question of *how*, that is to say the very practical, concrete teaching, is usually regarded as secondary in relation to the questions of *what*, that is to say the content, and *why*, which denotes the purpose, meaning and role of the subject in school and in society. The article adopts the notion that focus on the 'how'-question, that is to say, on the subject teaching practice – more precisely 'social issues as the point of departure' – will shed new light on the subject content of social studies, the 'what' as well as the 'why', as well as on the relation between them. More concretely the article stresses the very relationship between the meaning of the subject of social studies and the addressing of social issues in the subject teaching practice. Put differently, the article approaches social studies through the "lens" of social issues and the possible didactical inclinations of this lens, found in teachers' descriptions of their teaching practices, in regard to this specific concept. In this way I wish to say something about the character of social studies by way of the concept of social issues, as conceived by and acted upon in teachers' talk about their teaching practice.

The national curriculum for schools in Sweden comprises a general section of guidelines along with separate subject syllabi for each subject. Each course within a subject is described using a list of "core content" and "knowledge requirements[1]" for the assessment. The subject syllabus of social studies states that teaching social studies should be done with *social issues* as a *point of departure*. With such an instruction an interest follows to analyze social issues as a didactical concept. In school students are presented with certain content and from this learn something and in that process develop abilities of various kinds. In the current discourse of education there has been a shift to put the emphasis on the latter phase of this process (see Sundberg 2015; Biesta 2011) – that is to say, the learning outcomes and the way to measure these. Biesta (2011) says that we are living in the "age of measurement". The rhetoric around the present curriculum is manifested in an endeavor of clarity in the steering documents. There is an effort to be more precise as to *what* the students are supposed to learn (Prop. 2008/08:87). The focus for this article is at the other end of the spectrum of the teaching process, namely what is set as the *point of departure* in the teaching of social studies. This approach allows for a discussion about the character of the school subject social studies and the teaching of it. Studying the point of departure is a way to reach an

[1] Both these concepts were new to the 2011 curriculum. In the former curriculum the concept of *core* content did not exist and the word *criteria* was used instead of *knowledge requirements* in relation to assessment.

understanding of the subject as it is perceived and didactically reflected upon by social studies teachers in upper secondary school. Thus, evidently there is *something* that is supposed to be used as a "point of departure" – something that in one way or another differs from the stipulated content of the school subject.

Based on the assumption that teachers make professional judgments and have didactical strategies that can be interpreted and understood to be more than merely didactical techniques, the questions posted in this article deal with these strategies and the conceptions of the subject social studies that emerge when teachers talk about teaching social studies through social issues. By way of these questions the article investigates and deepens the insight of the consequences of the teachers' didactical 'doing', the 'how', and 'what', in terms of conceptions of the subject social studies.

Central questions

Incorporating an interview study with seven teachers of social studies in Swedish upper secondary school, this article aims to identify and discuss teachers' conceptions of the school subject social studies through an analysis of their didactical[2] reflections on the concept *social issues*. For this aim to be achieved the following research questions were asked:

> *What didactical strategies do teachers use when choosing what social issues to use as the point of departure in social studies teaching in upper secondary school?*

> *What conceptions of the subject of social studies emerge through the teachers' descriptions of their teaching where 'social issues as the point of departure' is being taken into account?*

Outline

The article begins with an overview of previous research, first on the conception of the school subject social studies and then more specifically on the ways to understand the role of (social) issues in and for the subject. Next follows a description of the method used for the empirical study that the article is based on. In the section "Social studies through the lens of social issues" the result of the research questions posted above are presented, from which the conclusions from the empirical study are drawn. Finally, these conclusions are discussed in relation to previous research.

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[2] In this article the concept of didactics is to be understood on the basis of the German Didaktik-tradition. In an American context "theory and practice of teaching and learning" would be more appropriate. See Gundhem & Hopmann (1998) for the distinction between the use of 'didaktik' in Central and Northern Europe versus how it is understood in the Anglo-Saxon curriculum-tradition.

Social studies and social issues in previous research

In this section I will describe the characteristics of the subject of social studies as it has been described in previous research. Research in this field has been mainly carried out from two perspectives: a curriculum theory approach and empirically oriented research performed on social studies teachers. In focus in the research drawn upon are the didactical questions of *what* and *why*. I will also draw on research regarding the role of (social) issues in the teaching of social studies.

The background to the Swedish school subject social studies can be found in the after-math of World War II. A government commission from 1946 (SOU 1948) outlines the idea of a new school subject, namely "samhällskunskap" (social studies) its main purpose being to serve as a tool for democracy. Thus, the why-question right from the outset was the focus, leaving the what-question to be yet defined. So, even though the aim of democracy was set out from the start it was still not clear how this school subject was to be constructed. Research has pointed out that democratic education in the Swedish context is broad, covering education *about, for* or *through* democracy (e.g. Hjelmér 2002; Bronäs 2000). In the first case the focus is to learn about the democratic system, in which case the content can be defined beforehand. In the second case the chosen course content needs to enable students to develop the skills necessary for democracy. Finally, the third case not only deals with the content but also expects students who are learning about democracy to *experience* democracy within the classroom. Even though there is general consensus as to the fact that democracy in one way or another is important in and for the subject disputes remain as to what this implies, this connects to the didactical questions of 'why', 'what', 'how' and 'for whom' of the subject of social studies. Another aspect that also relates to a subject-specific tension between content and purpose ties with the variations that come out of different ontological and epistemological subject positions identified in curriculum theory research and in educational philosophy. To mention but one prominent example, different conceptions of the subject social studies derive from essentialism, progressivism and reconstructivism (Englund 1986). This relates to the 'camps' that Evans (2004; 2015) claims have fought to retain control of social studies in the United States. Close at hand is a dichotomy wherein the subject is either traditionally discipline-based or inquiry-/ issues-oriented (Evans 2015, p. 25). Thus, when delving into the why-question and not simply stating "democracy" what can be found is that different ways of legitimizing the subject leads to different ways of viewing its content. Hence, the why- and the what-questions interrelate.

Didactical research on the Swedish school subject social studies has repeatedly shown that it is difficult to identify the core of content (see for example Bjessmo 1990; Bronäs & Selander 2002 and Sandahl 2014). The fact that the subject has become continually richer in content and perspectives (Larsson 2011) has also contributed to the difficulty of identifying specific core content. In his aim toward a subject conception that exists at a level above the specific content that seems diverse and extensive Sandahl (2011) draws on the theory of first- and second-order concepts. He argues that although the content described as first-order concepts could be conceived to be fractured and

diverse the special characteristics of the subject are instead to be found in the second-order concept. This way of describing the subject leans toward a more scientific subject conception (one of the subject conceptions of Englund (1986)) with second-order concepts such as social science perspectives, social science causality, social science evidence, social science inference and social science abstraction. This subject conception emphasizes the "scientific approach" rather than the "answers" found in research. Stressing the scientific base of the subject could also lead to a subject with predefined content based on research.

Research focusing on curriculum analysis usually identifies contradictions, contrasts and alternative interpretations. However, when looking at the didactical research on social studies teachers, there is a slight difference in the findings. One differing feature is that the school subject does not appear vague and fractured to the same extent (see Bernmark Ottosson, 2009, Karlefjärd, 2011 and Odenstad, 2010). Instead, there seems to be a fair amount of consensus among teachers as to the content of the subject. Odenstad (2010) argues that the school subject, since it does not connect to one specific academic subject, has formed its own traditions in terms of content. The fact that the connection between the academic disciplines and the school subject is not as direct as it is for many other subjects is both an argument for a very diverse subject, as previously shown, and at the same time opens the way for a school subject in its own right and with its own "canon". Thus, there is a point in researching the school subject in the context of teachers and schools and not simply through the curriculum or as an extension of the academic disciplines. When Kristiansson (2014) studies the views social studies teachers have on the subject in the context of early school years, he sees a subject that seems to have central components even though the teachers find it difficult to put into words. The teachers in his study view it as a "large, constantly changing subject oriented towards current issues and involving other subjects" (Kristiansson 2014, p. 217), and yet there is consensus as to what is important in terms of content, that being *democracy*, *current issues* and *values* (Kristiansson 2014, p. 219). The difference between the aim of the subject and its content (the why- and the what-question) is not always easy to maintain. Lindmark (2013, p. 56) studies teachers' different subject conceptions of social studies in upper secondary school and shows that these teachers have a tendency to mix content and purpose. In the interviews they commented on the *purpose* when asked to describe the content. Evidently the relationship between the 'why' and the 'what' is a complex one. With democracy as the main purpose of the subject alternative ways of constructing the content follow, and the idea of the purpose of the subject may appear so strong that it is not always possible for the teachers to separate purpose from content.

The specific concept of social issues lies at the fore of the study that this article is based on. One reason for focusing on the concept of social issues as presented in the curriculum and understood by and dealt with by teachers is that there is no such research to be found from recent years. Lars-Erik Bjessmo conducted a study in 1992 after a curriculum reform from 1988, a reform limited to the subject of social studies and a first step toward a new curriculum in 1994. Bjessmo (1992) argues that the concept of social issues represents a new and explicit function in the syllabus of social studies. He shows

that social issues are not only to be seen as content but also as holding the potential to affect the didactical way of planning and implementing the subject. Bjessmo (1992) argues that the concept in its new form in the syllabus indicates a problem-oriented and issues-centered teaching of social studies.

This specific attention to the concept of social issues has since then not been presented in didactical research in Sweden. An argument to take on a similar perspective now is that the syllabus of social studies has kept the phrasing that the content should be studied "with social issues as a point of departure", however the context has changed. A discourse analysis (Morén & Irisdotter Aldenmyr, 2015) of the concept in curricula over time shows that the concept of social issues is downplayed in the current curriculum and does not have the crucial role that Bjessmo pointed out in 1992. Since research has shown that the subject conception found with teachers could differ from what comes out of curriculum analysis, there is a point to conducting the study in line with the design presented. Before this study began 74 teachers completed a questionnaire (see Method). The results of this questionnaire showed that the teachers did not follow the logic drawn up by curriculum theory, stating a dichotomy between issues-centered and content- (discipline-) centered teaching or between teaching that aims to develop ability or teaching that aims to convey certain content (Morén 2016).

The didactical how-question lies embedded in the curriculum instruction that teaching should be conducted with social issues as *the point of departure*. Evans (2015) claims that the different camps mainly answering to the why-question correspond to a greater pendulum that swings between inquiry-based, issues-oriented teaching and teaching with the disciplinary content as the point of departure. In addition, it has been suggested that the how-question in terms of what is used as the point of departure is intimately connected to different approaches to the what-question (Morén & Irisdotter Aldenmyr 2015). Olsson (2016) has shown that "news" is an important part of the subject, but he does not comment specifically on the syllabus concept of 'social issues'. His findings show that the news sometimes forms a separate element and sometimes is integrated with the theme of current studies in the course. It is the latter version that is interesting in terms of this study, when social issues from the news becomes the starting point of the content to study and not a separate endeavor.

Aspects of issues-oriented teaching, when something other than the predefined content is used as the point of departure, has also been dealt with in didactical research on other subjects than social studies. In recent years there has been a growing interest in the importance and potential of issues-oriented teaching in science education, as shown in the research on "socio-scientific issues" (SSI) (e.g. Bossér et al 2015). This research promotes the idea that motivation to study (the natural) sciences will increase if it is connected to social issues that matter. The how-question and the what-question are interrelated. In the field of religious education studies research has discussed the concept of "questions of life" (livsfrågor) as a possible point of departure for the subject, thus affecting the way teachers tackle the didactical questions (Falkevall 2010).

Within social studies research there is an international field focusing on the controversial issues and the circumstances in which these are to be dealt with in school (Totten 2015). In order to teach controversial issues teachers need to be perceptive and

flexible to find the issues that are controversial in the specific context. Diana Hess (2009) argues that social studies has the potential to become an important and interesting subject so long as teachers do not avoid the controversial issues. In the Swedish context research has shown there to be a tradition of consensus when social issues are brought to social studies with a citizenship education perspective. This follows the results derived by Bronäs (2000), who compared school books in Germany and Sweden and found that in Sweden there was a tendency to present society as being freer of conflict and social issues that divide people.

A theoretical perspective of interest for this study – as it has the potential to develop the understanding of the very circumstances behind using social issues as the point of departure – is presented by Biesta (2013) when he elaborates on the "beautiful risk" of education. In connection to his idea that education not only serves the function of socialization and qualification but also subjectification, Biesta argues for the "weakness" of education. In the current discourse on education he claims there is a tendency that policy makers would like to see education as secure and predictable. However, Biesta claims that this would only reduce the complexity and openness of human learning. The weakness is thus the strength of education, and social issues could in this perspective be viewed as a potential for the subject of social studies.

The study that this article is based on addresses the understanding that social studies teachers have of social issues as a didactical concept that is approached through teachers' descriptions of the subject in relation to their teaching of social issues, and more specifically, the instruction to take "social issues as a point of departure". Central concepts for the study are *didactical strategies* and *subject conceptions*. They are two interrelated concepts connected to didactic theory. The strategies are formed based on how the teacher relate to the didactical questions 'why', 'what', 'how', 'for whom', etcetera. The subject conception is understood as an idea of the subject's special characteristics, content and purpose that teachers embrace. The term subject conception is used here in a way similar to the way in which Englund (1986) and Lindmark (2013) use it, as presented above.

Method of the study

The study on which this article draws is based on qualitative interviews with seven upper secondary teachers of social studies. The study was in turn linked to a previous study (Morén 2016) where 138 teachers participated in a questionnaire on the topic of social issues in social studies and were given the opportunity to state their interest in being part of a follow-up interview study. Of the 28 teachers who gave their approval for interviews seven teachers were selected. The criteria for selection were that, in the questionnaire, they would all state they "teach with social issues as a point of departure", have at least a few years of teaching experience and in terms of other aspects, such as

sex, age and complementing teaching subjects[3], represent a diverse group. As almost all teachers who completed the questionnaire claimed they taught with social issues as their point of departure, as stated in the syllabus, the interviewees are really to be seen as a random selection. As such I have no reason to believe that these seven teachers represent a certain attitude towards social issues or social studies. The schools were located in different towns within two counties of Sweden. Social studies is taught in academic as well as vocational programs in Sweden, and both were represented in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a relaxed and private setting at the teachers' schools, with no outer disturbance, and each lasted about an hour and a half. An interview guide was developed based on the didactical questions of what, how, why and for whom, with regards to their subject teaching: What do social issues denote in your view? How is social studies taught when – if at all – social issues are adopted as the point of departure? Why this approach and why the specific issues chosen? This last question also contained the didactical question "for whom?" with an idea that this could be an important aspect related to the other didactical questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were done with an effort to adapt the spoken word to the norms of written word, while remaining as true as possible to the character of the statements of the informants.

Based on a social constructionist approach to the teachers' descriptions, the interviews were seen as a construction of data rather than a collection of data. The interviews were to a great extent an act of reflection at this particular point in time, as the idea of viewing social issues as a didactical concept had not been salient to the teachers previously. Due to the asymmetric power relation it can be assumed that the interviewer has an effect on the respondent, making him/her sensitive to what he/she perceives to be the expected answer (Kvale 2006, p. 484). The reliability was strengthened, though, by the fact that examples were continuously taken from the teachers' own practices. As such, the interviews enabled the teachers to formulate an understanding as to how social issues related to their conception of the subject based on how they conducted their teaching and why. In accordance with research ethics, the schools are not disclosed and the teachers taking part are given pseudonyms.

The analysis of the interviews was inductive in that they sought significant ways for the teachers to talk about their teaching, and through this their explicit and implicit relationships to the subject of social studies and the concept of social issues without a predefined hypothesis of what to find. These findings are developed through an analysis of the strategies the teachers express as they describe how they teach with "social issues as the point of departure". As mentioned, the concept of social issues had not necessarily been reflected upon as *a didactical concept* which is why the analysis would focus on the teachers' description of their teaching practice in a context where social issues are

[3] Social studies teachers in upper secondary school in Sweden teach in general at least one more school subject. The 'second subject' seemed to have insignificant importance to the result of the questionnaire, why this aspect was of reduced importance when selecting the interviewees.

present as an important aspect. Seven interviews are indeed too few for far-reaching generalizations to be made. The research value of the study lies in the possibilities the deep interviews have for the formulation of potential understandings of social studies. In the text analysis of the transcripts, I have conducted a form of thematic analysis, searching for common dominant traits as to how social issues are understood in relation to the subject of social studies: what they are as well as what they do (Bryman 2011, p. 528). I have also searched for diversions from these common dominant traits in order to find other possible conceptions.

Social studies through the lens of social issues

This section is structured in themes according to the answers to the central questions posted for this article. Together these themes reveal the conceptions of the subject social studies that emerge when teachers' didactical reflections on the concept of social issues are being analyzed. The first question, regarding the specific didactical strategies teachers use when selecting which social issues to study, is a theme on its own, and is described in the first section below. It shows that the social issues selected by the teachers come from current events and/or connect in some way to the interests of the students. This addressing of certain social issues (rather than other ones) points toward the notion that the teachers find the subject content of social studies in upper secondary school difficult to define beforehand.

The second central question of the article is presented here as three different themes. These themes should not be seen as contradictory, but rather as complementary subject conceptions. The themes that serve to describe the subject conceptions that emerge in the teachers' descriptions of their teaching when social issues are taken into account as a point of departure are as follows:

- Social studies becomes an *open* subject through the window of social issues.
- Social studies transcends its own boundaries as social issues point to a wider range of subjects.
- Social studies is defined by its legitimacy, the 'why' becoming the 'what'.

I will now elaborate on these themes related to the second question put forth in this article, but I will begin with the question of didactical strategies chosen in the selection of social issues. After a summarizing conclusion, the themes will be further discussed, which also raises the question as to whether or not the social issues used in teaching social studies can be seen as having an intrinsic value, or just an instrumental value. The instrumental value is always there, in relation to learning outcomes that could be interpreted as independent of specific content. The question then remains whether or not the social issues have any intrinsic value.

Looking for current events or the interests of the students when choosing which social issues to study

The didactical aspect of teaching social studies with social issues as point of departure is revealed by way of a review of the process teachers adopt when selecting

the social issues to be used in their teaching. The strategy of using social issues as the point of departure tends to collide with the very idea of detailed, predetermined content. The predominant feature in the teachers' understanding of social issues is that it deals with *current* issues, which are difficult to identify in advance. Often, the process of deciding on the social issues involves the students. Some of the teachers describe how this is a process in which the subject is defined in a manner that is quite pragmatic. The teacher is a kind of "gate keeper" with the power to decide which issues are part of the subject and which are not. The position taken by the teacher is for the most part to accept the ideas of the students or possibly guide them in some way so that they fit with social studies. Magnus describes this process where some of the students' suggestions are accepted and others turned down. He says:

> *[I] have a very wide and accepting view, and I like that formulation [about taking a point of departure in social issue] because it feels like a good … then you can… it opens up to do a little of what you feel like." (Magnus, p. 1)*

Furthermore, the involvement of the students in the selection of social issues demonstrates an ambition to find the issues that reflect the students' personal interests: as such, these issues can, in a sense, be seen to be "genuine". Anna describes how she tries to find the "hot" and controversial issues that are shared through the (social) media used by students. Siv argues that by letting the students have a say in what issues to study, they will choose issues that in some way are significant to them.

> *It will be more meaningful to them, because, I mean, they often choose things they need to deal with. I mean, I don't know how many kids that come from families where they have been exposed to physical assault and have been able to sort of work through it. And this is without us having to mention that it's a reality for them personally. […] It's the same thing with the kids from Syria and Kurdistan. They want to study the conditions of their home countries. It's clear as hell that they are not interested in Canada or Japan or any such place. (Siv, p. 3)*

One teacher seems to be more preoccupied with the issue of assessment, which has the effect that the criteria for assessment also become a vital aspect in the selection of which social issues to study:

> *Okay, we have these knowledge requirements, how can we include the social issues here then? (Clara, p. 17)*

This position marks an exception within the group of teachers interviewed. This teacher is also more inclined to plan ahead and also regularly use a textbook as part of her plan. She argues that this is not only a way to follow the guidelines of the steering documents but also a way of being responsive to the students. She complains a bit that this has a negative effect on the subject and the teaching, but defends it with the argument that it is out of compliance to the students' wishes:

> *And then I include such modules, even if I as a teacher maybe think it's a bit boring and you feel, well I almost feel like a bad teacher just because it's so uninspiring, but as I said, this is what the students want sometimes. And so we do it that way. (Clara, p. 19)*

A more frequent thought is that compliance with students' wishes relates more to which topics or issues to bring to the classroom. Eva-Lena is very clear that some essential subject content is "dry as tinder", mentioning as an example that the Philips-curve in economics is almost "naturally painful" but that she needs to balance this with finding time for the social issues that are of interest to the students: "[…] to me it is a deadly sin to enter the classroom without having reflected on the thought: "how will this arouse the curiosity of the students?"" (Eva-Lena, p. 16). Siv usually introduces a subject area before she involves the students in choosing what specific issue to deal with. At that point she feels it would be meaningless for her to choose the topic, the presumption being that they will not learn more that way. Siv states that the students never question the content of the course nor the subject, and that this is due to the fact that through dialogue she is able to tie in with the issues that are of interest to them. How much time she allows a topic to form part of a course depends on student enthusiasm. The issues need, according to her, to be real and important. Magnus recounts a discussion with a colleague on the importance of issues being chosen:

> *…when he [the colleague] says this: "but Magnus, it's about learning. Never mind* what *they work with. It's about learning a model". And then [he goes on to] the next theme: "never mind what they work with, it's about learning a method here". Finally when I've heard that several times, I say "but* somewhere *it has to* matter *what they work with. Sometimes it has to be that* what *they work with is the thing and same shit what method they use" (Magnus, p. 13).*

In contrast to criticism[4] that being too responsive to students turns the subject into an arena for discussion where everything is equally valid, both Eva-Lena and Anna argue that it lies with them to counteract such tendencies. Eva-Lena even talks about "limiting student democracy" in the sense that they cannot just say whatever.

> *I have no right, from a moral perspective, to let the students immerse themselves in opinions without ground. That is just a nuisance, I mean, they need to have a basis for their opinion. (Eva-Lena, p. 18)*

Anna uses the term "the tyranny of opinion" (Swedish: tyckandets tyranni), referring to an aspect of power and the fact that the classroom easily becomes an arena of power where strong voices dominate, regardless of knowledge. Therefore, she does not allow debates unless they are well prepared in advance.

In summary, the didactic strategies that are said to be used when choosing *which* social issues to bring into the classroom shed light on social studies teachers as agents who are consciously negotiating with their students in terms of what issues to accept as the point of departure. The issues of didactic interest are viewed as being of current importance either in society or for the student personally. These social issues are almost always said to carry some sort of instrumental value in relation to what is supposed to

[4] There is a Swedish word "flummig" that if often used in the school debate. It reflects an attitude where authority is abandoned in both teaching and the teaching matter.

be learned in the subject. However, that does not say whether they can also be seen as having intrinsic value or not, a question I will elaborate on in the discussion.

Social studies becomes an open subject through the window of social issues

The teachers claim that the concept of social issues as written in the syllabus has not been subject to much didactical reflection on their part. They view it as a more or less given component of the subject social studies, a concept that does not in itself challenge the idea of what social studies is and what it is like to be a social studies teacher. For a social studies teacher, it seems to go without saying that social issues in one way or another are dealt with within the subject, which is apparent from a questionnaire in a previous study (Morén 2016) where social studies teachers showed that the concept of social issues in itself does not lead to a didactical challenge. It was not until the interviews went into depth in discussing social issues as *a point of departure* that more reflected aspects of the didactical inclinations of the concept were revealed in the teachers' discussion. The teachers argued that social issues as a point of departure tie with a great potential of the school subject. This is shown by the positive attitudes that relate to the statements concerning what is meant by *social issues*.

> *We are lucky in social studies, thanks to social issues. In those you should look for causes and consequences. And then you can get quite a lot into it [the subject]. It's like: thank you, I can put a lot of what they [the students] do into it [the subject] that way. (Anna, p. 24)*

Another teacher also shows an appreciation for the potential that lies within the concept of social issues:

> *It's almost impossible to do wrong. You can deal with just about anything and still not go beyond the limits. So, in that way it's a fantastic subject in my opinion. (Siv, p. 2)*

Social issues as a concept is not stressed as being problematic in itself, but it tends to *do* something to the subject according to the teacher. Upon a deeper look at the teachers' didactical reflections, a fuller picture evolves as to what this potential consists of and how the concept relates to the stipulated subject content and the aims of the subject. This potential involves the feature that social issues "open up" the subject, its content and possibilities. Most of the teachers used that kind of phrasing when describing the 'role' of social issues in their subject teaching. From a didactical perspective, it is the *function* of social issues that is stressed. Magnus says:

> *Social issues are not specific. I have viewed them as, how should I put it, an opening that enables me to deal with a lot. Not narrow questions, but an opening, within a field of interest that does not have to be specified. […] The social issues that appear are not…well, I want them to have a discussion, and I don't know beforehand exactly what issues they will be. (Magnus, p 1 and 18)*

In this sense, social issues stand out as being the window through which the subject has the potential to "open up". The temporary aspect in this didactical reasoning tends to stem from the notion that social issues are defined as current. This notion marks the

characteristics of the whole subject and makes it – also in relation to other subjects – difficult to plan ahead. The teachers either simply do not plan in advance or just realize that the plans they make are never carried out as conceived. In all interviews but one (Clara's), the teachers describe how social studies in this regard differs from the other subjects they teach. This does not mean that they do not know what they want with the course or with the subject. It is just that emphasis is on the fact that the character of the subject demands flexibility and openness in terms of the news and the students. More than one of the teachers also described how they had become more flexible and less inclined to make detailed plans the more teaching experience they acquired. This is notable as the general trend over recent years has been toward more predetermined content and toward teachers being expected to demonstrate and distribute plans showing what students are supposed to study and what they are supposed to learn. This is what Anna has to say about the demands from the principal to give her a detailed plan against the background that the subject is rather steered by current issues than by any other principle:

> *Since this happened in Trollhättan [a school shooting] we can't just talk about the closure of a Volvo factory. No, it doesn't work that way. I think that I have a responsibility in this regard. You cannot … there are probably teachers that stick to their plans. But I told my principal the other day in a performance review: "You will never get a detailed plan from me!" (Anna, p. 7)*

Before the interviews, I asked the teachers to present some plans. In most cases they were troubled by that request, a reaction that could be explained by a situation where expectations of planning ahead (content as well as goals) are immanent. Eva-Lena's statement illustrates this:

> *You asked me to show you some kind of long term plan. That made me sweat! Because I always make some kind of plan, at least for the semester. But it has yet to work, because things always happen.[…] If you shoot 140 people in Paris, then we just have to skip what we are doing. You can't talk about it three weeks later. It's, like, impossible. As you can understand then, my plan dies abruptly. (Eva-Lena, p. 22)*

Peter also comments on the fact that he finds it more or less impossible to plan the course ahead without first knowing the students or what is going to happen in the world:

> *I can't because it's social studies, and I don't know what will happen next week. You have to take it from where we are. (Peter, p. 1)*

The subject conception that emerges out of these reflections is a one that is open with regards to its content. Social studies stands out as a flexible subject, always open to cover new, previously unknown (subject) issues and thereby not meaningful to pin down by any disciplinary oriented or scientifically established content. In this perspective it is open toward the unexpected, defying being predefined.

Social studies transcends its own borders – social issues point toward a wider field of subjects

Social studies is usually described as being a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary subject. There are many academic disciplines that, combined, form the subject[5], allowing it to host several areas of knowledge and topics. Yet, the teachers often call for a (more) interdisciplinary approach and include other school subjects besides social studies in their teaching of the subject. Social studies teachers view the subject as being "too narrow in itself" when social issues are brought up. In one of the schools in the study, this conviction had affected the ideology of that particular school. There, the teachers adopted an interdisciplinary approach in the organization of their teaching, constantly working with interdisciplinary themes and projects. At the other schools, the teachers either worked on an interdisciplinary basis when circumstances allowed or at least opined that it would be rewarding were they only to be given the opportunity. There are many arguments for this position. One is that the social issues to be taught cannot fit within the school subject. Peter says, when arguing that "everything is connected to each other" (Peter, p. 1), that the subject is "more than interdisciplinary" (Peter, p. 2). When bringing assessment into the discussion, Eva-Lena claims that receiving the highest grade is impossible *within* the subject. She says that social issues are "wider than the subject". Linus argues that he can get much more out of the subject when cooperating with other subjects, such as history. In an argument that could seem paradoxical, Clara claims that the students sometimes perform better in assignments in social studies when they are presented in another school subject. She says:

> *It can be easier, in my opinion, to discuss social issues in [the subject] Swedish, for example. We can take our point of departure there and write debate articles and essays, and then we are a bit freer, because we don't have to limit ourselves in 'oh, now we need to know these and be able to account for these concepts', so it can be easier in that context (Clara, p. 3)*

This argument shows that social issues that can be covered within social studies can also be included in other subjects. It also shows there to be a conception as to what is expected in a subject in a school context and how social issues have the potential to break these notions.

Another aspect that shows how the teachers find it difficult to pin down the content of the subject is the attitude toward textbooks that emerges from the discussion with the teachers. It is not that they are necessarily negative toward textbooks per se, but they do seem to find textbooks by themselves to be inadequate or else they are critical to different aspects of a textbook. They are, in general, critical of those teachers (sometimes colleagues) who allow textbook to dictate the course as this does not allow the subject to develop in accordance with social issues but rather some other logic. The teachers in the study generally use a textbook (or different ones) as reference material

[5] These academic disciplines are not specified in the steering documents. After naming political science, sociology and economics the current subject plan adds "but also other disciplines from the social and humanistic sciences are included".

as well as other reference material. Some of the teachers say they use textbooks to a lesser extent than previously. Anna lets her class use two different textbooks, but does not plan her course according to the textbook:

> *I notice that there is no longer "read page 53 and complete the assignments", rather it's more […] since we are dealing with social issues we can't ignore what is happening. (Anna, p. 2)*

She claims that this change over time can to a large extent be explained by the fact that she is more secure in and knowledgeable about the subject. Eva-Lena says that the subject does have some necessary content that is "dry as tinder", at which time a textbook can fill a function. However, when you deal with the subject as a "subject for life", then you do need to put down the textbook (Eva-Lena, p. 16). Eva-Lena mentions how textbooks seldom present their sources in the academic way she as a teacher would like her students to do. Peter points out how the textbooks are usually a concentration of what he basically wants his students to know by the end of the course. And then they will need to study so much more to get there. He objects to the argument that a textbook is written for the specific context by saying that this is a central aspect of the social issues that are supposed to be at the heart of the subject – that they are *not* adjusted to fit a school context. Linus describes how he "writes his own textbooks" by using an iBook where he can adjust the content according to the issues being covered.

The subject conception that these reflections nurture, it seems, is a subject that stands out because it transcends its own borders. Defining the subject by way of its prescribed core content seems insufficient. I argue that this subject conception exists irrespective of the actual presence of interdisciplinary approaches. The social issues are not limited by the definition of the subject in the core content of the syllabus, and textbooks are also too narrow to cover what the subject is when social issues are taken as the point of departure.

Social studies: a subject defined by its legitimacy

Even though there is a syllabus describing the aim and the content of the subject social studies in upper secondary school, on many occasions the teachers stress that steering documents related to a level above the subject plan are also important in defining the subject. In the current model of Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school, there are basically two levels above the syllabus that both have their 'own' documents: the goals and guidelines for each program of upper secondary school[6] and the overall curriculum. In times when there is increasing focus on accountability (Sundberg 2015) it seems clear that the instructions that are found regarding core content and assessment have a tendency to over-shadow the more general aspects of the curriculum or the program syllabus. It is within this context that Magnus, interestingly,

[6] There are at the moment 16 national programs, or fields of study, each with its own specific goals.

almost excuses himself by saying, "I would like to claim that the curriculum[7] is a steering document as well" (Magnus, p. 4). When reflected upon in light of the increasing general accountability trend in Swedish schools, the extraordinary aspect of this statement is not that this teacher is turning to the curriculum in order to legitimatize the social studies subject: rather, the extraordinary can be seen in the way in which he mentions this document as a sort of deviation from the norm.

Peter describes a hierarchy of the social studies steering rationales where the goals, in the form of values and capabilities, are primarily taken from the overall curriculum and secondly from the program. He seems to be very relaxed when it comes to the content of the actual syllabus for social studies, arguing that it is not a challenge to make sure that the stipulated content in one way or another is covered by the end of a whole course. Nonetheless, he does not let that become the tool for planning. He claims that this more laid-back attitude toward the predefined content has grown stronger with more experience:

> *In the beginning I thought it was more difficult because […] I saw the core content as some sort of module or element of a course. "Now we study media." "Ok, now are done with media; now we'll study human rights. […] It took years before it became clear. So now I find it quite easy. (Peter, p. 2-3)*

Peter also mentions how his first priorities are the goals of the program. Most of the teachers say, in one way or another, that this more flexible attitude to the syllabus of social studies is easier to uphold in some courses than others. In some cases they complain that the more detailed content of the introductory course of social studies hinders them from teaching exactly the way they want to. But also in that case, they strive toward something else. Linus describes how he negotiates between goals at different levels in order to fit the type of issues he finds important:

> *When I talk about the crafts program, I deal with professional culture and such, well, what it's like in professional life. That's when I work with the labor market. But then, I could find it more difficult to connect to democracy and human rights. Then I tie it with the fundamental values of the school, looking at other steering documents than the actual course. (Linus, p. 3)*

A pattern forms showing that teachers refer to the value-oriented goals of school when describing what lies at the core of social studies. In some instances there is criticism that this aspect is no longer as clear in the actual syllabus, since much of the value-oriented content has been moved to the overall curriculum as a result of the last reform in 2011. Anna comments on this, while making it clear that democracy is a vital component of the subject:

> *Well, you wish you could be grounded in democracy. And sure, even if the task to foster democratic citizens is really the main reason why we have this subject, the mission of democracy is maybe not as clear anymore [in the syllabus], but I stress, or, I guess it's how you are as a teacher, but I am very*

[7] This is to be understood from the notion that the over-all curriculum is a document separate from the syllabus.

> *strict and careful in my classes with … you just don't say certain things. End of discussion! (Anna, p. 19)*

Eva-Lena describes the subject as profoundly important for the students' abilities to function within society. She points to the syllabus and says: "This is life!" (p. 10). Much like most of the informants she basically supports the structure of the new steering documents, and claims that the content and capabilities that are prescribed do not present an obstacle for teaching with the value-oriented curriculum in mind. With regards to the increasing number of immigrants in the classroom, she points out the importance of helping these students feel they can trust society and "the system". Clara also mentions a more pragmatic function of the subject, that being that the social issues chosen are often the ones the students need in order to be independent in society. She quotes students, saying: "But it's about 'how are we going to manage in half a year from now'?" (Clara, p. 8).

The subject conception that emerges in these teachers' argument is a subject that is deeply anchored in the value oriented aims of school and society, as declared in the overall curriculum. In terms of a general didactical perspective, it is a subject that is easier to define by its 'why' than by its 'what' or put differently, the 'why' of social studies in upper secondary school is its 'what'.

Conclusions

Returning to the central questions put forth in this article, it is possible to draw some conclusions and develop these conclusions further into a discussion. The didactical strategies used when choosing the social issues in the teachers' subject teaching is partly directed toward the current events 'at hand' and partly toward the students' personal needs and interests. In both cases these strategies go along with the description of a social studies subject that does not lend itself to being predefined as regards a given content at any detailed level in the teaching. The question of what issues the students are to work with and why these issues and not others is a separate question that invites discussion about the importance that is given to social issues used in teaching social studies. The question at stake could be formulated in terms of whether social issues have only an instrumental value (which they always have, in relation to the expected learning outcomes) or perhaps also an intrinsic value. I will elaborate on this theme in the discussion later.

The second central question in the article aimed to provide a picture of the teachers' conceptions of social studies when talking about teaching with 'social issues as the point of departure'. When the teachers describe their understanding of social issues it does not seem that they have deliberated upon it as a didactical concept in a systematic way before (the study was undertaken). However, by talking about it as something to be used as a point of departure for teaching social studies, a picture evolved where the concept of social issues could be seen as carrying didactical implications, leading to different conceptions of social studies. One conclusion is that social issues are seen as to be a given components of the subject; the content of the subject is built up on social issues.

However, when describing the function of social issues in the teaching of social studies, the concept of social issues turned out to have didactical implications, leading to a conception of a subject that opens the way to the unexpected. Thus social studies is seen as a subject the content of which cannot be predefined in detail. It always carries the "risk" that Biesta (2013) writes about. The metaphor of a window was used to describe how social issues 'open up' the subject. And it opens the way to a wider arena than what is found in the list of core content in the syllabus. In this way social studies tends to stretch beyond the limitation of the core content in the syllabus and towards other school subjects. It seems that not even the multidisciplinary subject social studies is enough to deal with social issues. A description of the subject through the lens of social issues demonstrates that the purpose of the subject, described in terms of democracy, is more in focus in the teachers' description than is its specific content.

Discussion

Based on the themes and aspects raised above, I will here elaborate on the results regarding teachers' didactical strategies when selecting social issues (question one) and teachers' conceptions of social studies when taking social issues into account (question two).

Previous research has shown that 'news' is regarded as an important aspect of the subject social studies (Olsson 2016; Bernmark Ottosson 2009). In the commentary[8] to the syllabus, to be read alongside the syllabus, the description of social studies begins with viewing the subject as being tied to current events (aktualitetskaraktär) which is also empirically confirmed by research (see Lindmark 2013; Sandahl 2011). This may be more the case in Sweden than, for example, the U.S., as history is taught as a separate subject in Sweden and is not included in social studies. However, there is a difference between "news coverage" being a common component of the subject and social issues being the point of departure that defines the subject – and that thus contains the unexpected as well as the expected. Not knowing beforehand what social issues will appear as the point of departure gives the subject the potential for taking on the unexpected. The main steering document for the subject, the syllabus, describe various content, which is expected to be taught and that is formulated as a list of core content. The teachers in this study are not critical per se of a curriculum that stipulates certain content. They tend to be fairly relaxed and confident that the core content of social studies will be covered in one way or another in their subject teaching. However, it does become problematic when too much content is prescribed, which seems to be the case in the introductory course of social studies. In such a situation, the notion of social issues as being the point of departure seems to be more difficult to uphold. Mostly, and especially with the more experienced teacher, social issues as the point of departure enables them to include the *unexpected* in the subject and in their teaching. As one of the teacher's teaching strategies, the unexpected, it could be said, is also the expected.

[8] The commentary aims to allow for a broader understanding of the syllabus.

This is also the way these teachers interpret the steering documents. A subject always, according to them, incorporates the expected. It is only against the background of something expected that it might become meaningful to talk about the unexpected. The potential lies within the subject of social studies being relevant with regards both to important current events and to students' personal lives and interests. The rationale in the didactical theory of the German tradition is that you need to have an idea about why the subject is taught and about the specific content of the subject before deciding on how to tackle it. This article, together with the study on which it draws, aims to stress how these questions are intimately intertwined (cf. Henriksson Persson & Olson 2016), pointing out the importance of the how-question in terms of "the point of departure". It is by using social issues as a point of departure, and not specific predefined content, that the subject opens up, according to the result presented above. When it comes to teaching using social issues as the point of departure there is a chance that students find the subject interesting and meaningful. The counter position is a subject that finds its legitimacy only within the bounds of school where motivation is based on school results in measured learning outcomes rather than on the power of the issues themselves. The path is not set out in detail, and the openness contains some uncertainty, which is inevitable – and even carries important potential – if one, like Biesta (2014) views education as a 'beautiful risk'. Maria Olson describes the challenge involved in civic education when it comes to balancing between the affirmative, the already known, and the creative, the unknown (Olson 2012, p. 49). Social issues enable teachers in social studies to balance and move between these different, mutually dependent, objectives of social studies as well as of school as a public institution.

Defining the subject by way of social issues, as the teachers tend to do, makes it futile to try to draw any precise, exact borders for the content of social studies in upper secondary school. Social studies is, already in its construction, a school subject that is multidisciplinary, which is stressed in the syllabus as well as mentioned as a special trait of the subject in didactical research (see Bronäs 2002, Vernersson 1999, and Sandahl 2014). In this article, I argue for a subject conception that views social studies, despite its multidisciplinary character, as not being "large" enough to deal with all the aspects of importance that the subject must tackle and deal with, as addressed by social issues. This implies that it might be important to promote a call for even wider interdisciplinary approaches to social studies due to the character of social issues. The social issues emerge as having the potential to open up for content and perspectives that are not limited to the list of core content in the syllabus. When the content in the definition of the syllabus in this way is downplayed because of the character of social issues, something other makes its way in to define the subject, namely its purpose, the 'why'. The study that this article draws on also shows how the use of social issues as the point of departure leads to a position where the subject of social studies to a higher extent tends to be defined by its purpose rather than by its content. Lindmark (2013, p. 56) also shows that teachers sometimes find it difficult to separate content from purpose. When asked about the content they would give the purpose of the subject as an answer. There is a risk, especially in times when increasing focus is on accountability, that one defines the subject by the prescribed learning outcomes that are used for assessment. When such

assessment is used as an all-encompassing point of departure for the teaching of the subject, offering little room for social issues as didactically important, we may risk of practicing what Carlgren (2016) calls a "backwards pedagogy". Also, what follows the change from "criteria" to "knowledge requirements" is a more precise idea of what knowledge it is that is to be assessed. Carlgren (2016) argues that this is one aspect of the discursive shift toward a firmer view of knowledge. Even if the knowledge requirements need to be interpreted they are "intended to be capable of being standardised, measured and compared" (Sundberg & Wahlström 2012, p. 351).

With such an emphasis on learning outcomes, the predefined content is no longer guiding the subject; nevertheless, there is something predefined in the foreground, formulated in the abilities of the learning outcomes. Here I wish to stress the conclusion drawn from the themes above that the didactical aspect of social issues is not primarily about what they *are* but what they *do* to the subject. With this conclusion in mind, it may be more beneficial to talk about the subject of social studies in terms of what the social issues can do to the subject. Such a discussion will have a close relationship to the question of purpose of the subject as well as to the question of its content.

The study shows that for the teachers, social issues do play an important role *for* the subject. They have the capacity to open up the subject toward content and learning outcomes – expected and unexpected. The knowledge requirements do not pose a problem for the teachers. In this sense, social issues have an instrumental value in the teaching of social studies in upper secondary school. Now, a question is whether they could also be viewed as having intrinsic value. Do they matter? Reflections on this aspect is a consequence of the question of the strategies used when decisions are being made on what social issues should be given space in the teaching, and the different ways the teachers responded to that question. The dominant view is that the issues chosen *do* matter. They do have an intrinsic value. That is the reason, I argue, why those and no other issues are brought up in the classroom. In some cases the argument of the teachers is that the issue is of such importance for current events – locally, nationally or globally – that the teachers just can't replace them for that reason. When there is a refugee crisis due to the war in Syria it would be cynical to say that the issue is just of instrumental importance. From a cosmopolitan perspective of education represented by David Hansen (2008) it is important that school deals with the real challenges of the world with reflective openness. However, when saying that an issue has intrinsic value, it needs to be understood within a context, connecting to a Deweyan way of arguing that the content acquires its value when it brings meaning to the real life of the student.

This way of regarding the school subject and motivating students through the importance of social issues is also found in research on science education. There is a call to bring social issues into science education with reference to their being SSI (socio-scientific issues), with an attempt to connect science education to civic engagement (see Bossér et al 2015). The notion is that the didactically oriented teacher always needs to consider whether the content is relevant and meaningful to the students. This notion is captured in Eva-Lena's statement: "It is a deadly sin to enter the classroom without having reflected over the thought 'how will this arouse the curiosity of the students'?". Either the issue is significant in relation to the world or it could be of personal

importance for the student, and thus has intrinsic value. In either way, social issues do matter in subject teaching, and further, for the potential of the subject of social studies itself. A pedagogic theory of "the big five" has become very popular among Swedish teachers and is being promoted by the Swedish Agency for Education[9]. The idea is to focus on the abilities students are supposed to develop in school irrespective of the subjects or specific content. Sandahl's (2011; 2015) argument is similar; however, he argues that these abilities could be more subject specific. In contrast to this way of arguing for the abilities Young and Muller (2016) claims that there is important – to use their terminology 'powerful' – knowledge to be found in each subject. This indispensable content should, according to them, be possible to identify and predefine. I would like to argue, with support of the study conducted, somewhat differently. Although the abilities that are dictated as the expected learning outcomes are important, social issues *could* have an intrinsic value that stretches beyond the abilities that could be developed by studying them. As opposed to the expected learning outcomes (and content) an important aspect of social issues is that they fall into the category of not predefined content. Too much predefined content is an obstacle for the open subject that the teachers advocate. What is more, predefined learning outcomes carry the risk of making school merely instrumental. This article contributes to this discussion from a didactical perspective that can be discerned through research that gives voice to the teachers in their discussions about their subject teaching practices. By analyzing teachers' descriptions of social issues as a didactical concept in this practice, this article argues that social studies has the potential to be a subject that is open to challenges and important issues, from the very personal to the global. Social issues in a sense *are* the subject, but more importantly, they *do* something to the subject. And the subject conceptions that emerge from the teachers' descriptions is that social studies in upper secondary school is a subject that is open to the unexpected, transcending its own borders and seeking its core in the legitimacy of the subject rather than through its prescribed content.

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[9] The originator of the idea of "the big five" is a teacher educator, Göran Svanlid. See Svanelid (2014)

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