

# **Discourses of criticality in Nordic countries' school subject Civics**

**Kristina Ledman**



**Nordidactica**

**- Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education**

**2019:3**

Nordidactica – Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education

Nordidactica 2019:3

ISSN 2000-9879

The online version of this paper can be found at: [www.kau.se/nordidactica](http://www.kau.se/nordidactica)

## Discourses of criticality in Nordic countries' school subject Civics

Kristina Ledman

Department of Education, Umeå University

*Abstract: Criticality (the ability to think, self-reflect and act critically, as well as reason analytically) is framed as an important goal of education generally, and citizenship education specifically. However, literature and research within subject didactics tend to frame criticality as subject-specific, hence its conceptualisation can vary substantially depending on epistemological and research traditions. Thus, this paper compares its treatment in the same subject, civics, in curricula of the five Nordic countries. Civics is an interesting case as it is a major element of citizenship education, which varies somewhat among the five countries. Four ideal types of criticality are elaborated and deployed in the analysis: general, disciplinary, moral and ideological criticality. The results reveal substantial differences between the five compared curricula. They also reveal apparent correlations between civics as a single-subject construct (as in Denmark and Sweden) and disciplinary criticality, and between civics as an integrated curriculum construct (as in Iceland) and general criticality. Overall, the disciplinary view of criticality slightly prevails in the five compared curricula. The results raise questions about contextual factors' effects on how criticality is constructed in school subjects, and helps reflection on what we actually refer to when we talk about a certain school subject.*

**KEYWORDS:** CIVICS, SOCIAL STUDIES, CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION, CRITICALITY, CRITICAL THINKING, CURRICULUM, COMPARATIVE METHOD

**About the author:** Kristina Ledman has a PhD in History and Education, and is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Education, Umeå University, with special interests in citizenship education and social justice.

## Introduction

Civics is a major element of citizenship education (e.g. Børhaug 2014; 2011; Christensen 2011), and criticality (the ability to think, self-reflect and act critically, as well as reason analytically) is often ascribed an important function in educating for democracy (e.g. Brookfield 2012; European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice 2017). In this study, curricula of the school subject civics in the five Nordic countries is compared, paying particular attention to forms of criticality the pupils are supposed to acquire through teaching of the subject. Civics refers here to the Swedish school subject 'samhällskunskap' and corresponding subjects (which are crucial for the comparison) in the other Nordic countries. In Sweden, civics was constructed as the primary subject for citizenship education in the post-World War II reforms of comprehensive schooling. During the course of further reforms, the subject's construction has varied between a single subject, to various degrees of integration in social studies (Englund 1986, 2005; Larsson 2011). Through parallel developments in the other Nordic countries, citizenship became a key part of the 'Nordic model of education'. Antikainen (2006) identifies values such as equity, participation and welfare as the major goals of this ideal model, and the public funded school system as its main form. As a school subject, civics has been ascribed the function of preparing students for citizenship in a democratic welfare state, as described by Børhaug (2010) in the case of Norway, and as such plays an important role in development of welfare state nations.

Like other school subjects, and perhaps primarily other social studies subjects, civics has an educational function in both legitimizing the existing social order and contributing to the process of students becoming autonomous subjects. 'Being critical' or having a disposition or abilities to 'think critically' is an essential aspect of such autonomy. Thus, in citizenship-promoting education, critical thinking is framed as crucial for further studies, individuals' development and both safeguarding and enhancing democracy (Brookfield 2012). For these reasons, critical thinking is a general ideal and normative goal in many curricula of national educational systems in Europe, and one of four competence areas for citizenship education defined in the Eurydice report on citizenship education (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice 2017, see also 2006/962/EG).

There are many definitions of critical thinking in terms of knowledge and abilities. Hence, there are different views of how it should best be taught in school and an ongoing discussion concerns to what extent criticality is discipline- or domain-specific (e.g. Abrami et al. 2015; Ennis 1989, Facione 1990; McPeck 1990; Davies 2013; Moore 2011). It is argued that disciplines can be conceptualized as different cultures, where epistemological structures and concepts constitute contexts in which critical knowledge is situated, and this is also reflected in school subjects (Kreber ed. 2009; Goodson 1993; Schüllerqvist and Osbeck 2009). Accordingly, critical thinking varies between different subjects. For example, Hjort (2014) found differences in qualities ascribed to critical thinking in the subject civics and the subject philosophy in upper secondary school. Moreover, in an analysis of curriculum texts and students' national test results, Nygren et al. (2018) concluded that different sets of skills were defined or treated as 'critical

thinking' in the school subjects history, Swedish, physics and mathematics in Sweden. The idea of criticality as a result of intrinsic properties of specific subjects can be complicated by focusing on characteristics of teaching and learning processes. Certain forms of contextualization in different subject has been found to promote critical thinking, e.g. technology (Westlin 2000), science (Östman 1995), economics (Davies 2015), geography (Grahn 2011), and civics (Englund 1986). In other words, there are results that points in the direction of criticality as subject specific, whereas other results complicate that picture.

If we focus on civics, which is closely related to citizenship education (e.g. Børhaug 2014; 2011; Christensen 2011), results show that civics teachers ascribe criticality an important function in the subject (e.g. Lindmark 2013). In Swedish civics didactic research there is ongoing discussion about the conceptualization of criticality in teaching and learning civics (*samhällskunskap*) and associated subjects, as illustrated by the following examples. Social analytical thinking' is suggested as a core concept by Blanck and Löden (2017), and Sandahl (2015) elaborates a 'disciplinary thinking', inspired by the definition of first and second order concepts in history education. Schüllerqvist and Karlsson (2015) propose a wider conceptual starting point, 'society', for expanding knowledge in civics. According to Tväråna (2019), in an investigation of critical judgement in social science education, increases in situated contextual knowledge are required for gradual development of the ability to analyse justice issues critically.

If we focus to different conceptions of criticality more generally, the historical perspective provided by Brodin (2007) shows that critical thinking has been ascribed diverse meanings in different times. Similarly, Stables (2003) notes that 'assumptions of criticality in the Western liberal tradition are by no means uniform, constant or uncontested', and different epistemologies are behind the great diversity of understandings of criticality and critical thinking. Bermudez (2014) suggests that the differences in the multifaceted discourses of critical thinking are rooted in different research traditions that rarely communicate. She defines four theoretical traditions ('critical thinking', 'history education', 'moral education' and 'critical pedagogy') that, she argues, 'emphasize different intellectual operations and claim different epistemic and social purposes' (Bermudez 2014, s. 104) in defining the essence of 'critical'. However, the traditions' comprehension of criticality is still complementary rather than irreconcilable and the author proposes critical inquiry tools that transcend the respective traditions. In this inquiry, I use the four traditions as foundations for ideal types that organise the analysis. The traditions are described and discussed in the following section, 'theoretical and methodological considerations'.

The review of previous research give no one answer to how criticality should be defined, and whether it is dependent on subject (or discipline) or contextualization. Studies have compared subjects (e.g. Nygren et al 2018; Hjort 2014) and explored how criticality in civics can be described and conceptualised (e.g. Sandahl 2015; Blanck and Löden 2017; Schüllerqvist and Karlsson 2015; Tväråna 2019). This study instead compares criticality in civics situated in different national curriculum contexts. The design provides an opportunity to see what seems to be consistent, and inconsistent

between different versions of the same subject, and serves as a generator of ideas for further research. More specifically, I aim to contribute knowledge about how criticality is constructed and conveyed in civics curricula (particularly of the five Nordic countries) and explore consistencies and variations in different subject curriculum constructions and contexts. Thus, I hope to provide an empirical contribution to a discussion of subject specificities of critical thinking.

## **Theoretical and methodological considerations**

The four traditions identified by Bermudez (critical thinking, history education, moral education and critical pedagogy) constitute the theoretical background to ideal types of criticality that I use to differentiate between different notions of criticality in the examined material (civics curricula of the five Nordic countries). It should be noted that the ideal types represent ends of a four-dimensional conceptual framework that constructs detected in the material resemble to varying degrees, rather than representing definite categories in the analysis. Hence, any expression of criticality in the empirical material is likely to be related to more than one ideal type, even if it closely resembles one of them (Eriksson 1989; Bergström and Boréus 2005).

The ideal types defined are *generic*, *disciplinary*, *moral* and *ideological criticality*. In this section I describe these ideal types and explain how I define them. The first ideal type, *General criticality*, is based on the 'critical thinking' tradition (or movement), which regards criticality as 'general cognitive skills such as analysis, inference, evaluation, interpretation, explanation' as well as characteristics such as inclinations to question and 'get it right' (Bermudez 2014: 104; see also Ennis 1996). Although proponents of the tradition tend to recognise that critical thinking is to be understood as situated in specific knowledge areas' fields of practices, the key elements are the 'general cognitive skills'. The second ideal type, *Disciplinary criticality*, is based on what Bermudez (2014) defines as 'history education'; a tradition focused on how epistemological knowledge structures and traditions require particular thinking tools and habits of mind. The tradition recognizes cognitive psychology, but stresses that 'historical thinking' also rests on acquisition of core concepts and procedures of history as a discipline (Bermudez 2014; see also e.g. Wineburg 2001; Lévesque 2008; Seixas et al. 2013). The label I have chosen for this second ideal type, disciplinary criticality, is intended to reflect the multidisciplinary of the school subject civics. I thereby address ideas of 'social analytical thinking' (Blanck and Löden 2017) or 'disciplinary thinking' (Sandahl 2015), which represent procedural and conceptual knowledge from disciplines on which civics is based in Sweden (foremost political science, sociology, human geography and economics). The third ideal type, *Moral criticality*, is based on the theoretical tradition, 'Moral education', which focuses on how 'individuals can develop the capacity for moral reflection and judgment, which becomes increasingly inclusive, principled, and independent of the dictates of established authorities' (Bermudez 2014). Critical here refers to the 'reflective distance from one's egocentric

and socio-centric perspective, and is self-directed, yet sensitive to and inclusive of others'. The fourth ideal type *Ideological criticality*, is rooted in the 'critical pedagogy' tradition, which regards criticality as being necessary in knowledge production and distribution of knowledge, the deconstruction of power structures embedded in knowledge, and for students to construct knowledge on their own. Further, it is seen as essential that students are to critically examine social, economic and cultural structures prevalent in society, thereby enabling active engagement in the reconstruction of unjust social relations (Bermudez 2014).

TABLE 1

*Four theoretical traditions and constructions of what constitutes 'criticality', based on conceptualizations by Bermudez (2014:106), with modification.*

<i>Theoretical tradition</i>	<i>'Criticality' consists of:</i>	<i>Ideal type</i>
Critical Thinking Movement	Meta-cognitive assessment of arguments and reasoning	General criticality
Disciplinary Education	Disciplined sourcing, multi-causal and contextualised explanations	Disciplinary criticality
Moral Education	Independent judgment that coordinates relevant perspectives	Moral criticality
Critical Pedagogy	Deconstructing/revealing power relations and social structures	Ideological criticality

Applying notions of 'criticality' defined and applied in different traditions of research and practice seems functional, given the multidisciplinary of civics and the heterogeneity of its classification and consideration as a single school subject or component of various combinations of other subjects. However, it is important to remember that the ideal types are constructions to facilitate analysis, and they can be problematized. Depending on the epistemological starting point, elements of ideological criticality, as knowledge situated and embedded in power, are also parts of disciplinary criticality (cf. Segall 2006). Disciplinary criticality, as conceptualised in the ongoing discussion of 'knowledge based curriculum' (Young 2008) and 'powerful knowledge' (Wheelahan 2010), has an important function in empowering groups and individuals, and can thus be related to ideological criticality. This chimes with the social realist idea of the emancipatory function of education, rooted in Bernsteins' (2000) argument that conceptual knowledge provides foundations for questioning 'how it is', which gives access to the 'unthinkable' and 'society's conversation' about itself (cf. Bernstein 2000; see also Wheelahan 2010). Structural and systematic thinking, based (for example) in disciplines, is a precondition for emancipation, as it not only enables participation in society's conversation, but is also a powerful tool to explore alternatives and generate innovation for social change (cf. Gamble 2014; Winch 2014).

Like other school subjects, civics is a construction of pedagogised knowledge, selected and transformed from different fields of knowledge and practice (cf. Bernstein 2000; Ledman 2015). Not being primarily identified with a singular subject, e.g., history

or physics, civics can be said to constitute a weaker discourse than such school subjects. Thus, civics may be a heterogeneous school subject that varies among national contexts. An associated issue, of both methodological and theoretical importance for the presented study, is whether the subjects or elements of integrated subjects, in the five Nordic countries are sufficiently comparable. Here, those in the other four countries are categorised as counterparts to Swedish civics (*samhällskunskap*), and I address the issue of comparing school subjects in different national curricula in the discussion at the end of the article.

The process of inquiry includes a comparative analysis of the five Nordic countries' secondary civics curricula (i.e., curricula for the Swedish '*samhällskunskap*' and corresponding curricular elements of the other four countries) for years 7-9. The Nordic countries share similarities, which enables comparison, most importantly a national educational system and curriculum, but also common basic values related to a modern welfare state and similar cultural, social and, to some extent, historical conditions (Antikainen 2006). The five Nordic countries all also have, to some degree school subjects or content integrated in Social studies, that can be identified as corresponding to civics as covered by the term *samhällskunskap*. The comparison was restricted to curricula for years 7-9, partly because some of the countries lack civics courses for earlier years. However, challenges in the comparison of variables remained. Following recommendations by Backström-Widjeskog and Hansén (2002), I sought to differentiate between linguistic, organisational and contextual equivalence in the comparison. The organisational challenge was addressed by using the Swedish curriculum as a reference, and comparing the other Nordic countries' organisations of knowledge in the subject or areas of study to it. To address a substantial linguistic challenge I chose versions of the curricula in languages that are most intelligible to me. Swedish is my first language, and English my second language. However, Danish and Norwegian are closely related to Swedish, and I could read and closely analyse original versions of the curriculum texts in these languages. I lack abilities to scrutinise Icelandic or Finnish texts sufficiently well. Therefore, I used solely the Swedish version of the Swedish curriculum, a Danish version of the Danish curriculum, both the Norwegian version and official English translation of the Norwegian curriculum, the official English translation of the Icelandic curriculum and the Swedish version of the Finnish curriculum (one of two official versions since both Swedish and Finnish are official languages in Finland). Following these methodological choices, the organisation of civics and social studies subjects in each of the national curricula was analysed. I then examined the curricula and identified passages where criticality was addressed. Next, I closely read these passages, comparing expressions of criticality with the four ideal types, then compared the expressions' degrees of correspondence to the ideal types of criticality in each of the constructions of the subject (or curricular element) civics, and both similarities and differences in this respect among the five countries' curricula.

## Organisation of social studies subjects in the five curricula

The five compared national curricula have different structures of subjects equivalent to Swedish social subjects, as shown in the overview in Table 1.

TABLE 2

*Subjects corresponding to Swedish social studies subjects in the Nordic countries*

Sweden	Geography, History, Religion, Civics
Denmark	History, Christianity and Civics ('cultural subjects') and Geography (a 'science' subject)
Finland	Religion, Life view knowledge, History and Civics (social studies subjects) and Geography (a 'science' subjects)
Iceland	An integrated curriculum for social studies organised in three categories: External world, Inner world, Social world
Norway	A Social Studies curriculum is divided into the following main subject areas: The researcher, Civic life, Geography, History. A separate curriculum covers knowledge of Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics (KRLE)

In the Swedish curriculum, which provided the reference point in the comparison, four subjects (Civics, Geography, History and Religion) are parts of the social studies subject area, but have separate subject curricula and are not presented as a group in the national curriculum, instead all subject curricula are presented in alphabetical order. A social studies area in the Finnish curriculum includes the subjects Civics, History, Religion and Life view knowledge, while Geography is classed as a science subject. In the Danish national curriculum, there is a similar classification, with Geography treated as a science subject, while History, Christianity and Civics are included in a group of 'cultural subjects'. Norway has a Social studies curriculum divided into four main subject areas: The researcher, Civic life, Geography and History. Besides Social studies, there is also a curriculum for knowledge of Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics (KRLE) that is divided into the following main subject areas: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Philosophies of life; Philosophies and Ethics. Iceland has an integrated Social studies curriculum, with subdivisions ('External world', 'Inner world' and 'Social world') following a markedly different logic from the Swedish approach. However, the introduction stresses that the content is derived mainly from history, geography, sociology, religious studies, life skills and philosophy, and ethics, together with knowledge and elements from other subjects within the social and humanistic sciences. The Icelandic curriculum leaves the schools to decide how to organise the division of subjects in the most reasonable, convenient and effective way.

As shown by this summary, classification of the subjects differs among the curricula. For example, Geography is grouped with science in Finland and Denmark, but with the social sciences in Sweden and Finland, and treated as a contributor to studies of the three 'worlds' recognized in the Icelandic curriculum. Religion is placed within the 'Curriculum for knowledge of Christianity, religion, philosophies of life and ethics' in Norway, but is referred to as a social science subject in Sweden and Finland. In Finland,



in addition to Religion there is a subject called 'Life view knowledge', which concerns ethical and philosophical issues. The Danish subject Christianity has a narrower focus on Christianity, as indicated by the name of the subject, than the Swedish subject Religion, which encompasses not only religion, but also philosophical and existentialist perspectives. The equivalents to Swedish samhällskunskap are Civic life in Norway, and Civics in Denmark and Finland. In Iceland, it is not possible to identify a corresponding part of the subject curriculum on this level of analysis. Instead, parts with corresponding content were identified by close reading of the curriculum. On a classification scale from 'integrated subject construction' to 'single subject construction', Iceland is at one end and Sweden at the other, in the order: Iceland, Norway, Finland, Denmark and Sweden.

## **Criticality in the Nordic school subject civics curricula**

In this section I report references to criticality found in each considered curriculum and their relations to the four defined ideal types: *general*, *disciplinary*, *moral* and *ideological criticality*.

### **The Swedish case**

Most expressions of criticality in the Swedish civics curriculum are strongly aligned to disciplinary criticality. For example, in the introduction (describing the aim of the subject), procedural knowledge (critical literacy and methods for critical inquiry) and abstract knowledge (concepts and models) of social science are promoted.

*Teaching should give pupils the tools to manage information in daily life and studies, and knowledge about how to search for and assess information from different sources. Through teaching, pupils are given opportunities to develop knowledge on how societal questions and societal structures can be critically examined. Pupils should also be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of social science concepts and models.*

The introduction is followed by the learning objectives in the form of abilities, which include, *inter alia*, giving pupils opportunities to:

- *reflect over how individuals and society are shaped, changed and interact,*
- *analyse and critically examine local, national and global societal issues from different perspectives,*
- *analyse social structures using concepts and models from the social sciences,*

The references to reflect on change, primarily with analytical categories such as local, national and global, as well as perspectives (commonly economic, social, cultural etc., although not outlined in the text), represent well-established analytical frames for social science.

Disciplinary criticality is highlighted in the first paragraph describing requirements for grade C in Civics at the end of year 9, e.g. "In the descriptions, pupils can use

concepts and models in a relatively well functioning way". In the second paragraph, however, the contextualisation towards social science is weaker, and the requirements stipulate a requirement for more general critical thinking abilities, closer to general criticality.

*Pupils can study societal issues from different perspectives and describe relatively complex relationships by applying developed and relatively well informed reasoning. Pupils assess and express different viewpoints in some societal issues by applying developed reasoning and relatively well informed arguments and can to a relatively great extent switch between different perspectives.*

However, expressions regarding criticality in the last two sentences (abilities to identify injustices and power relations) are oriented towards ideological criticality:

*Pupils can give an account of the meaning of human rights, and their importance, and provide examples of how such rights are violated and promoted in different parts of the world. In addition, pupils can give an account of the national minorities and their special status and rights [...].*

The requirements finally focus on more general critical literacy:

*[...] Pupils can search for information about society and then use different sources in a relatively well functioning way, and apply developed and relatively well informed reasoning about the reliability and relevance of their sources.*

In sum, disciplinary criticality is largely promoted in the Swedish case, but there are also requirements to develop students' general criticality, and some references to ideological criticality. The following case, Denmark, resembles the Swedish case, in treating Civics as a single subject construct.

### **The Danish case**

The Danish counterpart to Swedish Civics is 'samfundsfag', which is usually translated as social sciences or social studies in English. The second paragraph of the introduction for this subject states that: 'The pupils are to obtain the prerequisites for developing critical thinking and a set of values enabling them to participate in society in a qualified and committed manner', thus stressing the importance assigned to critical thinking in education for citizenship. The competence aims for civics are divided into four areas. The pupils are to be able to take a stance in relation to political questions, economic questions and cultural and social questions, and to use social science methods: "The student can use social science methods". The curriculum stipulates five types of social science methods that students should be able to use across all areas of the subject:

*Inquiry methods focus on pupils being able to apply social sciences methods and conduct inquiries.*

*Dissemination focuses on the pupils being able to convey results of performed inquiries*

*Language and writing language focus on the pupils being able to express themselves in written and oral language within the subject areas.*

*Information search focuses on the pupils being able to find relevant sources to elucidate social science issues.*

*Statistics focus on pupils being able to interpret statistics within areas of the subject.*

These competences represent disciplinary criticality, but also more general critical proficiencies. The abilities and content knowledge the pupils are supposed to acquire include requirements clearly related to disciplinary criticality, e.g., “The pupil can identify, formulate and conduct simple studies of societal issues” and “The student can analyze social differences with concepts of social differentiation”. Other learning objectives include abilities to detect and discuss ideological content and how media is used to set the political agenda and decision-making. In contrast to the Norwegian curriculum (reported below), which defines procedural knowledge in relation to main areas of the group of social studies, the Danish curriculum defines it in relation to civics. However, the defined competencies also resemble general criticality: ‘The pupil can find relevant sources; The pupil has knowledge about information search, including with digital media; Pupils can interpret simple statistics; The pupil has knowledge of types of statistical representations’

In conclusion, the Danish curriculum resembles the Swedish curriculum in largely promoting disciplinary criticality, but there are more frequent allusions to general criticality. Finland, the third case, is like the Swedish and Danish cases in treating civics as a specific subject.

### **The Finnish case**

‘Samhällsläran’ in Finland translates to civics and shares similarities with its Swedish counterpart. However, more holistic forms of criticality are promoted than in the Swedish and Danish examples. The Finnish national curriculum’s introductory section defines competencies that are to be integrated in the following subject curricula, including (*inter alia*) the “Ability to think and learn”, stating that “pupils are to be given the opportunity to observe, and train their ability to observe and seek information in different ways and to critically examine the content that is processed from different perspectives”. Another mentioned competence that is closely related to criticality is ‘multiliteracy’. Development of criticality is a core objective highlighted in the introduction to the Civics curriculum and description of the subject:

*In teaching and learning civics the pupils are to be guided to be informed about current issues and events and realise in what way these current issues are interrelated and have meaning for their own life. A core objective is that the pupils learn to search for and critically assess information produced by different forms of actors and deploy the information in different situations.*

The Finnish curriculum combines the competencies defined in the introduction with nine subject-specific goals and four content areas for Civics. The second subject-specific goal is that “the pupils are to be helped to train their ethical understanding and judgemental capacity in different human, societal and economic issues”. In terms of the ideal criticality types, I regard this as most closely related to moral criticality. I also

relate the fifth goal to moral criticality "...studying different social activities, organisations and minority groups in a multifaceted and non-prejudiced manner". Goal four is to '...help the pupil deepen and update their knowledge and abilities regarding society, economics, and consumption and to critically evaluate media's role and importance'. In this passage, criticality is only explicitly spelt out in relation to media. The close relation between criticality and democracy is expressed in the second of the content areas, 'a democratic society':

*The education encompasses structures and exercises of power in society. The pupils also inquire how opinions are channelled in the activities and decisions by individuals, organisations, media and the public power, in Finland and internationally.*

Here criticality is clearly related to the concept of power, which could be interpreted as an expression of ideological criticality, but power as such is a core concept of disciplines that civics draws upon, including both political science and sociology. Thus, it could also be interpreted as an expression of disciplinary criticality. However, disciplinary criticality is less strongly emphasized in the Finnish curriculum than in the Swedish and Danish curricula, which also have single subject constructions of civics. Besides disciplinary criticality, allusions to moral criticality can be discerned, as well as both general and ideology criticality. In the fourth case, the Norwegian curriculum, the construction of the subject civics differs from the single subject Swedish mode.

### **The Norwegian case**

In the Norwegian curriculum, civic life is one of the main areas of the subject 'Social science', for which it states, "The subject of Social science provides pupils with the tools to analyse, discuss and elaborate on questions about historical and contemporary societies and to identify and discuss the balance of power." In this short excerpt, two of the discourses can be discerned: disciplinary criticality, in the form of 'tools', and ideological criticality in the form of "identify and discuss the balance of power". In the analysis, I have also considered the main subject area 'The Researcher', which is to be integrated in the teaching of the other subject areas (and thus civic life), and has the following explicitly stated criticality-related aims:

*Stimulating critical assessment about established and new knowledge in social sciences using sources and source criticism is an essential theme of the main subject area. The Researcher also covers communication, discussion and development of knowledge and competence regarding the social sciences.*

As in the three examples of single-subject constructions described above, a criticality discourse resembling disciplinary criticality mainly permeates the Researcher part of the curriculum. However, this procedural knowledge is defined on a general level for the main subject areas: history, geography and civic life, thus not subject specific as in the Swedish or Danish case. The domination of disciplinary criticality continues in the Competence aims after year 10, which include expressions of criticality that resemble ideological criticality, recognising that power is integrated with knowledge: "[...] show

how incidents can be presented in different manners and discuss how special interests and ideologies can cloud one's view about what was experienced of fact and truth".

Passages focused on the main subject area Civic life, which I have identified as the closest counterpart to Swedish civics, include little if any clear expression of criticality, as in this excerpt summarising the subject area:

*The main subject area covers themes like socialisation, politics, economics and culture and deals with a sense of community and the differences and contrasts from a contemporary perspective. The interaction between cultural norms and societal control on the one hand and individual actions and choices on the other are key elements of the main subject area. [...]*

Notions of criticality in passages specifically concerning civic life can be related to moral criticality, but they are weakly expressed. However, competence aims for year 10 include (*inter alia*) enabling pupils to understand how different ideological positions result in different 'values and interests', a form of criticality that can be classified as disciplinary, moral and/or ideological criticality. Promotion of ideology criticality can also be discerned in paragraphs on human rights, indigenous people and gender roles. When passages on Civil life and the Researcher are considered together, disciplinary criticality becomes more prominent, and if the civics curriculum in Norway was regarded as consisting of the Civic life and Researcher curricula, disciplinary criticality would be the dominant form of criticality in it. As noted above, the notion of disciplinary criticality conveyed through the Researcher curriculum represents a more general level of disciplinary procedural and conceptual knowledge than the type presented in literature on history education. There are also more diverse expressions of forms of criticality in the Norwegian curriculum than in the Swedish curriculum, with formulations that are closer to moral and ideological criticality.

### **The Icelandic case**

In the Icelandic curriculum, civics is not constructed as a separate subject. Instead, the subject area social studies includes competence aims and knowledge areas that are included in civics (*samhällskunskap*) in the Swedish curriculum. However, there are no direct references to political science or economics.

*Social studies now consist, for example, of subjects that have been taught in Icelandic schools under the common heading of social studies, sociology, as specific study categories or subject areas. These are mainly history, geography, sociology, religious studies, life skills and philosophy, and ethics. These studies are also based on knowledge and elements from other subjects within the social and humanistic sciences.*

Like the Finnish curriculum, the Icelandic curriculum is built on development of key competencies, such as 'Creative and critical thinking' and 'Using media and information'. Instead of dividing social studies into main subject areas, as in the Norwegian case for example, the content and learning are divided into three areas. These are: 'External world (Environment: society, history, culture; and pupils' competence to understand reality)'; 'Inner World (Self-image: pupils' competence to understand

themselves and others)', and 'Social World (Relations: pupils' competence to form and develop relations with others)'. Competence goals for grade 10 related to the Swedish samhällskunskap concept include (for example) abilities to explain and discuss: different ideas of the structure and realisation of democracy; the role of the main social institutions and structure of the administration and formal relations of Iceland within the international community; ideas on welfare society and its connection with politics, economics and ideologies.

A conclusion from the analysis is that the concept critical thinking or critical is more frequently expressed than in the other four cases.

*It is, for example, important that pupils accept responsibility for their financial affairs and, at the same time, become critical consumers and able to understand offers that are presented in various ways.*

Another interesting feature is the use of critical and creative thinking as a combined concept: "Social studies encourage both critical and creative thinking". These uses of criticality refer to more generic abilities and knowledge, closely related to general criticality.

The Icelandic curriculum also explicitly proposes certain teaching methods. Conversation is emphasized as important for critical thinking:

*The teaching methods that can contribute to increased competence in social studies are, for example, discussions and questioning techniques that train conversation and critical thinking. Conversation is the forum for the enrichment of critical thinking. It is where pupils have an opportunity to deal with, reflect on and discuss as a group, and with their teacher, specific fields within the study material in a systematic, demanding and creative manner.*

The teacher is mentioned as an agent here, but the promoted communication should clearly be pupil-centric and controlled by pupils. Working methods proposed are inquiry and problem-based instruction, in pairs and groups, as well as field trips, or as in the example below, class councils:

*Class meetings are an example of a method that tests democratic organisation, tolerance and mutual respect for the opinions of others. In such meetings all the pupils have to have a chance to express themselves and learn to show consideration for others according to fixed rules. At these meetings it is possible to discuss current affairs, matters of opinion or activities at school or in life in general and try to find a common ground.*

The form of criticality expressed in the learning goals of the activity, appears to be most closely related to moral criticality, which Bermudez (2014) describes as 'reflective distance from one's egocentric and socio-centric perspective, and is self-directed, yet sensitive to and inclusive of others'. The activity of the pupils in itself as part of a process of becoming an autonomous subject.

In the Icelandic case, criticality is also included in the knowledge and abilities required to obtain the highest grade (A), rather than B or C:

*In an **orderly, independent and critical** manner obtain, use and evaluate information on cultural and social issues whether it is oral or appears in conversation, texts or various media. **Analyse and in a clear manner** explain*

*different ideas on democracy, in an independent and critical manner **support** the value of positive views of life, virtues and evaluation for a healthy self-image and responsibility as a citizen and consumer. In an **independent** and **critical** manner, analyse and **precisely** describe the influence of role models and stereotypes on the formation of self-image and in an **orderly** and **critical** manner discuss social and ethical issues from different points of view. Finally, **discuss** and **analyse** in a **critical** and **orderly** manner their status as participants in society, their rights, duties and values.*

This example of grading criteria is representative of the notion of criticality embedded in the Icelandic curriculum. The term critical is explicitly expressed, and I perceive the meaning ascribed to it as representing general criticality. In contrast to the Swedish or Danish cases, there are very few references to established concepts and methods from social science disciplines. The disciplinary form of criticality is weakly represented. However, the Icelandic curriculum makes room for both ideological and moral criticality, especially the former, which emphasises the role of activity as part of criticality. In the concluding discussion, I compare and discuss how and in what form criticality is conveyed in the different constructions and contexts of the five analysed cases.

## **Concluding discussion**

Several subject didactic studies on criticality and critical thinking (e.g. Hjort 2014; Nygren et al. 2018) have examined differences in critical thinking between different subjects. In contrast, this study addresses consistencies and inconsistencies in concepts of criticality embedded in different versions of the same subject. The application of the four ideal types (general, disciplinary, moral and ideological criticality) generates a multifaceted picture of criticality in the school subject civics in the Nordic countries. In a sense, general criticality is present in all five cases, as it includes knowledge, abilities and dispositions that are closely related to education and *bildung* generally permeating the curricula. However, the relative emphasis on general criticality varies among them. The integrated Icelandic curriculum has the construct with the weakest subject-specific discourse of content knowledge and educational goals, and disciplinary criticality is most weakly expressed in it. Disciplinary criticality is most dominant in the single subject curricular constructs of Sweden and Denmark. Here, conceptual and methodological 'tools' of disciplinary knowledge are more strongly emphasised than those of other forms of criticality. Disciplinary criticality is also an important element of the Norwegian curriculum, but it is defined in relation to a group of main subject areas. Thus, disciplinary criticality is defined in the same way for civic life as for history. In that sense, the Norwegian curriculum promotes a form of disciplinary criticality for social studies subjects, rather than specifically for civics. The Finnish case is interesting in relation to disciplinary criticality as it is less dominant than in Sweden and Denmark, despite similarity in curricular construction. In the Finnish case, I found expressions of moral criticality. Neither moral criticality nor ideological criticality is dominant in any of the cases addressed, but the relative presence of moral criticality is

strongest in the Finnish case and the relative presence of ideological criticality strongest in the Norwegian and Icelandic cases. As shown, the ideal types of criticality can be problematised, questioned and discussed. However, results of the analysis, based on the descriptions and definitions of the four ideal types, indicate that disciplinary criticality is most consistently promoted in the curricula generally, except in Iceland, but there is no dominant form of criticality in civics as a school subject in the Nordic countries.

The methodology applied in this inquiry (comparing presentations of civics and associated teaching and learning requirements in multiple national curricula to identify apparent similarities and differences regarding criticality) poses several challenges. One is in the comparability of the examined comparable variables, and the possibility that differences between the Swedish *samhällskunskap* and the claimed equivalents in other national curricula are too great for fruitful comparison. Deeper understanding of the national contexts of the different curricula might have increased the validity of the inquiry. However, comparative studies of subjects in multiple educational contexts can contribute to reflections about how we conceive school subjects. The results add nuances to the understanding of criticality as subject-specific, by highlighting the importance of curricular contexts for its construction. Important contextual factors that may affect views of criticality may include (*inter alia*) historical trends, and contemporary experiences that could influence national curricula of civics and social studies. The latter may include the recent financial crisis, surges of migration, the establishment in parliament of right wing nationalist parties in all Nordic countries except Iceland, recognition of Sami as indigenous people, and increasing recognition of the need for sustainable development (manifested most strongly in Extinction Rebellion). Supranational and intergovernmental educational policy discourses also affect educational policy. As noted in the introduction, the European Union identifies critical thinking as a key competence (2006/962/EG), which affects education policy in the three Nordic EU member states. Thus, factors that explain the differences in national curricular contexts in the five Nordic countries and associated differences in criticality constructs warrant further attention.

To increase knowledge of subject specificities of critical thinking and criticality, it would be interesting to extend comparative studies of critical knowledge between contexts to other school subjects. The macro perspective of educational system, policy and ideology is sometimes overlooked in subject didactic research and thus we lose sight of how a contemporary school subject is informed by logics other than those of the field of (disciplinary) knowledge. Comparison of school subjects over time or, as in this case, between national contexts provides an approach for increasing our sensitivity to the situated elements of school subjects. In this specific case, it helps us to reflect on what we talk about when we talk about school subject civics, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of criticality in school subjects.



## References

- Abrami, P. C., Bernard, R. M., Borokhovski, E., Waddington, D. I., Wade, C. A., & Persson, T. 2015. Strategies for teaching students to think critically: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 85(2), 275–314.
- Antikainen, A. 2006. In search of the Nordic Model in Education, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 50:3, 229-243, DOI: 10.1080/00313830600743258
- Apple, M.W. 1990. *Ideology and curriculum*. (2. ed.) New York: Routledge.
- Backström-Widjeskog, B. & Hansén, S-E. 2002. Problems concerning comparative research of curriculum development. In M. Rosenmund, A-V. Fries & W. Heller *Comparing curriculum-making processes* (pp. 55-71). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Bergström, G. & Boréus, K. (red.) 2005. *Textens mening och makt: metodbok i samhällsvetenskaplig text- och diskursanalys*. (2., [omarb.] uppl.) Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Bermudez, A. 2014. Four tools for critical inquiry in History, Social Studies, and Civic Education. *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, no. 52 (2015): 102-118. <https://doi.org/10.7440/res52.2015.07>
- Bernstein, B. 2000. *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Blanck, S och Löden, H. 2017. "Med samhället i centrum – Medborgarskapsutbildningen och samhällskunskapsämnetns relevans" i *Nordidactica – Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*. 2017(4), 28-47
- Brodin, E. 2007. *Critical thinking in scholarship: meanings, conditions and development*. Diss. Lund : Lunds universitet, 2007. Lund.
- Brookfield, S.D. 2012. *Teaching for critical thinking: tools and techniques to help students question their assumptions*. (1. ed.) San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.
- Børhaug, K. 2010. Norwegian civic education – beyond formalism? *Journal of Social Science Education*, 9(1), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-503>
- Børhaug, K. 2011. Justifying Citizen Political Participation in Norwegian Political Education, *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*, 3(2), ss. 23-41
- Børhaug, K. 2014. Selective critical thinking: A textbook analysis of education for critical thinking in Norwegian social studies. *Policy Futures in Education*, 12(3), 431–444. <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2014.12.3.431>
- Christensen, T. S. 2011. Samfundsfag – et senmoderne fag? *Nordidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 2011(1), 1–25
- Davies, M. 2013. Critical thinking and the disciplines reconsidered. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(4), 529–544.

- Davies, P. 2015. Towards a framework for financial literacy in the context of democracy, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47:2, 300-316
- Englund, T. 1986. *Samhällsorientering och medborgarfostran i svensk skola under 1900-talet I och II*. Uppsala: Pedagogiska institutionen.
- Englund, T. 2005. *Läroplanen och skolkunskapens politiska dimension*. Göteborg: Daidalos.
- Ennis, R. H. 1989. Critical thinking and subject specificity: Clarification and needed research. *Educational Researcher*, 18(3), 4–10.
- Ennis, R. H. 1996. Critical Thinking Dispositions: Their Nature and Assessability. *Informal Logic* 18 (2 and 3): 165–182.
- Eriksson, G. 1989. *Platon & smitaren*, Atlantis, Stockholm.
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. 2017. *Citizenship Education at School in Europe – 2017. Eurydice Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Franck, O. 2014. Gränsöverskridande värden i icke konfessionell etikundervisning: Ämnesidentitet och multidisciplinärt lärande i ämnet religionskunskap, *Norddidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 2014(1)
- Facione, P. A. 1990. *Critical thinking: A statement of expert consensus for purposes of educational assessment and instruction*. Fullerton: US Department of Education
- Gamble, J. 2014. 'Approaching the sacred': Directionality in relation between curriculum and knowledge structure. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 35 (1): 56–72. doi:10.1080/01425692.2012.740802.
- Goodson, I.F. 1993. *School Subjects and Curriculum Change*, 3rd ed. London: Falmer Press.
- Grahn, A. 2011. *Fakta, normativitet eller pluralism. Didaktiska typologier inom gymnasieskolans geografiundervisning om klimatförändringar*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.
- Hjort, S. 2014. *Kritiskt tänkande i klassrummet: en studie av didaktiska val och manifesterat kritiskt tänkande i samhällskunskaps- och filosofiundervisning*. Lic.-avh. Linköping : Linköpings universitet, 2014. Linköping.
- Kennedy, M., Fischer, M., and Ennis, R. 1991. Critical thinking: literature review and needed research. In L. Idol and B. Jones (eds.), *Educational values and cognitive instruction: implications for reform*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates
- Kreber, C. red. 2009. *The university and its disciplines: teaching and learning within and beyond disciplinary boundaries*. New York: Routledge.
- Larsson, A. 2011. Samhällskunskap. In Esbjörn Larsson & Johannes Westberg (eds.), *Utbildningshistoria: en introduktion*. Lund: Studentlitteratur

Larsson, K. 2013. *Kritiskt tänkande i grundskolans samhällskunskap* Diss. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 2013. Göteborg.

Ledman, K. 2015. *Historia för yrkesprogrammen: innehåll och betydelse i policy och praktik*. Diss. Umeå : Umeå universitet, 2015

Lévesque, S. 2008. *Thinking historically: educating students for the twenty-first century*. Toronto: Buffalo.

Lindmark, T. 2013. *Samhällskunskapslärares ämneskonceptioner*. (diss.). Umeå: Umeå universitet.

McPeck, J. E. 1990. Critical thinking and subject specificity: A reply to Ennis. *Educational Researcher*, 19(4), 10–12.

Messer-Davidow, E., D. Shumway & D. J. Sylvan 1993. *Knowledges: Historical and Critical Studies in Disciplinarity*. Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia.

Moore, T. J. 2011. Critical thinking and disciplinary thinking: A continuing debate. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(3), 261–274.

Nygren, T., J. Haglund, C. R. Samuelsson, Å. Af Geijerstam & J. Prytz 2019. Critical thinking in national tests across four subjects in Swedish compulsory school. *Education Inquiry*, 10:1, 56-75, DOI: 10.1080/20004508.2018.1475200

Sandahl, J. 2015. Preparing for citizenship: The value of second order thinking concepts in social science Education, *Journal of Social Science Education*, 14(1), ss. 19-30.

Schüllerqvist, B. & C. Osbeck red. 2009. *Ämnesdidaktiska insikter och strategier*. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press.

Schüllerqvist, B. & Karlsson, S. 2015. Samhällsbegreppet och samhällskunskapsämnet. Paper presented at the Nordiska konferensen i samhällskunskapsdidaktik 2015, Karlstad.

Segall, A. 2006. What's the purpose of teaching a discipline, anyway?. I Segall, A., Heilman, E.E. och Cherryholmes, C.H. (red.) 2006. *Social studies - the next generation: researching in the postmodern*. New York: Peter Lang.

Seixas, P., Morton, T., Colyer, J. & Fornazzari, S. 2013. *The big six: historical thinking concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education.

Stables, A. 2003. From discrimination to deconstruction: four modulations of criticality in the humanities and social sciences. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28:6, 665-672, DOI: 10.1080/0260293032000130270

Tväråna, M. 2019. *Kritiskt omdöme i samhällskunskap: undervisningsutvecklande studier av samhällsanalytiskt resonerande i rättvisefrågor*. Diss. (sammanfattning) Stockholm : Stockholms universitet, 2019

Wheelahan, L. 2010. *Why knowledge matters in curriculum: A social realist argument*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Westlin, A. 2000. *Teknik och politiskt handlande. Rationalitet och kritik i den samhällsorienterande undervisningen*. Uppsala Studies in Education, 95.

Winch, C. 2014. Know-how and knowledge in the professional curriculum. In *Knowledge, Expertise and the Professions*, eds. M. Young and J. Muller, 46–60. New York: Routledge.

Wineburg, S. 2001. *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Young, M. 2008. *Bringing knowledge back in: From social constructivism to social realism in Sociology of Education*. London: Routledge.

Östman, L. 1995. *Socialisation och mening. No-utbildning som politiskt och miljömoraliskt problem*. Uppsala: Uppsala Studies in Education 61.