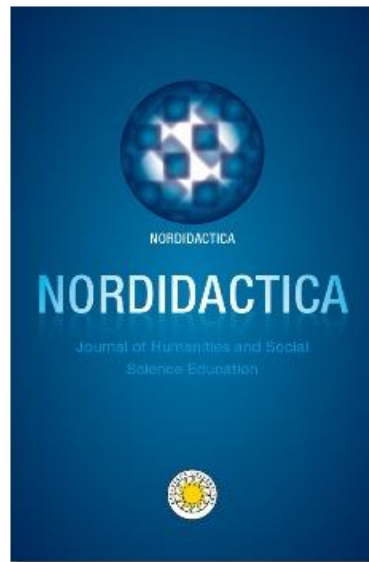# Exploring students' effort in social studies

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Exploring students' effort in social studies

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Abstract: Preparing young people for becoming responsible citizens is an important educational aim. The school subject of social studies contributes to this wider educational aim by focusing on knowledge, skills and values to support young people in developing their knowledgeable participation in democratic processes. As social studies combines a focus on knowledge and participation, students' own effort is of vital importance. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors associated with students' effort in upper-secondary social studies. The survey sample comprised 264 upper-secondary students (16 to 17 years old) from schools located in urban and rural areas in three Norwegian counties. Regression analysis was used to assess the strength of statistical associations between the dependent variable—students' effort—and the hypothesised antecedents: students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies, students' self-efficacy in social studies, students' perceptions of the teacher's expectations in social studies, students' relational trust toward the teacher, gender and books in the home. Our findings show that all of these factors, except for teacher expectations and relational trust, were significantly related to students' effort. The results are discussed, and implications for social studies and further research are outlined.

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Introduction

Preparing young people to contribute to society, individually and through their involvement in different kinds of communities, is an important educational aim. The school subject of social studies plays an important role in this mission because of its focus on knowledge, skills and values that contribute to equipping students to take active part in society (Barton & Avery, 2016; Reinhardt, 2015). Particularly, social studies aims to contribute to young people's knowledgeable participation in democratic and political institutions and processes through both the activities and the subject matter of lessons. For example, students are expected to engage in writing argumentative texts and participating in oral discussions about social and political issues and structures. This requires effort on the part of learners in order for them to reach their own learning goals as well as those embedded in the curriculum. While students' effort has not been a focus of research in social studies, educational research in general has identified it as an important variable. Effort and achievement in upper-secondary school greatly influence young people's opportunities as adults, particularly those concerning their education, career and finances. Researchers have identified students' effort in the classroom as a predictor of academic accomplishments in both secondary and tertiary education (Cole, Bergin & Whittaker, 2008; Green, Liem, Martin, Colmar, Marsh & McInerny, 2012; Wentzel, Muenks, McNeish & Russell, 2017). Moreover, students' effort may be seen as an indirect expression of their motivation (Timmers, Braber-Van Den Broek & Van Den Berg, 2013). In social studies, the way teachers make meaningful connections between content, activities and students' interests, experiences and curiosity might not only be motivational for students, but also make the subject's content relevant and important for their lives as members of society (Mathé & Elstad, 2018; Christensen, 2015). However, social studies is also characterised by information about social and political structures and institutions, social scientific concepts and thinking, and increasing demands for justifications and argumentation (Blanck & Lödén, 2017), which some students may perceive as challenging. At the same time, social studies aims to inspire and enable students to participate in society as engaged citizens (Blanck & Lödén, 2017; Sandahl, 2015). In light of this, it becomes important to identify what schools and social studies teachers can do to engage their students and create productive learning environments in which students perceive that their effort leads to positive results.

To the best of our knowledge, researchers have not investigated what motivates and supports students' effort in regard to social studies and its subject-specific characteristics. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore factors associated with students' self-reported effort in upper-secondary social studies to identify potential measures educators can take to inspire students' effort. To investigate this phenomenon, we conducted a multiple regression analysis based on survey data collected in Norway. In this article, we first describe the Norwegian study context and present previous research related to student effort. Then, we outline some theoretical perspectives before detailing the methods we employed in the present study. Finally, we discuss the findings and deduce implications for practice and further research.

The Norwegian context

Education is among the Norwegian welfare state's vital social goods. The tenets of schooling in Norway are the development of social justice, equity, equal opportunities, democracy and inclusion (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training [UDIR], 2017). Over time, however, the hegemony of these ideas has been challenged both in management intentions and in pedagogical practice (Imsen & Ramberg, 2014). Results from international large-scale studies provided legitimacy for policy changes when Norway experienced disappointing results in the first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study at the turn of the millennium (Elstad, 2010). It became an important goal for Norwegian politicians that student results on PISA rankings should improve. As a consequence, the government implemented a new educational policy named *The Knowledge Promotion* (Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). Target management with result control characterises the education sector in a stronger way than before. Norwegian white papers began using a new word for academic pressure (*læringstrykk*, which literally means 'learning pressure'), and a white paper published in 2004 emphasised that Norwegian teachers should put more pressure on learners for higher achievement (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2004). Additionally, a white paper from 2009 declared that teachers 'have a clear responsibility for what students learn' (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2008-2009).

In Norway, grades 1–10 are mandatory, while grades 11–13 are optional, and approximately 98% of students continue directly from lower- to upper-secondary school (UDIR, 2016). The core curriculum (UDIR, 2017) states that all school subjects are to prepare students for participation in society. This aim is clearly expressed through the inclusion of 'democracy and citizenship' (*Demokrati og medborgerskap*) as one of three new cross-curricular themes[1]. However, the social studies subject is responsible for topics concerning social structures, politics and democracy. Social studies is a mandatory subject from grade 1 in primary school (age 6) through grade 11 in upper-secondary school (age 16–17). In primary and lower-secondary school, social studies comprises social science, history and geography. This study focuses on students in upper-secondary school, where the subject is studied three hours each week and consists only of topics from the social sciences (e.g., sociology, social anthropology, political science). The purpose of the mandatory social studies subject in upper-secondary school states the following:

> *The subject shall promote the ability to reason and solve problems in society through discussion and by stimulating the desire and ability to seek knowledge about society and cultures. Knowledge about the society around us will inspire curiosity and wonder in pupils and stimulate reflection and creative work. In this way, the individual can better learn to understand himself and others, develop competence and influence the world we live in, and be motivated to acquire insight and strive for lifelong learning.* (UDIR, 2013)

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[1] Norwegian curricula are currently undergoing reform. Except for the mentioning of the new core curriculum, the description in this article is based on the current curricula (January 2020).

In light of the overall purpose, the subject comprises five main areas: the researcher; the individual, society and culture; work and commercial life; politics and democracy; and international affairs. In addition to the subject content, the curriculum emphasises central democratic skills and competencies, such as discussing and analysing social and political challenges and issues. This subject represents the last year of mandatory social studies for students in Norwegian schools.

Framing of the present study

Previous research on students' effort

Many students believe that their ability and effort determine their achievement in school. Previous studies on the antecedents of learners' engagement and effort in learning activities have found that several internal factors (e.g., motivational factors and student beliefs) and external factors (e.g., aspects of teaching and the classroom environment) influence students' effort (e.g., Allen, Hafen, Gregory, Mikami & Pianta, 2015; Timmers et al., 2013; Wentzel et al., 2017). Commonly investigated factors include teachers' social/emotional and academic support (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel et al., 2017) and students' peer support (Wentzel et al., 2017), gender (Fan, 2011) and academic and non-academic self-concept and motivation (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke & Akey, 2004; Timmers et al., 2013; Wentzel et al., 2017). In the following, we elaborate on this previous relevant research and the hypotheses of the present study.

As this article aims to contribute to knowledge about teaching and learning in the school subject of social studies, we begin this review by outlining some central contributions related to social studies and citizenship education before moving on to research about students' effort in school. Several studies have demonstrated the impact of citizenship education on students' knowledge and engagement (e.g., Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Reichert & Print, 2018; Whiteley, 2014). Another strand of research has investigated instructional practices in social studies education, often through qualitative methods of inquiry (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, Beeson & Ayers, 2015; Sandahl, 2015). Such studies have involved both teachers and students and have explored a variety of topics. In the Swedish context, for example, Sandahl (2015) found that activities in class focused on students' abilities to analyse, critically review and contextualise subject matter issues, which he labelled 'second-order thinking concepts' in contrast to thematic first-order subject matter concepts, such as poverty and free trade. Moreover, Børhaug and Borgund (2018) conducted an interview study and found that students in elective social studies subjects in Norway were motivated by the subjects' openness to self-regulation, the students' ability to draw on prior knowledge and the relevance of the subjects' content to their lives. In a previous study, Mathé & Elstad (2018) reported that students found social studies valuable in terms of preparing them for citizenship and that students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in the subject were most strongly associated with their enjoyment of social

studies and aspects of the teacher's instructional contribution. Few studies, however, have focused on students' effort in the Norwegian school subject of social studies.

The perceived value and relevance of school activities might influence students' effort and goals related to particular domains or tasks. For example, Timmers et al. (2013) found students' perceptions of task value to be positively related to the effort they put into completing a task, and Greene et al. (2004) concluded that students' perceptions of the meaningfulness and relevance of classroom tasks influence the effort they put into the task. An important aspect of social studies that might contribute to students' perceptions of value and relevance is the extent to which students see the subject as valuable in terms of inspiring and preparing them for current and future citizenship. We therefore posit that students' perceptions of citizenship preparation are associated with the effort they put into the subject.

However, perceiving that social studies is relevant and important is not necessarily enough to boost students' effort. Research has found that high self-efficacy can have a positive impact on learning, achievement, interests and effort (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). More specifically, studies have concluded that students' self-efficacy is an important factor explaining their effort in school and on specific tasks (Greene et al., 2004; Murdock, Anderman & Hodge, 2000; Schunk & Mullen, 2012; Wentzel et al., 2017). We argue that self-efficacy in social studies is related to students' perceptions of their ability to, for example, accomplish subject-specific tasks, understand domain-relevant concepts and produce well-written social studies texts. We hypothesise that these perceptions may, in turn, influence students' effort.

In addition to self-efficacy, students may experience varying degrees of academic pressure from their teachers. Academic pressure is the degree to which teachers' expectations and other environmental forces press students to achieve in school (Murphy, Weil, Hallinger & Mitman, 1982). For example, students might perceive that the teacher sets high standards for them and expects them to follow what is happening in the world and to work hard in the subject. Research has shown that teachers' expectations influence students' effort and achievement (McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Murdock et al., 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and tend to be self-fulfilling (Jussim, Madon & Chatman, 1994). We expect that students' perceptions of the teacher's expectations push them to respond in particular ways to school; as such, these perceptions may be associated with students' efforts in social studies.

Moreover, previous research has found student–teacher relationships to be important for student outcomes (Lee, 2012). For example, students who perceive that their teachers support and care about them tend to be motivated and actively engaged in academic activities at school (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011; Ruzek, Hafen, Allen, Gregory, Mikami & Pianta, 2016). In their meta-analysis, Roorda et al. (2011) even found that effect sizes for positive relationships were larger for both engagement and achievement in secondary school than in primary school. We therefore assume that students' relational trust toward the social studies teacher is associated with their effort in the subject.

Besides aspects of students' school environment, various background variables are often found significant when it comes to student outcomes. For example, studies have

indicated that differences exist between males and females in terms of school attainment and academic self-discipline (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006) and that females tend to earn higher grades than males in major subjects in primary and secondary schools (e.g., Backe-Hansen, Walhovd & Huang, 2014; Duckworth & Seligman, 2006). Therefore, we include gender as a control variable.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a widely used contextual variable in educational research (Benner, Boyle & Sadler, 2016; Park & Bauer, 2002). However, there is an ongoing dispute about the conceptual meaning and empirical measurement of SES in studies conducted with upper secondary students (Ensminger, Fothergill, Bornstein & Bradley, 2003). Combinations of variables are used to measure SES, and some large-scale studies such as PISA consider students' self-reported number of books in the home as an indication of the availability of educational resources in students' home (OECD, 2016). While Rutkowski and Rutkowski (2010, 2013) argued that background measures such as the number of books in the home are problematic when comparing educational systems in different country contexts, particularly developed versus developing countries, they stated that 'information provided from these 30 economically developed countries [OECD] is sound' (Rutkowski & Rutkowski, 2010). As one potential aspect of students' SES, we expect that the number of books in students' home environment is related to their effort.

This review of previous research has presented certain factors that may be important for students' effort. Based on this research, we aim to explore some aspects of students' effort and six related factors in the subject of social studies (see Figure 1). In the following, we provide an outline of the central concepts of the present study.
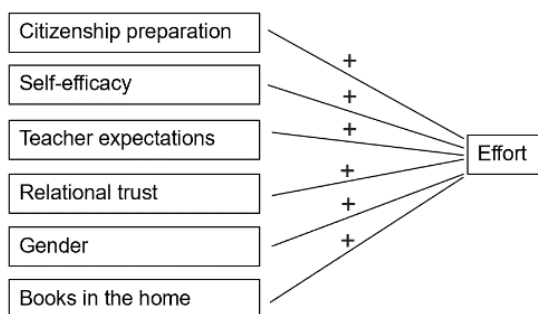

FIGURE 1.

Expected relationships between students' effort and related factors.

Theoretical perspectives

In this study, we focus on students in the context of social studies in school by combining subject-specific characteristics with more generic aspects of school learning. We therefore draw on both social studies and citizenship education research and general education research, rather than one unifying theory. The purpose of this framing is to elaborate on the central concepts of the present study.

This study draws on educational theory focusing on the learner as an active constructor of knowledge. For example, students interpret, reject or accept information they receive from various sources, such as teachers (Furnham & Stacey, 1991; Shor, 1992). Further, being able to demonstrate academic development in school requires students' effort, which can be viewed as an indirect measure of motivational beliefs (Timmers et al., 2013). Brookhart (1997) argued that both covert (mental) and overt (visible) activities are part of student effort. While covert cognitive activity is central to learning, teachers also expect students to perform overt activities, such as 'to do homework, write papers, perform experiments, participate in class discussions, and in general behave as citizens in a community of learners' (Brookhart, 1997, p. 174). In line with Brookhart (1997), we emphasise students' self-reported covert and overt effort in our dependent variable *students' effort in social studies*.

A common purpose of social studies is to prepare students for citizenship, for example in terms of democratic and political participation (Solhaug, 2003, 2013). According to Sandahl (2013), the combination of teaching subject matter and fostering democratic citizenship is typical of Scandinavian social studies subjects. Christensen's (2015) model of knowledge domains in social studies illustrates this combination by showing how social studies draws on four interrelated domains: (a) societal processes and institutions and topical issues, (b) social scientific disciplines, (c) students' lifeworld and (d) democratic values. Particularly, the balance between these domains is key to ensuring social studies instruction that builds on social science; is relevant to current society and developments; relates to and draws on students' own experiences, questions and situations as young citizens; and incorporates democratic practices and values. In short, in addition to contributing to students' knowledge of structures, processes and important issues in society, social studies should facilitate students to cultivate interest and participate in society. Our first independent variable *students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies* taps into these perspectives.

Broadly, students' actions can be related to their beliefs about their own capabilities and expected outcomes (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Bandura (1977, 2006) assumed that one's motivation to act, degree of effort and persistent use of coping mechanisms in the face of setbacks were strongly influenced by the belief in one's abilities in a given domain. He introduced the concept of self-efficacy as an assessment of a person's capability to accomplish a desired level of performance in a given endeavour and proposed four major influences on self-efficacy beliefs (originally developed for student teachers): mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences and physiological arousal, of which mastery experiences is the most powerful. Self-efficacy increases if students perceive their achievement to be successful, which in turn increases their expectations with regard to their future performance. Success increases self-efficacy, which may result in greater effort, while failure lowers self-efficacy, resulting in lower effort. Our second independent variable *students' self-efficacy in social studies* draws on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, emphasising mastery experiences.

A school environment that emphasises academic excellence creates expectations of both teachers and students to conform to academic standards (Lee, 2012). Individual teachers in the classroom may pursue this environment by seeking to improve student

learning in different ways. Besides teaching subject matter, teachers are tasked with identifying students' learning potential and contributing to the conditions for students' development (Weinstein, 2002). How teachers communicate their academic expectations to their students is an example of teachers' contribution in this respect (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014). Such expectations can be generic (e.g., motivating students to work hard and telling them that they can do better) and subject-specific (e.g., expecting students to pay attention to current societal and political events). However, supportive and trusting student–teacher relationships are also an important aspect of the school climate (Lee, 2012). Lee (2012) argued that the combination of demandingness (teacher expectations) and support (relational trust) can contribute to creating a social environment that supports student engagement and achievement. For example, students are more likely to internalise their school's academic norms if 'their relationships with the socialization agents are nurturing and supportive' (Lee, 2012, p. 332). Consequently, our third and fourth independent variables *students' perceptions of teacher expectations in social studies* and *students' relational trust toward their social studies teacher* reflect these perspectives.

In sum, our theoretical framework builds on perspectives of teaching and learning and the broader aims of social studies and citizenship education.

Methods

This article reports on a quantitative study conducted in Eastern Norway among 16- to 17-year-old students in the mandatory school subject of social studies. We designed a quantitative study to explore the strength of relations between students' self-reported effort in social studies and associated factors. This kind of study allowed us to search for patterns and associations on an aggregated level rather than within or across individual responses. The quantitative design also enabled a larger sample size to include the perspectives of a wide variety of students.

Sample and data collection

One of the authors and a research assistant collected quantitative data through a 111-item paper-and-pencil questionnaire distributed in person at 11 upper-secondary schools in Eastern Norway. The survey instrument covered three main themes: students' perceptions of (1) the concepts of democracy and politics and (2) the social studies subject and (3) their political interests and activities. To recruit participants, we contacted the heads of the social studies departments of 21 schools in the region and asked them for access to students in a social studies class whose teacher would be willing to allow us to conduct our research during a social studies lesson. We received positive responses from 11 teachers; thus, the sample included a total of 264 students (43.7% boys and 56.3% girls) in 11 classes (one from each school). No students declined to participate in the study. To reduce the extent of missing values, we worked with each student to browse through the questionnaire to check whether they had unintentionally left any questions unanswered immediately after each student finished the survey.

The students were 16 or 17 years old when they completed the questionnaire. Through our sampling procedures, we attempted to increase the variation in the sample in terms of (a) examination of rural, suburban and urban schools (across three counties); (b) use of entire classes of students; and (c) student intake (schools varied from low to high intake criteria). However, except for a small group of students who attended a vocational study programme, all the participants were enrolled in the general study programme.

Research ethics

We ensured compliance with the ethical standards required by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (2016). First, we fully informed the study's participants of the project's aims and scope. Second, we obtained informed consent from each participant. We provided information about the study and what participation would entail on the front page of the questionnaire. We also informed students that completing and submitting the questionnaire would be considered consenting to participation. In addition, we informed students that they could choose not to answer any question on the questionnaire or withdraw from the study at any time during completion of the survey (as we would not be able to trace their anonymous data after this). Third, participants' privacy and confidentiality were assured since we collected no personal or identifiable information such as students' names or information about schools or counties. All communication prior to data collection happened between one of the authors and the contact person at each school.

Measures

The variables are each based on 3–6 items developed by the researchers (see the Appendix). All the measures included in this study were scored on a 7-point Likert scale with 4 as a neutral value. Therefore, all the variables are assumed to be at an approximate interval level. The variables are as follows:

- *Students' effort in social studies*: This variable comprises three items intended to measure students' self-reported effort on social studies assignments and preparation for social studies lessons. An example item is 'I always do my best when working with social studies'.
- *Students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies*: This variable is intended to measure how students perceive the value of social studies for preparing them for democratic citizenship. We adapted three items from the measure developed by Tuan, Chin and Shieh (2005) for science education. We created three additional items to investigate central aspects of social studies and citizenship education. An example item is 'Social studies helps me understand the world around me'.
- *Students' self-efficacy in social studies*: This variable comprises four items intended to measure students' self-reported efficacy and perceived abilities in social studies. An example item is 'I have a very good comprehension of the concepts in social studies'.

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- *Students' perceptions of teacher expectations in social studies*: We constructed this variable, consisting of three items, to measure students' perceptions of the teacher's academic expectations for students in social studies. An example item is 'My social studies teacher expects students to pay attention to what goes on in the world'.
- *Students' relational trust toward their social studies teacher*: This variable comprises four items intended to measure students' perceptions of teacher support as well as students' trust in what the teacher tells them. An example item is 'My social studies teacher is concerned with the wellbeing of every single student'.
- *Gender*: We constructed the measure of gender to obtain information about students' self-identified gender. The variable is dichotomous (1=boy, 2=girl).
- *Books in the home*: We used the PISA measure of number of books in the home as a background variable (OECD, 2016). The PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) is derived from several variables, and we do not argue that one indicator alone sufficiently measures students' SES. The measure asks students to choose between six response alternatives: (1) 0–10 books, (2) 11–25 books, (3) 26–100 books, (4) 101–200 books, (5) 201–500 books or (6) 500 books or more.

We piloted and discussed the instrument with a group of 20 students, aged 16–17, enrolled in social studies in 2017. This process resulted in some changes in wording. The Appendix presents the constructs and items, which were originally written and distributed in Norwegian and then translated to English for this article. Table 1 presents the bivariate correlations, descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha (α) for each construct. The reliabilities are quite satisfactory.

Data analysis

To analyse the relationships between the variables, we conducted multiple linear regression. Its estimation using ordinary least squares (OLS) is a widely used tool that allows an estimation of the relation between a dependent variable and a set of independent, or explanatory, variables (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Initially, we examined descriptive item statistics using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The item scores were approximately normally distributed for all variables. Then, we conducted Principal Component Analyses (PCA) for each measure and deleted some items due to their poor psychometric properties. However, the items associated with each variable emerged as one component in the PCA (see the Appendix), and we combined the respective items to make up the following variables: students' effort, citizenship preparation, self-efficacy, teacher expectations, and relational trust. We found that the items concerning students' effort in social studies accounted for 59%, the items concerning students' self-efficacy in social studies accounted for 75%, the items concerning citizenship preparation in social studies accounted for 60%, the items concerning students' perceptions of teacher expectations

in social studies accounted for 53%, and the items making up relational trust account for 80% of the variance.

We tested the hypothesised model by linear multiple regression analysis in SPSS. For clarity, we standardised all scale variables before adding them to the regression analysis. We based the assessment of the regression models on the adjusted R^2, a modified fraction of the sample variance of the dependent variable that is explained by the regressors[2]. The aim of the analysis was to confirm or reject the study's six hypotheses concerning the strength and significance of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

Reliability and validity

We used Cronbach's α, which captures the breadth of the construct, to assess the indicators' measurement reliability for each scale (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Cronbach's α is influenced by the number of items in a test (Eisinga, Grotenhuis & Pelzer, 2013) and ranges from 0 to 1. Our measures are mostly satisfactory with values ranging from .567 to .917 (see Table 1). We acknowledge that the variable teacher expectations has a somewhat low alpha. As our survey instrument represents our first effort in terms of developing a survey instrument for social studies in upper-secondary school, we decided to retain the measure of teacher expectations for further analyses. We acknowledge that it should be developed further to increase reliability, but deem it sufficient for the purpose of the present analysis.

While this article is based on new quantitative data from students in social studies, there are some clear limitations concerning validity. First, we do not claim causality. Causation in human interaction is very complex: the 'effect' of causes is produced by many factors, and the exogenous variables we used in our model do not capture the complete picture. Johnson and Christensen (2017) established three conditions for making a claim of causation between two variables: (a) The two variables must be related, (b) changes in the independent variable must occur before changes in the dependent variable, and (c) there must not be any plausible alternative explanation for the observed relationship between the variables. While the first condition (i.e., presence of a relationship) was met, this is not a sufficient requirement for a causation claim. The second requirement (the temporal order condition) could not be addressed directly because the data were cross-sectional (i.e., collected at a single point in time) and we do not claim to have controlled for all alternative explanations. That is, although the expected relationships were theory-generated, suggesting that the estimated regression coefficients may reveal causal relationships, the identified causal directions may be ambiguous.

Second, we make no claims to external validity, or generalisability, due to limitations in the sample (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). While the sample comprised students from schools located in urban, suburban and rural areas with low to high intake criteria

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[2] Adjusted R^2 is a better measure than R^2 because adjusted R^2 does not necessarily increase when a new regressor is included.

and mixed SES, we relied on non-probability sampling for this study. We do not suspect selectivity bias to be a clear threat to validity because no students refused to participate in our investigation. A larger sample might improve the validity of the statistical conclusions (Cook & Campbell, 1979). However, readers may make naturalistic generalisations by comparing their groups' demographics and other characteristics to the demographics and characteristics of the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) and decide upon the transferability of the results by comparing the context of the study to their own.

Results

Table 1 presents the bivariate correlations between the variables as well as the means, Cronbach's α and standard deviation for each construct. Distribution percentages show that, although the mean value for students' self-reported effort in social studies is close to the neutral value 4 in this sample, 67.6% of the students agreed that they always do their best when working with social studies (item 74, response alternatives 5–7).

TABLE 1.

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities and bivariate correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Students' effort							
2 Citizenship preparation	.478**						
3 Self-efficacy	.455**	.294**					
4 Teacher expectations	.286**	.421**	.190**				
5 Relational trust	.189*	.275**	.247**	.281**			
6 Gender	.128*	.052	-.097	.056	-.121		
7 Books at home	-.009	.019	.284**	.118	-.006	-.078	
Reliability[1]	.656	.852	.890	.567	.917	-	-
Means	4.26	5.23	4.90	5.13	5.26	1.56	4.28
Std. deviation	1.24	0.99	1.23	0.95	1.33	4.97	1.28

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, [1] Cronbach's α

Of note in Table 1 is the relatively strong correlation between perceptions of citizenship preparation and self-efficacy on the one hand and students' effort on the other. We also note the weaker correlations between the dependent variable and teacher expectations, relational trust and gender. Concerning gender, the only significant correlation is with the dependent variable, students' effort. Interestingly, the strongest non-significant correlation, between self-efficacy and gender ($r = -.097$), indicates that boys reported higher self-efficacy than did girls (boys = value 1). Table 1 also reveals a lack of significant relation between books in the home and students' effort. Despite its seeming lack of relevance in terms of understanding effort, we retain this variable for further analysis due to its general importance as an independent variable in educational research. Table 2 presents the results of the regression analysis.

TABLE 2.

Coefficients of regression with students' effort as the dependent variable (n=264).

	Model		
	B	SE(B)	ß
Constant	-1.732	0.402	
Citizenship preparation	0.320	0.060	0.317***
Self-efficacy	0.385	0.057	0.381***
Teacher expectations	0.081	0.058	0.080
Relational trust	0.019	0.057	0.019
Gender	0.286	0.104	0.141*
Books at home	-.093	0.042	-0.117*
R^2 -adjusted			*0.358*

Note: *** p<.001, * p<.05, [1] Cronbach's α

Unlike the correlations presented in Table 1, the regression analysis presented in Table 2 shows each variable's unique contribution to explaining the dependent variable. Table 2 presents the unstandardised (b) and standardised (ß) coefficients of the OLS regression with students' effort as a dependent variable, as well as the standard error of the regression (SE (B)). The results of the regression analysis show that students' self-efficacy and perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies were moderately and significantly associated with their self-reported efforts in the subject. We also found that gender was significantly associated with students' effort. Interestingly, in light of the correlations in Table 1, the number of books at home seems to be significantly negatively associated with effort. That is, the present analysis indicates that students who reported having fewer books at home also reported exerting more effort in social studies. The variables *teacher expectations* and *relational trust* were not found to have a significant association with the dependent variable in the regression analysis, despite the significant correlations presented in Table 1. This finding might be a result of indirect relationships, causing the potential impact of these variables to work indirectly through one or more of the other independent variables.

We tested the regression model but found no indication of multicollinearity being a problem in the analysis (variance inflation factor values under 2). Below, we discuss this study's findings in light of previous research before we briefly discuss its limitations and offer implications for educational practice.

Discussion

The results of the present analysis offer new insights for the field of social studies didactics. As expected, the relation between students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies and effort was significant. While studies on the impact of citizenship education have frequently focused on students' future engagement (e.g., Reichert & Print, 2018), we constructed our variable on citizenship preparation to be

sensitive to students' current citizenship opportunities and activities. This measure is an important contribution to social studies didactics because it is tailored for young people. In light of previous research, one interpretation of the relationship between students' perceptions of citizenship preparation and effort might be that students who perceive social studies to be relevant and valuable are more likely to enjoy working with the subject and exert effort to improve their knowledge, skills and achievements (Greene et al., 2004; Timmers et al., 2013). This relationship relates to the combination of perspectives characteristic of social studies, for example how teachers balance social scientific disciplines and students' lifeworld (Christensen, 2015). This explanation might also reflect Børhaug and Borgund's (2018) finding that students were motivated by social studies to the extent that the topics were relevant for their own lives. However, we do not claim that students' perceptions of citizenship preparation led to their effort in social studies. A more plausible assumption might be that students' perceptions of citizenship preparation are reciprocally related to their effort in social studies. That is, students who actively engage with the subject matter and prepare for social studies lessons might develop an understanding of social issues that enables them to recognise their own role in a larger system (Reinhardt, 2015) and consequently acknowledge the value of social studies in terms of citizenship preparation. To better understand the mechanisms at work in this phenomenon, future research could involve controlled experiments or qualitative approaches to investigate students' perspectives on and work related to social studies.

In light of educational theory and research, it is not surprising that students' self-efficacy is associated with their efforts. Our measures focused on characteristics of social studies in school and this is therefore new insight for social studies didactics. Mastery experiences are motivational and might make working with a challenging task both more interesting and less daunting (Bandura, 1977; Wentzel et al., 2017). Efficacy and students' effort in social studies might also have a reciprocal relationship, in the sense that strengthened efforts may inspire learning, mastery experiences and gains in achievement that influence efficacy beliefs (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Conversely, lower self-efficacy might lead to lower goals and less effort, which negatively affects engagement and learning (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). In social studies, students write academic texts and participate in discussions in which they are required to evaluate and discuss contrasting arguments using a variety of concepts (Mathé & Elstad, 2018; Sandahl, 2015). The items making up our self-efficacy variable include comprehension of concepts in social studies and writing social studies texts. As such, the positive association between self-efficacy and effort in this study might support our assumption that these aspects are relevant components of students' social studies self-efficacy. However, more studies are needed to understand the fine-grained mechanisms involving self-esteem, self-efficacy and aspects of volition related to social studies and how effort can vary between situations. For example, research could examine the role of peers in group work and class discussions in social studies as our instrument focused on individual characteristics.

Based on previous research (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Lee, 2012; Ruzek et al., 2016), we assumed that teachers' expressions of academic expectations for students and

students' relational trust toward their social studies teacher would be positively associated with their efforts in the subject. However, we found no direct connection between these independent variables and students' effort in the multiple regression analysis. The mean values for students' perceptions of teacher expectations (m=5.13) and relational trust (m=5.26) are quite high, indicating that students in this study perceive their social studies teacher to have high expectations of them and support and care for them. However, as Lee (2012) posited, it is the combination of expectations and support that may contribute to creating a school environment supporting students' engagement and achievement. In this study, the two variables were only moderately correlated (r=.281). The fact that these two variables do not seem to operate in combination in any strong sense might explain their lack of direct influence on students' self-reported effort (Lee, 2012). Moreover, other factors might matter more, such as parents' expectations, support from the peer group (Wentzel et al., 2017) or school culture. Future studies could investigate these topics and include more background variables. Finally, we acknowledge that this result might be related to limitations of the present analysis. A structural equation model might nuance the results; for example, teacher expectations and support might mediate students' perceptions of citizenship preparation, as these variables are moderately positively correlated.

While we found gender to be significantly associated with students' effort, this association was quite weak. The inclusion of gender as a control variable and the results of the analyses indicate that gender is not an underlying factor creating spurious effects of the other independent variables (Henseler & Fassott, 2010). That being said, although the differences between the genders were small, being a girl was more strongly related to higher self-reported effort than being a boy. We note that this finding is in line with some other studies and acknowledge that self-discipline could be a mediating factor here. That is, as studies have found girls to be more self-disciplined than boys (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006), self-discipline might contribute to girls' increased efforts in social studies. However, gender was only weakly associated with students' efforts in this study. Moreover, social studies teachers have limited ability to ameliorate the complex structures influencing gender differences, and this study indicates that teachers' strategies to improve students' effort and learning outcomes might instead focus on more social studies subject-related aspects of teaching.

Finally, we included students' self-reported number of books at home as an indication of SES. The significant negative association between the number of books at home and students' effort might indicate that students from lower SES backgrounds invest more effort to compensate for fewer educational resources at home, while students from higher SES backgrounds do not see the need to put in the same amount of work. It should be mentioned, however, that SES is usually related to students' achievement rather than effort (DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2001), so our results do not necessarily oppose previous research utilising students' SES as a background variable. As we have not collected achievement scores or grades, we are not able to investigate the relationships between students' SES, effort and educational achievement. In their study, DeLuca and Rosenbaum (2001) found that students' efforts were strongly and significantly related to their long-term educational attainment, even when controlling

for achievement in secondary school. This finding would indicate that students who invest more effort in secondary school are rewarded for their effort in the long run. However, the same study also found that low-SES students got significantly lower benefit for increases in effort (measured via time spent on homework) than did high-SES students. Even though DeLuca and Rosenbaum's (2001) study was conducted in an American educational context more than two decades ago, it highlights the complex relationships underlying students' educational attainment and points to the need for more knowledge about the nature and function of students' effort in social studies in the Nordic context.

Despite its limitations, we argue that this study can serve as a point of departure for future research. First, additional explanatory factors could be added to the model to increase its explanatory potential. For instance, future research could utilise literature on a range of non-cognitive attributes (Brunello & Schlotter, 2011) that are important in educational settings. Second, more research is needed to improve the validity of our results. The Cronbach's α values were quite satisfying, but the operationalisations of constructs can always be improved. Third, this study relied on a non-probability sample. Future studies could include larger and, if possible, representative samples to improve external validity. Finally, although we argue that students' effort is an important part of their education that might influence their academic development, achievements and, consequently, future educational opportunities, we recognise other relevant factors, such as students' background and parental support. Moreover, the quality of instruction and students' emotional and social well-being in school may be consequential. However, as students' effort has the potential to be inspired, developed and intensified, we believe this study contributes with relevant insights for social studies didactics. In the following section, we outline some implications of our results.

Implications for instruction and concluding remarks

Social studies instruction can target all the variables, except gender, that were found to be positively associated with students' effort in this study. The analyses therefore indicate that teachers can take steps to support and inspire students' effort in social studies.

First, teachers can exert a positive influence on students' efficacy beliefs by contributing to a classroom environment where students experience that their own and others' efforts lead to positive outcomes (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Teachers can also support students' self-efficacy by addressing students' individual goals related to the subject (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). In social studies, such goals can be related to developing one's argumentative skills, understanding particular content knowledge or participating in whole-class discussions. A persisting challenge, however, is inspiring the effort of students who seldom or never achieve higher grades in the subject and whose lack of motivation and mastery beliefs might deter them from engaging with the concepts, perspectives and content knowledge of social studies. This challenge is

perhaps also related to students' perceptions of the nature and relevance of the subject itself, which we address in the following.

Second, teachers can contribute to students' perceptions of the value of social studies in terms of citizenship preparation by being sensitive to connections between social studies content and students' lifeworld (Christensen, 2015), for example by relating students' experiences, questions and interests to social and political structures and issues. Such connections might highlight the potential of social studies to address students' current and future opportunities for democratic and political engagement, thereby giving value to the activities and content in social studies (Greene et al., 2004; Timmers et al., 2013). As such, contributing to students' ability to see the value of social studies might strengthen students' motivation, which may boost effort (Greene et al., 2004; Timmers et al., 2013; Wentzel et al., 2017).

However, relating content knowledge to students' perspectives and interests does not imply abandoning the instructional goals of the teacher or the curriculum, nor does it change the fact that some aspects of the subject might not appear particularly interesting or relevant to some students. In line with Christensen (2015), it is precisely this combination of various knowledge domains and perspectives that characterises social studies, and maintaining, adjusting and making visible this combination is perhaps one of the challenges of social studies instruction.

This study contributes to our understanding of the antecedents of students' effort in social studies, a phenomenon which has not been heavily studied. We note that students' reported self-efficacy in social studies, their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies and their gender were significantly and positively related to students' effort, and the number of books in their homes was negatively associated with effort. Conversely, their perceptions of teacher expectations and relational trust were not directly related to their reported effort. In addition to providing insights into students' perspectives on social studies in upper-secondary school, our results open new research questions that call for more research on social studies teaching and learning.

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Appendix

Constructs	Mean values	Std. deviation	Skewness/ kurtosis	Component loadings
Students' effort in social studies				
74. I always do my best when working with social studies	5.13	1.494	.-543/-.166	.795
75. I always prepare well for social studies lessons	3.63	1.622	.121/-.403	.811
77. I usually complete social studies assignments well before the deadline	4.01	1.724	.081/-.731	.703
Students' perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies				
54. I think social studies is important because I can use what I learn in everyday life	5.27	1.287	-.480/.338	.741
55. I think social studies is important because it challenges me to think	5.26	1.165	-.232/-.113	.771
57. Social studies helps me understand the world around me	5.61	1.184	-.645/.078	.794
58. Social studies makes me curious about the world around me	5.35	1.333	-.652/.235	.804
59. Social studies prepares students to participate actively in society	5.23	1.320	-.745/.736	.727
60. Social studies makes me want to get engaged in society	4.66	1.479	-.335/-.102	.770
Students' self-efficacy in social studies				
70. I always do very well on evaluations in social studies	4.91	1.467	-.577/.168	.843
71. I have a very good comprehension of the concepts in social studies	5.07	1.386	-.710/664	.912
72. I find it very easy to understand new materials in social studies	4.94	1.441	-.619/.303	.876
73. I am very good at writing social studies texts	4.74	1.394	-.237/-.216	.837
Students' perceptions of teacher expectations in social studies				
My social studies teacher…				
62. Expects students to pay attention to what is going on in the world	5.36	1.205	-.448/-.084	.671
63. Pushes me to work even harder with the subject	4.67	1.454	-.294/-.249	.769
64. Has high expectations of us students	5.33	1.255	-.193/-.973	.755
Relational trust				
82. My social studies teacher is concerned with the wellbeing of every single student	5.28	1.499	-.761/.340	.929
83. I trust what my social studies teacher tells me	5.43	1.442	-.925/.746	.848
84. My social studies teacher expresses a personal interest in students' learning	5.13	1.514	-.573/-.136	.898
85. My social studies teacher is concerned with the success of every single student	5.22	1.521	-.703/.024	.903
Gender				
Boy/girl	1.56	4.97	-.254/ -1.950	
Books in the home	4.28	1.289	-.474/-.417	