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A Qualitative Investigation of Norwegian Lower Secondary Students' Perceptions

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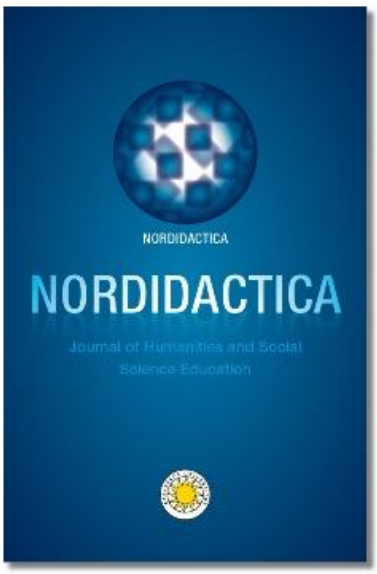

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A Qualitative Investigation of Norwegian Lower Secondary Students' Perceptions

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Abstract: This article explores lower secondary students' perceptions of how their experiences in the social studies classroom might affect their sense of internal political efficacy (IPE). The qualitative data underlying the research are group interviews with 13- and 14-year-old Norwegian students, which were analyzed using a constant-comparative method. The students' responses indicate that there are three obstacles to IPE facing the students in the social studies classroom: (1) the reactions of their peers in political discussions, (2) the perception that adolescents are not respected due to their young age, and (3) a view of opinions as fixed and hence unchangeable. The possible solutions given by the students are to work to enhance the level of respect and support that they experience in the classroom, to practice politics through carefully structured discussions, and to work in smaller groups. In analyzing the findings, Albert Bandura's theory of how efficacy develops as a consequence of experiences in a person's environment has been useful. The article also draws on Gert Biesta's framework, describing how one central aim of education is to enable students to function as subjects in a world that brings both possibilities and limitations to their preferred actions. The main implication is that the social studies teacher should aim for critical analysis and raising awareness of different perspectives instead of focusing solely on the students' personal opinions.

KEYWORDS: INTERNAL POLITICAL EFFICACY, EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY, SOCIAL STUDIES, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Introduction

Norway has a long history of civic education dating back to the establishment of Nordic social democratic welfare states after the Second World War (Telhaug et al., 2006). The Norwegian Education Act clearly states that one educational objective is to promote democracy (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020), and this trend has intensified with the introduction of *democracy and citizenship* as a cross-curricular theme taught in all subjects in Norwegian schools since 2020 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). This implies great opportunities and responsibilities for educators, who play a central role in providing adolescents with the best possible foundation for taking care of and developing their own democratic society (Held, 2006).

This answers the question of what the schools should do (teach for democracy) but still leaves the question of *how;* how can teachers work in practice to enable young citizens? Comprehensive research shows that internal political efficacy (IPE) is a key factor that can lead to participation in the political sphere (Beaumont, 2011; Reichert, 2016; Torney-Purta, 2002). Correspondingly, this is also true in Norway, where this study is situated (Ødegård & Svagård, 2018; Solhaug, 2006). In addition, there is solid evidence that educational factors, such as active students and an open classroom climate, support student IPE (Isac et al., 2014; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015).

Nevertheless, exceptions do exist concerning the connection between education and IPE. Several studies based on data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2016 show that there is little or no connection between school factors, such as an open classroom climate, and IPE in Norway (Blaskó et al., 2019; Lieberkind, 2015). There is still uncertainty about how this phenomenon can be explained, partly because previous explorations of IPE in Norway were all quantitative studies (Bragdø & Mathé, 2021; Ødegård & Svagård, 2018; Solhaug, 2006). Although they provide valuable insights into the apparent connections between the variables in their data material, they are insufficient for explaining the results. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to fill this gap by qualitatively examining social studies students' views on the connection between their experiences in the social studies classroom and their sense of political efficacy. In the Norwegian education system, social studies combines topics from geography, history, sociology, and political science. The subject is compulsory for all students throughout the 11 years of their schooling, and has a special responsibility for civic education (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020).

The research question in this study was: *What do adolescents identify as sources in the social studies classroom that can contribute to or limit their sense of internal political efficacy?* The data underlying the study consisted of group interviews with 13-year-old Norwegian students that were analyzed using the constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The article begins with a presentation of a broad theoretical framework that draws on Biesta's notion of the subjectification function of education (Biesta, 2021). Thereafter, I present the IPE concept as one possible route to support the subjectification process through social studies education, and describe how Bandura (1997) has explained the different educational experiences that might help students

develop student efficacy. Next, I examine former scholarship on social studies education and IPE to compare and contrast my findings with existing knowledge on important aspects of an educational context that might affect student IPE. The findings section presents three obstacles to IPE facing students in the social studies classroom: the reactions of their peers during political discussions, the feeling that adolescents are not respected due to their young age, and a view of opinions as unchangeable. The possible solutions proposed by the students to enhance their IPE included structured discussions, working together, and receiving respect and recognition from their peers. These are discussed in relation to the theoretical outline of the article and previous research.

Theoretical Framework

To perceive oneself as capable of influencing society, one must feel enabled to challenge the existing order and function as an autonomous individual. Biesta (2009a) refers to this as the *subjectification* function of education. Being a subject is not the same as having an identity. While identity is about *who* a person is, being a subject concerns *how* a person exists in the world, which entails having both the capacity and competence to act and the inabilities and incompetence that the person posits (Biesta, 2021, p. 52). Being a subject thus permits adolescents not only to achieve a predefined version of what citizenship should be (Biesta, 2009b), but also to take ownership of their citizenship and develop as active and responsive citizens (Lawy & Biesta, 2006).

Thus, an important premise is to know what leads to a feeling of human agency. Bandura (1997, p. 437, 2006b, p. 170) describes how a person's self consists of a personal identity and agentic capabilities. While identity refers to self-characterizations of what one is, agentic capabilities are, for example, intentionality and self-reflection, involving cognitive activity that leads to purposeful acts to acquire or avoid a specific outcome. The most important foundation of the latter aspect of human agency is efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2006b).

There are strong indications that the connection between agency and efficacy is also present within the political sphere because a key indicator of political participation across different types of civic action has proven to be political efficacy (Dalton, 2020; Vecchione et al., 2014). The internal aspect of political efficacy has been found to be a critical factor in predicting both social movement citizenship, which emphasizes forms of participation oriented toward political and civic life (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015), and more traditional forms of participation, such as voting in an election or membership of a political party or organization (Ødegård & Svagård, 2018). These IPE studies focus on the feeling of an individual's *political competenc*e. Concurrently, political efficacy also contains an external aspect—a belief in system *responsiveness* (Craig, 1979, p. 226). Bandura (1997, p. 483) explains how IPE and external political efficacy (EPE) are not independent from each other; people's beliefs about the responsiveness of a given system might affect their IPE and thus their efforts to try to

impact the given system over time. Likewise, people who have a weak sense of IPE might effect little change even in a system that provides many opportunities to do so.

Thus, the two aspects of political efficacy are intertwined and often correlated (Craig, 1979). However, Sohl and Arensmeier (2015, p. 135) argue that, due to a lack of conceptual clarification, there is a need to treat the concepts separately. In line with this assertion, this article focuses on the internal aspects of political efficacy. In cases where EPE is considered, this is explicitly formulated, and the aspects that are considered are when EPE seems to influence student IPE. I use the term "political efficacy" in instances where both aspects are included.

The next question to be asked is how IPE can be supported in schools. Albert Bandura (1997) identifies four factors that can enhance one's sense of self-efficacy on a general level, which can also be applied to IPE specifically. The first factor is mastery experiences, which, in an educational context, means that the student experiences authentic evidence of her capability to succeed. The second factor is vicarious experiences, which posits that self-efficacy can be developed through social modeling. Observations of others display both the behavior of the other and the outcome of such behavior. Such observations can both inspire and enable students to act in a particular way. The third factor leading to self-efficacy is verbal persuasion, which happens when significant others express faith in one's capabilities to perform. In a school setting, this function might be filled by the teacher or by other students giving constructive feedback. The fourth factor, physiological or affective activation, can affect efficacy when read as signs of an ability or inability to perform. For our purpose, this means that students who experience a bad mood or physiological pain might misread these feelings as signs of dysfunction or vulnerability and hence allow them to affect their judgement of efficacy.

All of these factors apply to the individual form of efficacy. In addition, Bandura explains how efficacy can develop as a consequence of being part of a collective due to people's "shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results" (Bandura, 2000, p. 75). When part of a group, the coordinative and interactive group dynamics might influence the individual's efficacy by virtue of both affecting the individual's ability to perform in the group and the individual's evaluation of his or her group's capability to operate as a whole (Bandura, 2000, p. 76).

Literature Review: The Connections Between Internal Political Efficacy and Civic Education

Turning now to the existing literature, I will outline the central educational settings that seem to be advantageous for student IPE.

An open classroom climate has repeatedly been found to be beneficial for student IPE (Claes et al., 2017; Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015; Maurissen et al., 2018). Such a climate is characterized by students being encouraged to voice different opinions, which are respected and tolerated by fellow students and teachers (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Within this atmosphere, it is possible to aid students in practicing argumentation, encountering different perspectives, and considering the difference

between evidence and opinion (Hess & McAvoy, 2014, p. 78). Such deliberative practices might mitigate the influence of one's social background (Beaumont, 2011; Hoskins et al., 2021) by providing all students with an opportunity to practice central political skills, such as reasoning and discussing (Levy, 2013).

Often, the threshold for participating in a full-class discussion can be experienced as high. Working in smaller groups might then be a way to provide students with opportunities to work together and practice communication (Chen & Stoddard, 2020; Schmidt, 2021). These practices might enable further participation in other and more extensive arenas in the long term. The teacher's organization of the classroom and of discussions can thus be an influential base for student IPE.

Nevertheless, in Norway, some findings show no connection between an open classroom climate and IPE (Blaskó et al., 2019; Bragdø & Mathé, 2021). Lieberkind (2015) argues that a possible reason for such a (dis)connection is that teachers orchestrate and control openness in the classroom, leaving little room for student influence. Concurrently, several studies have indicated positive connections between the teacher and IPE. Formal classroom instruction (Dassonneville et al., 2012) and teacher-led reflection in groups after civic engagement activities (Bird et al., 2019) are both reported to enhance IPE. Moreover, Sohl and Arensmeier (2015, pp. 146, 137) explain the teacher's role in possibly affecting student IPE positively through pointing to engaged teaching, and how this might spark student attention and interest.

The teacher might also arrange the classroom to provide students with possibilities to be active, which could lead to mastery experiences and beneficial observations. Participating in classroom projects that are student-centered and action-oriented (Ballard et al., 2016), and in school-based civic learning experiences, such as political role play, heightens IPE (Levy, 2018). The same is observed for students involved in school democracy (Maurissen, 2020). Enabling students to be active participants in their education has thus proven to be a crucial remedy and can be effective when practiced in different arenas, such as in their classrooms and schools, and in their own communities. This underscores how the role of the teacher could make a significant difference in both promoting and reducing student IPE.

Method

Data Collection

The primary data underlying this research consisted of interviews with 16 students from the same class, aged 13 and 14. I also observed the class for several weeks. The observation data were not systematically analyzed, but served as a contextual guideline to set up and conduct the interviews. I will now outline the methodological choices.

The age group of the student participants in this project was the same as that of the ICCS, in which student political efficacy was a topic (Schulz et al., 2018). To expand on and explore the Norwegian ICCS findings (Huang et al., 2018), it seemed natural to have student participants of the same age. Concerning the choice to follow one group

of students, I used purposeful sampling (Bryman, 2008, p. 458). To answer the research question, I wanted to explore a student group in depth. This was also due to the larger research frame of which this article is a part, as I was going to follow up on the data collection with further work together with the teacher. Having further classes to follow would therefore not have been possible within the given resource frame.

I ended up following a group of students with different backgrounds and different levels of both competence and participation in the social studies classroom. The school was situated in an urban inner-city area in Norway. Regarding the choice of this particular student group, I used snowball sampling to contact teachers who might be interested in the project (Bryman, 2008, p. 184). As the sampling was done during the coronavirus pandemic, few schools were available as research sites. The sampling method can thus also be described as one of convenience (Bryman, 2008, p. 183).

Interviews

I interviewed the students in focus groups of four at their school in May 2021. Leaning on theoretical findings concerning the connections between political participation, civic education, and political efficacy, these three concepts provided the foundation for the three subsequent parts of the interview. Apart from identifying the concepts, framing them in introductory questions and explanations, and preparing tasks for the students to work on in the interview, my main focus was on making sure that all the students understood the tasks and on supporting their work and asking follow-up questions when needed to encourage them to work further on the task (Halkier, 2010).

The interviews were performed in four groups, with four students in each group. After describing the form and content of a social studies lesson, the students picked a topic they had been working on in class. This topic provided a starting point for exploring political participation and IPE. The first task explored the following question: *What types of political participation would you use to influence politics concerning the given topic?* I assigned the students different roles (writer, group leader, etc.). They were asked to suggest ways in which they might influence a political decision and to write down their suggestions on Post-it notes and hang them on the wall. During this task, the students were introduced to different arenas, such as their classroom, their school, and life outside school, to spark their thinking about how they could participate.

In the second task, the students explored what experiences in the social studies classroom they thought influenced their ability to perform the political actions they had posted on the wall, working on the overarching question: *How do experiences in the social studies classroom influence your political efficacy?* The section started with a concrete example, to familiarize the students with the concept of efficacy (Bandura, 2006a). The students were asked to consider whether they could "jump one meter", and this example was used to explain the concept of efficacy, and how different factors in the students' context would impact their estimation of their ability to perform this specific task. Thereafter, I used the students' answers from the previous task to conceptualize political participation and asked them to discuss what in-school experiences they considered to have influenced their ability to perform the political

actions that they had come up with. The students were again assigned different roles in the conversation while they worked on finding keywords to write down on a large piece of paper. The four categories the students discussed as potentially influential classroom factors were their teacher, their peers, didactic methods, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Focus group interviews might be beneficial when research participants are similar, cooperative, and from the same context (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164). In this study, all the participants were situated in the same class, had experienced the same teaching, and were of the same age. I therefore found it fitting to use this method to enable the students to probe each other's reasons and modify answers after listening to each other (Bryman, 2008, p. 475; Chrzanowska, 2002, p. 5, chap. 5). This could institute a deeper elucidation than in a more traditional sequence of conversation between interviewer and interviewee.

Furthermore, focus group interviews can be seen as beneficial when individual interviews may be difficult because the interviewee is hesitant about providing information (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164). As focus group interviews leave less control for the interviewer and more room for the interviewees (Bryman, 2008, p. 475), I was hoping to avoid the potential consequences of the hierarchical relationship between me, as an adult interviewer, and the interviewees, as students (Halkier, 2010), and to allow the students to talk more freely by enabling them to talk to peers and not only to me. To ensure that the students felt comfortable in the interview situation, I used knowledge from prior observations to construct groups that would allow everyone to participate. The roles that the students were given in the work on the tasks were also a way to ensure that everyone could feel that their participation in the group was essential for the group solving the task, and hence that their contribution was valuable to the research. At the same time, I was hoping that the interview situation would feel both more entertaining and relaxed to allow the students to feel comfortable in what was an unusual situation (Chrzanowska, 2002, p. 9, chap. 2).

Moreover, a way to overcome the participant's feeling of a lack of control or power in an interview situation is to use stimuli—providing participants with material that they are in charge of (Chrzanowska, 2002, p. 5, chap. 6). At the same time, I did not want my predefined impressions to influence the students' answers, so the use of stimuli tasks was also a way to allow the students to work on the interview topics without me steering them in a specific direction in terms of content. Using the tasks as tools, the students were given the opportunity to move beyond the categories given in the task (Sannino, 2015). Given that the tasks consisted only of concepts to be explored and of practical instructions, the students were free to interpret the concepts and suggest their own solutions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Another type of stimulus that I actively used during the interviews was mirror data, where my observations were used to reflect back to the students how specific classroom situations had played out (Cole & Engeström, 2007). Thus, as the interviews progressed, I could use my knowledge to expand their thinking. When needed, I would follow up on the students' descriptions and explanations with questions or comments that would expand on their depiction while also adding components from my observations. In this

way, I could use my background knowledge to make my participation in their conversation both relevant and pointed (Chrzanowska, 2002).

Nevertheless, the potential disadvantages of using focus groups must be addressed. The dangers are, for example, groupthink, where conclusions are reached that individual participants think are wrong, thus making them feel uncomfortable, and the conformity effect, where participants answer in line with others to avoid potential social consequences (Chrzanowska, 2002, p. 10, chap. 4). Chrzanowska (2002, p. 9, chap. 5) suggests that a way to moderate focus group interviews to avoid participants getting stuck in socio-emotional roles or plays for status is to manage the group carefully by impartial moderation and validation of individual views (Chrzanowska, 2002, p. 9, chap. 5), for example, by encouraging the silent and stopping the dominant. An example of this can be seen in the excerpt on p. 39, where Nate, who had been silent for some time, was encouraged to share his views.

Finally, I was careful to signal the transitions in the interview and explain the concepts and tasks to try to remove any potential anxiety or insecurities on the student's behalf (Chrzanowska, 2002, p. 7, chap. 7). I leaned on theoretical insights regarding how to execute these explanations. As for the term "efficacy" (Norwegian: *mestringstro*), I assumed that it would be an unfamiliar concept to the students. As efficacy beliefs partly stem from people visualizing themselves executing activities skillfully (Bandura, 1997), I started by letting the students consider what they thought of as political activities to enable them to operationalize the concept of IPE in the next part of the interview. As the term itself was introduced, I used a concrete example and phrased the question using the word *can* to underscore that efficacy is about one's perceived capabilities, and to distinguish self-efficacy from phenomena such as self-esteem or expectations of potential outcomes for a particular action (Bandura, 2006a). As for the tasks, I explained them, and afterwards, I checked with each student individually to see if they understood their part of the group work. During the work, I was careful to look for signs of insecurity (e.g., students looking down or not participating) to help them both perform their assigned task and contribute content to the group.

Data Analysis

As I wanted to explore the students' understanding of the connections between social studies teaching and IPE, the constant-comparative method seemed a natural choice, since it can be used to correct, redefine, and modify already existing concepts and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The audio files from the interviews were analyzed using this method, in which the making of constant comparisons is the main tool, while moving back and forth between data collection, analysis of the data material, and consulting already existing theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

After the first interview, I transcribed it and wrote memos before I returned to do the second interview. The students' names were not used; instead, I used numbers in the transcriptions, and they were subsequently given pseudonyms. I repeated this routine of interviewing, transcribing, and writing memos four times, moving back and forth

between data collection, initial analysis, and reading existing research. Between interviews, I used the asking questions technique to gain new insights and find new angles to look for in the next interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

After I finished the interviews, I coded and analyzed the transcripts using NVivo. The first round of coding was open and systematized the data according to the structure of the interviews. I used the following labels: *description of social studies lesson*, *experience of social studies lesson, political participation channel, agency,* and *lack of agency*. Concurrently, I actively used memos in which I wrote down keywords, thoughts, and questions. Following Strauss and Corbin (1990), I looked for *causal conditions*, which were factors that the students considered hindered or supported IPE. During this step, I used my knowledge from the observation period to contextualize and understand the students' descriptions and explanations. The causal conditions identified were *emotional closeness, relationship with peers, relationship with adults, teaching methods,* and *behavior*. The material was then coded a second time using this second set of categories as labels.

After the second coding, I developed propositions regarding how the categories were connected to each other (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). When combining and exploring the factors identified in the second round of coding, I was able to single out a three-headed model for IPE obstacles: *the classroom climate*, *the students' age*, and *the view of opinions as static*. These were connected to certain solutions: *respect and support*, *structured discussions*, and *working together*. I then read the data material a third time, ensuring that it was coded correctly, and sorted the prior categories into larger folders that represented the final layer of categories I had identified. The categories from the third and final round of coding were used to structure the findings section and guide the discussion presented below.

Findings

To present my findings, I begin by describing the educational factors that the students described as hindrances to their IPE. The second part of this section describes what the students saw as classroom solutions that could enhance IPE.

Three Obstacles to Internal Political Efficacy

The Social Consequences of Participating in Discussions in the Social Studies Classroom

The students described social studies as a subject they both liked and found interesting. Sometimes the subject was thought to be challenging due to a harsh debating climate. Group 4 described occurrences of discussions as "fun," "interesting," and "something that I can learn from." Concurrently, they described the discussions as shown in the example below:

> *Dan: […] There is often a bit of discussion in the classroom. There are maybe four or five students who talk a lot, while the others sit and listen.*

Emma: Someone did something, and then others heard it and answered back, and then it turns into a discussion.

Dan: And then it will probably be a bit more…

Emma: Yes, it takes about half an hour to sort it out.

Dan: There will be a bit of bad blood between…

Lily: …the different persons.

(Group 4, May 2021, Oslo)

Group 4's description of the classroom discussions resonated with all the interview groups. Following up on the student's description of the classroom, the next excerpt displays Student Group 4's response to the researcher asking about the students' experience of being in the classroom during such a discussion.

Lily: It's ok, really, if they discuss something important. It is good that they dare to say something about it and manage to have a discussion about it.

Dan: At the beginning of the year, I participated a lot in those discussions. But recently, it has not been as much. I mostly have something to say, but I don't partake as much as before, because I know…

Lily: …it turns into a big thing.

Dan: Yes, it turned into a big thing. I said what I thought. And after that, there was a lot of talk about me […] because I had another opinion.

Researcher: That does not seem like a good situation to be in.

Dan: No.

Researcher: How about you, Nate. How is it for you to be in the classroom?

Nate: […] Sometimes these persons talk a lot, and then it gets really boring to sit and listen to them.

(Group 4, May 2021, Oslo)

The starting point given by Lily in this citation is that the discussions were, *per se*, a good thing. The problem would seem to be the *form* of the discussions, which led to different types of reactions. Nate found the discussions boring and did not participate. Dan, on the other hand, was an example of a student who used to actively participate. Due to the hostile classroom climate, he limited his participation to avoid potential social consequences. This same resistance toward participating due to the classroom environment was also mentioned by the last girl in Group 4, Emma. She was an example of a student who had rarely participated in classroom discussions or group work at all, because she was afraid that some of her peers would be irritated if she said something in class that they saw as wrong.

Sometimes, when there are discussions, there has been a bit of a mess, so if I don't know very much about that topic, then I don't want to say anything, because if I say something wrong, then I feel that someone in the class will get pretty annoyed about it.

(Emma, May 2021, Oslo)

The classroom discussions thus seemed a hindrance to IPE from the perspective of the students, as they described them using words such as "teams," "winning," and "losing." One person's gain in a discussion was equated with someone else's loss, turning the discussions into a hostile zero-sum game. Nonetheless, it is important to underscore that the students still saw it as *possible* to participate. It was not that they were unable or not allowed to voice their opinions, but rather that they risked losing face or friends by doing so.

Adolescents Are Not Listened To

The second level of IPE obstacles was related to what the students described as a lack of respect for adolescents, which they saw as leading to a lack of access to political influence. Lily stated that children are looked down on, and a consequence was that the path to having an impact was a lot longer than for adults:

> *Because it's hard when it's children to get what you want, because you're a child and they sort of … you can be looked down on because you're just a child, so you […] need to have a larger group, get many more engaged, you need to make a big deal out of it.*
>
> (Lily, May 2021, Oslo)

Accordingly, this view was expressed in the ways in which the students talked about themselves as less worthy and of their opinions as stupid or maybe not worth listening to, such as when Sofia started one of her replies with "What I was going to say is just very stupid" (Sofia, May 2021, Oslo). This feeling of not being in a position where influencing their own society was possible was explained as leading to a low IPE level. This is in line with Bandura's explanation of how a perception of a lack of system responsiveness might impact IPE negatively (1997, p. 483).

The student's IPE was instead seen as dependent on adults or celebrities. Teachers, politicians, influencers, parents, or journalists were seen as gatekeepers to influence, on whom the youth are dependent for being heard, which can be seen as resonating in Sarah's statement below: It is when someone important fronts a topic that the students are interested in that students could have an impact in this matter.

> *I feel that if a student […] tries to say something or has an opinion, then he or she does not reach out to very many. But if a person with a higher status, for example, has a strong opinion … A celebrity or another important person who is in a way a role model for many says something and does something about that topic, then quite a few will get involved and become interested in it.*
>
> (Sarah, May 2021, Oslo)

Views Are Unchangeable

While the first obstacle to IPE arose due to possible sanctions the youth would meet for participating in the social studies discussions, and the second referred to the lack of access to influence, the third obstacle was more substantial in nature. Dominic argued that he did not participate in student strikes as part of the so-called Fridays for Future

movement because of who he *was*: "I really am, I know it's very important, but […] I'm not a person who goes out and wants to strike. I'm kind of only staying inside" (Dominic, May 2021, Oslo). Dominic did not stay at home because the cause was not important or because it was not a good thing to strike instead of going to school. In contrast, his argument for his lack of action was that it was part of what defined him as a person.

Another illustration is given by Tina, who gave her view on the possibility of abolishing racism through political participation. Tina argued that "of course, racism will never go away to any degree, because everyone has different opinions" (Tina, May 2021, Oslo). Tina's statement, containing the phrases "of course," "never," and "everyone" when talking about changing opinions, seemed to characterize a person's point of view as something static and immovable. Words and phrases such as "never," "not possible," "there will always be," and "not at all" were consistently used throughout the interviews when considering opinions and the possibility of making such opinions change, be it the student's own or others'.

Whereas trying to change something in the preceding sections was seen either as hard or as something that had to be done by others, the expressed connection between viewpoints and a person's identity seemed to lead to a view of change as close to impossible, because student opinions or behavioral patterns were seen as fixed. Moreover, this linkage was explained as leading to low levels of IPE. People's beliefs about the influenceability of what they try to impact might influence their IPE, as IPE specifically presupposes a view that what one is trying to do is actually doable (Bandura, 1997). The above examples illustrate how, for many of the students, it was their own and others' viewpoints that were considered unchangeable as a consequence of them being tied to their personal identity, which was seen as fixed. Therefore, the conception of opinions as static is the last aspect highlighted as an obstacle to student IPE.

The Students' Suggested Classroom Solutions

After considering the obstacles to IPE, the students discussed how these obstacles could be overcome. This section will elucidate three suggestions that emerged from this part of the interview.

Respect and Support from Peers and Teachers

Throughout the interviews, the students frequently mentioned that respect and support from their peers and the teacher were critical to gaining IPE. This was underscored as crucial not only in the classroom discussions, but also during pair or group work or, when it came to the teacher, on a regular basis during the lessons.

To start with the classroom discussions, Jane (May 2021, Oslo) explained that while one did not have to agree, one had to respect how others might have different opinions. The important thing was to feel safe and validated as a person, not that everyone had to agree on a particular topic. Thus, there seems to be a difference between respect and agreement, where the respect part was the eminent part that was seen to possibly affect IPE positively.

As an extension of the desire for respect from fellow classmates in classroom discussions, emotional support from peers and teachers was also underscored as important also on a more general basis. An example of this was given by Anna when describing how she felt when she was encouraged by other students in a smaller group setting: "Because it's like, it helps me, because … or it helps me because I think I can do it" (Anna, May 2021, Oslo). Based on the students' statements, their IPE thus seems to be influenced by their relations to their peers in different classroom settings, and this could go both ways: Supportive peers might influence IPE positively, while negative comments or a negative atmosphere might affect it negatively, as demonstrated when discussing the social consequences of participating in class.

The teacher might also take on a supportive role, as illustrated by Group 1. In this example, the students discussed how the teacher could possibly affect their IPE positively during her day-to-day work in the classroom.

> *Jenny: I think it is important for the teacher to show that everyone has a voice that they can use and reach out with. For example, by letting everyone sit down and write a letter to Erna [the then-present Prime Minister of Norway]. That is possible, but it depends on whether it reaches her. So I think that it is important for the teacher; she can show that it is possible … I don't know how to put this into words.*
>
> *Vanessa: …show that it is actually possible to have an impact, show that writing a letter has results?*
>
> *Lu: Maybe engagement? Yes. Engagement too, the teacher must somehow try to engage the students, speak positively […]. Not just like: "No, you will not be able to do this" […]. But [she] must try to encourage and show different examples of what we're supposed to do or let us know about it then, if you understand.*
>
> *(Group 1, May 2021, Oslo)*

The passage points to different aspects of how the teacher might play a central role in student IPE. As illuminated by both Jenny and Lu, the teacher might give examples of how the students can potentially impact the political system to enhance student IPE. Lu underscored that engagement is important, using the words "positively" and "encourage." Furthermore, she stated that being negative on the student's behalf could possibly influence the student's IPE negatively. Thus, the teacher might play a central role in enhancing the students' sense of political efficacy by being emotionally supportive and by providing students with genuine chances of experiencing politics. At the same time, it could influence the student's IPE negatively if the teacher is negative about the student's possibilities.

Structured Classroom Discussions

All the interview groups mentioned one classroom experience as an example of what they thought would enhance IPE: a clearly structured classroom discussion. In the example below, Jessica started by stating that the solution to the heated classroom discussions was not to silence them. Contrarily, the discussions should be allowed to

happen, but within a frame that was controlled by the teacher. Building on Jessica, Ivy remembered an example of such a discussion:

> *Jessica: Maybe have discussions where the teacher has a bit more control. [Sometimes] the teacher has stopped the discussion and left it hanging. And you can't just turn it off.*
>
> *Ivy: I came up with something! Organized debates. We had that once, and it worked a lot better than regular discussions.*
>
> (Group 3, May 2021, Oslo)

In the lesson that all the groups described as favorable, the students were to discuss three topics of their choice in class. Having the students choose the discussion topics made the content engaging and the students part-owners of their own learning experience. This might be one way to overcome the adolescents' feeling of not being listened to—a starting point for enhancing IPE could be the students having an actual impact in educational settings.

In preparing for the discussions, the students did not know which standpoint they were to argue for or against. This meant that they had to engage with both sides of the argument. At the same time, the students were removed from the position where they were responsible for their own views, because they did not have to agree with the position they were assigned by the teacher. However, they were expected to argue for the perspective to which they were assigned, meaning that all the students had to participate to make all the different viewpoints heard. The structure of the discussion and the focus on the possible arguments instead of the personal opinions of the students made the discussions less daunting to participate in than the whole-class discussions mentioned above. The students hereby again underscored means that could lessen the potential negative social consequences of participating in class, which could consequently reduce the negative impact of participating on their IPE. Discussing was also stated as a way of practicing politics, which could positively affect their IPE.

Working Together

The carefully structured discussion has parallels to working in groups, which was the third and final solution the students put forward. As with the discussions, they emphasized that the work had to be clearly organized to avoid blind passengers. But when a group worked well, Dominic (May 2021, Oslo) illustrated how diverse points of view were a strength: "Well, in a group you have different opinions, and it's not like one person, it's not like one brain. It's like in that saying about two heads being better than one." This answer points to the possibility of heightening IPE through a form of collective exercise in which their competencies are pooled together, which, again, might lead to a feeling of increased ability for the individual student.

Furthermore, Lu elucidated how working in a group made her feel:

> *I kind of get more self-confidence when I work with someone, because then I think it's not just my [product]. If you have to give a presentation in front of the class and such, I feel that if I'm with someone, I'm not nervous, […] so if*

> *we're writing a letter [to a politician] or something, or a letter to the editor, I feel better if I'm with someone else.*
>
> (Lu, May 2021, Oslo)

A closer look at Lu's comment shows how she feels more confident about her actions when she is part of a pair or a smaller group. She explains that this is due to her not being responsible by herself—and that this makes her less nervous. Lu also explicitly points to the link between the feeling that she has in the classroom when she is to present in front of the class and how this feeling can be transmitted to political actions, such as writing a letter to a politician. Working together in smaller units thus seems to be favorable for student IPE, as it might provide them with a sort of practicing ground with a smaller audience, which might provide mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997). Additionally, working with someone might provide a feeling of security due to the students not being singularly responsible for what Lu terms "products." When seen in connection with the obstacles to efficacy, this part might provide a starting point for working around the students being afraid of participating in classroom discussions due to peer reactions.

Discussion

The initial aim of this study was to identify factors in the social studies classroom that might affect student IPE. Based on the present findings, I will now deliberate on how IPE may be connected to students' classroom experiences.

Throughout the interviews, the students regularly commented on how respect from their peers was crucial to gaining political efficacy. The importance of relations with peers corroborates the view that an open classroom climate is key to enhancing student IPE (Claes et al., 2017). When the students listen to each other, and when a hostile critique is replaced with constructive argumentation, it might contribute to a safe zone where they may express views without social risk. This might lead to positive mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). On the contrary, if the classroom environment is felt to be hostile, it can hinder efficacy, because people will avoid potentially threatening situations if they feel unable to cope with situations they see as risky (Bandura, 1990). This is clearly in accordance with the presented findings, where the risk of participating in class is explained as being directly connected to a lack of IPE.

Moreover, the students' age is important when considering their understanding of their lack of ability to act without the help of adults. Such a view is consistent with what Lawy and Biesta (2006) describe as an understanding of citizenship as a possible achievement that students have yet to obtain. If such an impression is present in the classroom, it might suggest that the students have not experienced a sufficient level of teaching in which they have practiced, experienced, or watched others experience actual impacting situations (Bandura, 1997). This proposition is supported by results from ICCS 2016, which show that traditional teaching forms, such as textbook work and teacher lectures in which students take notes, still prevail in social studies education in Norway. Notwithstanding, discussions are common (Huang et al., 2018).

The question, however, is whether classroom discussions have the ability to promote an open classroom climate. Lieberkind (2015) describes how Scandinavian countries might have open, but at the same time neatly managed, classrooms where students do not experience any real impact. Such a state would naturally not lead to situations in which students might feel enabled to master politics, as they are not in a context in which they are really autonomous (Biesta, 2021). The present study could be seen to support Lieberkind's argument insofar as the students underscored the importance of having an open classroom climate, but at the same time saw themselves as unable to have an impact due to their age.

Concurrently, all of the interview groups used a discussion that was carefully structured by the teacher as an example of a situation in which they felt comfortable practicing discussions, which was seen to also practice politics. The discussion in this context meant taking an active part and engaging in a classroom activity, and thus being an active subject in their own learning. This corroborates Bandura's theory, which demonstrates that a person's efficacy is partly the result of experiences in his or her own environment (Bandura, 1997). However, a closer look at the discussion shows that an important part was that the students did not argue for their personal views. Instead, the discussion became a way of enlightening different perspectives that were not connected to the individual students. The situation then resembles a political role play, which former research has shown to provide both mastery experiences and beneficial observations, leading to enhanced IPE for students (Levy, 2018). At the same time, the focus is relocated, moving from personal opinions that are seen as static parts of the student to *how it is possible* to think, interpret, and act on a given matter. It might then be that the student's IPE is strengthened due to being in a context where different opinions are present, without feeling these to be a threat to the individual student. Again leaning on Bandura (1997), an important entry point to feeling efficacious is being able to visualize oneself executing an act skillfully. If a discussion thus consists of students who are solely asked to state their opinions, this is also where they have their mastery experiences and where they can observe others mastering or receiving positive feedback. This creates a sense of efficacy toward this particular type of action, and hence a preference for it (Bandura, 1989). Being a subject is thereby reduced to stating one's opinion, which can hardly be seen as consistent with Biesta's call for autonomous individuals who are able to enact change (2009a).

Educational Implications, Recommendations for Further Research, and Limitations of This Study

Moving back to the classroom, the question remains as to what the educational implications would be if the premise were that students should be able to think of themselves as subjects in Biesta's broader view. The methods the students considered favorable for practicing politics—primarily discussions and group work—might at first seem unexpected due to the current negative experiences the students reported. However, as McAvoy and Hess point out, there is a distinction between discussing and

deliberating in the classroom, the latter meaning that students will "practice reason-giving, listening, perspective taking, evaluation of views and treating each other as political equals" (2013, p. 19). It is hence the latter form of conversation that is to be encouraged and aided in the social studies classroom, and it is also the latter form of discussion that was called for by the students. Interestingly, working in smaller groups might provide the students with an important practicing arena, which might contribute a sort of collective efficacy that may impact the individual student's feeling of ability through providing emotional support and positive feedback (Bandura, 2000).

Practicing their own ability to meet, respect, and negotiate between different perspectives might provide students with valuable feedback and mastery experiences that could enhance their efficacy in political situations (Bandura, 1997). Seeing and understanding their own societal position and that of others is essential for being an able subject in a democratic society (Biesta, 2021). The role of the teacher as an institutor of an advantageous classroom climate with rich possibilities for the students to be active, but at the same time without leaning solely on the personal opinions of the students, thus seems to be an important thread to follow up on both for educators and in future research. Another suggestion could be targeted classroom interventions to test teaching methods that specifically follow students' recommendations to determine whether they have any pronounced effect on students' IPE. Researchers could also explore the role of the school in promoting IPE further by using a larger sample, other age groups, or viewing it in relation to other arenas in adolescents' lives, such as their out-of-school milieus.

However, the generalizability of the results is subject to limitations due to the small number of participants. Even though a thorough description may lead to a naturalistic generalization of knowledge that can be useful to practitioners working in a relatable context (Postholm & Smith, 2017), further research is clearly needed to explore how an open classroom climate might be established and, concretely, how the teacher impacts student IPE through her operation of the classroom. It should also be mentioned that a lack of information on students' socioeconomic status (SES) could have affected the findings. SES has proven to be an indicator of both low levels of IPE and political participation (Isac et al., 2014). However, research suggests that civic education might have a compensating effect by beneficiating students with low SES (Hoskins et al., 2021). To establish a greater degree of accuracy, a natural progression could be to study the role of SES in the connections between the social studies classroom and IPE development.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken to investigate adolescents' views of IPE and what sources in the social studies classroom they saw as contributors to or obstacles to IPE when thinking about performing political actions. Three obstacles to IPE were revealed: possible social consequences of participating, lack of access to participation due to adolescents' young age, and a feeling that opinions are fixed, which would make

participating meaningless. The identification of these obstacles is important, because through pinpointing where the problems lie, it might be possible to find ways to overcome them and to promote IPE in the social studies classroom.

The investigation thus has implications for practice. An open classroom climate is confirmed as a significant foundation for promoting respect and support among students. However, even if an open classroom climate is established, it might not be sufficient to enhance students' IPE. If the student still sees the possibilities for real impacts as scarce, being in a respectful and constructive environment might not in itself be enough. It is therefore very important that the students get to experience real impacts and, at the same time, practice situations that might make them feel enabled to perform similar actions outside of the educational context. Moreover, the importance of the teacher was confirmed. She can play a constitutive role in the educational work on promoting IPE by organizing her teaching in a way that promotes active student participation in an open classroom environment.

The empirical findings of this study show that future research on civic education and IPE needs to take students' self-perceptions into account and how different teaching methods may promote divergent views on their ability to change their own minds and those of others. A clear course of action would be to shift the focus from the student to the world, and from opinions to perspectives (Biesta, 2021). If we can manage to do this, we might also enable students to become real subjects of their own lives and societies through the work done in the social studies classroom.

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Appendix 1: Interview manual

For the reader:

- The text in italics shows the information/questions directed by the researcher to the students.
- The text not in italics elucidates the researcher's interview plan, the tasks given to the students, and other factors that were to be considered during the interview.

Introduction

1. *Presentation (me + research project)*
2. *Information about consent + anonymity*
3. *Recording starts*

1 The social studies classroom

Describe a social studies class (content – form)

4. *What do you work on in social studies classes? (Before/now, interesting/not interesting, likes/dislikes)*
5. *Are there topics you would like to work on in social studies classes? What, and why?*
6. *How do you work / what do you do in class / what forms of work do you use? (What makes you like/dislike the subject?)*
7. *What do you think about the subject, and why do you think so?*

2 Ways of participating

The students choose a topic that they have worked on in class (see questions 1 and 2).

8. *If you were to influence this issue or make your opinion heard, how can young people proceed / what can young people do?*

Task 1: The students are assigned four roles and work on the basis of question 5 above

A. Writer (has pen and writes on the Post-it notes)
B. Chair (makes sure that everyone in the group gets to participate, asks for input from others)
C. Post-it person (hangs the notes on the wall)
D. Arena manager (introduces new arenas when the previous theme is emptied)
    - Arena 1: In your class
    - Arena 2: At your school
    - Arena 3: In your local environment
    - Arena 4: In the whole of Norway, or outside Norway

3 Political efficacy

Introduction based on the participation methods that the students themselves have come up with (question 5)

9. *How do you think that what you experience in the classroom can affect your belief in whether you can do these things?*

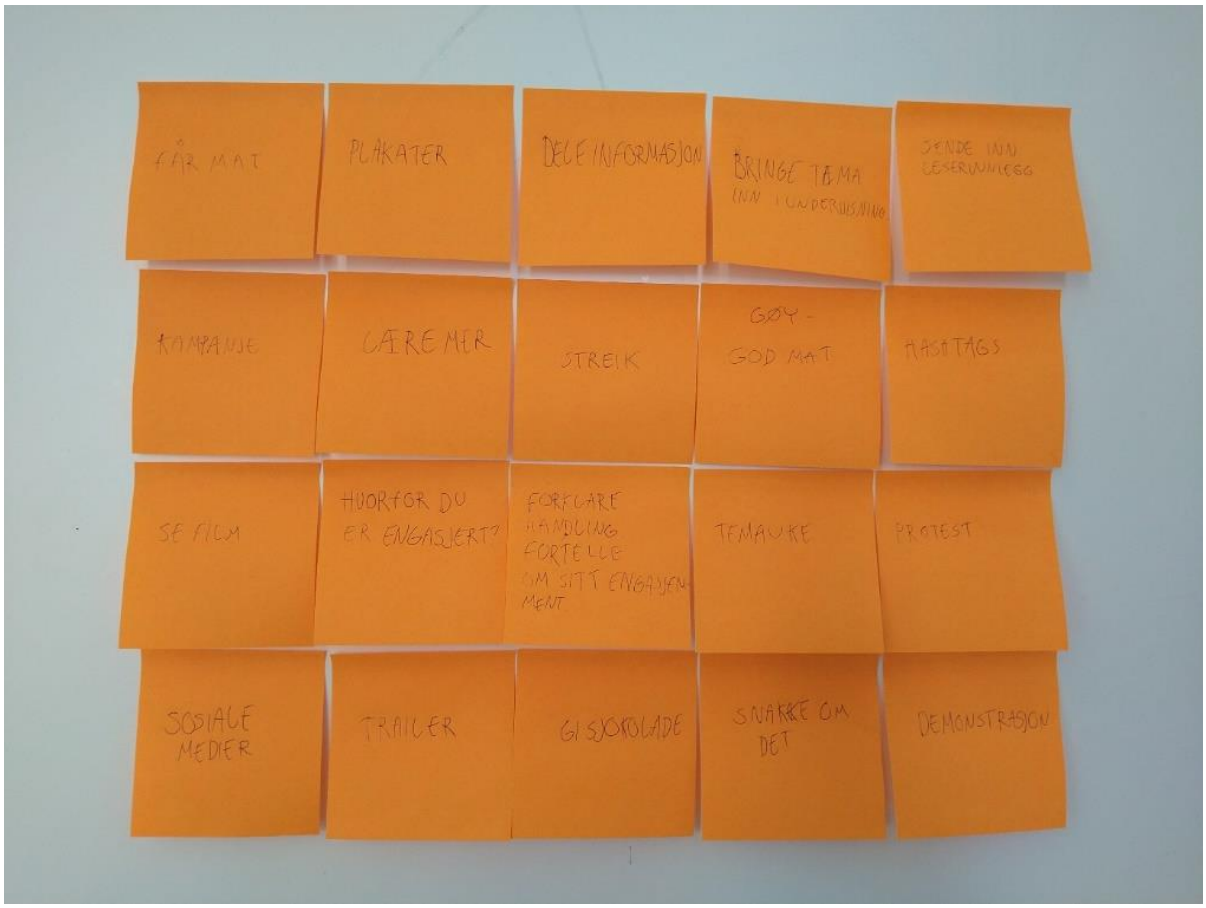
Task 2: The students write down four categories on a large sheet of paper (four fields on the sheet). The students are assigned different roles and work on question 6 above.

A. Writer (has pen and writes on the large sheet)
B. Chair (makes sure that everyone gets to participate, asks for input from others)
C. Guard (makes sure that everyone does their part of the work on the task)
D. Theme manager (introduces new themes when the previous theme is emptied)
    - The teacher
    - Fellow students
    - Teaching methods
    - Covid-19

End session

1. *Thank you for participating*
2. *Repeat consent information*
3. *Contact information*

Appendix 2: Example of student group response to task 1 concerning political participation methods



Appendix 3: Example of student group response to task 2 concerning classroom factor's potential impact on political efficacy