Engagement, passivity and detachment: 16-year-old students’ conceptions of politics and the relationship between people and politics

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While there is a wealth of literature on young people and politics, most studies have examined their interest, trust and participation in politics as well as their attitudes toward and knowledge about formal politics. Little is known, however, about young people and the concept of politics. This article investigates 16-year-old students’ perceptions of the concept of politics and their conceptions of the relationship between people and politics. This knowledge is valuable for citizenship and social studies education, as an increasingly polarised political climate poses challenges to democratic politics and, consequently, to young people’s political engagement and participation. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine students at five Norwegian upper secondary schools. The students varied in their interest and involvement in politics. A main finding is that the students perceived politics as processes related to shaping society, as decisions and activities related to ruling a country, and as the activities of discussion and debate. Three conceptions of the relationship between people and politics are presented: engagement, passivity, and detachment. In addition, while the 16-year-olds participated in political discussions privately and at school, they stated that they did not participate in political discussions in social media. Implications for citizenship and social studies education include the need to strengthen the bottom-up perspective on politics and focus on in-depth understanding of political processes and tools and methods of social-scientific enquiry, as well as providing students with opportunities for and practice with handling opposition in political discussions online.

Keywords: politics; citizenship education; social studies; conceptions

Introduction

The political climates in many European countries and the USA have become increasingly polarised (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The global community faces tremendous challenges and threats to key democratic values and rights, such as tolerance and freedom of speech, resulting in severe societal and political tension. This tension is also a challenge to democratic politics. Young people, here defined as those aged 14–24 (White et al., 2000; O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007), are living in rapidly changing contexts that affect their development, socialisation and participation in society.

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Processes related to financial and political instability, individual vulnerability and global risks impact young people’s lives and outlooks in profound ways. Because of the concern that young people participate less in politics than their older counterparts (Pattie et al., 2004; Sloam, 2016), and because democracy requires support and participation from citizens (Dahl, 2001; Behrouzi, 2005), it is important for research to include the views of young people, especially in terms of political engagement.

According to Hay (2007), “Politics” is a dirty word, a term that has come to acquire a whole array of almost entirely negative associations and connotations in contemporary discourse (p. 153). Tonge (2009) claimed that the term ‘politics’ elicits negative reactions from young people (p. 240). To learn how young people relate to the political, we need to know more about how they conceive of politics. The voices of young people are particularly important in this context, not least because of the role they are playing in the global rise of populist movements. Fukuyama (2016) described the present as ‘a new age of populist nationalism, in which the dominant liberal order that has been constructed since the 1950s has come under attack from angry and energised democratic majorities’. Recent political events in 2016, the US presidential election and Brexit are pertinent examples. Such developments underscore the mandate of schools, especially citizenship and social studies education, to educate students about politics and to give them experience with political conversations, focusing on tolerance, respect and factual debate (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). This paper argues for a renewal of the responsibility of citizenship and social studies education to meet the challenges of a changing social and political climate.

Low trust in politicians, increasing political polarisation, unemployment and economic hardships are major concerns in many European countries and elsewhere (Sloam, 2014). In this paper, I have chosen to study Norway, which has been characterised for decades as a stable, wealthy democracy (Lijphart, 1999) and was ranked first in the 2016 Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017). Features of the political system concerning the relationship between the people and their representatives have caused experts to describe Norway as an example of a consensual democracy (Lijphart, 1999). These features make Norway a relevant context in which to study young people’s views on politics and democracy.

This study examined how 16-year-olds in Norway perceive the concept of politics and the relationship between people and politics. The intention is to identify how this group of young people relate to the concept of politics to contribute to a better understanding of young people’s engagement in and disengagement from politics in the context of citizenship education.

Young people’s engagement in and conceptions of politics

To shed light on 16-year-olds’ perceptions in this study, I investigated prior research about: (1) young people’s (aged 14–24) engagement in politics and (2) their conceptions of politics. I have focused on studies from the USA and Northern Europe, as these regions are comparable to the Norwegian context in that they are peaceful, democratic and industrialised, despite differences in relevant social, political and other contextual factors that may influence the findings.
Engagement in and with politics

Several political science studies have examined young people’s interest, trust and participation in, as well as their attitudes toward and knowledge about, politics (e.g. White et al., 2000; Pattie et al., 2004; Fieldhouse et al., 2007). These studies have shown that young people are less interested in, have less knowledge about and participate less in conventional politics than older people. Sloam (2016) noted a decline in voter turnout and party affiliation among young people across Europe, and researchers have characterised the generation as disengaged and apathetic (e.g. Pattie et al., 2004; Henn et al., 2005; Tonge, 2009).

Other studies have refuted the claim that today’s young people are not engaged with politics (Zukin et al., 2006; Sloam, 2007, 2014; Tonge, 2009; Flanagan, 2013). These studies have argued that young people engage actively in different civic and political activities than older generations did. Kahne et al. (2013) described this as a focus shift from ‘big P’ politics (e.g. elections) to ‘little p’ politics, a more direct form of ‘lifestyle politics’, self-expression and community-based work. Others have found that young people feel unheard by politicians and consequently withdraw from formal political activities, engaging in newer forms of participation, such as signing petitions (e.g. Quintelier, 2007; Sloam, 2014). Evidence has suggested that the young engage in politics as individuals, rather than as part of large organisations (Fieldhouse et al., 2007). A recent study categorised youth into four groups: Active, Standby, Unengaged and Disillusioned (Amn/C23a & Ekman, 2014). The Standby citizens, by far the largest group, are interested in politics, but passive because they see no need to get engaged, implying that young people in well-functioning democracies reserve their engagement for when they see a real need to get involved.

Sloam (2016) claimed that young Europeans have increasingly turned to ‘non-electoral’ and ‘non-institutionalised’ forms of participation, and many young people use social media to engage with politics in different ways. This activity focuses on individual self-expression that bridges the private–public boundary and addresses issues related to young people’s lives (Loader et al., 2014; Sloam, 2014). Storsul (2014) found that social media facilitated participants’ deliberation, but also that ‘the social character of the arenas delimit political debates’ (p. 21). The young participants actively employed Facebook for political purposes (e.g. planning events), but they hesitated to engage in political debate. Similarly, Ekström and Shehata (2016) found that young people were reluctant to express political opinions online. Banaji and Buckingham (2013) identified a digital divide along socio-economic lines and noted that the Internet works well for those who are already engaged, but is less effective in reaching out to unengaged young people. These findings have implications for citizenship education.

During the last 10–15 years, researchers have increasingly critiqued the narrow conception of politics in studies of adolescents’ interest and participation in political activities (O’Toole, 2003; Marsh et al., 2007; Quintelier, 2007; Manning, 2010; Kallio & Häldi, 2013). These studies have noted that focusing on formal political activities limits the opportunities to learn about involvement in other civic or political activities or how respondents define political participation (EdComs, 2008). Manning (2010) argued, ‘If young people lack knowledge and
interest in electoral politics, then they are deemed to be lacking knowledge and interest in politics’ (p. 2). Despite a decline in conventional forms of political participation, many young people are interested in politics and political issues more broadly defined (EdComs, 2008).

**Conceptions of politics**

Some studies have explored young people’s conceptions of politics and the political. O’Toole (2003) found that 16- to 24-year-olds’ conceptions of politics related to their current social situations. Most conceptions related to the government, but participants also discussed politics as a means of effecting change and the ability to express views.

Two studies identified clear distinctions between activists and non-activists. White et al. (2000) discerned three types of responses to ‘politics’ amongst 14- to 24-year-olds. Less interested participants responded with a ‘vague blankness’ (p. 23), but related the term to the government and running the country. Another group connected ‘politics’ to traditional party politics in Britain. A more interested group revealed broader ideas and discussed goals and issues of politics, while some expressed negative views on politics as control, power struggle and corruption.

Sloam (2007) conducted focus group interviews with non-activist people aged 15–24 and in-depth interviews with young activists. His findings indicated a large gap between the participatory experiences of activists and non-activists (p. 560). Specifically, non-activists had a ‘conventional’ understanding of politics, were disillusioned and lacked knowledge about how the system works, leaving them with negative associations to the word ‘politics’ (p. 556). Non-activists participated in few political activities, but revealed strong convictions about issues that affected them personally. The activists related ‘politics’ to ‘changing things through policies and law’ and believed they could effect change, particularly in local politics (p. 561), and criticised the apathy of other youth. Still, the activists also revealed negative associations to the word ‘politics’ and were reluctant to call their activities ‘politics’. Similarly, Manning (2010) found that young activists did not relate to labels such as ‘political’, ‘activist’ or ‘feminist’ (p. 3). Like the findings of two previous studies (Buckingham, 1999; Harris & Wyn, 2009), these participants distinguished between ‘real politics’ and their own potentially political interests.

Most studies reviewed here have focused on young people’s participation in political activities and their political interests and knowledge. These studies took place in Europe and the USA but, to the best of my knowledge, there are no such studies on Norwegian adolescents. To fill this gap, this paper reports on the perceptions of politics among 16-year-old students in upper-secondary school. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do 16-year-old students perceive the concept of politics?
2. How do the students perceive the relationship between people and politics?

In the following, I present the study’s theoretical and methodological framing.
Insights from political theory

To analyse how students perceive ‘politics’, I draw on different conceptions of politics and the political. ‘Politics’ is a contested concept. Barry (2000) noted the difficulties of defining politics, claiming that expanding the meaning of politics from areas of voting, law-making, pressure group activity and ‘governing’ to the politics of family, industrial organisations and other phenomena outside formal state institutions causes it to lose its descriptive meaning. An expanded concept of politics could cause many areas of social life to be viewed as discordant and conflictual instead of, more accurately, cooperative (Barry, 2000).

Many theorists have delineated the concept of politics and created criteria for its use. Schmitt (1996) argued that ‘the specific political distinction to which political action and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy’ (p. 26). Building on Schmitt, Mouffe (1993, 2005) argued that, in pluralist democracies, the friend–enemy distinction should be replaced by the notion of ‘adversaries’. An adversary is an opponent ‘whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated’, not an enemy to be destroyed (Mouffe, 1993, p. 4). Mouffe (2005) showed how antagonism can be transformed into a we–they opposition compatible with pluralist democracy. Mouffe (2005) explained:

by ‘the political’ I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political. (pp. 8–9)

Most scholars have agreed that politics contains elements of disagreement, conflicts of interest and pluralism, while disagreeing about where to draw the lines of what does and does not constitute politics. Held (1991) illustrated a continuum, ranging from views of politics as co-extensive with the whole range of human activity to conceptions linked directly to the state. Leftwich (2004) distinguished between politics as an arena and as a process. The arena approach is narrower, focusing on governments’ goals, policies and decisions. Within this approach, some hold a particularly limited view, including only debates and arguments involving government, while others regard all formal institutions as sites of politics. Conversely, those who support the process approach see politics as a wider phenomenon not limited to certain institutional arenas.

The debate on the concept of ‘politics’ is relevant as a point of reference for students’ perceptions, as both the theory and the students deal with the question of what politics is. In addition to the students’ perceptions, I present three mutually exclusive conceptions of the relationship between people and politics: ‘engagement’, ‘passivity’ and ‘detachment’.

Insights from literature on teaching citizenship

A central goal of citizenship education is to foster citizens who participate actively in civic and political life (Leighton, 2012). This kind of education is important for maintaining and improving democratic communities, in which ‘people are
educated to engage in reflective thought and to contribute to collective action’ (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 270). Teachers play a critical role in schools’ efforts to reach such goals, so it is relevant to discuss how teachers can facilitate this kind of education. For example, Freire (2014) argued that, because neutrality is impossible, the teacher must strive for a directional role, as opposed to a manipulative or authoritarian role. For example, teachers have no right to impose their political preferences upon their students, but they should tell them what their political preferences are. Some view this approach as controversial and as a contrast to giving equal weight to multiple perspectives (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The approach also seems to be based on the premise that all teachers hold values consistent with the goals of a democratic education and the ideals of Western democracy. For Freire (2014), a directional teacher holds up his or her ideals while allowing deep respect for the students’ various ideals. This is key in citizenship education, as students who are only listened to when they say what authorities want to hear may become ‘disillusioned with authority’ (Leighton, 2012, p. 81). Leighton (2012) emphasised the need for balance between supporting students in learning to find their voices and not necessarily doing what those voices ask. Like Mouffe (2005), he argued that disagreement, as an important feature of democracy, can be channelled constructively in citizenship education.

The study context

Norway is a stable representative democracy known for its international peace-keeping efforts, high level of gender equality and character as a broad welfare state. Based on such elements, experts have described Norway as a consensual democracy (Lijphart, 1999). Under the Norwegian core curriculum (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 1993), all school subjects should prepare students for participation in society; however, the subject of social studies is responsible for topics concerning politics and democracy. 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 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2016). Since social studies is offered from grade 1 in elementary school (age 6) through to grade 11 in upper-secondary school (age 16–17), most Norwegian students study social and political issues and democracy for 11 years before entering higher education or starting to work. Politics and democracy learning outcomes in upper-secondary school focus on understanding political parties and institutions, opportunities for participation, pluralism and the rights of minorities, and challenges for democracy (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013). Desired outcomes also include central democratic skills, like discussing and analysing, which may contribute to a more elaborate understanding of these issues (Mathé, 2016).

The Norwegian school curriculum is undergoing major reform. This context invites fundamental questions about how the social studies curriculum responds to the ways in which young people understand and relate to politics. A comprehensive report on ‘the school of the future’ (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015) recommended that progression schemes and principles of in-depth learning should guide
the new curricula, in which democratic competence should be in focus, especially in social sciences (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015).

At 16, students in Norway are increasingly able to participate in political activities, such as mock elections (Børhaug, 2008), and Norway experimented with reducing the voting age from 18 to 16 in the 2011 and 2015 local elections (Norwegian Government, 2014). Upper-secondary students are nearing adult citizenship, and these years can be seen as important for developing interest in and knowledge about social and political issues. By focusing on 16-year-olds, this study investigates young people’s perceptions in the transition from formal education to formal enactment.

To illustrate how Norwegian citizenship education compares with those of some other Western democracies, Table 1 provides an overview of the citizenship education programmes and some key citizenship elements in Norway and the UK, and guidelines for the EU and the USA. This overview does not take into account the general objectives and values of the education systems or how the curricula are implemented in schools.

Table 1 shows that there are differences between countries in the organisation and volume of citizenship education. However, although the citizenship elements do not all feature as strongly in all the curricula and guidelines, the documents have many similarities in terms of the aims and content of the education. Particularly, they highlight the centrality of promoting knowledge and understanding of, as well as participation in, civic and democratic life, which are arguably important aspects of citizenship education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizenship education</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>The UK</th>
<th>The EU</th>
<th>The USA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of compulsory citizenship-related programmes</td>
<td>Integrated in compulsory subject year 1–10</td>
<td>England*: Separate compulsory subject in lower and compulsory upper secondary</td>
<td>Part of national curricula in all countries</td>
<td>No federal curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Separate compulsory subject year 11*</td>
<td>Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*: Cross-curricular and integrated approaches</td>
<td>Time taught as separate 1–12 years*</td>
<td>Part of standards curricula in all states**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic principles and institutions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X***</td>
<td>X****</td>
<td>X*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity/pluralism</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues and challenges</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic skills</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for participation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study
To address the two research questions, I conducted interviews with nine 16-year-old students in 2015–2016.

Participants
Because of the diverse conceptions of politics already discussed (Held, 1991; Mouffé, 1993, 2005; Schmitt, 1996; Barry, 2000), it was important to access different conceptions of politics among the interviewees. Previous research has focused on young people as active or passive in their relations to politics (e.g. Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Tonge, 2009; Manning, 2010; Sloam, 2014, 2016). In response, Amnä and Ekman (2014) argued for nuancing the active–passive dichotomy by keeping political interest conceptually separate from participation. Building on these ideas, I aimed to include participants that could be expected to have diverse associations to politics, and I developed three profiles: (1) students who were not interested or active in politics; (2) students who were interested but not active; and (3) students who were both interested and active. I contacted social studies teachers at five schools and asked them to invite students to participate in my study, based on the three profiles. Nine students (four boys and five girls) from the five schools were willing and able to participate; three for each profile (see Table 2).

The sample included variations in gender, geographical setting, interest in and experience with politics and political activities. The sampled schools reported having students with mixed to high socio-economic status and were in the mid- to high-echelon of upper-secondary schools in their area.

Data collection
Since studies have shown the importance of exploring young people’s conceptions of politics and avoiding closed categories (O’Toole, 2003; Manning, 2010; Kallio & Häkli, 2013), I decided to conduct interviews (Creswell, 2013). First, I interviewed the students from Profile 2 in a group setting, which allowed them to build on each other’s responses and to initiate interactions (Vaughn et al., 1996). Although inspired by each other’s ideas, they gave some brief answers and nodded in agreement instead of adding to the discussion. To assure data reliability and counter the bias of opinion leaders, I probed the individual students and

Table 2. Participant profiles and participating students (pseudonyms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile 1: Not politically interested, non-active</th>
<th>Profile 2: Politically interested, non-active</th>
<th>Profile 3: Politically interested, active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georg</td>
<td>Bendik</td>
<td>Dina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugo</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Emma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>Finn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
actively asked follow-up questions. Because of these concerns, I conducted the
remaining six interviews as individual interviews (Creswell, 2013), to explore each
student’s conceptions in-depth. All the interviews were conducted at the students’
schools.

Following Kvale (2007), I prepared a semi-structured interview guide based on
two main themes: students’ perceptions of the concept of politics and their concep-
tions of the relationship between people and politics. I used the interview guide for
each interview and asked follow-up questions requiring students to reflect on their
responses. Following a few background questions, I asked ‘What do you think about
when you hear the word “politics”? ’ After they responded, I asked them to elaborate
on what politics is. Students first gave relatively short, simple answers before explain-
ing more thoroughly, touching upon several dimensions and ways of defining the con-
cept and practices of politics.

The individual interviews ranged from 30 to 57 minutes (mean = 37.1 minutes),
and the group interview, in which I consciously divided the time between the three,
lasted for 72 minutes. Immediately following each interview, I took reflection notes
and transcribed the audio-recorded interviews in their entirety.

Data analysis

The analysis consisted of three main steps. First, I read each transcript and high-
lighted phrases and keywords to get an overview. This process allowed for initial data
sorting. Second, I used descriptive coding to categorise statements based on the stu-
dents’ perceptions of politics (King & Horrocks, 2010). I then counted how many
students had mentioned each keyword. In the third stage, I identified thematic com-
monalities to develop a more interpretative coding, letting me locate responses within
three broad categories (King & Horrocks, 2010) presented in Table 2. I refined the
descriptive categories and connected these keywords with ways of conceptualising
politics. The keywords were always used in their context in the transcripts.

RQ1 addressed the students’ understanding of the concept of politics. Students
mentioned three words, ‘society’, ‘rule’ and ‘discussion/debate’, more frequently than
others, and each student mentioned at least one of these. These words formed three
broad categories: ‘Shaping Society’, ‘Ruling a Country’ and ‘Discussion and Debate’.
Despite this data-driven approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and the fact that initial
data sorting preceded any detailed connections between the data and political theory,
the students’ conceptions shared clear commonalities with key dimensions in the lit-
erature already discussed (see Table 3).

This categorisation allowed for some overlap. Although processes linked to shaping
society often related to the state or government, the interviews revealed that they
belonged to different perspectives on politics: shaping society as a bottom-up per-
spective and ruling a country as a top-down perspective. This important nuance
shows how the students conceived of politics as more than government. Moreover,
they recognised that discussions and debates occur among citizens who shape society
and among politicians at all levels and in all areas of society. In this respect, student
responses dealing with discussions and debate could be placed in Shaping Society or

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Validity, reliability and ethics

To ameliorate the threat of their teachers serving as gatekeepers, I asked the students if they were still willing to participate and assured them that they could withdraw their consent at any time (Busher & James, 2012). All participants signed standard consent forms, and I anonymised all data after data collection (Creswell, 2013). When asked to define their levels of political interest and activity, all participants confirmed the profiling information provided by their teachers.

This study has some limitations. First, the sample covers some diversity in students’ conceptions, but does not allow for generalisation and requires further validation (Cook & Campbell, 1979). The sample includes adolescents with different backgrounds and interests, but other criteria could have been used to recruit participants. Data collection through interviews provides limited insight into participants’ thoughts and understanding, because it relies on willing expression. My questions may have influenced participants’ answers, despite being open-ended questions and allowing time for reflection and follow-up comments. One avenue for future research is to employ different designs to reduce the threats against external validity.

Findings

This study aimed to explore how 16-year-old students perceived the concept of politics and the relationship between people and politics. First, I present the students’ perceptions of the concept of politics, based on the three themes outlined above (RQ1). Then, I address the students’ conceptions of the relationship between people and politics (RQ2), including the students’ view of their own role. Interestingly, while the students’ responses related to RQ1 seemed unconnected to the three student profiles, I identified some correspondence between profiles and conceptions in the responses related to RQ2.
Students’ perceptions of the concept of politics

As in the studies discussed earlier, the students expressed different aspects of the concept of politics that were categorised into Shaping Society, Ruling a Country, and Discussion and Debate (see Table 4).

In Table 4, the first column presents the interview questions while the other three list the words highlighted in students’ answers. I categorised the responses in Shaping Society, Ruling a Country, or Discussion and Debate, and gave each a common name with a number in parentheses. For example, students who talked about society also used words like ‘shape’ and ‘influence’, which was categorised as Shaping Society. Each theme will be discussed in more detail below.

Shaping Society. The Shaping Society category contains student responses dealing with politics as a means of improving and running society. Five students explicitly mentioned society, for example, as ‘how to make a society work’ (Dina) and ‘an ideology of how you think society should be’ (Anne). When students talked about politics as shaping society, they explained that this is about setting priorities, coming to agreement about issues, solving problems and citizens’ opportunities to influence society. Only one student who identified as being active in politics related this last point to her own experiences: ‘I am active myself. I have recently joined a political party, so ... politics, that makes me think about how you can be a part of influencing the society you live in’ (Emma). Emma highlighted the role of citizens in her perception of politics, and the students commonly described politics as concerning how people live together in society. This theme represents a bottom-up perspective on politics.

Ruling a Country. The category Ruling a Country comprises student responses addressing politics as government and democratic institutions. Students who referred to ruling a country offered different explanations. Bendik explained democracy as a type of politics, relating democracy to political rule. Finn discussed politics as being
about monetary choices and stated that these decisions concern what benefits the most people in society. Iris related ruling a country to a country’s laws and rules.

These answers relate to another theme, the participants in politics. Six students mentioned politicians as the main participants and as those who have power and make decisions. These responses represent a ‘top-down’ perspective on politics, focusing on power, government and decision-making.

Several students stated, however, that everyone is or can be a participant, primarily related to forming political opinions and paying attention to societal happenings. Some limited the group of participants to those people active in politics or voting in elections.

**Discussion and Debate.** Three students focused on discussion and debate as the essence of politics. They described how politics works in democratic societies where politicians discuss important issues. Hugo reflected:

> It makes me think about important people making arguments, for example about important issues in society that need to be addressed. [...] They discuss what is going to happen and not happen, and how to move on with things... and... Rules. Laws and stuff.

This response echoed other statements and vaguely described what (national) politics is and how it works, but without including formal democratic institutions.

Another relevant issue was whether participants considered discussions between friends as politics. The question prompted conflicting responses. Iris said, ‘I wouldn’t say that it is the same as doing politics. [...] It is just expressing opinions.’ Hugo disagreed: ‘It is politics, really. We do the same thing as the politicians, discuss and talk about politics [...] only they have more people watching and following them, and think the same thing.’ The distinction is in the view of ‘doing politics’ versus talking about politics. Some students noted that the topic of a discussion determines whether it is political.

Also relevant were students’ descriptions of where politics occurs. Five students responded that politics takes place everywhere because people talk about politics everywhere, political messages are everywhere and politics influences all areas of society. Other students suggested that politics happens in public places and places where people meet to discuss things (e.g. school, social media). Interestingly, an uninterested, non-active participant reflected:

> I think politics is mostly in social media, because that’s where everyone is. (…) And politicians probably go online to find issues to address, for example. Because they do want people’s opinions, and it’s not easy to just stand outside and ask what people think. Because people don’t say what they mean face to face. (Georg)

Although all students reported reading discussions online, none participated in these discussions. This topic will be discussed in relation to RQ2.

**Students’ conceptions of the relationship between people and politics**

Three conceptions of the relationship between people and politics emerged, which I have entitled ‘engagement’, ‘passivity’ and ‘detachment’. Further, while the participants engaged in political discussions at home and in school, they expressed reluctance to discuss political issues in social media.
Three conceptions of the relationship between people and politics. While Anne, Caroline, Dina, Emma and Finn were interested in politics, only some were active. Their focus produced the first conception shown in Figure 1. These students wanted people to participate and be active in politics. In their view, people are not distant from, but neither completely a part of, politics, but they can choose to become so by participating.

This conception focuses on formal politics, political parties, the public sphere and citizen participation. These participants highlighted their opportunities to influence others.

Bendik, Georg and Hugo are all non-active, and revealed a conception of ‘politics’ indicating some distance between people and politics (see Figure 2). They described that people can reach through to politics with their opinions, but politics is primarily an activity for politicians. These students gave some negative descriptions of politics and politicians (e.g. lying, promoting selfish interests).

This conception focuses on formal politics, politicians and the distance between these and people. These students said they had no role in politics, although they had some political opinions and cared about certain issues.

The third conception is based on only one student, Iris, who distanced herself from formal politics (see Figure 3). She was interested in issues, but did not want to participate. She argued that differences between the political parties were so small that it made little difference who won elections. She was frustrated at politicians’ refusal to address the issues that concerned her, and she struggled to find like-minded people.

This conception focuses on formal politics, political issues, detachment and withdrawal. Although she made personal choices contradicting the status quo, Iris felt it would be more political if she tried to influence others.

When examining the links between profiles and conceptions, some interesting patterns emerge. First, interested students expressed an engaged conception of the relationship between people and politics (conception 1). One interested, but non-active respondent was the exception (Bendik). He was grouped with the two non-interested, non-active boys who expressed a more distant relationship between people and politics (conception 2). Iris was perhaps the most interesting case. Profiled as non-interested, non-active, she was clearly interested in political issues and active in her own life, despite refusing to call this politically active. Because of her

Figure 1. Conception 1 – Engagement

Figure 2. Conception 2 – Passivity
Students’ reasons for not participating in political discussions in social media. When discussing their role, I asked about participation in political discussions in social media. All students reported using social media to read news, debates and comments; however, they never participated in such discussions. Students explained that they found opposition uncomfortable and that it was difficult to win with their own arguments in online discussions. The following quotes illustrate their reservations:

*I am perhaps a little afraid that . . . that many people will argue against me, and that there will be a big discussion about something that I don’t want to discuss.* (Dina)

*The more people who are with you, the more right it becomes. If I am left with no one, and you have several, it is kind of like people will see you as being right rather than me. I am more wrong.* (Hugo)

*I just don’t feel that this is an arena where I can express myself in a way that convinces people, where they haven’t just made up their mind and then they’ll write a comment that’s kind of based on biased opinions.* (Finn)

*When I have opinions about something, I have strong opinions about it, and many will disagree with me. And then I will just be argued against. . . . And that is no fun, even if it is something you want to express. It is no fun being opposed that much.* (Iris)

The students focused on discussions as a platform for expressing opinions and winning or losing. This necessarily entails being confronted by others with different views. The girls seemed slightly more concerned with this than the boys. No clear differences emerged based on interest or activity level. Nearly all students preferred and engaged in face-to-face discussions with friends or family, and politically active students engaged in discussions within their political party and with other parties’ youth wings.

The main analysis revealed the students’ understanding of the concept of politics in three themes: (1) politics as processes, ideas and activities related to shaping society (a bottom-up perspective); (2) decisions, priorities and power related to ruling a country (a top-down perspective); and (3) discussions and debates among politicians and other people. Although students frequently mentioned politicians as participants in politics, several students highlighted the potential of everyone being participants.
Students’ conceptions of the relationship between politics and people can be grouped into three: (1) engagement, focusing on opportunities for participation in the public sphere; (2) passivity, viewing politics as a sphere of its own; and (3) disengagement, characterised by withdrawal from formal politics. Although most students discussed political issues, none engaged in discussions online. In the following, I will discuss these findings in relation to theoretical perspectives and prior research.

The concept of politics: students’ perceptions and political theory

All students discussed and reflected on their perceptions of the concept of politics. They touched upon many topics outlined in the theoretical overview and did not display very negative associations to ‘politics’. Likewise, they were mainly unconcerned about the boundaries of politics. This may have a contextual explanation: growing up in a safe, prosperous Western democracy may alleviate fear of state abuse. A main finding was the students’ perceptions of politics as both a top-down activity and a bottom-up process. When referring to politics as concerning governing and political rule, participants took the arena approach (Leftwich, 2004). From this top-down perspective, formal political institutions are central. This view echoed previous studies which found that young people primarily related politics to government and party politics (e.g. White et al., 2000; O’Toole, 2003).

The most frequently occurring feature in the students’ responses (i.e. shaping society) related to what Leftwich (2004) called a process view of politics, where politics extends beyond formal state institutions. The public sphere is important, particularly when talking about discussion and debate between people as the essentials of politics. This finding may add to Leftwich’s thesis by illustrating how the arena and process views of politics meet in discussions that may lead to political change. Participants highlighted school as an important public place for political discussions. These students saw politics as happening in certain arenas with certain people, but they also recognised how everyone can participate in important political discussions. This finding may indicate a distinction between formal politics and the kind of politics non-politicians are involved in: doing politics versus talking about politics.

Engagement, passivity and detachment: students’ perspectives

In some studies (O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007; Amnå & Ekman, 2014), non-activist youth displayed negative attitudes towards politics and seemed frustrated with the government. Overall, the Norwegian students reported few negative associations. As with previous studies, politically active students saw politics as being about change. They believed they could make a difference, primarily through their participation in political parties (O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007). All students considered attempting to influence others as a political activity, but only the interested, active students reported trying to influence others, primarily through political discussions with their friends. They were reluctant to call this activity ‘doing politics’, and did not refer to themselves as full participants in politics. Unlike the disinterested, passive group in Amnå and Ekman’s (2014) study, but like the non-activists interviewed by Sloam (2007),
the three students grouped in the conception ‘passivity’ held political opinions, indicating that even uninterested young people see the relevance of political matters.

Students’ online engagement is a newer form of participation (Storsul, 2014; Elstad, 2016). None of this study’s participants engaged in online discussions, despite using social media to follow news and political issues and read other people’s comments. Although this finding is not generalisable, other studies (Storsul, 2014; Ekström & Shehata, 2016) have produced similar findings, demonstrating the likelihood that some adolescents avoid engaging in online discussions. This study’s participants displayed a more critical view of people in such fora than of formal politics and politicians. In line with Mouffe’s concept of the political, the students’ refusal to participate in online discussions may indicate that these fora have yet to be transformed into ordered places where conflicts can be peacefully contained. Consequently, opponents see each other as enemies to defeat instead of adversaries to coexist with.

Another pertinent issue is the students’ discomfort in facing opposition online. Perhaps it is irrelevant whether young people take part in online discussions if they discuss issues in person. However, restricting deliberation to peers and family limits the opportunity to meet demographic and socio-economic diversity and consequently other perspectives (Wojcieszak et al., 2009). Because discussion fora and comment sections are an extended public sphere, we should give young people the tools, skills, knowledge and confidence to participate in online discussions. The school context can facilitate peer-to-peer interaction (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013) through planned or spontaneous discussions on issues of interest in various participatory media (Rheingold, 2008), allowing students to practice discussion skills in an environment protected from the rough debating climate found in many open discussion fora. In turn, these activities could be extended to reciprocal engagement with political representatives or other influential figures, also shown to be important for civic participation (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). A possible pitfall is that students may feel unheard (Leighton, 2012; Freire, 2014), which could lead to passivity or even disillusionment. This is indeed an argument for the important role of the teacher in preparing and supporting such processes (Rheingold, 2008).

Previous studies have shown that discussing politics and social issues in the classroom is strongly associated with students’ interest in politics and political efficacy (Kahne et al., 2013; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015). Teachers play a significant role in supporting and challenging students in such discussions, to facilitate learning experiences where student voices take the lead (Leighton, 2012; Freire, 2014).

Implications

Considering the socio-political situation in Western Europe and the USA, and the students’ perceptions of politics, this study has implications for citizenship and social studies education.

‘Conceptualisation’ is the ability to understand and explain the world, and conceptual knowledge is required for critical reasoning (Rata, 2012). How students perceive the concept of politics could be essential, because their conception of and relation to politics can influence their actions. Norwegian students have grown up, been educated and participate in a democratic society characterised by social trust, which
could inspire both active and passive forms of citizenship. One limitation of this study is the lack of information about participants’ religious beliefs or ethnic backgrounds, which is an avenue for further research on young people’s views of politics.

Because a central goal of education is to prepare students for active, democratic participation (e.g. Hoskins et al., 2012; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015), we should strengthen further the bottom-up perspective on politics, focusing on the (extended) public sphere as a central arena for participation. This focus includes empowering students through participation in discussions, practice in facing opposition and critically reviewing arguments and political information in social media (Journell et al., 2015), including rhetoric with emotional appeal. A strong focus on the bottom-up perspective of politics does not reduce the importance of knowledge about political institutions and formal politics. However, we should ask what is important knowledge about politics, so teachers and students can focus on in-depth understanding of political processes and the tools and methods of social-scientific enquiry to critically evaluate political information (Journell et al., 2015). Such a bottom-up, empowerment-focused perspective may be considered naïve. However, change must also come from below, and motivating young people to engage politically in the extended public sphere can help achieve knowledgeable participation. Future research could address to what extent teachers should take on the directional role recommended by Freire (2014), and whether this approach inspires student reflection and engagement in the classroom.

This study aimed to identify how young people relate to the political, to further understanding of young people’s engagement in and disengagement from politics. The paper offers in-depth insights into the participants’ conceptions of politics, contributing new knowledge to the field of citizenship education. We cannot rely on voluntary organisations and political parties to train youth in factual argumentation and handling disagreement and criticism, because such organisations cater to young people who are already engaged. Students who are interested but inactive, who are detached or disillusioned, or who report being uninterested in politics should be given the opportunity to prepare for and engage in knowledgeable participation. Developing such skills requires considerable scaffolding, and citizenship and social studies education must take on this challenge to strengthen young people’s opportunities and abilities to engage.

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