Democracy and politics in upper secondary social studies

Students’ perceptions of democracy, politics, and citizenship preparation

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Summary

The purpose of this PhD thesis in social studies didactics is to investigate three aspects of the theme of democracy and politics in social studies education in upper secondary school in Norway. This is an article-based thesis comprised of three articles and an extended abstract.

While several studies have investigated young people’s attitudes toward and participation in democracy and politics, as well as the influence of citizenship education on young people’s political participation, few studies have explored students’ perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics and their own perceptions of citizenship education. To address this gap in research, the overarching aim of my thesis is to investigate 16- to 17-year-old students’ perceptions of the core concepts of democracy and politics and aspects of citizenship preparation in the social studies subject in Norwegian upper secondary school.

The PhD project consisted of three interrelated phases focused on 16- to 17-year-old students enrolled in upper secondary social studies. Methodologically, this project relied on multiple methods of data collection and analysis to investigate students’ perceptions. To analyse students’ perceptions, I drew on citizenship education literature, focusing on the role and teaching of school subjects such as social studies, as well as political theory, focusing on theoretical perspectives on the concepts of democracy and politics.

Article I reports on a qualitative study investigating 16-year-old students’ understanding of the concept of democracy. To collect data, I conducted focus groups with 23 students enrolled in social studies in upper secondary school. The data material consisted of focus group transcripts. I found that students’ understanding of ‘democracy’ centred around four themes: (a) rule by the people, (b) voting and elections, (c) other forms of participation, and (d) rights and responsibilities. These findings show that students primarily expressed a liberal understanding of the concept of democracy, focusing on voting and elections, but that they also mentioned more participatory and deliberative perspectives. Another central finding was that students’ understandings ranged from somewhat limited to more elaborate, for example in terms of nuancing and questioning their own and others’ responses.

Article II reports on a qualitative study investigating 16-year-old students’ perceptions of the concepts of politics and conceptions of the relationship between people and politics. I conducted individual interviews with nine students, and the data material consisted of interview transcripts. The main findings were that students perceived ‘politics’ to concern three main aspects: (a) ruling a country, (b) shaping society, and (c) discussion and debates.
Further, the students expressed three conceptions of the relationship between people, including themselves, and politics, labelled (a) engagement, (b) passivity, and (c) detachment.

Article III reports on a quantitative investigation of factors related to students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. The article was based on a survey among 264 students aged 16–17. The survey data indicated that students perceived the role of social studies positively in terms of preparing them for citizenship, for example in terms of helping them understand the world around them. Further, the regression analyses revealed that students’ reported enjoyment of social studies and aspects of the teacher’s instruction were most strongly associated with their perceptions of citizenship preparation. Somewhat surprisingly, the variable measuring students’ perceptions of the political interest of and discussions with family and friends was not significantly associated with their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

Based on the findings in the three articles, the main contribution of this thesis is increased knowledge about essential aspects of the theme of democracy and politics in social studies, namely students’ perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics, as well as citizenship preparation in social studies. The findings have shown that the students who participated perceived ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ both in terms of top-down notions of government and other political institutions and bottom-up perspectives focused on discussions and other non-institutional aspects of democratic politics. Moreover, the findings indicated that students perceived social studies as valuable in terms of preparing them for current and future citizenship and that their enjoyment and aspects of instruction were associated with these perceptions. These findings are valuable for understanding young people’s perspectives in the context of social studies and citizenship education and for developing social studies education sensitive to students’ perspectives.
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Part I

Extended Abstract
1 Introduction

‘Each new generation contributes to social change by reinterpreting the social contract. Consequently, examining adolescents’ views provides a lens to the future.’
(Flanagan, 2013, p. 34)

This quote by Flanagan (2013) highlights that adolescents are the future; consequently, adults should care about their perspectives on the societies in which we live. This emphasis on young people’s voices is particularly important in light of the increasingly polarised political climates of many countries (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The early 21st century has witnessed the growth of populist movements that strongly influence politics and policy, with the Brexit vote being a pertinent example. These developments in democratic politics have combined with technological changes to influence how people relate to politics and each other and how politicians communicate with the people (Sunstein, 2017). Democratic values and institutions have been under pressure from political leaders who have used their power to strengthen their own positions by denigrating and undermining democratic institutions, people’s lack of trust in the political system, and threats to human rights (Sloam, 2014; Sunstein, 2017). In Norway, the Power and Democracy study (1998–2003) argued that, over time, political power has been transferred to institutions not held accountable in elections, potentially weakening democratic channels of decision-making (Østerud, 2017). Consequently, the 2018 political landscape is perhaps more unpredictable than ever before, with changing conditions for democratic participation. In this context, it is crucial to hear the voices of young people, the people who will shape the future.

While young people’s perspectives on democracy, politics, and citizenship are influenced by a diverse range of experiences and sources, it is through education in school that society attempts to provide children and young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values deemed appropriate and necessary for them to care for and contribute to that society (Biesta, 2011a; Olson, 2009; Solhaug, 2018). One of the most emphasised forms of preparation is that of citizenship education, through which students are prepared for and gain knowledge about and through citizenship (Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Sandahl, 2015). In democratic countries, a central aspect of this education is preparing young people to understand and participate in democratic processes to ensure that they engage in and exert
their influence on democratic politics. In many countries, including Norway, this is a particular focus of school subjects such as social studies or separate citizenship education subjects (Eurydice, 2017; Keating, 2016; Sandahl, 2013, 2015; Solhaug, 2013). Citizenship education is organised in different ways in different countries. A stand-alone approach indicates that one school subject is dedicated entirely to citizenship education, an integrated approach indicates that citizenship education is integrated with other topics in a school subject, and a cross-curricular approach indicates that citizenship education is taught across school subjects (Eurydice, 2017). In Europe and the United States, school subjects responsible for aspects of citizenship education may be called for example social studies, social science, citizenship education, or civics. In Norway, citizenship education is taught through both a cross-curricular approach and an integrated approach in the subject of social studies. Indeed, Solhaug (2013) argued that ‘as a research field for citizenship and education, “social studies” is very relevant’ (p. 182).

Studies in different educational contexts have found citizenship education to be an influential factor in terms of civic and political participation (e.g., Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Pontes, Henn, & Griffiths, 2017). In their review of social studies education, Barton and Avery (2016) noted that ‘teaching these subjects contributes to students’ ability to participate responsibly in the public sphere, and to their desire to do so’ (p. 986). Democracy and politics are core concepts within social studies in Norway, and questions and issues related to these concepts are essential aspects of citizenship education (Davies, 2015; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training [NDET], 2013; Solhaug, 2013). To contribute to our understanding of young people’s perceptions of core concepts and instruction in social studies and citizenship education, I have dedicated my PhD project to examining students’ perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics and their perceptions of aspects citizenship preparation in upper secondary social studies in Norway.

1.1 The relationship between democracy and politics
Although they have different origins, democracy and politics can be seen as related concepts (Bartolini, 2018), especially when conceptualised as belonging to the world of government. For example, democracy may be seen as a frame within which politics takes place, but it is also possible to see politics as the overarching concept and democracy as one of multiple ways of organising politics. Despite such theoretical and empirical relations between democracy and politics, there are several reasons to keep them conceptually separate. First, the two concepts have been defined differently and used for different purposes (e.g., Bartolini,
2018; Crick, 2000): democracy often concerns people’s control over decision-making and the values of freedom and equality between people, while politics often relates to the activities of government and the people trying to influence it. Second, while democracy is usually associated with ideals such as equality, freedom, and respect for human rights, politics is often given negative connotations, such as power struggle, egotism, and deception (Crick, 2000; Held, 1991). Due to the contested nature of these two concepts and the different ways of conceptualising the relationship between them, I argue the necessity of investigating students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ separately.

Several studies have examined young people’s interest, trust, and participation in, as well as their attitudes toward and knowledge about, democracy and politics (Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, & Agrusti, 2017; White, Bruce, & Ritchie, 2000). Concerning politics, studies have shown that young people are less interested in, have less knowledge about and participate less in conventional politics than older people (e.g., Bergh, 2013; Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2004; Sloam, 2014). Regarding democracy, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) found that 14-year-old students in Norway and the other participating Nordic countries had comparatively high trust in democratic institutions, were knowledgeable about democracy, and supported democratic values (Huang et al., 2017; Schultz et al., 2017).

However, few studies, in or outside Norway, have addressed the question of how young people perceive the concepts of democracy (Arensmeier, 2010; Avery, Levy, Simmons, & Scarlett, 2013; Flanagan, 2012) and politics (Harris & Wyn, 2009; Manning, 2010; O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007; White et al., 2000). In this thesis, I argue that, because democracy requires active support as well as opposition from citizens (Behrouzi, 2005; Dahl, 1998; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010), it is important for research to include the views of young people, especially in the context of social studies and citizenship education.

Citizenship education takes place both through formal education, teaching, learning, and experiences in school, and through informal sources outside of school, such as in families and communities. I use citizenship education in the context of social studies education, known as social studies didactics in Norway, to which this thesis belongs. Social studies didactics is the field of teaching and learning in social studies in Norway, both in school and in teacher education. According to Christensen (2015), an important debate in social studies didactics is how the social studies subjects can mediate between students and society; specifically, students are to learn about society, of which they are already a part, in order to be able to
participate in it. As such, educating for democracy is an important aspect both of social studies didactics and citizenship education.

1.2 Democracy and citizenship in the Norwegian school system

The context for this thesis is Norway, and the empirical data were collected among upper secondary school students. Primary school (years 1–4), middle school (years 5–7), and lower secondary school (years 8–10) are mandatory for all students in Norway. Upper secondary school (years 11–13) is voluntary, and approximately 98% of students continue directly from lower to upper secondary school (NDET, 2016).

In Norway, educating for democracy is a mandate given to the entire school system (NDET, 2017). This mandate is described in the Education Act, which states that the education ‘shall promote democracy, equality and a scientific way of thinking’ (Education Act, 1998, § 1-1, my translation). The core curriculum emphasises democratic values and practices in school, while the main responsibility for teaching the concepts of democracy and politics, including the relationship between individuals, the government, and society, is found in the mandatory school subject social studies.

1.2.1 The social studies subject: Democracy, politics, and citizenship education

Social studies is a compulsory common core subject taught from year 1 through year 11. Consequently, the mandatory social studies subject in upper secondary school is the last social studies course taken by all students in Norwegian schools (excluding subjects such as history and religion). The Purpose of the social studies subject states that

Knowledge about society and politics is valuable in itself while at the same time being a prerequisite for participation in democratic processes. Knowledge about the political system in Norway and in international society allows pupils to learn how politics is characterised by cooperation, conflict, influence and the use of power in different forms. (NDET, 2013, p. 1)

According to Sandahl (2013), this combination of teaching subject matter and fostering democratic citizenship is typical of Scandinavian social studies subjects. ‘Politics and democracy’ is one of four thematic main areas of the subject in upper secondary school, illustrating how these concepts are core concepts in the social studies subject.

1 Year 12 in vocational education.
2 A fifth main area, ‘the researcher’, is focused on social scientific communication and methods of enquiry and is meant to be addressed together with the four thematic main areas.
In upper secondary school, the subject of social studies consists of topics from several social sciences, such as sociology, social anthropology, political science, law and economics. In the national curriculum, politics and democracy competence aims focus on understanding political parties and institutions, opportunities for participation, pluralism and the rights of minorities, and challenges for democracy. The competence aims include central democratic skills, like being able to investigate, discuss, and analyse (NDET, 2013).

At the time of this writing, the Norwegian education system is undergoing major curricular reform. As a foundation for this reform, the comprehensive report ‘The School of the Future - Renewal of Subjects and Competences’ recommended that democracy and citizenship be given an explicit role in school, across subjects (NOU 2015-2016: 28, 2016). The aim is to facilitate learning that strengthens students’ understanding of democracy and their ability to participate in democratic processes and communities. This goal is manifested in the new core curriculum, to be initiated in 2020, in which democracy and citizenship together form one of three cross-curricular themes (NDET, 2017). The overarching principles state that education should give students opportunities to participate and to learn what democracy means in practice (NOU 2015-2016: 28, 2016). Given the central role of democracy, politics, and citizenship education in social studies in particular and in the school system in general, an investigation of students’ perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics as well as aspects of citizenship preparation is warranted.

1.3 Overarching aim and research topics

While prior studies have investigated young people’s attitudes toward and participation in democracy and politics, as well as the influence of citizenship education on young people’s political participation, few studies have explored their perceptions of what these concepts mean and their own perceptions of citizenship education. I have chosen to focus on the perceptions of a particular group of young people, namely 16- to 17-year-old students. This age can be seen as important for developing interest in and knowledge about social and political issues (Amnå, Ekström, & Stattin, 2016; Finlay, Wray-Lake, & Flanagan, 2010). Further, upper secondary students are nearing adult citizenship (Niemi & Junn, 1998), and the mandatory social studies subject in upper secondary school represents one of the final efforts of the school system in terms of citizenship education for all students. By focusing on

3 The report uses the term ‘co-citizenship’, which is similar to the Norwegian term ‘medborgerskap’ (as opposed to ‘statsborgerskap’, used for formal citizenship status in a country). Not reduced to citizenship status, I use the term ‘citizenship’ as I perceive this to be the most common term in literature on citizenship education.
16- to 17-year-olds, this thesis thus investigates young people’s perceptions in the transition from formal education to formal enactment. The overarching aim of my thesis is therefore to investigate 16- to 17-year-old students’ perceptions of the core concepts of democracy and politics and aspects of citizenship preparation in the social studies subject in Norwegian upper secondary school.

To meet this aim, I have chosen to study three interrelated aspects of the theme of democracy and politics in social studies in this PhD project, specifically students’ perceptions of the concept of democracy, students’ perceptions of the concept of politics, and students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies and factors associated with these. I conducted three studies that are presented in three articles:


In line with the dissemination strategy of the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Oslo, Article I was published in an open access journal, while Articles II and III are published in level 2 journals.

1.4 The structure of the extended abstract
This PhD thesis consists of an extended abstract (Part 1) and the three articles (Part 2). The extended abstract comprises five chapters following this introductory chapter. While the articles report on the three phases of study, the extended abstract discusses their integration.

In Chapter 2, I review research informing democracy and politics in social studies and citizenship education, including the role of citizenship education, young people’s perceptions of democracy and politics, and aspects of citizenship education in school.
Chapter 3 is a presentation of the theoretical framing of my PhD project. In this chapter, I discuss the concepts of democracy, politics, and citizenship education based on a combination of citizenship education theory and political theory.

In Chapter 4, I present the research methodology of this thesis. Here, I account for and discuss my choice of methodology and methods, and I argue for the appropriateness of the research design I chose for this study.

Chapter 5 summarises the three articles of this PhD thesis, addressing the main findings.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions of this PhD project before I provide brief concluding remarks and suggest implications for educational environments and further research.


2 Review of research informing democracy and politics in social studies and citizenship education

In this review chapter, I aim to contextualise the theme of my thesis, namely democracy and politics in social studies, focusing on students’ perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics, and democracy and politics in social studies and citizenship instruction. The purpose of this review chapter is to combine and extend the reviews presented in the articles, aiming for relevance rather than comprehensiveness (Maxwell, 2006). I have chosen to contextualise my PhD project using research from Europe, North America, and Australia, as I consider these contexts comparable to the Norwegian context in that they are relatively peaceful and democratic areas that all provide some form of social studies or citizenship education (Eurydice, 2017). Nonetheless, educational and political differences will necessarily influence research findings within and across the reviewed studies.

Issues of democracy and politics are important within social studies and citizenship education and may include students’ and teachers’ perspectives as well as school and classroom activities (Reinhardt, 2015; Solhaug, 2013). This review includes research dealing with, on the one hand, students’ perceptions of and relations to democracy and politics and, on the other, the role and instructional practices of social studies as a school subject and a form of citizenship education (Arthur, Davies, & Hahn, 2008). As the reviewed research includes participants aged 11–30, I will use the term ‘young people’ when referring to research not specifically focusing on students or focusing both on students and other young people. By contrast, I use the term ‘students’ when referring to my own research and consider students to be a sub-group of young people in general.

Both social studies didactics and citizenship education draw on perspectives and research from different disciplines (Barton & Avery, 2016; Reinhardt, 2015), such as sociology, human geography, political science and pedagogy, among others. To benefit from this complexity in the field, this review includes diverse research. I first offer a broad perspective on citizenship education in school by looking at research on the impact of citizenship education on students’ knowledge about and engagement in democracy and politics (2.1), as this has been a focus of citizenship education research in several countries. Then, I provide a brief review by looking into research concerning students’ perceptions of democracy (2.2), young people’s perceptions of and engagement in politics (2.3), and democracy and politics in social studies and citizenship education instruction (2.4). Finally, I
provide a short summary connecting these various strands of research to identify potential research gaps influencing my PhD project (2.5).

2.1 The role of citizenship education

Two main concerns of citizenship education are contributing to young people’s knowledge of democracy and politics and inspiring civic and political engagement (Johnson & Morris, 2010; Leighton, 2012). Many empirical studies of citizenship education have been quantitative, and they have commonly investigated the relationship between some form of citizenship education as the independent variable and various forms of student learning or engagement as the dependent variable (e.g., Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Reichert & Print, 2017). First, citizenship education has been associated with knowledge about society and politics (Niemi & Junn, 1998; Whiteley, 2014). Based on data from the United States, Niemi and Junn (1998) provided some early evidence that civic education in school matters. They found a high and significant impact of civic education on political knowledge among 17-year-old students. In the United Kingdom, Whiteley (2014) found that citizenship education clearly influenced young people’s (18–26 years old) political knowledge, even when controlling for their socio-economic background.

Second, several studies have investigated the effect or role of citizenship education in preparing young people for civic and political participation. These studies have operationalised the notion of citizenship education in various ways. For example, some studies have focused on certain activities, in or outside of school (e.g., Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Reichert & Print, 2017), while others have focused on topics or issues across school subjects (e.g., Hoskins, Janmaat, & Villalba, 2012; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015), and even combinations of these (e.g., Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Quintelier, 2015). Participation has frequently been operationalised as likelihood of voting (e.g., Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Pontes et al., 2017; Tonge et al., 2012) and/or other forms of commitment to participation (e.g., Hoskins et al., 2012; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Lin, 2015; Reichert & Print, 2017). These studies have found citizenship education to influence young people’s engagement positively. However, while Kahne and Sporte (2008) found classroom civic learning opportunities to have high impact on American high school students’ commitment to civic participation, even when controlling for prior civic commitment and other factors, Tonge et al. (2012) found that the influence of citizenship education was weaker for young people (aged 11–25) in the United Kingdom than that of background control variables, such as age and social class. Out-of-school factors were also stronger predictors of
In a longitudinal study in the United Kingdom, Keating and Janmaat (2015) investigated whether citizenship education had a lasting impact on young people’s civic engagement, measured at three time points: at 11–12, 15–16, and 19–20 years of age. This study distinguished school-based activities, such as student councils and debating clubs, from formal education, measured via students’ reporting of having received no, a little, or a lot of citizenship education. The study included both electoral participation and more expressive forms of participation, such as using social media for political purposes and taking part in demonstrations, as outcome variables. The authors found that school-based activities had a positive effect both on electoral and expressive political participation, while the quantity of citizenship education had only a weak, positive effect on voting and did not appear to influence expressive participation. The influence of citizenship education was present even after the participants had left school and was stronger than the effects of background variables such as socio-economic status. Differences in the role of control variables may be a consequence of different ways of operationalising citizenship education and the nature and organisation of citizenship education in various educational contexts, implying that I cannot rely solely on studies conducted in other countries to learn about citizenship education in social studies in Norway.

Despite the influence of socio-economic status, the various studies reviewed here have supported the notion that the issues and activities often used to operationalise citizenship education (e.g., classroom discussion or deliberating political issues) are associated with outcomes in line with the aims of citizenship education (e.g., students’ political efficacy and commitment to political participation; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015; Whiteley, 2014). However, many studies have examined citizenship education across school subjects (Hoskins et al., 2012; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Quintelier, 2015; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015). That is, findings have indicated that practicing skills and experiencing participation matter, but these activities have often been studied outside the context of school subjects that deal specifically with democracy and politics. Further, while many studies have measured the impact of citizenship education on engagement (e.g., Hoskins et al., 2012; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Quintelier, 2015; Reichert & Print, 2017), few have examined how students perceive this aspect of their education.
2.2 Students’ understanding of the concept of democracy

Children’s and young people’s understanding of different aspects of society is a field that has received much less attention than children’s understanding of the physical world (Davies & Lundholm, 2011; Furnham & Stacey, 1991), such as gravity and the shape of the earth. Moreover, studies of young people’s understanding of society, including the political domain, have tended to focus on their knowledge and their conceptual development (e.g., Berti, 2005; Berti & Andriolo, 2001; Berti & Ugolini, 1998; Torney-Purta, 1992; Zhang, Torney-Purta, & Barber, 2012). Although research on young peoples’ trust in and attitudes toward democracy exist (e.g., Huang et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2017), only a few studies have examined students’ understanding of the concept of democracy. Drawing on the Finnish National Electoral Study, Bengtsson and Christensen (2016) found that people’s perceptions of democracy influenced their political participation. That is, the way we understand democracy might contribute to the ways and extent to which we choose to engage in democratic processes. Bengtsson and Christensen’s (2016) study illustrates the importance of knowledge about young people’s perceptions of the concept of democracy for citizenship education in social studies, a goal of which is to prepare young people for participation in society and democratic politics (NDET, 2013).

Three main themes have stood out in previous studies of young people’s understanding of ‘democracy’. First, in the studies reviewed, the participants highlighted different kinds of freedoms and individual rights as essential features of democracy (Arensmeier, 2010; Avery et al., 2012; Flanagan, 2013). Participants saw freedom of speech and individual freedom as important in various contexts (Sweden, Eastern and Central Europe, and the United States), in line with previous studies of adults’ perceptions of democracy (e.g., Canache, 2012; Dalton, Shin, & Jou, 2007). Second, the role of ‘the people’ was a common theme in young people’s perceptions of ‘democracy’ (Arensmeier, 2010; Flanagan, 2013). Particularly, young people focused on people’s influence on decision-making, primarily through voting for political representatives. Third, young people related democracy to civic equality (Avery et al., 2012; Flanagan, 2013), highlighting people’s opportunities for participation, the rights of different groups of people, and equal protection under the law. In these studies, civic equality seems to have been a more important feature of young people’s ideas of democracy in Eastern European countries than in the United States and Sweden, which might indicate that certain democratic values are more taken for granted in the Western countries or have not been made explicit in presentations of democracy in school (Arensmeier, 2010). These themes illustrate diverse conceptions of democracy, as they...
refer to aspects of the political system related to representative democracy, human rights, and civic equality.

Although the reviewed studies have suggested that young people across contexts share some ideas of what ‘democracy’ means or implies, characteristics of national democracies and differences in the social studies or citizenship education curricula provide good reasons to examine young people’s understanding of the concept of democracy in various countries (Barton & Avery, 2016). Further, while these studies have offered insight into young people’s perceptions, two of these studies were based on survey responses (Avery et al., 2012; Flanagan, 2013), providing limited data on participants’ reasoning and reflection and no opportunity for the researcher to follow up on responses. Conversely, Arensmeier’s (2010) focus group study conducted in 2003 generated more qualitative data on aspects of the participants’ understanding, suggesting a potential for further research. Apart from Arensmeier’s (2010) study, knowledge of how young people would express their understanding of the concept of democracy in a more open and dynamic form of data collection is lacking.

2.3 Young people’s perceptions of and engagement in politics

Compared to the limited in-depth qualitative research on young people’s understanding of ‘democracy’, more qualitative studies have addressed ‘politics’, some in direct response to quantitative studies focusing on institutionalised political participation (e.g., O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007). Research on young people’s engagement in societal and political issues and processes has long been a feature of citizenship education (e.g. Hahn, 1998) and has taken place in a variety of academic disciplines, such as sociology, political science, and media studies, in addition to the educational sciences. This kind of research has blossomed during the last two decades, partly spurred on by what has been described as a continuing downward trend in the political interest, knowledge, and participation of young people in Europe and the United States (e.g., Sloam, 2016). Simultaneously, several authors have recommended that researchers should strive to broaden their conceptions of the political and allow young people’s definitions to be included in determining what constitutes political engagement (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Kallio & Häkli, 2013; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Manning, 2010; Marsh, O’Toole, & Jones, 2007; O’Toole, 2003).

The studies reviewed in this section provide some insight into young people’s perceptions of politics. However, these studies primarily focused on issues of political engagement or disengagement rather than the concept of politics itself. That is, participants’
perceptions of politics were often based on their political and non-political experiences and interests as well as how they defined these in relation to the political, although O’Toole’s (2003) study also included an exercise of sorting images as either political or non-political to explore young people's conceptions of the political.

Unlike their perceptions of democracy, young people have not often associated politics with ‘the people’ in a broad sense. When reviewing studies of young people’s perceptions of politics from the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Australia, three main themes stand out. First, as with the concept of democracy, young people have tended to relate politics to government, politicians, and the running of a country (O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007; White et al., 2000). Several young people in different contexts have expressed somewhat negative associations to government and politicians and have not described their own activities as political (Manning, 2010). Second, studies have indicated that young people’s perceptions of politics were often related to their life situations and personal experiences (Harris & Wyn, 2009; O’Toole, 2003). This was particularly clear for young people who had negative experiences of authority figures (e.g., the police), seen as representing the state or the government, or of racism or exclusion (O’Toole, 2003). A common aspect of this group of young people’s perceptions was that they were interested in and may have held strong convictions relating to local issues that affected them personally (Harris & Wyn, 2009; O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007). Third, some young people have associated politics with positive goals and issues, including the possibility to change the status quo and to make a difference on issues they cared about (O’Toole; Sloam, 2007; White et al., 2000). These positive perceptions of politics were most common among young people who were active in various forms of political organisations or who expressed an interest in politics (Sloam, 2007; White et al., 2000).

Research on young people’s perceptions of politics are often framed by issues of political engagement (Manning, 2010; O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007), as these may be seen as interrelated. In a large study of young people’s political socialisation, Amnå and Ekman (2014; see also Amnå et al., 2016) presented four empirically founded profiles of youth political engagement in the Swedish context, which is arguably similar to the Norwegian context in many ways. Aiming to nuance the active/passive dichotomy often used in describing political participation, the authors kept political interest conceptually separate from participation to allow for the possibility that the students (mean age 16.6) were not either interested and active or disinterested and passive. The authors identified four student profiles: Active, Standby, Unengaged, and Disillusioned. The Active profile (6%) was characterised by high levels of interest and participation. Students belonging to this profile reported trying to
influence their family and friends and had high levels of news consumption. The Standby profile (46%) was characterised by the highest level of interest of all the profiles and average levels of participation. These students had the same level of news consumption as the Active students, but they were more satisfied with democracy than those students. Low levels of interest and participation characterised the Unengaged profile (26%). Similar to the Standby students, the Unengaged ones were also quite satisfied with how democracy worked. Finally, the Disillusioned profile (21%) was characterised by the lowest political interest of all the profiles and low levels of participation. Students in this profile had low trust in political institutions and low levels of knowledge about politics. In other words, Amnå and Ekman (2014) identified one active and three passive types of young citizens with very different characteristics. The various profiles pose different types of challenges for citizenship education, for example regarding students’ perceptions of the relationship between people, including themselves, and politics.

Taking a different approach to young people’s citizenship, not limited to the political domain, Olson, Fejes, Dahlstedt and Nicoll’s (2015) study investigated students’ (aged 18–19) descriptions of citizenship and self-reported citizenship activities in Sweden. The study identified three citizenship discourses, namely a knowledgeable citizen, concerned for example with keeping informed and engaging in discussions; a holistic citizen, focused for example on the collective dimension of citizenship and helping others; and a self-responsible ‘free’ citizen, valuing freedom and independent decisions within the regulations of society. This study illustrated how students’ understanding of and engagement in terms of citizenship can have other sources and involves other discourses than those of the school curriculum, indicating the need to inquire after students’ own understandings of their role as citizens.

Because knowledge of how young people understand ‘politics’ is of importance to social studies and citizenship education as well as to processes of democratic politics, research on the meanings young people assign to the concept of politics is necessary. Further, as students’ perceptions may be related to how they view their own role in politics and research has identified various modes of engagement among young people, there is a need to know more about their conceptualisations of the relationship between people and politics.

2.4 Democracy and politics in social studies and citizenship education instruction

In the beginning of this chapter, the reviewed studies demonstrated the role of citizenship education relating to students’ knowledge and engagement (Section 2.1). Another strand of research has investigated instructional practices in social studies and citizenship education,
often through qualitative methods of inquiry. Such studies have involved both teachers and students and have explored a variety of topics. In their review of research on social studies education (focused on, but not limited to the United States), Barton and Avery (2016) concentrated on the impact of instruction; students’ thinking, including knowledge, reasoning, and affective commitments; and factors affecting teaching. Less research, however, has focused specifically on teaching related to democracy and politics in social studies and citizenship education classroom instruction (Reinhardt, 2015). Barton and Avery (2016) highlighted the importance of classroom discussion in research on social studies subjects. A challenge related to the research on discussions is that, while students have generally reported engaging in classroom discussions frequently, classroom observations have indicated that the extent of ‘in-depth, substantive exchange of perspectives’ (Barton & Avery, 2016, p. 1005) about social and political issues is minimal. Despite the apparent differences in participants’ (i.e., students and teachers) and researchers’ conceptions of what constitutes a discussion, research has shown that engaging in discussions is associated with higher knowledge and more positive attitudes (Barton & Avery, 2016; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). In addition, classroom discussion may serve as a frame for several essential features of social studies and citizenship education, such as practicing democratic skills (Barton & Avery, 2016); supporting, strengthening, and challenging student voices (Leighton, 2012); allowing students to engage with current and controversial issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Jahr, Hempel, & Heinz, 2016); presenting and evaluating different perspectives (Avery, Levy, & Simmons, 2014; Hess & McAvoy, 2015); and inspiring student engagement (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), while simultaneously exploring subject-specific concepts and topics required by the curriculum. For example, Hess and McAvoy (2015) studied discussions of political issues in U.S. social studies classrooms, including students’ perceptions of and the teacher’s facilitation of discussions of controversial political issues. Among other findings, Hess and McAvoy (2015) found that students in classrooms with high-quality discussions expressed greater interest in politics and higher levels of comfort with disagreement as a result of taking that class; additionally, students across different types of classrooms reported that taking the class prepared them to vote.

A critique of the strong focus on discussion and deliberation in social studies and citizenship education research, however, is that such activities often lack a focus on disciplinary skills (i.e., the use of methods and tools) used, for example, by political scientists when they seek to understand and analyse political issues (Journell, Beeson, & Ayers, 2015; Sandahl, 2013). In his study of social science lessons in Swedish upper secondary school,
Sandahl (2015) found that activities in class focused on students’ abilities to analyse, critically review, and contextualise subject matter issues related to the topic of globalisation, rather than on the first-order subject matter concepts, such as free trade and poverty. These findings indicate the importance of disciplinary skills in social studies subjects, enabling students to think critically, analyse, and test their arguments.

Concerning subject-matter topics in social studies and citizenship education, research in both Norway and the United States has indicated that some teachers focus on narrow conceptualisations (Barton & Avery, 2016; Børhaug, 2008; Patterson, Doppen, & Misco, 2012). In the United States, Patterson, Doppen and Misco (2012) found that most of the teachers participating in a study about teacher conceptualisations of citizenship education subscribed to what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have labelled a ‘personally responsible’ conception of citizenship associated with a ‘thin’ understanding of democracy. A smaller group subscribed to a ‘participatory’ approach, focusing on active participation in society and democracy, and the smallest group of teachers adopted a ‘social justice’ approach, characterised by a desire to change the status quo (Patterson et al., 2012).

In the Norwegian context, these conceptions were reflected in 14-year-old students’ ideas of citizenship in the 2016 ICCS study, where students’ support of aspects of citizenship related to morality and duties, such as voting in elections and respecting members of government, was stronger than in the 2009 ICCS study (Huang et al., 2017). Participating in political discussions was seen as one of the least important aspects of good citizenship among these students. In an earlier study of political education in upper secondary social studies in Norway, Børhaug (2008) found that teachers highlighted voting as the main form of political participation. Teachers presented politicians as the only political actors, while the role of citizens was presented as choosing between political parties. At the same time, teachers underlined the importance of being politically active, but struggled to justify this position when required by students to do so (Børhaug, 2008). The indication that teachers relate the topic of politics to institutionalised political participation resonates with young people’s perceptions of ‘politics’ as having to do with government and politicians (Section 2.3).

Although research has shown that students tend to value and benefit from high-quality discussions in social studies, that disciplinary skills are an important aspect of the social studies subject, and that some aspects of social studies might be presented narrowly by some teachers, knowledge of how students themselves perceive social studies and citizenship instruction intended to prepare them for democratic citizenship is scarce. One exception is Davies et al.’s (2014) study from the United Kingdom, which noted that ‘youth perspectives
of citizenship education within schools are largely positive, reflecting a keen awareness of the importance and presence of curriculum-based civics education’ (p. 151). Other than this, students’ perceptions of their citizenship education have not been heavily researched.

2.5 Summary
As demonstrated by this review of national and international research, there is a need for research on democracy and politics in social studies and citizenship education. Specifically, this review has highlighted the need to investigate how young people understand and relate to the concepts of democracy and politics. Further, while research has documented that citizenship education can contribute to engagement, less is known about how students enrolled in social studies classes or similar school subjects perceive the role of the social studies subject in terms of preparing them for current and future citizenship. To address this gap, there is a need for research that (a) focuses on students’ perceptions of the concept of democracy, using methods that facilitate student reflection; (b) focuses on students’ perceptions of ‘politics’, specifically on the meanings students assign to the concept of politics and how these relate to their perceptions of the relationship between people and politics; and (c) includes student perspectives on citizenship preparation in social studies. This knowledge is required to develop and practice a social studies education, including aspects of citizenship education, sensitive to the perspectives of the young people who constitute the people, the decision-makers, and the makers of the future.

Based on the identified needs for further research, I have defined the following overarching research question for my thesis: How do students (aged 16–17) perceive the core concepts of democracy and politics and aspects of citizenship preparation in the social studies subject in Norwegian upper secondary school?

The empirical research presented above drew on a variety of methods. For example, while the studies examining young people’s perceptions of democracy and politics were predominantly based on qualitative data, the studies investigating the role of citizenship education were predominantly based on quantitative data. In this thesis, I employ both approaches specifically to access students’ perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics as well as factors related to students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. To the best of my knowledge, this PhD thesis is the first study investigating students’ perceptions of democracy, politics, and citizenship preparation in social studies in Norway. In the following chapter, I discuss how I frame the overarching research question, and the inherent concepts, theoretically.
3 Theoretical and conceptual framing

In this chapter, I discuss the general theoretical and conceptual framing of my PhD thesis. The purpose is to present a foundation for the theoretical framing used in each of the three articles of the thesis and show how they are related. As my overarching research question concerns students’ perceptions related to the school subject of social studies, it is important to frame my PhD project within educational theory while addressing theoretical debates on the concepts of democracy and politics.

Drawing on educational and social science concepts and perspectives, citizenship education is not a uniform or ‘grand’ theory, but can refer both to education more generally and to teaching and learning in specific subject areas, such as social studies. One common theme, however, is education that aims to contribute to people’s reflective participation in democratic processes (e.g., Arthur et al., 2008). Therefore, I use citizenship education theory as theoretical framing in my PhD thesis, supplemented by theoretical perspectives focused on the concepts of democracy and politics as presented within political theory. My overarching theoretical framing of citizenship education builds on two distinct but interrelated theoretical areas: citizenship education and political theory.

Social studies education (in the American tradition) and social studies didactics (in the European tradition) both draw on perspectives from different disciplines (Barton & Avery, 2016; Reinhardt, 2015), such as sociology, human geography, and political theory, in addition to educational perspectives. Using citizenship education and political theory to understand students’ perceptions of core concepts and citizenship preparation in social studies aligns with Christensen’s (2015) model of knowledge domains in the social studies subject, which includes topical issues and social structures and processes; students’ lifeworld (for example their own curiosity and experiences); social science disciplines; and democratic values (Christensen, 2015, p. 23). In this thesis and in social studies didactics, these four aspects of social studies are combined to qualify students’ engagement and participation in society.

This chapter is structured as follows: First, I present some perspectives on citizenship education (3.1). Then I discuss political theory, including ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ as contested concepts (3.2). Next, I present aspects of citizenship education related to school subjects such as social studies (3.3) and a conceptualisation of students’ perceptions (3.4). Finally, I provide a short summary of how these perspectives relate to the theoretical framing I have used in the three articles in this PhD thesis (3.5).
3.1 Citizenship education

The broad field of citizenship education comprises several theoretical strands and covers a range of topics concerning the role of education in enabling people to live and participate in diverse and democratic societies (e.g., Osler & Starkey, 2018; Solhaug, 2013). In this PhD thesis, I focus on ‘education for democratic citizenship’ and use this term interchangeably with ‘citizenship education’. The Council of Europe (2010) has defined education for democratic citizenship as follows:

education, training, dissemination, information, practices and activities which aim, by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding and moulding their attitudes and behaviour, to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law. (Council of Europe (CoE), 2010, Section 1)

My thesis builds on several elements of the above definition; namely education in a school context, including knowledge, skills, and understanding, and the role of education in contributing to students’ empowerment and democratic engagement. Building on previous definitions and perspectives (Carpini, 2004; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2010), I understand the term ‘engagement’ in this context to include young people’s various forms of political interest, thereby incorporating cognitive and emotional components, and individual and collective actions aimed at contributing to change, including both conventional and non-conventional forms of participation. Importantly, I do not see engagement as a matter of either being or not being engaged in particular arenas, but instead as a scale allowing for various nuances and modes (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Olson, 2012).

Although widely supported as an important feature of education, citizenship education has also faced criticism (e.g., Davies, Evans, & Reid, 2005; Olson, 2009; Olson et al., 2015). Biesta (2011a, 2011b) criticised what he considered an individualistic and outcomes-oriented conceptualisation of citizenship education in school curricula. He argued that implementing citizenship education as an antidote to the ‘alleged crisis of democracy’ (Biesta, 2011b, p. 6) signalled that the problem was based on a lack of the correct knowledge, skills, and values of individual young people and largely overlooked that people’s citizenship is situated in complex social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. These contexts are largely absent from the Council of Europe’s (2010) definition of education for democratic citizenship, which is very much focused on the individual. My PhD thesis examines students’ perceptions, which are arguably shaped by, situated in, and may influence students’ social, cultural, economic,
and political contexts. Further, the nature of citizenship education in schools might strengthen the notion of young people as ‘citizens-in-waiting’ or as ‘not-yet-being-citizens’ (Biesta, 2011b, p. 13; Olson, 2009). In response to these critiqued aspects of citizenship education, Olson (2009) suggested an educational policy that ‘rejects socialisation as an educational paradigm and guarantee of democracy’ (p. 78, original emphasis). Rather, she suggested encouraging students’ “voicing” of different meanings and understandings of democracy and democratic life’ (p. 78) to open up the political and societal framing of citizenship education. This approach would involve recognising that young people’s citizenship is always in part shaped outside school (Olson et al., 2015). However, as citizenship education is increasingly to be found in school curricula as separate subjects, integrated or cross-curricular topics, or a combination of these (Eurydice, 2017), it becomes important to identify the role of formal school education in terms of enabling and inspiring young people to participate in democratic and political processes and contexts. In this thesis, ‘citizenship preparation’ refers to social studies education aiming to cultivate students’ knowledgeable participation in society and democratic politics (Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004).

### 3.2 Political theory and the concepts of democracy and politics

Democracy and politics can be considered core concepts in citizenship education in general, and specifically in social studies (e.g., Reinhardt, 2015). I draw on political theory to shed light on key aspects of these disciplinary and subject matter concepts to provide an overview of some perspectives and dimensions of the concepts of democracy and politics through which to understand students’ perceptions.

According to Heywood (2015) and Freeden (2013), political theory differs from political science, which is concerned with empirical investigations. As concepts constitute general ideas about phenomena, political theory involves ‘the analytical study of ideas and concepts that have been central to political thought’ (Heywood, 2015, p. 3). Such concepts are the units of meaning with which we build knowledge and make sense of the world. In this section, I present some perspectives that have shaped the ways I use these concepts in this thesis.

The terms ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ can both be labelled ‘contested’ concepts (e.g., Bartolini, 2018; Biesta, 2011b; Birch, 2007; Heywood, 2015), indicating that theorists and others have disagreed on their meaning and that multiple ways of understanding and using them are widespread. The contested nature of these concepts is a justification for the importance of exploring how young people understand and perceive them: that is,
investigating students’ perceptions of these concepts is not aimed at uncovering misconceptions or how much they know about them, but at learning what meaning the students themselves assign to these concepts. As is common in the field of citizenship education (e.g., Biesta, 2011b; Solhaug, 2013), rather than framing young people’s perceptions within one theory, I have outlined strands of different theories to allow students’ perspectives to take the lead. Similarly, political theorist Freeden (2013) indicated that the meaning of the concept of politics is, in fact, an empirical question, when asking: ‘What do people have in mind or imagine when they encounter the word ‘politics’?’ (p. 3). Canache (2012) adopted the same position concerning the concept of democracy, stating that ‘rather than assuming that all citizens conceive of democracy similarly, we should approach as an empirical matter the questions of whether there is commonality in views about democracy across individuals and groups’ (p. 1133). Building on these perspectives, I approach the concepts of democracy and politics as contested concepts below, as I also do in Articles I and II.

3.2.1 Democracy as a contested concept
The contested nature of ‘democracy’ makes it difficult to define the concept. Borrowing from Birch (2007), I will illustrate this predicament. First, the etymological definition of democracy is ‘rule by the people’ (“Democracy,” 2002). However, defining who the people are and what kind of rule we are talking about, inevitably depends on one’s political values and ideologies. For example, does ‘people’ include all people living in a country, or only its citizens? Alternatively, does it only include some citizens, like those older than 18 or those who own property? The concept of ‘rule’ offers a similar dilemma: If one employs a strict definition of rule, such as ‘the activity of reaching authoritative decisions that result in laws and regulations binding upon society’ (Birch, 2007, p. 111), it is clear that, in modern Western democracies, a small percentage of the population is involved in ruling. In a weaker sense of the word, influencing political decisions is a sufficient requirement for ‘rule of the people’ (Birch, 2007) – but the question remains how extensive this influence needs to be. This issue makes political participation, understood as people playing a part in the process of government through choosing leaders and on various levels shaping and implementing policies (Birch, 2007), an important concept in the debate on the operationalisation of ‘rule by the people’ and, consequently, the conceptualisation of democracy. The character and extent of the people’s political participation is a key issue of strife in political theory and philosophy (e.g., Pateman, 1970; Schumpeter, 1994). This example of the challenge of defining
‘democracy’ illustrates the close relationship between the concepts of democracy and politics in some contexts, but also the need to keep them conceptually separate to be able to explore the meanings assigned to each and how they are perceived as different or related.

Additionally, the concept of democracy has been extended to describe social relationships and social equality in a society (Birch, 2007). As such, people discuss different kinds of democratic relationships, such as within the workplace (Pateman, 1970), family, or school (Heywood, 2007; Persson, Stattin, & Kerr, 2004), which differ significantly from government. These dimensions and conceptions of ‘democracy’ illustrate the importance of creating a theoretical framework allowing for different ways of understanding democracy.

To include these approaches to democracy, I have built on three theoretical perspectives, namely liberal, participatory, and deliberative democracy (Barber, 1984; Behrouzi, 2005; Cohen, 2002; Dahl, 1998; Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1995, 1999; Munck, 2014; Nguyen, 2014; Pateman, 1970; Schumpeter, 1994; Terchek & Conte, 2001). These three theoretical strands present different ways of understanding the relationship between people and the government in a democracy. Specifically, these perspectives have different views on the role and responsibility of the state and the role and responsibility of its citizens. Liberal theory is focused on individuals’ preferences and the aggregation of these during elections of political representatives (Schumpeter, 1994; Terchek & Conte, 2001). Liberal theory is focused on representative democracy and political institutions, of which an important mandate is to ensure people’s individual rights. In this view, democracy is upheld through the people’s right to replace political representatives that have lost popular support. Participatory democracy calls for participants’ active participation in decision-making processes and extends democracy beyond the institutions of the nation-state and into other areas of society (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1927; Pateman, 1970). Although broad participation in elections is seen as important, it should be supplemented by other forms of participation. Proponents of participatory democracy have argued that such participation contributes to people’s political competence and personal development. Finally, deliberative democracy involves deliberative processes of opinion- and will-formation guided by the common good (Habermas, 1995, 1999). A central aspect of this process is that all participants should be able to present their views and suggestions with the outcome determined by the strength of their arguments. Such democratic processes rely on conditions and procedures ensuring a fair and inclusive deliberation process, such as being free from force. I used these three perspectives on democracy to frame students’ understanding of the concept of democracy in Article I.
3.2.2 Politics as a contested concept

As with the concept of democracy, theorists have suggested many different ways of understanding ‘politics’ (e.g., Barry, 2000; Crick, 2000; Easton, 1965; Held, 1991; Heller, 1991; Leftwich, 2004; Mouffe, 1993, 2005). A major theoretical debate about the concept of politics concerns the problem of delineation, or where to draw the boundaries of what constitutes politics. While most scholars have agreed that politics contains an element of disagreement and pluralism, they have disagreed on where to draw the lines of what does and does not constitute politics (Held, 1991; Heller, 1991). Politics may be the adjustments we make to live together; the activities of citizens and their leaders within or outside the public sphere; state and government activities related to decision-making; interaction between individuals or groups; a feature of political systems; or even the language we use when we talk about social and political issues (Ball, 1988; Leftwich, 2004). For example, Crick (2000) aimed to free politics from other domains and concepts while praising it as an activity with a life of its own. In limiting the scope of politics, Crick (2000) claimed that including all discussion, conflict, struggle and conciliation in the conceptualisation of politics would ignore the fact that politics depends on some settled order ‘sufficiently complex and divided to make politics a plausible response to the problem of governing it’ (Crick, 2000, p. 18). Easton’s (1965) simple definition of politics as ‘the authoritative allocation of values’ (p. 50) was arguably also restricted to government. Heller (1991), conversely, warned about excluding too much from the concept of politics. Both Marxist and feminist perspectives on politics have criticised attempts to limit politics to the world of government and argued for including other aspects of society, such as the existence of exploitative relationships and issues primarily associated with the private realm. In turn, Held (1991) pointed out how including such issues in the concept of politics opens these domains to state regulation; in effect, Held argued that broad concepts of politics can become related to reduced freedom. To gain knowledge about students’ various perceptions, I found it important to include theoretical perspectives that were sensitive to such dimensions and nuances in ways of understanding and using the concept of politics.

I have used political theory to present some key dimensions of the concept of politics (Barry, 2000; Held, 1991; Leftwich, 2004; Mouffe, 1993, 2005; Schmitt, 1996). I outlined such dimensions to allow for students’ various associations to ‘politics’, which is a difficult concept to grasp. Definitions of politics range from most human activities to state-linked conceptions (Barry, 2000; Held, 1991). I drew on Mouffe (1993, 2005), who built on and challenged ideas of deliberative democracy and argued for an agonistic politics where conflict
is acknowledged as inherent to society and adversaries consider each other’s perspectives legitimate rather than aiming for consensus. Another contribution was Leftwich’s (2004) distinction between the arena and process views of politics, where the former concerns government and other formal institutions as sites of politics, while the latter is open to the idea that politics is a wider phenomenon taking place in a range of situations and fora. The arena approach is narrower, focusing on governments’ goals, policies, and binding decisions. In this approach, politics is about the debates of what policies are to be implemented and by whom. According to Leftwich (2004), some embracing the arena approach hold a limited view, including only debates and arguments involving government. Others regard all formal institutions as sites of politics, representing an extensive view. Those who support the process approach see politics as a much wider phenomenon in society with processes not limited to certain institutional arenas (Leftwich, 2004). Leftwich’s conceptualisations of politics as arena or process allow for multiple perceptions of politics, incorporating several dimensions of politics as discussed above (e.g., Crick, 2000; Easton, 1965; Held, 1991). I used these perspectives on politics to frame students’ perceptions of the concept of politics in Article II.

3.3 Citizenship education in social studies

Based on the perspectives of citizenship education presented above, the aims of such education are ambitious, which is of particular relevance as citizenship education is organised in many different ways. In this section, I discuss citizenship education literature related to various aspects of teaching and learning in school subjects such as social studies.

Davies (2015) suggested three main characteristics of citizenship education in school. First, citizenship education is concerned with contemporary content. He noted that, although the present state of a society is clearly shaped by historical phenomena and developments, citizenship education primarily deals with issues of current and topical interest while addressing power relations, social structures, and events of political, cultural, and economic significance locally, nationally, and globally. As such, citizenship education should be dynamic and able to address issues as they occur. In Article III, the significance of contemporary content is present in the dependent variable ‘citizenship preparation in social studies’, through items focused on students’ understanding of the world around them and in the independent variables ‘discussing democracy and politics’, ‘online political communication’, and ‘political interests of family and friends’ through items measuring discussion of political issues. However, this focus on contemporary content does not entail that the subject area is fragmented or subject to the ever-changing news scene.
Rather, Davies (2015) offered a second suggestion that citizenship education depends fundamentally on conceptual understanding. As concepts are the building blocks of how we understand and explain the world around us (Rata, 2012), it is essential to consider the meaning of concepts relevant to citizenship education. It is common to distinguish between substantive and procedural concepts (Davies, 2015). Concepts such as democracy, politics, citizen, and citizenship are substantive, or first order, concepts because they help students learn about something, while procedural, or second order, concepts describe what students should be able to do as they learn, for example reflect, analyse, discuss and draw inferences from evidence (Sandahl, 2015). In citizenship education, working with both kinds of concepts facilitates learning experiences that connect strongly to the aims of citizenship education described above. Articles I and II highlighted conceptual understanding through their focus on the concepts of democracy and politics; additionally, such understanding was an important aspect of the independent variable ‘teacher contribution’ in Article III through items measuring students’ perceptions of the teaching of complex concepts in social studies.

Third, and in line with the aims of citizenship education outlined in the previous section, Davies (2015) suggested that a commitment to social justice should permeate citizenship education in school. This approach would highlight the importance of students understanding their rights and duties in democracy as well as developing the skills and dispositions to participate (Johnson & Morris, 2010). It also includes being attentive to students’ and communities’ identity and diversity. That is, private and personal issues are often strongly related to public issues and social structures. Being attentive to social justice is tied to a sensitivity toward the differences in students’ and other people’s role and status in terms of citizenship, which regulates the relationship between the individual and the state. This sensitivity includes attempting to ameliorate the somewhat liminal political status of young people in many contexts (Biesta, 2011b; Wood, 2012), as the age when young people are given the right to vote is often used to distinguish children from adults (Lockyer, 2008). Articles I and II remained sensitive to the social justice perspective of citizenship education by focusing on students’ perspectives of democracy and politics, as well as students’ own role in the relationship between people and politics. In Article III, the independent variable ‘discussing democracy and politics’ conveyed the social justice perspective, as did the dependent variable ‘citizenship preparation in social studies’ through its focus on the role of social studies in preparing students for engagement and participation.

Supplementing Davies’ (2015) three aspects of citizenship education (contemporary content, conceptual understanding, social justice), I would like to highlight the student-voice
approach (Cremin & Warwick, 2015). To reach the ambitious aims of citizenship education, several authors have argued the importance of allowing students’ voices to feature prominently in citizenship education lessons (Hess, 2009; Leighton, 2012; Olson, 2009). Engaging students in pair, group or whole-class discussion can bring citizenship to life in the classroom by facilitating processes in which students can develop their ideas and critical enquiry skills with the help of the teacher (Cremin & Warwick, 2015) as well as ‘weigh evidence, consider competing views, form an opinion, articulate that opinion, and respond to those who disagree’ (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 5). Engaging in class discussion means engaging in a fundamentally democratic activity so that students are not simply preparing for active citizenship; in fact, they are being active members of society. Articles I and II highlighted the importance of student voices through their focus on students’ perceptions both in terms of facilitating students’ talk and relating to the ideas students expressed about ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’. Moreover, in Article III, student voices were inherent in the independent variable ‘enjoying social studies’ through items measuring students’ enjoyment of the activities in social studies lessons, as well as in ‘discussing democracy and politics’ and ‘teacher contribution’ through items focusing on students’ perceptions of discussing issues and multiple perspectives in social studies lessons.

However, as Biesta (2011b) pointed out, there is no one-to-one relationship between what is being taught and what students learn. Rather, ‘what students learn from what they are being taught crucially depends on the ways they interpret and make sense of the teaching, something they do on the basis of a wide and diverse range of experiences’ (Biesta, 2011b, p. 14). That is, the ways students perceive and interpret concepts and phenomena are influenced by their own perspectives, and these perspectives are in turn shaped by previous learning and other kinds of experiences. Given that concepts comprise one pillar of citizenship education, the meaning of these concepts must be considered (Davies, 2015). Insight into students’ ideas and perceptions is of utmost importance for the development of citizenship education.

3.4 Conceptualising students’ perceptions
In psychological literature, the term ‘perception’ is used in different ways, although a basic element is that perception ‘involves the analysis of sensory information’ (Pike & Edgar, 2005, p. 73). ‘Perception’ has been used in a wider sense in literature reporting on young people’s perspectives and ideas on various issues (e.g., Armstrong, Hill, & Secker, 2000; Dill & Thill, 2007; Peterman & Kennedy, 2003). In addition to cognitive factors (e.g., intelligence), young people’s perceptions may vary based on their experiences and inputs from primary and
secondary socialisation agents (Furnham & Stacey, 1991). Young people’s perceptions may reflect their home environment, school learning, community membership experiences, and media representations of the world; in turn, their perceptions may shape how they understand and relate to the world (Bruer, 1993). Further, young people play an active part in their own development and, especially in adolescence, interpret, reject, or accept information they receive from various sources, such as teachers, parents, and the media (Furnham & Stacey, 1991; Shor, 1992). For adolescents’ (aged 12–17) conceptual development in politics and history, Torney-Purta (1994) highlighted the significance of long-term social experience, resulting in an ability to deal with more complex situations; continuity in building one knowledge structure upon another; and the peer group’s role in situating social cognition. Consequently, students’ perceptions of democracy, politics and citizenship preparation in social studies are both a result and a part of the ongoing process of conceptual development and understanding.

Building on these conceptualisations as well as definitions in the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2005), I use the terms ‘understanding’ (p. 1667), ‘conception’ (p. 313), and ‘perception’ (p. 1122) to denote students’ ideas or beliefs of what something is, particularly, with what they associate a particular concept (White & Gunstone, 2014). Although previous research has used these three terms to address people’s ideas about various social scientific concepts, I found that the term ‘understanding’ was frequently used for the concept of ‘democracy’ (e.g., Arensmeier, 2010; Avery et al., 2012; Canache, 2012); therefore, I used this term in Article I. To illustrate the nuance between students’ ideas of the concept of politics as identified through thematic analysis across participants and each student’s view on the relationship between people and politics, I used both ‘perception’ and ‘conception’ in Article II. I used only ‘perception’ in Article III, which was based on students’ responses to items in a questionnaire aimed at measuring their perceptions of citizenship preparation in the social studies school subject.

### 3.5 Summary

The above framework illuminates the overarching research question of this thesis from different perspectives. Utilising literature on citizenship education supplemented by insights from political theory has provided me with a theoretical framing for exploring students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’, ‘politics’, and citizenship preparation in upper secondary social studies. Building on Christensen’s (2015) model of knowledge domains in the social studies subject, Figure 3.1 presents the theoretical model.
In this model, the theme of democracy and politics represents topical issues and social studies content, students’ perceptions are considered expressions related to their lifeworld, political theory contributes to social science disciplinary perspectives, and citizenship education theory incorporates democratic values. These four knowledge domains contribute to social studies didactics and to the social studies school subject’s content, methods, and purposes; consequently, they feature strongly in my PhD thesis. To sum up how I have used aspects of citizenship education and political theory in the articles making up this thesis, Table 3.1 provides an overview of the main theoretical framing of the three articles.

Table 3.1. Theoretical framing of the articles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extended abstract</th>
<th>Article I</th>
<th>Article II</th>
<th>Article III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship education and political theory</td>
<td>Political theory: democracy</td>
<td>Political theory: politics Citizenship education</td>
<td>Citizenship education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As highlighted in this chapter, the importance of understanding students’ perspectives necessitates the choice of investigation methods that enable access to this kind of insight. As a result, my PhD project is an empirically based study qualitatively investigating students’ self-reported perceptions of the concepts of democracy (Article I) and politics (Article II), and quantitatively investigating students’ self-reported perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies and factors associated with these (Article III). I address the resulting research methodology in the following chapter.
4 Research Methodology

In this chapter, I begin by discussing my use of a multiple methods approach (4.1). Next, I provide an account of the methodological design, including samples (4.2), data (4.3), and analyses (4.4), which led to the three articles making up my thesis. Finally, I address aspects of research credibility relevant for this PhD thesis (4.5).

4.1 Multiple methods approach

Many research studies have relied on the use of multiple methods (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Poth & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Morse (2003) defined multiple methods research as ‘the conduct of two or more research methods, each conducted rigorously and complete in itself, in one project’ (p. 190). Multiple methods are used ‘when a series of projects are interrelated with a broad topic and designed to solve an overall research problem’ (Morse, 2003, p. 196). This PhD project resonates with three of Greene’s (2007) purposes of mixing or integrating methods in research projects, namely complementarity, development, and expansion. Specifically, my PhD project relies on complementarity because I have used qualitative and quantitative methods that tap into facets of the same complex phenomenon, namely students’ perceptions of three aspects of democracy and politics in social studies, with different local and regional samples in different phases, seeking to gain a more comprehensive picture by exploring different perspectives. I relied on development by collecting and analysing data sequentially across phases to let convergence or contradiction from one study inform the next, specifically implementation and measurement decisions, as well as identification of the sample for the next phase. Finally, I relied on expansion by collecting and integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate different phenomena across phases. I will justify these purposes in this chapter.

The use of multiple methods can be founded in a pragmatic philosophy (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), which argues that ‘there may be both singular and multiple versions of the truth and reality’ (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 23) and that ‘different approaches generate different outcomes’ (Biesta, 2010, p. 116). In this project, I have used pragmatism to imply there is more than one way of investigating students’ perspectives and the belief that different ways of doing so might uncover different aspects of students’ ideas and experiences at the time of investigation (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). For example, qualitative and quantitative strands of my project added insights at several points of integration throughout
my PhD thesis. There is little available research on students’ perceptions related to the social studies subject in Norway. Therefore, the study’s exploratory nature is one rationale for choosing a qualitatively driven design (Creswell, 2012; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). The qualitative methods I used in Articles I and II produced data that provided insights for the quantitative methods I used in Article III. Pragmatism offered an epistemological and methodological justification for the use of multiple methods in this thesis. In the following, I will present the research design and the methods employed in my project.

4.1.1 The multiphase research design

One challenge of writing an article-based thesis was determining how to integrate the three articles into a holistic PhD study. Responding to this challenge, I have carried out a multiphase project with each phase comprising a sub-study I disseminated in one of my three articles. Figure 4.1 presents the design.

Figure 4.1. Research design.

The multiphase design enabled a stepwise analysis, where the analysis in each phase influenced the next. This multiphase design included elements of an emergent approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), letting me plan for unexpected situations or outcomes (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). I will discuss the links between phases and the design challenges below.

The three phases had separate but related student samples, data collection periods, and data analysis methods. I designed Phase 1 (autumn 2014–spring 2015) as a qualitative investigation to examine how a group of 16-year-old students expressed their understanding of the concept of democracy and how they perceived the teaching of concepts in general in social studies. For this phase, I conducted five focus groups with a total of 23 students who
attended social studies classes at three upper secondary schools. Phase 1 was important for the planning of Phase 2 because it clarified that I needed to focus on specific concepts related to the social studies school subject rather than looking at how students perceived the teaching of concepts in general. This slight change in focus is an example of emergence in my PhD project (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Further, to better grasp students’ understanding of the conceptual difference between ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’, I added questions about the concept of politics to the final focus group, which provided interesting insight into students’ perceptions and initiated a need to investigate the specific concept of politics in Phase 2. Consequently, Phase 1 resonated with Greene’s (2007) purpose of development, as this phase contributed to framing the development of the following phases of my PhD project.

I also designed Phase 2 (spring 2015–spring 2016) as a qualitative investigation based on the findings in the previous phase. The main purpose was to explore how 16-year-old students perceived the concept of politics. I decided on the concept of politics because findings from Phase 1 showed that the students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’ were closely related to aspects of the political system. I also learned in Phase 1 that, while focus groups were well suited for facilitating conversations between the participants and allowing them to build on each other’s responses, they were less suited for in-depth exploration of individual students’ reasoning. To access in-depth perspectives in Phase 2, I conducted individual interviews with nine students in upper secondary social studies classes. Phase 2 relates to the purpose of complementarity by allowing access to different samples’ reasoning on separate but related concepts and to development by contributing to the initiation of Phase 3 (Greene, 2007).

Enabled by the multiphase design, Phase 3 built on findings from Phases 1 and 2. Because differences emerged in how students in the two qualitative phases perceived and related to the concepts of democracy and politics, I designed this phase as a quantitative investigation to address students’ perceptions of the social studies subject, particularly related to preparing them for present and future citizenship. I aimed to explore the strengths of relations between students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies and associated factors. Thus, I was open to identifying consensus and corroboration of results as well as dissonance and contradiction. I used a larger sample from the population of 16- to 17-year-old students enrolled in social studies in upper secondary school. Consequently, Phase 3 also relates to the purposes of development and complementarity, in addition to expansion (Greene, 2007), by complementing the two qualitative phases, building on them to develop a
quantitative student survey, and investigating a different aspect (i.e., citizenship preparation) of students’ perceptions of democracy and politics in social studies.

As mentioned, I have disseminated findings from each phase separately in the corresponding articles. In addition, as each phase influenced and was influenced by the other phases, the multiphase approach enabled a research design that integrated multiple methods to allow for valuing different perspectives and diverse student voices (Greene, 2007). I developed this design when the first phase (i.e., the initial exploration of students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’) revealed that it was necessary to go more in-depth in investigating other aspects of students’ perceptions in the second phase, specifically their perceptions of ‘politics’. The first two phases inspired new questions regarding students’ experiences with the social studies subject, influencing the third phase. Although Phase 3 broadened the scope of my PhD project by adding students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in the social studies subject to the investigations of students’ perceptions of social studies concepts, both are important aspects of social studies didactics (Christensen, 2015; Reinhardt, 2015). After investigating students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ in Phases 1 and 2, I considered it necessary to investigate students’ perceptions of the social studies subject and lessons. As such, the combination of students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’, ‘politics’, and citizenship preparation illustrates the emergent elements of the research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Table 4.1 gives an overview of the phases and the resulting articles.
Table 4.1. Overview of the parts of my PhD project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Phase 1 – Article I</th>
<th>Phase 2 – Article II</th>
<th>Phase 3 – Article III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title of article</strong></td>
<td>Students’ understanding of the concept of democracy and implications for teacher education in social studies</td>
<td>Engagement, passivity and detachment: 16-year-old students’ conceptions of politics and the relationship between people and politics</td>
<td>Students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies: the role of instruction and students’ interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research questions</strong></td>
<td>How do Norwegian 16-year-olds explain their understanding of the concept of democracy?</td>
<td>1. How do 16-year-old students perceive the concept of politics? 2. How do the students perceive the relationship between people and politics?</td>
<td>Which factors are related to students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methods</strong></td>
<td>Qualitative (focus groups)</td>
<td>Qualitative (interviews)</td>
<td>Quantitative (survey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants</strong> (Section 4.2)</td>
<td>Sample 1: 23 upper secondary students (age 16)</td>
<td>Sample 2: nine upper secondary students (age 16)</td>
<td>Sample 3: 264 upper secondary students (age 16–17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data sources</strong> (Section 4.3)</td>
<td>Audio-recorded and transcribed focus groups</td>
<td>Audio-recorded and transcribed individual interviews</td>
<td>Survey data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key concepts</strong> (Sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4)</td>
<td>• Democracy • Understanding • Conceptions</td>
<td>• Politics • Perceptions • Conceptions • Citizenship education</td>
<td>• Citizenship preparation • Perceptions • Democracy • Politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following sections, I describe participants and sampling (4.2), data collection (4.3), data analyses (4.4), and research credibility (4.5) in more detail.

4.2 Participants and sampling

Drawing on the argument that researchers need to learn more about young people’s perceptions of concepts such as politics (e.g., Kallio & Häkli, 2013; O’Toole, 2003), this PhD project focused entirely on the student perspective. To ensure access to students with different interests and perspectives from various educational environments, I used different samples for each phase, one local and two regional ones. These samples included a total of 293 students.

4 In this context, ‘explain’ is used as a synonym for ‘express’, not aiming to explain causal relationships or have students give reasons for their understanding. Instead, it is a result of a translation of the Norwegian term ‘forklare’, which can be used to mean both ‘explain’ and ‘express’.

5 All students in Phases 1–3 attended the mandatory social studies subject in upper secondary school. In Phase 3, a small group of students in vocational studies completed this course in year 12 rather than year 11.
aged 16–17 from 15 upper secondary schools in three counties in the east of Norway, including both rural and urban areas. The samples were drawn from the same population: students attending social studies in upper secondary school in Norway. I used purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2011; Palys, 2008) in the first two phases and convenience sampling in Phase 3 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participating students signed standard consent forms, and the data was anonymised directly following data collection (Creswell, 2013).

Sample 1 was a purposive sample aiming for maximum variation. Since Phase 1 was the initial exploration of students’ perceptions, I used variation among the students’ academic performance as the main selection criterion to improve the likelihood that multiple perspectives were represented in the groups. To produce some variation within the sample, I decided to sample students from different schools. The sample included 23 students (12 boys and 11 girls) from three upper secondary schools: two groups of students from two schools, and one group at the third school. With the help of their teachers, I purposively selected all students to represent maximum variety (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018) within their classes, based on their academic achievements in social studies (low, medium, and high) and their willingness to talk about their perspectives with each other and myself. Despite the selection criteria, I observed that there were few high achievers among the students participating in the first four groups. In line with saturation strategies (Johnson & Christensen, 2014), I decided to conduct a fifth focus group for which I specifically asked the teacher for high-achieving students. As the data from this group largely confirmed the perspectives from the first four, I did not pursue a larger sample in Phase 1. Based on the focus group data analysis, I identified differences among the students in Sample 1 in terms of political interest and experience. Acknowledging that this might influence their perceptions, I decided to take political interest and experience into account for the sampling in Phase 2.

Thus, Sample 2 was also a purposive sample, which included nine students from five upper secondary schools. I expanded the geographical scope to two counties, while Sample 1 was confined to one county. Analysis showed that the fifth group in Phase 1 provided valuable data on the students’ perceptions of ‘politics’, so I included these three students from Sample 1 in Sample 2. Thus, the participants in Phase 2 were nine purposively selected 16-year-old students (five girls and four boys). To access variety in students’ perceptions, I chose interest in and experience with politics as the main selection criteria. I gained access to students by contacting social studies teachers at the five schools. Previous research has indicated that political interest should be kept conceptually separate from political participation (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), so I developed three profiles and asked teachers to
choose students that were: (a) active in or had experience with politics, (b) interested in but not active in politics, or (c) uninterested and not active in politics. Some teachers asked certain students, while others asked all their students for volunteers. Each interview began with the participant describing his or her own level of interest in and experience with politics, thereby confirming the teachers’ profiling. Sample 2 included three students for each profile.

Sample 3 was based on convenience sampling and included 264 students (aged 16–17) from a total of 11 upper secondary schools in three counties of south-eastern Norway. Three schools were also a part of Samples 1 and 2. Unlike the previous samples, Sample 3 consisted of whole classes to include as many students as possible. To access a variety of students, I contacted the social studies department heads at 21 upper secondary schools in the three counties located both in rural and urban communities, with both vocational and general education programmes, and with low- to high intake criteria. I asked each department head for access to a social studies classroom whose teacher would be willing to allow me access to one lesson to have students respond to a paper-based survey. I received positive responses from 11 teachers at 11 schools, ending up with a total of 264 student respondents (43.7% boys, 56.3% girls). The schools reported having students from mixed to high socio-economic status backgrounds.

4.3 Data collection

I collected the data material using both qualitative and quantitative methods with the intention of moving from exploring a few students’ perspectives in focus groups (Phase 1) and individual interviews (Phase 2) to investigating a larger number of perspectives through a survey (Phase 3). The overall purpose was to investigate how students perceived and understood the concept of democracy (qualitative data and analysis; focus group interviews6), how students perceived and related to the concept of politics (qualitative data and analysis; individual interviews), and how students perceived citizenship preparation in social studies and factors associated with these perceptions (quantitative data and analyses; survey). The following section is intended to supplement the accounts given in each article and to show points of integration across the data sources.

6 In Article I, I used the term ‘group interview’. Because the research literature primarily uses the terms ‘focus group’ or ‘focus group interview’ (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996), I use these two terms interchangeably in this extended abstract.
4.3.1 Qualitative data

To explore young people’s perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ and to avoid closed categories that predefine response alternatives (Kallio & Häkli, 2013; Manning, 2010; O’Toole, 2003; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, & Andolina, 2010), I decided to conduct focus groups and individual interviews with students for the first two phases of the study. A common critique of focus groups and interviews as methods of data collection is that these are sometimes falsely presented as a window into the interviewee’s mind (Hammersley, 2003). I acknowledge the limitation of focus groups and interviews that they provide information only about what the interviewees express willingly in that particular setting. I discuss this issue further in the section on validity (4.5.2).

Focus groups: For the purpose of Phase 1, I chose focus group interviews to allow students to build on each other’s responses and obtain a broad understanding of their perceptions (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) and interaction among the interviewees (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The notion that ‘democracy’ is understood individually and enacted also collectively makes focus groups relevant in terms of accessing students’ understandings of the concept; consequently, the group conversations were less structured than individual interviews. This was suitable for Phase 1 because it allowed me to learn how students talked about the themes in the interview guide relatively freely. Consequently, my role was to facilitate interaction between individual students’ perspectives, which developed through the group discussions.

I prepared a semi-structured interview guide (Kvale, 2007) consisting of questions about the students’ perceptions of the teaching of subject-specific concepts in social studies in general and their understandings of (i.e., what meaning they assigned to) the concept of democracy in particular (see Appendix A). I composed the interview guide to allow all the questions to be answered both individually and through discussion among the participants.

The students had recently worked with the topic of ‘politics and democracy’ in their social studies classes and were willing and able to converse about their conceptualisations of democracy. I used the interview guide to give direction to the conversation and supplemented with follow-up questions, which were adapted to each group and to individual students. Although all students participated actively in the conversation and seemed happy to answer follow-up questions, they sometimes provided brief answers or nodded in agreement instead of adding to the discussion. Through the follow-up questions, I was able to invite students to explain their statements, reflect on contradictions, and provide examples. This strategy also reduced the dominance of potential opinion-leaders in the groups (Creswell, 2013).
Because I learned from the first four focus groups that the students related democracy to politics, I became curious to learn more about the students’ perceptions of the concept of politics, which is a central concept in the social studies subject. In line with an emergent approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), I therefore added a section on the concept of politics to the interview guide in the fifth and final focus group to learn more about how the students perceived ‘politics’ in addition to ‘democracy’ (see Appendix B). The fifth focus group made me realise a need to explore students’ perceptions of the concept of politics in more depth, which initiated Phase 2. Because the section on ‘politics’ in the fifth focus group provided valuable insights, I decided to use these data in Phase 2.

Individual interviews: The focus groups taught me that it was important to be able to follow the reasoning of individuals, so I chose to conduct six individual interviews in Phase 2 to explore each student’s perceptions in-depth (Creswell, 2013). I based these interviews on a semi-structured interview guide, this time focusing on the students’ perceptions of the concept of politics (see Appendix B). In these interviews, I was able to examine their expressed ideas in-depth through questions aimed at covering various dimensions of the concept of politics, reflecting debates about this concept in political theory (e.g., Crick, 2000; Held, 1991; Leftwich, 2004; Mouffe, 2005, 2013), and the students’ own view on the relationship between people and politics. I based the interview questions partly on findings from Phase 1. For example, the students’ focus on elections when talking about democracy made me wonder about their perceptions of who participated in politics and where politics took place. As I was interested in students’ perceptions of politics as a disciplinary concept in social studies, I did not include questions about students’ political views or affiliation to political parties. In the interviews, follow-up questions functioned to identify nuances and discrepancies in the students’ responses and to address statements that could help me understand how the students perceived the concept of politics in-depth. Consequently, the follow-up questions were a part of the interaction between me and the students; therefore, they varied between interviews.

4.3.2 Quantitative data
A combination of the findings from Phases 1 and 2 and the lack of research on citizenship education in social studies in Norway made me want to investigate the concepts and theme of democracy and politics in relation to social studies instruction. To complement the smaller samples used in the first two phases of the PhD project, I decided to include a larger sample in Phase 3. Further, since Phases 1 and 2 benefited from exploratory data, I wanted to be able to investigate the associations between students’ perceptions of central aspects of social studies
across participants rather than individual perceptions. Consequently, I decided to conduct a quantitative survey with closed items for Phase 3. Quantitative surveys are limited by their predefined response alternatives, which do not allow participants to express their responses freely. However, surveys produce different expressions of students’ voices than qualitative methods, so combining data from these methods contributes to a richer picture of students’ perceptions, which is arguably an aim of multiple methods research (Greene, 2007).

The items in the survey instrument were inspired by previous educational theory and empirical research (e.g., Fauth, Decristan, Rieser, Klieme, & Büttner, 2014; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Quintelier, 2015; Reimers, Ortega, Cardenas, Estrada, & Garza, 2014; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003; Torney-Purta, 1994; Tuan, Chin, & Shieh, 2005) as well as ideas expressed by the students in the interviews in Phases 1 and 2 (Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002; Torney-Purta et al., 2010). I designed a survey instrument consisting of three sections (see Appendix C). The first section built directly upon the findings from Phases 1 and 2 and concerned the students’ perceptions of and relations to democracy and politics. The second section was aimed at investigating the students’ perceptions of various aspects of the social studies subject, including the teacher’s instruction, discussion of multiple perspectives, the value of social studies, and their own work with the subject. The third and final section concerned the students’ political interests and activities outside formal school activities. I added the last two sections for two main reasons. First, the students in Phases 1 and 2 frequently referred to social studies and school when talking about democratic and political experiences, and some also talked about being involved in political discussions and activities in their leisure time. Because I did not focus explicitly on social studies instruction in the interviews, I saw the need to investigate this further in Phase 3. Second, by including items concerning social studies lessons, I was able to analyse how students perceived some aspects of social studies related to democracy and politics. For example, inspired by the findings from Phases 1 and 2, the survey instrument included items on the extent to which students reported discussing democracy and politics in the social studies classroom, students’ perceptions of the teaching of complex concepts, and the value of social studies in preparing them for citizenship. Also inspired by the findings in Phases 1 and 2, I based the citizenship preparation items on bottom-up perspectives to make them relevant for young people (for example by using phrases such as ‘the world around me’ and ‘get engaged in society’, rather than limiting citizenship to political participation). Generally, I attempted to write items that would be easy for students to form an opinion about. Aware that some measures might be unsuccessful, we included more items than
necessary for one article. These items will be used in future research on students’ perceptions of the social studies subject.

Pilot: In the first stage of the survey instrument development, the participants in Sample 2 completed and commented on the first draft. Second, before collecting the survey responses among Sample 3, I conducted a small pilot of the questionnaire with 20 students during a social studies lesson at one participating school, although these students were not a part of Sample 3. I gave the participants brief instructions and informed them that I would also ask them about the questionnaire during the session. Some students had comments while completing the survey, and I addressed and discussed these with each student and subsequently wrote them down. As each student finished the questionnaire, I sat down with each of them and went through the following questions:

1) How was your experience of completing the survey?
2) Were there any questions you were uncertain about or that were unclear or difficult to understand? (If so, these were discussed.)
3) Did you think carefully about each question?

In plenary, I asked the pilot students about how they had understood the scale of response alternatives and the fact that there were labels above only alternatives 1 (strongly disagree), 3 (quite disagree), 5 (quite agree), and 7 (strongly agree). Their comments primarily concerned difficult words in some items. I took notes of all their comments and implemented the proposed changes in dialogue with my co-author. We also went through the response frequency for all the items in the pilot and made minor changes to some items in order to inspire more spread in the responses.

Administering the survey: I personally administered the survey to Sample 3, except at two schools where a trained master student administered the survey. We brought printed questionnaires and pens to each class and informed the students orally before handing out the questionnaire. We explained the response scale and let the students know that they could ask questions at any time during their participation if anything was unclear. None of the students who were present in class opted out of taking the survey. To reduce the extent of missing values, we worked with each student to browse through the questionnaire to check for unanswered questions immediately after each student finished the survey.

4.3.3 Strengths and limitations
Table 4.2 presents some strengths and limitations of the methods used in Phases 1–3 and the consequences these choices of data collection had for my PhD thesis.
Table 4.2. Strengths and limitations of data collection in Phases 1–3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Strengths (+) and limitations (-)</th>
<th>Consequences across phases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups (qualitative)</td>
<td>+ open-ended questions</td>
<td>Based on the need for individual reasoning, I decided to conduct individual interviews for Phase 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ flexible interview guide</td>
<td>The responses contributed to development of the survey instrument in Phase 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ opportunity for students to build on each other’s responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- self-reported data only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- group dynamics may influence answers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- groups may develop differently</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- limited insight into individual reasoning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>+ open-ended questions</td>
<td>Based on the need for a larger sample, I decided to conduct a quantitative survey in Phase 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(qualitative)</td>
<td>+ flexible interview guide</td>
<td>The responses contributed to development of the survey for Phase 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ opportunity for students to build on each other’s responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- self-reported data only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- few participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- asymmetric relationship between researcher and informants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey (quantitative)</td>
<td>+ standardised instrument</td>
<td>Findings from Phase 3 were related to Phases 1 and 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ many respondents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ identify patterns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- self-reported data only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- closed-ended items only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- deductive approach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4 Analyses

As each article reported in detail the analytical processes of each study phase, I will elaborate on the connections resulting from the use of multiple methods across the three phases.

Although each phase had a specific focus, certain concepts and phenomena ran through all phases and were interrelated. In line with Greene’s (2007) popular purposes, I analysed the students’ views and perceptions based on how these were expressed in the three datasets: focus group and interview transcripts and survey responses. I analysed the qualitative data using thematic analysis, which is aimed at identifying and organising themes within the data and interpreting various aspects of the research aim (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In contrast, I analysed the quantitative survey data statistically using exploratory factor analysis to reduce data from individual items to a set of constructs and multivariate regression analysis to identify associations between the independent and dependent variables (Cohen et al., 2011).

Thematic analysis: All the qualitative data were transcribed in full using the software program InqScribe and analysed using thematic analysis. Listening through the audio-recorded interviews and transcribing in full was important to include nuances in the students’ responses. This analytic strategy enabled me to make sense of and categorise data that
focused on what the students expressed, consequently highlighting their perspectives. The main focus of the analysis was the students’ understanding of the concept of democracy in Phase 1 and the students’ perceptions of the concept of politics and the relationship between people and politics in Phase 2. For the focus group data, I analysed individual statements and identified how students built on each other’s responses (i.e., elaborating, agreeing or disagreeing) first within groups and then across. In the interview data, I looked for patterns in the responses from each student and across all the students, for example by comparing and contrasting student profiles (see Section 4.2 Participants).

The thematic analyses were data-driven in the sense that I coded and categorised the material based on the concepts used by the participants (e.g., voting, elections, majority), instead of pre-defined theoretical concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I related these empirical categories to theoretical concepts (e.g., aggregation of interests) after the initial data-driven steps of analysis. As a final step of the thematic analysis, I alternated between the inductive categories and theoretical concepts to identify similarities and differences between them.

The thematic analyses revealed a strong relation between the students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’, made clear by comparing the categories from Phases 1 and 2. Table 4.3 shows that categories from both phases dealt with the relationship between people and the state or nation. For example, the category ‘voting and elections’ is linked to the category ‘ruling a country’ in the sense that people vote in elections to select who represents them in national political decision-making (e.g., Barry, 2000; Behrouzi, 2005; Held, 1991; Leftwich, 2004; White et al., 2000). For further examples of the analytic process, see Appendix D.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic categories</th>
<th>Article I</th>
<th>Article II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rule by the people</td>
<td>Voting and elections</td>
<td>Shaping society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other forms of participation</td>
<td>Ruling a country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights and responsibilities</td>
<td>Discussion and debate</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3. Thematic categories identified in Phases 1 and 2.

Factor and regression analyses: Contrary to the thematic analyses in Phases 1 and 2, the purpose of the quantitative analyses performed in Phase 3 was to search for patterns and associations on an aggregated level rather than individual responses. In Phase 3, the main
focus of the analysis was instructional and personal variables associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. The survey data analysed in Phase 3 consisted entirely of numbers: students’ responses to statements and questions on a pre-defined 7-point scale. I used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyse the quantitative data in three steps: First, I made sure the data quality was sufficient for further analyses and ran descriptive statistics on each item. Second, I conducted exploratory factor analysis for each construct to see whether the items aimed at measuring a construct indeed worked well empirically. Some items were eliminated due to poor psychometric properties or poor fit with the most important factor produced by the factor analysis. I created variables based on the remaining items. Third, I used multiple regression analyses to investigate the relationship between the variables produced in the factor analyses by defining one dependent variable (i.e., students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies) and five independent variables (i.e., enjoying social studies, teacher contribution, discussing democracy and politics, online political communication, and political interest of family and friends). The choice of dependent and independent variables was based on an expected, or theoretical, relationship between variables (Kerlinger, 1969). However, the analyses allowed me to confirm or reject the model that I had defined. That is, the theoretical model is empirically testable and serves as a first attempt at developing an instrument to assess factors related to students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

Some constructs in the first section of the questionnaire, based on the categories in Phases 1 and 2, did not make good factors in the exploratory factor analysis and were not included in the regression analyses in Phase 3. Although I regret this weakness in the instrument, as quantitative analyses of students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ might have validated the findings from Phases 1 and 2, creating a good survey instrument is difficult (Johnson & Christensen, 2017), and I will continue my efforts in this respect. That is, the instrument developed in Phase 3 can be further developed in future research (Rapoport, 1959).

4.5 Research credibility
Research credibility deals with the quality and defensibility of research findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). In the following section, I discuss issues of reliability, validity, generalisability, and ethical concerns pertaining to this PhD project.
4.5.1 Reliability

According to Cohen et al. (2011), reliability ‘is essentially a synonym for dependability, consistency and replicability over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents’ (p. 199). Some researchers have argued that the concept of reliability is largely positivist (i.e., seeking predictability and control) and therefore most suited for quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In turn, researchers have developed concepts for reliability of qualitative research that are more sensitive to the contextual and unpredictable nature of research in naturalistic settings, such as Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) ‘credibility’ and ‘transferability’ (p. 219). Due to the multiple methods design of this study, I use concepts from quantitative and qualitative paradigms interchangeably. There are two broad types of reliability: internal and external reliability, which are both relevant to my project. Internal reliability concerns the measurement reliability of the instruments I used (interview guides and questionnaire), while external reliability concerns expected reliability of my research findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Due to the integrated nature of my research design, including the connections between the three phases in terms of contexts, samples, and instruments, I have chosen to address reliability issues for the three phases together.

First, concerning both internal and external reliability, the connections between the samples and the data collection processes across the three phases contribute to ‘reliability as stability’ (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 200) of the instruments used to uncover the participating students’ perceptions. That is, I developed the Phase 2 interview guide partly based on the responses to the Phase 1 focus group guide and used it first with one group of the Phase 1 sample. Moreover, I developed the questionnaire in Phase 3 partly based on Phases 1 and 2 and then piloted it with Sample 2. The stepwise analysis revealed common themes in the findings from the three phases, contributing to external reliability. Second, contextual factors can influence external reliability. Therefore, I conducted data collection in the three phases in similar contexts: in the students’ schools, mainly during or in connection with a social studies lesson. This consistency across the phases enhances the reliability of this project, as does the transparency in descriptions of sampling and data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Third, measurement reliability is an aspect of internal reliability which includes internal consistency of scale items (Creswell, 2009; Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In Phase 3, I used Cronbach’s alpha (α) to evaluate measurement reliability; as reported in Article III, all the constructs included were found to have acceptable to good internal consistency, ranging from .720 to .856 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).
4.5.2 Validity

Validity is required for qualitative and quantitative research (Cohen et al., 2011). My PhD project has validity threats to the inferences made based on both qualitative and quantitative data (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Internal and external validity concern the ability to infer causality between two variables and the extent to which results can be generalised to other persons and contexts (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). In this section, I present possible internal and external validity threats for each phase and describe how I aimed to resolve these.

Clarifying researcher bias and engaging in reflexivity is important for validation of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I have a background as an upper secondary social studies teacher, I was familiar with the educational setting of the participants. To reduce the risk that the students were influenced by my role as a researcher and former teacher, I did my best to make clear to all the students that I was there to learn from their perspectives, that there were no wrong or poor answers to my questions, and that nothing they reported would be brought back to their teachers or be a part of any school-based evaluation. However, the fact that data collection took place in a school setting and was related to their social studies class may have had some bearing on the way the students interpreted and responded to my questions (Cohen et al., 2011). Being aware of the possibility that students might be affected by the school context, I was particularly concerned with the steps taken to strengthen emic validity, such as rephrasing students’ answers, and understanding their perspectives.

Emic validity refers to accurate reporting of participants’ perspectives or ensuring that the articles present their intended meaning (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). I took two main steps to ensure accurate reporting: I actively used member checking as a strategy during all the interviews. I frequently rephrased students’ statements to make sure that I had understood their intention, and I continuously asked follow-up questions to invite them to clarify statements, explain and give examples. In addition, I provided numerous direct quotations and other low-inference descriptors (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) in the articles.

Descriptive validity refers to the factual accuracy of the researcher’s account of what occurred in the context of data collection (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). I took two main steps to reduce threats to descriptive validity in Phases 1 and 2. To strengthen the accuracy of the qualitative research reported in Articles 1 and 2, I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim, and I included representative excerpts from the transcriptions in the articles to provide readers with insight into the data so they could evaluate my inferences.
**Construct validity:** The process of operationalising higher-order concepts was an important part of ensuring the validity of the quantitative survey instrument because the manner of operationalisation determines whether we can measure what we want to measure. According to Johnson and Christensen (2017), the best way to reduce threats to construct validity is to use already developed and validated measures and to verify that the measures work well with the participants in each study. Unfortunately, I found no instrument that matched the purposes of my PhD project. To develop a relevant survey instrument with adequate measures, I defined constructs and created items based on extensive reading of relevant theoretical and empirical literature. In addition, I based measures in part on the findings from Phases 1 and 2 and on discussions with experts. However, the constructs in Phase 3 are complex and ambiguous, and others may define them differently than I have. Given potential threats to validity, the survey instrument should be further validated in future research.

**Statistical conclusion validity** concerns the statistical relationship between two variables and the strength of this relationship. This type of validity, which is determined through statistical significance and effect size estimates, is particularly important when inferring from a sample to a population (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). In Phase 3, the relevant population would be 16- to 17-year-old students attending social studies classes in upper secondary schools in Norway similar to the ones sampled. I used bivariate correlations and p-values to determine statistical significance to estimate the effect sizes. The bivariate correlations between the dependent and independent variables analysed in Phase 3 were statistically significant at the 1% level, so the statistical conclusion validity is deemed acceptable (Cohen et al., 2011). Because sample size affects statistical power, a bivariate analysis requires at least 50 respondents, and 15 respondents should be added for each new variable in the analysis (Christophersen, 2013). Hence, with a total of six variables, the minimum sample size for the analyses in Phase 3 was 110 respondents. The sample in Phase 3 (N = 264) met this requirement.

**Internal validity** concerns inferences regarding causal relationships between variables. As highlighted by Johnson and Christensen (2017), there are three conditions for making a claim of causation between two variables: (a) The two variables must be related, (b) changes in the independent variable must occur before changes in the dependent variable, and (c) there must not be any plausible alternative explanation for the observed relationship between the variables. While the first condition (i.e., presence of a relationship) was met in Phase 3, this is not a sufficient requirement for a causation claim. The second requirement (the temporal
order condition) could not be addressed directly because the data were cross-sectional (i.e., collected at a single point in time). However, I identified independent variables based on the qualitative data from Phases 1 and 2 as well as previous research, providing some evidence. The third condition (exclusion of alternative explanations) was not addressed as we could not include all possible alternative explanations in the analyses. That is, causation might have been operating but I make no claims to causal validity. This will be a continuing problem for future research.

*External validity* is often considered particularly relevant for the use of quantitative methods and is also referred to as ‘generalising validity’ (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). As the number of respondents and sampling strategy limit the opportunity for generalisation (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002), this study makes no claim to extensive or precise generalisation, neither to the target population nor over time (Cohen et al., 2011). I apply Barton and Avery’s (2016) notion that ‘studies of “how students think” are actually studies of how particular students think when confronted with particular questions in particular contexts (and which they may construe in particular ways)’ (p. 1000). However, although this PhD project is based on non-probability samples, I made efforts to increase the representativeness of results in terms of (a) examination of both rural and urban schools (across three counties); (b) use of entire classes of students (Phases 1 and 2: the invitation to participate was extended to the whole class. Phase 3: all the students who were present in class conducted the survey); and (c) student intake (schools varied from low to high intake criteria). Consequently, readers may make naturalistic generalisations by comparing their groups’ demographics and other characteristics to the demographics and characteristics of the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). This study’s findings could be used to strengthen the external validity of the results of future research, such as by replicating or building on the categories, concepts, and constructs in designing or discussing new empirical investigations.

In addition to the qualitative and quantitative validities discussed above, some types of validity pertain to the use of multiple methods (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). One such validity type is *weakness minimisation*. As Table 4.2 demonstrates, the three phases of this study have few overlapping weaknesses. The multiphase design is based on the notion that each phase builds on previous phases, which is intended not only to ameliorate weaknesses, but also to inspire new insights when observed together. However, Phases 1 and 2 had certain overlapping weaknesses; specifically, both relied on what the participants were willing to share in an interview situation, and both focused on few individuals’ perspectives. All three phases share one overlapping weakness, namely that this thesis relies solely on self-reported...
data. This is, however, related to the pragmatic underpinnings of the design: To answer the research question of how students perceive ‘democracy’, ‘politics’, and aspects of citizenship preparation in social studies, I needed to investigate their perceptions, which only they can provide.

Pragmatic legitimation concerns the extent to which the study’s purpose or goal was met (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). I could have answered my primary research question with only one method, for example the focus groups, the interviews, or the survey. However, this approach would severely reduce the overall validity of the study. By using only focus groups or interviews, I would have gained access to the perspectives of a few respondents and what they were willing to share with me in person, where researcher bias could threaten validity. Moreover, designing a survey instrument without building on interview data would have meant relying solely on related research from other contexts, theoretical perspectives, and my own ideas, which could threaten emic legitimation. As a result, I argue that the multiphase design was crucial for the pragmatic legitimation of this PhD thesis.

I have demonstrated multiple validities legitimation by addressing the most relevant qualitative and quantitative types of validity in this chapter, although I may not have addressed or resolved all possible kinds of validity threats that might exist in this PhD project. Throughout the work on this PhD thesis, I have used peer review as a consistent validation strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2017), which includes presenting and discussing my research with educational researchers in various settings. I have thoroughly discussed my data, analysis, and inferences with peers during my stay as a recognised student at the University of Oxford in 2016, as a member of the national graduate school NATED since 2014, as a member of the research group TEPEC at the University of Oslo since 2014, and with my supervisors throughout this project. In addition, my articles have undergone rigorous peer reviews prior to being accepted for publication in scientific journals. This kind of peer debriefing has offered invaluable contributions to the validation of my PhD project.

4.5.3 Ethical considerations
The researcher’s ethical responsibilities are related both to the research community and to the study’s participants (Tangen, 2013). For the research community, ethical considerations in research reports are critically related to accounts of methods and research credibility, which have been provided above. Particularly, I have been concerned with providing information about how I have gone about sampling student participants, collecting expressions of their perceptions, and subsequently analysing these to reach my research aim.
I conducted the data collection and analyses in line with the ethical guidelines of the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NCRESSH, 2016). First, all study participants gave voluntary, informed consent by signing consent forms in Phases 1 and 2 (see Appendix E) or by choosing to complete the survey, which included information about the survey and research purpose on the front page, in Phase 3 (see Appendix F). To ensure that the students were fully informed about what their participation would entail and to reduce the teachers’ role as gate-keepers (Busher & James, 2012), I explained to all participating students that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that they were guaranteed anonymity in resulting publications. No students demonstrated any concern or hesitation either before or after agreeing to be a part of the project. As all students were 16 or 17 years old, I did not seek consent from the participating students’ parents (NCRESSH, 2016). Second, no sensitive or personally identifiable information was recorded in the interviews. For example, I did not ask students about their names, which school they attended, or where they lived. As such, the participants cannot be identified through personal or background information in the recorded interviews. In the very few cases where students on their own initiative mentioned either the first name of a fellow student (in the focus groups), their school name, or the name of a political party they were affiliated with, I immediately anonymised these names in the transcribed data. All recordings were saved on secure university servers with limited access and password protection. These recordings will be deleted at the end of my PhD project. Further, the pen and paper questionnaire did not include names of individuals, their school, or the county. Unlike a digital questionnaire, the paper survey did not involve participants’ email or IP addresses.

Even though this PhD project did not investigate sensitive issues and students have been made anonymous, I have taken precautions to ensure that the chance of the study having negative consequences for the participants is minimal. Cohen et al. (2011) emphasised the ethical principle of ‘beneficence’ (p. 85), or the idea that research should benefit the participants and the educational community. Indeed, contributing to the development and improvement of social studies education and the inclusion of young people in the political realm are two main ambitions of this PhD project. In support of these goals, I have made an effort to portray students fairly and respectfully in all three articles and this extended abstract.
4.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have presented and discussed the methodological decisions, procedures, and challenges of my PhD project. I hope this chapter serves as a transparent and dependable account of the reliability and validity of my research. During my PhD project, I have experienced that things do not always go as planned, that some things are more difficult than I had imagined, and that decisions may have unintended, but often positive, consequences. As a result, the design of my project, in its flexibility and pragmatism, has enabled both frustration and learning.
5 Findings

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate 16- to 17-year-old students’ perceptions of the core concepts of democracy and politics and aspects of citizenship preparation in the social studies subject in Norwegian upper secondary school. I have investigated this overarching aim in three separate articles. In this chapter, I present the findings from each article through summaries of Article I (5.1), Article II (5.2) and Article III (5.3).

5.1 Article I

Building on previous research, which has demonstrated a knowledge gap pertaining to people’s conceptions of democracy (Canache, 2012), this article posed the following research question: *How do Norwegian 16-year-olds explain their understanding of the concept of democracy?* The article investigated qualitative focus groups with 23 students enrolled in social studies in the first year of upper secondary school. The analysis was data-driven and aimed at identifying central themes in the students’ understanding of the concept of democracy. The thematic categories were subsequently related to concepts from democratic theory and discussed in light of these.

In this article, I found that the students’ conceptions of democracy centred around four themes: (a) rule of the people, (b) voting and elections, (c) other forms of participation, and (d) rights and responsibilities. These themes are connected to aspects of the political system in the nation-state, particularly to the relationship between the government and citizens (Birch, 2007). Concerning forms of participation other than voting in elections, students highlighted the importance of engaging in discussions as a central democratic activity. In line with previous research, I identified indications of limited and elaborate ways of understanding democracy among the students (Munck, 2014; Sigel & Hoskin, 1981). These categories relate strongly to the competence aims in the current national curriculum in the upper secondary social studies subject (NDET, 2013). For example, the students who demonstrated elaborate understanding were to a greater extent than other students able to nuance their statements and question their own and other’s ideas.
Based on the identified student conceptions, I argued in this article that the students’ conceptions had much in common with theories of liberal democracy (Dahl, 1998; Schumpeter, 1994). I further argued that, in light of previous research, the focus on liberal democracy was not surprising (Børhaug, 2008), although the students also referred to and reflected on aspects of democracy found in participatory and deliberative theories (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1995).

Based on previous research that has expressed a need for the development of elaborate understandings of democracy (Behrouzi, 2005; Munck, 2014), I also argued that teacher education in social studies should aim to have student teachers explore and discuss various ways of conceptualising democracy. I further asserted that teacher education should make student teachers aware of possible implications of adopting and teaching different ways of understanding the concept of democracy. In addition to supporting student teachers’ professional development, increased emphasis on possible implications of various conceptualisations of democracy might help them as social studies teachers to facilitate learning that fosters elaborate understanding among upper secondary school students. Indeed, the most important argument in this article was that students primarily expressed a liberal understanding of the concept of democracy, focusing on voting and elections, but also included more participatory and deliberative perspectives. The students mentioned school as an important arena for learning democratic skills, and my analysis revealed both limited and more elaborate understandings, cutting across the thematic categories, which can be related to the social studies curriculum. These main findings initiated a need to investigate students’ perceptions of the concept of politics in Article II.

5.2 Article II

Based on how the students related ‘democracy’ to political institutions and processes in Article I and the identified need for research on young people’s perceptions of ‘politics’, I posed the following research questions in Article II: *How do 16-year-old students perceive the concept of politics? How do the students perceive the relationship between people and politics?*
This article reported on qualitative interviews with nine students in upper secondary social studies. The thematic analysis was aimed at identifying the meaning students assigned to the concept of politics and how they described the relationship between people, including themselves, and politics. After initial data-driven analysis, I related the students’ perceptions to concepts and dimensions in political theory.

For the first research question, the main findings were that the students perceived politics as concerning three main aspects: (a) ruling a country, (b) shaping society, and (c) discussion and debate. In answer to the second research question, I identified three conceptions: Five students expressed what I have labelled ‘engagement’, describing an overlapping and largely positive relationship between people and politics. Three students expressed ‘passivity’, describing people and politics as belonging to different spheres, with influence primarily moving from politics to people more than the other way around. Nonetheless, they expressed interest in certain political issues. One student expressed ‘detachment’. This student demonstrated interest in and personal concern for political issues, such as the environmental crisis and animal welfare, but she did not label this as political interest and distanced herself from formal politics. Finally, although all students reported reading people’s comments in online discussion fora, none participated in such discussions.

Relating the students’ perceptions to political theory and citizenship education literature, I argued that the students’ perceptions touched on some dimensions in political theory (e.g., the public–private divide) but differed, for example, in terms of concern for the boundaries of politics. Further, I argued that the students’ refusal to participate in online discussions may be understood in light of Mouffe’s (2005) concept of ‘the political’ in the sense that online discussion fora have not yet been transformed into ordered places where conflicts can be peacefully contained and where students learn to see opponents as adversaries rather than enemies to defeat.

The most important argument in this article was that the students perceived the concept of politics as processes related to shaping society, as decisions and activities related to ruling a country, and as the activities of discussions and debates. Three conceptions of the relationship between people and politics were identified: engagement, passivity, and detachment. While the students participated in political discussions privately and at school, they stated that they did not participate in political discussions in social media. Combining the findings from Article I and II showed that students viewed both ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ as related to institutional and non-institutional aspects of democratic politics (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), revealing both corroboration and complexity.
As an implication of the findings, I argued that social studies and citizenship education in school should strengthen the bottom-up perspective on politics and, to do that, ask what is important knowledge about politics for students to learn. I also argued that social studies and citizenship education should focus on giving students experiences in facing opposition and critically reviewing their own and other people’s arguments to enable knowledgeable participation. Combined, Article I and II initiated a need to investigate aspects of social studies lessons and instruction in Article III.

5.3 Article III


Because Articles I and II revealed different perspectives in students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ and identified school as an important arena for discussing such issues, I decided to investigate students’ perceptions of the role of social studies in preparing them for citizenship. Article III was guided by the following research question: Which factors are related to students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies?

This article reported on quantitative survey data from 264 students enrolled in social studies in upper secondary school. In the context of social studies and citizenship education theory, I developed the dependent and independent variables based on previous research (e.g., Ainley & Ainley, 2011; Ekström & Shehata, 2016; Fauth et al., 2014; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Melis, 2017; Reimers et al., 2014) and the findings from Articles I and II. The statistical analyses aimed at constructing reliable variables and conducting regression analyses establishing the strength and significance of the associations between the dependent and independent variables.

Preliminary analysis indicated that the students perceived the social studies subject as valuable in terms of preparing them for understanding and participating in society. Further, the regression analyses revealed that the following variables, in descending order of strength, were significantly associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation: students’ reported enjoyment of social studies, the teacher’s instructional contribution, the frequency of discussing the topics of democracy and politics in social studies, and students’ online political communication (the two last variables were close to identical in strength of association).

Somewhat surprisingly when compared to previous research (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, &
Keeter, 2003; Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Quintelier, 2015), the students’ reported level of political interest of and discussions with family and friends was not significantly associated with their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

In the discussion of these findings, my co-author and I noted the positive implication of the finding that students’ enjoyment was a stronger antecedent than their own political communication online. We argued that this could imply that the subject could reach more students than those who pursued their political interests actively. Because we also found teaching to be an important variable, we argued that instruction in social studies could influence how positively students perceive the role of the subject in preparing them for current and future citizenship.

In this article, we argued that students perceived the role of social studies positively when it came to citizenship preparation. The two most important factors related to perceptions of citizenship preparation were the students’ level of enjoying social studies and the teacher contribution. As an implication, we suggested that schools and teachers can do a lot to influence students’ experiences of citizenship preparation in social studies (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Building on students’ interests, engaging in discussions of topical issues, and presenting and discussing different perspectives on such issues are some examples of instructional aspects that seem to be important factors associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. Combined, the three articles have illuminated aspects of democracy and politics in social studies, particularly concerning students’ perceptions.
6 Discussion of contributions

In this section, I discuss the main contributions of this PhD project related to the understanding of young people’s perceptions of ‘democracy’, ‘politics’, and citizenship preparation in social studies. After considering some implications of a pragmatist philosophy of science (6.1), I discuss my contributions in three areas: as empirical contributions (6.2), theoretical contributions (6.3), and methodological contributions (6.4). Finally, I point to strengths and limitations in my PhD project (6.5) before offering concluding remarks (6.6).

6.1 Implications of a pragmatist philosophy of science

A pragmatist philosophy was presented as a justification for the research design employed in this PhD project (Johnson et al., 2007). The pragmatist philosophy offers both a justification for combining data and allows for emergence in the research process (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This philosophy has allowed me to use different data collection methods to access different student perspectives through their own words, reflections, and responses to predefined response alternatives and let the findings illuminate each other.

The findings discussed in this chapter are based on students’ perceptions: how they expressed their thoughts, ideas, and experiences to me as a researcher at the time of data collection and how I interpreted these. In line with Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), I recognise these perceptions as real in the context in which they were expressed and as potentially changing over time. The same participants would perhaps have answered my questions differently at a later point in time or in a different context, and they might have expressed other perceptions if asked different types of questions. Particularly, students’ perceptions will develop as a result of interaction between their own minds and the world around them (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Consequently, students’ perceptions of democracy and politics may change as they transition from being students and teenagers to adults.

At the time of submitting this thesis, the students who participated in this PhD project have all completed the mandatory social studies subject in upper secondary school, and their perceptions of the role of social studies may also change as they interact in different ways with democratic politics and have new educational experiences. Despite this change, the findings in this thesis are useful (Dewey, 1916; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) because insight into 16- to 17-year-olds’ perceptions may inform both educational research and
educational practice. The findings from this PhD project certainly do not constitute any recipe for educators. However, reflecting on the nuances in students’ bottom-up and top-down perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics and on the significance of students’ enjoyment and aspects of instruction for students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies might enable educators to better relate to students’ perspectives. As such, these findings may offer ‘intellectual and practical resources’ (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 111). This empirical investigation is also timely, as the findings represent students’ perceptions in a context of political polarisation and pressure on democratic politics from several types of actors and in multiple arenas. Insight into young people’s perspectives might help us in the pursuit of an education suited to the ever-changing world in which we live, so we need to understand how young people perceive that world and their own role in it.

6.2 Empirical contributions

The empirical contributions of this thesis relate to the theme of democracy and politics in social studies. As this PhD project builds on and expands prior international and national research by focusing on the Norwegian context and on 16- to 17-year-old students in the social studies subject, an important aim was to contribute with knowledge about students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ as well as how the subject area contributes to preparing them for current and future citizenship.

The findings from this PhD project have been discussed in relation to research conducted in other countries, specifically the United Kingdom, Sweden, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, the United States and Australia, and should therefore be relevant also outside the Norwegian context. Indeed, my first empirical contribution is how this thesis shows similarities in young people’s perceptions across countries and contexts, which is not a matter of course given the differences in education, political systems, and the provision of welfare services and other relevant social and political factors between countries in Europe, Australia, and the United States. While prior research on young people’s perceptions of democracy has identified associations such as various kinds of citizen rights, rule by the people, and civic equality (Arensmeier, 2010; Avery et al., 2012; Flanagan, 2013), these findings come from only a few studies, two of which relied on an open-ended survey question. To the best of my knowledge, this perspective has not been investigated in the Norwegian context. Thus, a contribution here is the finding that the Norwegian 16- to 17-year-olds participating in this project understood the concept of democracy primarily in terms of liberal democracy, focusing on the idea of rule by the people.
and the centrality of voting in elections, while also discussing their views on the Norwegian political system and how democracy works. Moreover, Article I provided insight into students’ reasoning about their own understandings. For example, some students offered critical reflection on the idea of rule by the people, questioning the precision of such a definition of democracy, and several students gave examples in which they related democracy to their everyday lives. As Olson (2009) argued, such voicing should be seen as an educational task alongside learning for and about democracy, as democracy and democratic citizenship should involve and, in part, be defined by young people. Given that democracy is a theoretically contested concept, the indication that participants in this PhD project shared some core ideas about what democracy means with students in other countries, even though students differed in the extent of elaboration they provided, is important insight for social studies and citizenship education in which conceptual understanding and aspects of democracy are central features (Avery et al., 2012; Biesta, 2011b; Davies, 2015; Reinhardt, 2015; Solhaug, 2013).

A second empirical contribution is how the explicit focus on the concept of politics not only emphasised students’ perceptions of what politics is, but also of where and how they believe it takes place and who they see as the main participants. Studies in Europe and the United States have indicated that young people’s perceptions of politics have tended to focus on top-down processes and institutions of government and rule (O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007; White et al., 2000), although some young people have positive associations to politics as being about creating change (O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007). However, these results have come from only a few studies, not focusing on the concept of politics itself or social studies or citizenship education. While in part associating ‘politics’ with politicians and government, participants in Phase 2 also offered expressions of bottom-up ideas such as being able to shape society, focusing on the role of ordinary people, the public sphere, solving problems, and talking about politics (Article II). In this sense, according to several students, politics can take place everywhere and include everyone. Moreover, students across levels of interest in or experience with politics highlighted these aspects of politics. To the best of my knowledge, this is new insight in the Norwegian context and might help teachers to relate their teaching about politics to students’ perceptions and reflect on, challenge, and develop students’ – and, indeed, their own – perceptions together. This insight into students’ perceptions of politics also contributes to the existing empirical research from other countries, in which top-down perspectives, particularly relating to various authorities, have been an important aspect of young people’s perceptions of politics (O’Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007; White et al., 2000).
The third empirical contribution of this PhD thesis concerns how the empirical data contribute to our knowledge about students’ perceptions of social studies in school. While studies of citizenship education have often reported the quantity of such education and/or its associated activities (e.g., Hoskins et al., 2012; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015) and previous research has emphasised the centrality of both first- and second-order concepts in social studies (Sandahl, 2013, 2015), little is known about students’ perceptions of citizenship education. Specifically, how students’ perceptions of social studies lessons are related to perceptions of the value of the subject’s citizenship preparation is a contribution based on the findings in Article III. With mean values above 5 (on a 7-point scale), students particularly expressed the importance of social studies in helping them to understand and making them curious about the world, challenging them to think, and preparing them to participate actively in society. Not only do these findings indicate that citizenship education in social studies may contribute to students’ engagement, similar to other studies (e.g., Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Pontes et al., 2017; Tonge et al., 2012), but they also further indicate some aspects of social studies that students reported as reasons why social studies is important, relating to knowledge, skills, and engagement.

Further, the indication that students’ enjoyment of social studies lessons, aspects of instruction, and discussions of democracy and politics may influence the degree to which they see social studies as valuable in terms of preparing them for citizenship contributes to building knowledge about social studies and citizenship education. In line with Christensen’s (2015) view of connections between knowledge domains in the social studies subject, these findings indicate the interconnectedness of students’ lifeworld; topical issues, structures, and processes; social science concepts; and democratic values in social studies. In contrast to recent studies (e.g., Quintelier, 2015), the quantitative analyses revealed that the social studies variables were more important for students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies than the out-of-school factors that were included. In addition, while previous studies have documented the impact of citizenship education on engagement (e.g., Hoskins et al., 2012; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Lin, 2015; Reichert & Print, 2017), findings from my PhD project offer insights into the role of students’ engagement in the social studies subject. For example, the positive association between students’ enjoyment of social studies and their perceptions of the teacher contribution is worth noting. Increased knowledge about how students perceive and enjoy social studies may help teachers plan instruction about democracy and politics that interacts with students’ interests and concerns regarding societal and political issues.
The fourth empirical contribution of this thesis concerns young people’s engagement. The three conceptions of the relationship between people and politics identified in Article II (i.e., engagement, passivity, and detachment) illustrate aspects of the students’ modes of engagement, ranging from expressions of political engagement to expressions of passivity and detachment. Previous studies have documented that young people in general are less interested in and participate to a lesser extent in formal politics, but engage in various kinds of non-institutionalised activities (Loader et al., 2014; Sloam, 2014, 2016). Amnå and Ekman (2014) found evidence of three specific types of passive young people in addition to the group of active young people. The conceptions identified in Article II revealed some nuances not made explicit in Amnå and Ekman’s (2014) quantitative study, where the unengaged and disillusioned young people expressed the lowest levels of political interest. Although similar in terms of reported political interest and participation, the students in my PhD project who expressed passivity showed interest in specific political issues and the students who expressed detachment described a keen interest in and concern for issues related to the environment and animal welfare (Article II). Some students, however, expressed strong support for democratic values and recognised the importance of people’s political participation but expressed that their engagement was restricted because they saw themselves as playing a limited role until coming of voting age (Articles I and II). The different ways the students perceived the relationship between people and politics, as well as their various modes of engagement, contribute to our understanding of how young people relate to democracy and politics in the Norwegian context. Particularly, the different ways the students perceived their own role in relation to politics might enable both researchers and educators to better address students’ concerns about the political system. Such insight into students’ views of their own role relates to the aim of educating people who participate, in various ways, in democratic politics (Børhaug, 2017; CoE, 2010; Johnson & Morris, 2010; NDET, 2013; 2017).

The fifth empirical contribution of this PhD thesis is the importance the students placed on engaging in discussions. The participants of all three phases highlighted discussions about political and topical issues. While research has documented the significance of an open classroom climate for discussion (e.g., Huang et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2017; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015) and the association between engaging in discussions and learning outcomes (Barton & Avery, 2016), the students themselves brought up discussions as important activities in a democracy (Article I) and as an essential feature of politics (Article II). The findings also showed that the students perceived the social studies subject as an important arena for discussion (Article III) and school as a public space and consequently an
arena of politics, for example through discussions (Article II). These findings support the
importance of engaging in discussions for students’ interest and participation both in school
and in their leisure time (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Olson et al., 2015; Quintelier, 2015). Of
note, across the qualitative and quantitative findings, students in this PhD project reported low
levels of participation in online discussions, illustrating some of the challenges related to
involving young people in political discussions in different online fora (see also Ekström &
Shehata, 2016). Social media such as Facebook are perhaps characterised by quite different
discussion climates than what students experience and practice within the social studies
classroom. The fact that students reported discussing democracy and politics quite often in
social studies lessons is a contribution that adds to the established importance of an open
classroom climate for discussion presented in previous research (Barton & Avery, 2016;
Huang et al., 2017; Schultz et al., 2017). To the best of my knowledge, students’ perceptions
of the approximate frequency of such discussions have not previously been investigated in
upper secondary social studies in Norway. The integrated findings across all three articles
demonstrate that participants perceived discussions of democracy and politics as an important
aspect of social studies lessons and of their engagement with democracy and politics.

In sum, by building on and adding to previous empirical research, my PhD project
contributes empirically to our understanding of young people’s perceptions of democracy,
politics, and citizenship preparation in social studies, specifically in the Norwegian context.
By extension, the project may have implications for other countries with various kinds of
social studies or citizenship education subjects. This knowledge informs social studies and
citizenship education by supporting the development of teaching that is sensitive to students’
ideas of and experiences with democracy and politics and that is focused on in-depth learning
and understanding (Biesta, 2011b; CoE, 2010; Johnson & Morris, 2010). Reflecting the
importance of democratic citizenship education, the topic of democracy and citizenship is
included as a cross-curricular theme in the upcoming education reform in Norway (NDET,
2017). This change certainly strengthens the need for knowledge about students’ perceptions
of democracy, politics, and citizenship preparation to which this thesis contributes.

6.3 Theoretical contributions
This PhD thesis has two theoretical contributions. The first is related to social studies
didactics and concerns how this thesis supports Christensen’s (2015) model of knowledge
domains framing social studies (see Figure 3.1), while the second is related to political theory
and concerns how the empirical data from this thesis contribute to nuancing and strengthening
perspectives on young people. First, building on Christensen’s (2015) model of connections between knowledge domains and students in social studies (see Figure 3.1), my PhD thesis offers a research-based example of how these domains interact theoretically concerning democracy and politics in social studies. Through the focus on students’ perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics and aspects of citizenship preparation in social studies, the four domains are represented in the literature framing the PhD project, the data collection instruments, and the findings. As such, this thesis contributes theoretically to unfolding the complexity and diversity in the area of social studies and citizenship education, and it shows how research and students’ perceptions draw on various knowledge domains. This contributes theoretically to strengthening Christensen’s (2015) model by illustrating its relevance in the Norwegian context based on an empirical study.

The second theoretical contribution concerns political theory. Allowing young people’s perspectives to engage with political theory highlights certain aspects of politics. The present empirical study focusing on students contributes to strengthening the perspectives of young people in researchers’ theorising about politics. Although political theory presents both top-down and bottom-up perspectives on democracy and politics, the theoretical perspectives I used to understand students’ perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics do not emphasise the role and situations of young people under the legal voting age (e.g., Held, 1991; Leftwich, 2004; Mouffe, 1993, 2005), even though bottom-up perspectives may allow for young people as participants. In my PhD thesis, the students’ ideas about what politics is and how and where it takes place contribute to political theory by providing the views of young people below the age when they are usually considered full citizens who are allowed to vote in elections. The participants in my PhD project expressed perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ that reflected both top-down and bottom-up approaches, connecting with debates in political theory (Crick, 2000; Held, 1991; Heller, 1991). For example, their perceptions of democracy were primarily linked to a top-down perspective, focusing on political institutions such as government and parliament, particularly related to elections (Article I; e.g., Dahl, 1998). Moreover, their perceptions of politics reflected bottom-up ideas that focused on ordinary people’s roles and engagement in shaping the communities and societies they are a part of (Article II; e.g. Habermas, 1995; Leftwich, 2004). However, both perspectives were clearly present in the responses to both concepts, illustrating that the students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’ comprised both representative rule and popular engagement. This is also an expression of the contested nature of the concepts of democracy and politics, in line with ideas expressed by Biesta (2011b), Birch (2007), and
Heywood (2015), which this thesis identified in how the students revealed diverse ways of understanding ‘democracy’ and ‘politics’, including their own discussions of political issues in school and the primacy of elected political leaders. The students’ perceptions illustrate how top-down and bottom-up ideas do not represent a dichotomy. Rather, these are levels that influence each other and overlap. Particularly, students’ perceptions of the role of discussions in politics and for their own engagement with politics has the potential to bridge bottom-up and top-down perspectives, as discussions can inspire political change. My PhD thesis contributes with insights into how participating in discussions is an easily accessible avenue through which young people can influence people and politics. Supporting the views of Olson et al. (2015), such discussions are an example of their ‘citizenship activities’ (p. 1040).

6.4 Methodological contributions

Methodologically, this PhD thesis offers two related contributions. The first one is the insight into students’ perceptions of democracy and politics enabled by the combination of focus groups and individual interviews. While the focus groups provided access to the participants’ talk with peers about democracy, the interviews gave the opportunity to access aspects of students’ individual reflection about politics. This methodological contribution was enabled because the combination of methods provided more nuanced and rich data on students’ perceptions of the two concepts than what I would have achieved with only one method, particularly pertaining to their own role in democratic politics. Specifically, while the focus groups discussed the notion of playing a limited role in democracy at the age of 16, by sharing experiences and supporting each other’s ideas, students expressed more diverse relations to politics during the one-to-one interview situation in which there was more room for individual reasoning and reflection on personal experiences.

A second methodological contribution is the development of the quantitative survey instrument. Several studies of citizenship education reviewed in this thesis have reported on quantitative data. For example, several existing instruments can measure the impact of citizenship education on young people’s civic and political engagement (e.g., Hoskins et al., 2012; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Keating & Janmaat, 2015; Lin, 2015; Reichert & Print, 2017), and the ICCS instrument covers a range of activities in school, such as students’ participation in school democracy and the measure of an open classroom climate (Huang et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2017). I was not able to locate existing instruments for the purposes of this project, so I developed the instrument used in Article III to measure students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies and factors that might be associated with these.
Although imperfect, this instrument represents a methodological contribution to developing quantitative research on social studies instruction, which I hope to develop further in future research. For example, the development of the measure ‘citizenship preparation in social studies’ is a contribution to citizenship education because it measures students’ own perceptions of this aspect of their education. The contribution of this measure lies in providing a tool for investigating how students experience some aspects of social studies lessons and the subject’s value in preparing them for current and future citizenship rather than measuring the impact of citizenship education on political engagement. To the best of my knowledge, this approach is a new effort in investigating the role of social studies and similar subjects. In line with Christensen’s (2015) model of knowledge domains in the social studies subject, the measure of students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies is sensitive to topical issues, structures, and processes (such as helping students understand the world around them), students’ lifeworld (such as being able to use what they learn in their everyday life), and democratic values (such as engaging in society).

Further, the measure ‘teacher contribution’ focuses on central aspects of instruction, such as the teaching of concepts, which Davies (2015) suggested is one of the defining features of citizenship education in school. This measure includes items tapping into both the teacher’s explanation of concepts and the extent to which students are involved in discussing various ways of understanding concepts, meaning that it is sensitive to the importance of the teacher’s instruction, the importance of recognising the contested nature of many social science concepts, and students’ various understandings. Consequently, the ‘teacher contribution’ measure includes both a focus on social science concepts and students’ perspectives on these (Christensen, 2015). This balance in the instrument between different perspectives is particularly relevant as prior studies have found that some teachers focus on somewhat narrow conceptualisations of central topics (Barton & Avery, 2016; Børhaug, 2008), while others argue for the importance of engaging with multiple perspectives in the classroom (Avery, Levy, & Simmons, 2014; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

6.5 Strengths and limitations

Through the above discussion of contributions, I hope to have demonstrated that, although each article in this thesis has its particular findings, these contributions were to a large extent made possible due to the integration of findings across the three phases and articles. I discussed methodological limitations in Chapter 4. Here, before providing some concluding
remarks, I would like to juxtapose these limitations with some strengths of the three phases and articles of this PhD project (Table 6.1).

**Table 6.1.** Strengths and limitations of the phases in the thesis enabled by the research design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths (+) and limitations (-)</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1 – Article I (focus groups)</strong></td>
<td>This ensured direct access to a variety of students and some individual and school variety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Sample of 23 students at three schools with low, average, and high achieving students.</td>
<td>Students were not tested for knowledge or correct answers. This allowed for data-driven analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Access only to what students willingly expressed in the focus group.</td>
<td>Students could build on each other’s responses. Power balance between researcher and students evened because students were in a clear majority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Access to students’ perceptions through their talk.</td>
<td>Students’ focus on the political system when talking about democracy influenced my choice of the concept of politics for Phase 2. Student responses inspired the development of items for the survey instrument in Phase 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Focus group interviews.</td>
<td>Insight into strengths and limitations of focus groups influenced my choice of individual interview for Phase 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Semi-structured interview guide.</td>
<td>Self-reports do not provide a complete picture of students’ perceptions. No sensitive issues were addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Non-probability sample.</td>
<td>Some students participated more actively than others. To ameliorate this, I actively asked follow-up questions and made sure all students were heard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 2 – Article II (individual interviews)</strong></td>
<td>The sample is not representative, which limits generalisability. However, the sample provides insight into the perceptions of a diverse student group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Sample of 9 students with varying levels of political interest and experience across five schools.</td>
<td>This ensured direct access to students and varied perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Access to students’ perceptions through their talk.</td>
<td>As in Phase 1, students were not tested for knowledge or correct answers, which allowed for data-driven analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Individual interviews.</td>
<td>This approach allowed each student to talk about his or her own perceptions in-depth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Semi-structured interview guide.</td>
<td>The guide allowed students to talk freely around central themes in a dynamic interview situation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Phase 3 – Article III (survey)**

| + | Students’ responses related to Phase 1. | This connection contributes to research validity across phases. |
| + | Students’ qualitative responses contributed to a quantitative instrument. | Student responses inspired the development of items for the survey instrument in Phase 3. |
| - | Access only to what students willingly expressed in the interview situation. | Interviews do not provide a complete picture of students’ perceptions, but allowed students to talk freely about their associations to ‘politics’. |
| - | Power balance between the researcher and the informant. | My role as a researcher may have influenced the students’ responses, but I aimed to assure the students that the interview was a conversation and not an evaluation. |
| - | Non-probability sample. | The sample is not representative, which limits generalisability. However, as in Phase 1, the sample provides insight into the perceptions of a diverse student group. |
| + | Sample of 264 students from 11 schools in three counties. | This ensured some individual, school and geographical variation and a larger sample than in the other phases. |
| + | Standardised instrument. | This instrument made it possible to explore associations in students’ responses. |
| + | Instrument built on Phases 1 and 2. | This approach contributes to research validity across phases. |
| + | Students’ perceptions of social studies. | This approach made it possible to see students’ perceptions of democracy and politics in relation to social studies, to Phases 1 and 2, and across methods. |
| + | Instrument developed particularly for social studies education. | This approach made it possible to study students’ perceptions of instruction and lessons. The instrument can be used in and adapted to different kinds of citizenship education lessons in various contexts. |
| - | Non-probability sample. | Schools and students were selected to provide variety in terms of student intake and geography, but the sample is not representative. However, survey data nonetheless provide valuable insights into the perceptions of a large student group from several schools. |
| - | Challenges of instrument development. | As I could not find previous instruments to build on, the survey instrument has some validity and reliability issues. I have provided an honest account of these in this thesis and will continue to develop the instrument. |
| - | No control variables included. | I was not able to control for the significance of socio-economic status. Out-of-school variables were included as background information. |
| - | Cross-sectional investigation. | Students’ perceptions were investigated at one point in time, which does not allow for determining causal directions. The study enabled insight into students’ perceptions and examination of associations. |
Overall, the limitations in this PhD thesis relate to the lack of representativity and generalisability and to the validity of the inferences made based on data from the instruments and samples included, while the strengths relate to insights into different expressions of students’ perceptions. As illustrated in Table 6.1, the strengths and limitations are intertwined. I nevertheless hope that the consequences of the strengths outweigh those of the limitations.

6.6 Concluding remarks

Since 2014, when I started data collection for this thesis, the political tensions and turmoil in the Western world seem to have contributed to increased discussion about the nature and future of democratic politics. In the same time period, the work with the upcoming educational reform in Norway has progressed, increasing educators’ interest in democracy and citizenship education in school. The present PhD thesis is my contribution toward addressing the important theme of students’ perceptions concerning democracy and politics in social studies. I hope to be able to develop this research further in future research.

In my PhD project, I have found that the 16- to 17-year-old participants expressed both bottom-up and top-down perceptions of the concepts of democracy and politics and that they viewed discussions as a fundamental activity for engaging with democratic politics. Moreover, the students considered school and social studies an important arena for engaging with democracy and politics and for preparing them for current and future citizenship, which is promising for young people’s future engagement. Particularly, students’ enjoyment of social studies lessons and aspects of the teacher’s instruction were the two factors most strongly associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies, illustrating the relationship between students’ interests and lessons that nourish these interests. The main contributions, therefore, concern more nuanced insights into students’ perceptions of ‘democracy’, ‘politics’, and aspects of citizenship preparation in social studies, as well as into the role of discussions and young people’s engagement. Finally, my PhD thesis offers new measures for students’ perceptions of the social studies subject.

The findings resulting from this project suggest some implications for educational practice. First, educators should carefully consider how they conceptualise and present the concepts of democracy and politics and how they build on bottom-up and top-down perspectives. Second, educators could facilitate different kinds of discussions about social scientific concepts and issues where different perspectives meet and are challenged. Third, educators should build on students’ interests in political issues to support their quite varied modes of engagement.
As research is a cumulative process aimed at increased understanding of the phenomena under study, the findings from this project point toward further research. First, building on students’ perceptions as identified in this PhD thesis, future research could investigate how the concepts of democracy and politics are used and taught in the classroom, how teachers’ presentations of these concepts influence students’ perceptions of them, to what extent and how teachers relate disciplinary content to students’ perceptions and experiences, and whether bottom-up or top-down approaches to politics dominate in the classroom.

Second, the field could benefit from knowing more about how students engage in conversations and discussions related to democracy, politics, and citizenship in the social studies classroom. Particularly, further research could explore the conditions for discussions where students critically examine their own and others’ perspectives; how discussions characterised by logical arguments, clear reasoning, and respect for competing opinions can be supported; and how such discussions are related to students’ political literacy and efficacy. These are arguably important issues for research within social studies didactics and citizenship education in the present political climate (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Third, this project has laid a foundation upon which to further develop quantitative measures for all three concepts of this thesis, namely students’ perceptions of democracy, politics, and citizenship preparation in social studies or similar school subjects. Future research could therefore build on the instruments and findings from this PhD project to further investigate various aspects of students’ perceptions and social studies instruction in other samples and contexts. I hope this thesis can contribute to the development of citizenship education in general and to social studies didactics in Norway in particular by adding to our knowledge of young people’s perceptions of core concepts and aspects of instruction in the social studies subject.
References


Council of Europe. (2010). Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and


Appendix A

Interview guide for the concept of democracy

Concepts in social studies:
1. What role does concepts play in social studies?
2. How do you work with concepts in class?
3. When did you study the topic of ‘politics and democracy’ this school year?

The concept of democracy:
4. How would you explain the concept of democracy?
   - Do you feel that you understand what democracy is?
5. Which criteria should be used for calling a country democratic?
6. Not considering elections, what does democracy consist of?
   - How would society look if people did nothing but vote in elections?
7. What are your opportunities to influence democracy?
8. How much influence should young people have in a democracy?
9. Do you feel like you are participants in democracy? How?
10. Are there any rights or duties in a democracy?
    - Do you feel like you have any responsibility for our democracy?
11. Are there any central democratic values?
12. Are there any weaknesses in the Norwegian democracy?
13. What do you think is the purpose of having a democracy?
14. Do you learn anything in school that contributes to preparing you for participation in democracy?

(Translated from Norwegian)
Appendix B

Interview guide for the concept of politics

1. What do you think about when you hear the word ‘politics’?
2. How would you explain what politics is?
3. Who are the participants in politics?
4. How does politics work?
   - What kinds of activities are involved in politics?
5. Where does politics take place?
6. Which issues are influenced by politics?
   - Is there such a thing as more or less political issues?
7. What do you think are the tasks of politics?
   - What is the ‘job’ of politics?
8. Is there such a thing as ‘political behaviour’?
   - What kinds of behaviours or actions would that include?
9. Is politics the same thing as democracy?
10. Does politics have any opposites?
    - What is not politics?
11. Are you interested in politics?
12. Do you consider yourself a political person?
    - How do you see yourself in relation to politics?
13. Are there any issues in society you are concerned with?
    - Do you get engaged in these? How? Have you discussed them with friends or on Facebook, for example? Do you consider this political participation?
14. What role does the topic of politics and democracy have in social studies?
    - Do you perceive the topic of politics to be important in social studies?

(Translated from Norwegian)
Appendix C

Survey instrument

Survey items from Phase 3, as presented to students (i.e. without construct names). Students responded on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

**Democracy and politics**

To which degree do you agree with the following statements about *democracy*?

1. The core of a democracy is that the will of the majority is carried out, regardless of whether it negatively affects a minority
2. Voting in elections is the only form of political participation that really matters
3. In a democracy, people’s rights are definitely more important than their duties (what is expected from us)
4. It is very important to participate in democracy also between elections
5. The term ‘rule by the people’ is a complete description of what democracy really is

To which degree do you agree with the following statements about *politics*?

6. The core of politics is that I get to contribute to shaping society
7. Politics is primarily about how the country is ruled by politicians
8. Politics primarily goes on through discussions of important issues
9. Politicians are definitely the most important participants in politics
10. Politics depends on people’s participation in decision-making processes
11. Disagreement is an obstacle for a functioning democracy
12. People having different opinions is a precondition for a true democracy
13. The most important thing in a democracy is that people come to agreement about issues once and for all
14. Politicians are best qualified to make decisions on behalf of the people
15. It is positive when politicians are more concerned with ordinary people than with the elite in society
16. The people, not politicians, should make the most important decisions, through referenda
17. The established political parties are more concerned with what benefits themselves than with improving ordinary people’s lives

To which degree do you agree with the following statements?

18. I am very interested in politics
19. It is important for me to get engaged in politics
20. I absolutely believe that everyone who makes an effort can become a part of politics
21. I consider myself a participant in politics
22. I often try to influence others’ opinions about political issues
23. It is primarily politicians who are involved in politics
24. Politics is nothing but arguing
25. In politics, most people fight for their own personal interests
26. There is a large distance between people and politics
27. Most political issues do not concern me
28. I feel that politicians do not take the most important issues in the world seriously
29. It is hard to find other people who care about the issues I am passionate about
30. Some issues are so important that people need to take matters into their own hands to make politicians understand, for example by protesting
31. I feel like it can seem hopeless to succeed in solving the issues I care about
32. I am sad and distraught by the fact that there is no political will to do anything about the major challenges the world faces
33. To make politicians understand the severity of the world’s challenges, young people need to protest

**Social studies**

To which degree do you agree with the following statements about your social studies lessons?

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>My social studies teacher usually shows a lot of passion for the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>My social studies teacher frequently uses news and topical issues during lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>We primarily work with tasks in the textbook in social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>My social studies teacher presents several views on an issue in his/her explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>My social studies teacher chooses examples that are interesting for the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>When the social studies teacher has gone through the teaching materials, I understand much more than I did before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>We often discuss the topic <em>democracy</em> in social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>We often discuss the topic <em>politics</em> in social studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To which degree do you agree with the following statements about working with social studies concepts in social studies?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>The social studies teacher is very good at explaining complex concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>There is a lot of focus on working with concepts in social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>In social studies, students have many opportunities to work with concepts individually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>In social studies, students have many opportunities to work with concepts in groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>The social studies teacher is very concerned with students really understanding the concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>In social studies, we often discuss different ways of understanding a concept</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To which extent can you relate to the following statements?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>I very much look forward to every social studies lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>I very much enjoy working with assignments by myself in social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>I very much enjoy participating in discussions in social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>In social studies, I prefer subject material that challenges me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>I enjoy most of the work in social studies lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>I learn much of value in social studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To which degree do you agree with the following statements?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>I think social studies is important because I can use what I learn in everyday life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>I think social studies is important because it challenges me to think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td>In social studies, I think it is important to work with exploratory activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td>Social studies helps me understand the world around me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.</td>
<td>Social studies makes me curious about the world around me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.</td>
<td>Social studies prepares students to participate actively in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60.</td>
<td>Social studies makes me want to get engaged in society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To which degree do you agree with the following statements?

**My social studies teacher…**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>61.</td>
<td>Often requires students to argue for their opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62.</td>
<td>Expects students to pay attention to what is going on in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.</td>
<td>Pushes me to work even harder with the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64.</td>
<td>Has high expectations of us students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65.</td>
<td>Often asks students directly about their opinions on various issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.</td>
<td>Makes sure everyone participates in discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67.</td>
<td>Expects that all students respect others’ opinions in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68.</td>
<td>Does not tolerate irrelevant [<em>usaklige</em>] statements from students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69.</td>
<td>Reacts strongly to mocking comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To which degree can you relate to the following statements about your own work in social studies?
| 70. | I always do very well on evaluations in social studies |
| 71. | I comprehend the concepts in social studies very well |
| 72. | I find it very easy to understand new material in social studies |
| 73. | I am very good at writing social studies texts |
| 74. | I always do my best when working with social studies |
| 75. | I always prepare well for social studies lessons |
| 76. | I often rush through my social studies homework |
| 77. | I usually complete social studies assignments well before the deadline |
| 78. | Even though I schedule time for social studies assignments, I am not able to complete them |
| 79. | I usually postpone social studies assignments until the last minute |
| 80. | Leisure activities sometimes prevent me from doing social studies assignments |

To which degree do you agree with the following statements?

81. My social studies teacher really cares about the students
82. My social studies teacher is concerned with the wellbeing of every single student
83. I trust what my social studies teacher tells me
84. My social studies teacher expresses a personal interest in students’ learning
85. My social studies teacher is concerned with the success of every single student

**Leisure time**

To which degree do you agree with the following statements?

86. My parents are very interested in political issues
87. I often discuss political issues with my family
88. My parents encourage me to pay attention to politics
89. I have several friends who are very interested in politics
90. I often discuss political issues with my friends
91. I like reading blogs with political content
92. I like participating in political discussions online
93. I like reading political discussions online
94. I like reading politicians’ tweets on Twitter
95. I like browsing the websites of political parties or youth parties

Are you, or have you during the last year been, a member of

96. A political youth organisation?
97. An environmental organisation?
98. Another kind of voluntary organisation or group?

Have you during the last year participated in

99. A demonstration?
100. A signature campaign?
101. Another form of democratic movement?

Have you during the last year

102. Written a comment to a newspaper?
103. Contacted a politician directly?
104. Given money to a charity?
105. Collected money for a charity?
106. Engaged yourself in any way for a cause?

107. Which grade do you expect to achieve in social studies this year?

1 2 3 4 5 6

**Background questions**
108. Are you a boy or a girl?
   Boy
   Girl

109. Which educational programme are you enrolled in?
   The general academic programme
   A vocational programme

110. How many books are there in your home?

   There are usually 40 books per meter of shelf. Do not count magazines, newspapers or school textbooks. (only check one box)
   
   0-10 books
   11-25 books
   26-100 books
   101-200 books
   201-500 books
   More than 500 books

Thank you for your participation!

(Translated from Norwegian)
Appendix D

Examples from the analysis of the focus group interviews in Phase 1. The excerpts show examples of student responses that were related to the analytical concepts *individual preferences, aggregation of interests, and the common good.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group transcripts (excerpts)</th>
<th>Analytical concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nora</strong> (follow-up question): But why is it so important to vote in elections?</td>
<td>I related these excerpts of students’ talk about voting to <em>individual preferences and aggregation of interest,</em> which refer to aspects of indirect democracy focused on the interests of individual citizens and the election of political representatives on the basis of these interests. These concepts are often related to theories of <em>liberal,</em> or <em>competitive,</em> democracy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boy 3 (group 2):</strong> Not voting is like giving a vote to a different party.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boy 2 (group 2):</strong> [...] It doesn’t take much of an effort to find a party to support. [...] And the purpose is to get the best possible cross-section of Norway’s needs. (Translated from Norwegian)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nora</strong> (follow-up question): Is it really like that, that the votes for a losing party are just a waste?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girl 1 (group 1):</strong> We have always heard that the majority decides. From [when] we were little. They start with it in kindergarten, that the majority decides. Because then more people will be happy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girl 2 (group 1):</strong> … and that is fair. (Translated from Norwegian)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The common good* is often related to theories of *deliberative democracy.*
Appendix E

Consent form (presented in writing and explained carefully before data collection started), Phases 1 and 2 (Translated from Norwegian).

Information about participation in research project

Background and purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate how students understand and relate to some social studies concepts. The interviews are anonymous and no personally identifiable information will be collected from participants.

What happens with your information?

The interview will be audio-recorded. The information that is collected will be treated anonymously. This means that only I, who am responsible for the project, will listen to the recordings and no one will be able to identify you in the data transcriptions or any resulting publications. The material will be used for research related to students’ conceptual understanding. The project is scheduled to end in 2018 and recorded material will then be deleted.

Voluntary participation

It is voluntary to participate, and you can withdraw from the project at any time without providing a reason.

If you have any questions about the research project, please contact Nora E. H. Mathé via email: n.e.h.mathe@ils.uio.no

Kind regards,

Nora E. H. Mathé

I want to participate:
Signature:...........................................
Appendix F

Information for students (presented in writing and explained carefully before data collection started), Phase 3 (translated from Norwegian). Students consented by completing the survey.

Thank you for welcoming me and for participating in my project.

I am working on a project in which I try to understand how 16- to 17- year olds understand and relate to democracy, politics, and social studies. This is important in several ways, but perhaps most because the way you choose to participate in society both now and in your futures is so important for society. I am also interested in finding out how we can improve the subject of social studies in school.

Today, you will first be asked to respond to a questionnaire. I am not asking you to write anything, only check boxes to signal how much you agree or disagree with different statements. It is important that you think carefully about which response alternative that is right for you on each question. There are no right or wrong answers here. I am not interested in what you know about social studies, but what you think about it.

Participating in this study is voluntary and everyone who chooses to participate will be completely anonymous. It will not be possible to recognize anyone in the data and presentations from this study.

I want you to try to spend at least 30 – 45 minutes on the questionnaire. Please ask questions along the way if anything is unclear or you have questions about anything. Everything is anonymous, so no one, including your teacher, will know how you have responded.

Thank you for participating!
Part II

The Articles
Article I
Students’ Understanding of the Concept of Democracy and Implications for Teacher Education in Social Studies

Abstract
According to recent studies, Norwegian students are knowledgeable about and show strong support for democracy, as well as demonstrate democratic attitudes. These qualities must be actively encouraged and maintained also in successful democracies. Little is known, however, about how students understand and explain democracy as a subject-specific concept. Such knowledge may be valuable for social studies teachers and teacher educators to fulfil the purpose of the social studies curriculum. The present article investigates 16-year-old students’ understanding of the concept of democracy. In social studies, the concept of democracy is essential not only for disciplinary understanding and discourse, but also for students’ out-of-school democratic participation. To investigate students’ understanding of this concept, semi-structured group interviews were conducted with a total of 23 students at three different Norwegian upper secondary schools. A central finding is that students primarily expressed a liberal understanding of democracy focusing on voting in elections as the main political activity. Students also demonstrated more or less limited or elaborate understanding. In addition to presenting and discussing students’ understandings of the concept of democracy, this article considers implications for teacher education in social studies. One implication is that teacher educators need to engage actively in discussing and defining core concepts with their students. This is related to supporting student teachers’ professional development and in turn developing adolescents’ opportunities for democratic participation. Such a dual focus can provide a knowledge base to help student teachers in their professional development in their first years as practicing teachers.

Keywords: democracy, concepts, understanding, teacher education, social studies, democratic theory

Sammendrag
Tidligere studier viser at norske skoleelever er kunnskapsrike om og viser sterk støtte til demokrati, og gir uttrykk for sentrale demokratiske holdninger. Vi vet at det må arbeides aktivt for å opprettholde disse kvalitetene, selv i stabile demokratier. Vi vet imidlertid lite om hvordan elever forstår og forklarer demokrati som fagbegrep. Dette er kunnskap som kan være verdifull for lærere og lærerutdannere i arbeidet for å oppfylle læreplanens formål i samfunnsfaget. I samfunnskunnskap er ikke demokratibegrepet bare sentralt for forståelse og deltakelse i faget, men også for elevers demokratiske deltakelse utenfor skolen. Denne artikkelen undersøker norske 16-åringers forståelse av demokratibegrepet, og bygger på semi-strukturerte gruppeintervjuer med til sammen 23 elever fra tre videregående skoler. Et sentralt funn er at elevate først og fremst uttrykker en liberal forståelse av demokrati med fokus på stemmegivning i valg som den viktigste formen for politisk deltakelse. I tilknytning til
dette kan elevene sies å vise mer eller mindre begrenset eller utvidet forståelse av begrepet. I tillegg til å presentere og diskutere elevers forståelse av begrepet demokrati, ser denne artikkel på mulige implikasjoner for lærerutdanning i samfunnskunnskap. Én implikasjon er at lærerutdannere aktivt bør involvere lærerstudentene i å diskutere og definere sentrale begreper. Dette kan være med på å støtte lærerstudentenes profesjonelle utvikling, og, gjennom dette, utvikle ungdommers muligheter for demokratisk deltakelse. Et slikt dobbelt fokus kan bidra med en kunnskapsbase som hjelper lærerstudenter i deres første år som praktiserende lærere.

Nøkkelord: demokrati, begreper, forståelse, lærerutdanning, samfunns-kunnskap, samfunnsfag

Introduction

Democracy is the frame for politics in Norway and about half the world’s countries (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). The institutions and practices of democracy create the political space in which we as citizens form our identities and exercise our rights. Political theorist Bernard Crick (2008) stated, “Democracy is both a sacred and a promiscuous word. We all love her but we see her differently. She is hard to pin down. Everyone claims her but no one can possess or even name her fully” (p. 13). These words illustrate both the importance and the intrigue of studying the concept of democracy in an educational context. All education in Norway, including teacher education, is mandated to promote democracy, and the concept of democracy is central in social studies.

Empirical research has produced substantial knowledge about students’ support for democratic values, and their current and envisioned civic and political participation (Mikkelsen, Fjeldstad, & Lauglo, 2011; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010; Torney-Purta, 2002). Less research, however, has investigated how adolescents understand the concept of democracy itself; that is, how they answer the question: what is democracy? The purpose of this article is to present and discuss Norwegian 16-year-olds’ conceptions of democracy. Knowledge about students’ conceptions of democracy can inform teaching and learning in social studies on all levels of the educational system. Based on this research, this article introduces the notions of limited and elaborate understanding of democracy, and argues the importance of incorporating conceptions of democracy in social studies in teacher education programmes.

Studies of people’s various ideas about and relations to democracy can be placed in two categories: (a) citizenship education, dealing primarily with attitudes toward, practices in and knowledge about democracy, and (b) studies focusing on people’s conceptions and understanding of democracy. In this study, a concept is understood as an idea, principle or category (Concept, 2015;
Tjønneland, 2011), and the terms *understand* and *conception* are used to describe the explanation students give for a concept.

The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), consisting of 38 national case studies followed by international comparative analyses, made important contributions to the field of citizenship education. The 2009 ICCS study found that a majority of students endorsed democratic values and intended to exercise their democratic right to vote in future national elections. However, the study found considerable variation across and within countries concerning students’ levels of civic knowledge (Schulz et al., 2010). Mikkelsen et al. (2011), who conducted the national investigation in Norway, found that Norwegian students demonstrated somewhat stronger support for democratic values than the international mean value. They strongly supported a representative form of democracy and expressed support for more participatory forms of citizenship.

As Canache (2012) noted, many studies have investigated people’s beliefs and democratic values, principles and participation, but few have addressed the question of how the average citizen understands democracy. However, some studies have sought to explore what citizens in developing countries understand by *democracy* (e.g., Canache, 2012; Dalton, Shin, & Jou, 2007; Ottemoeller, 1998). These studies have shown that people largely embrace a liberal definition of democracy, focusing on various rights and liberty. In Dalton et al.’s (2007) study, references to democratic procedures and institutions (e.g., elections, majority rule) occurred less often than references to freedom and liberty. Their international survey found that high levels of democracy were related to a greater emphasis on freedom and liberty, implying that participants in good democracies emphasise democratic values when asked to explain what democracy means to them. This difference illustrates how people’s understanding of concepts like democracy varies with context and what they view as ‘normal’ (Davies & Lundholm, 2011), and that citizens’ democratic experiences influence their perceptions of the central features of democracy (Moodie, Markova, & Plichtova, 1995).

Concerning youth, the results of the 1971 Civic Education Study indicated that students viewed democracy as giving people a chance to voice their opinions (Torney, Oppenheim, & Farnen, 1975), while later studies found that Western youth associated democracy with related concepts such as individual freedom, individual rights and voting (e.g., Moodie et al., 1995; Sigel & Hoskin, 1981; Szalay & Kelly, 1982). More recently, a Swedish study found that adolescents in 2003 had a quite uniform understanding of democracy, focusing on everybody’s opportunities to participate in decision-making through voting, basic political rights and the election of representatives to govern at the national level (Arensmeier, 2010).

This review demonstrates that, in Norway, we primarily have knowledge about conditions for citizenship education in schools and about young people’s
knowledge of and attitudes toward democracy. We do not know much about how Norwegian youth understand the concept of democracy: What is democracy? How does it work? What are the most important characteristics and features of democracy? These are the questions of interest in this article. These questions are important because how students perceive the notion of democracy has implications both for social studies education and for the likelihood of students wishing to help develop the democracies they are a part of (Canache, 2012). The focus of this article relates to conceptions of democracy as expressed in qualitative group interviews in the context of social studies in upper secondary school, which will be elaborated below.

Based on the identified needs for research on students’ understanding of the concept of democracy, the following research question has been defined:

How do Norwegian 16-year-olds explain their understanding of the concept of democracy?

In the following, I discuss how I have framed this study theoretically and methodologically.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this study builds on (a) democratic theory concerning how democracy can be understood in terms of a political system of government in modern nation-states, and (b) the Norwegian context, including a brief overview of the goals of education concerning democracy in schools. These contributions will be used to discuss the participating students’ conceptions of democracy.

Democratic Theory

The term democracy has various contested meanings. At its core is the idea of a government involving some form of “rule by the people” and a society that allows and upholds this practice (e.g., Behrouzi, 2005; Dahl, 2001; Nguyen, 2014). In modern nation-states, democracy is primarily representative; adult citizens choose their representatives in local and national elections.

This framework is based on three ideas of democracy prevalent in democratic theory; liberal (competitive) democracy, participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. These three strands offer different views on the citizen’s role in a democracy and on the relationship between the state and its citizens.

First, a liberal (competitive) view of democracy focuses on individual citizens and their preferences, instead of the ‘common good’. Citizens function primarily as voters, and politicians are their representatives, defending their
positions and competing for votes (e.g., Schumpeter, 1994). Tightly interwoven with this individualistic conception of politics is the importance of individual rights, intended to secure citizens’ freedom (Behrouzi, 2005; Rasch, 2004; Terchek & Conte, 2001). Behrouzi (2005) argued this view of democracy is a distortion of the “original” idea of democracy as “rule by the people”. He employed the phrase “audience democracy” to show that the role of the electorate is primarily “reactive”; it is left to respond to issues pre-defined by opinion polls, mass media and representatives through “political marketeering” (p. 156). This critique is representative of several arguments against competitive conceptions of democracy in modern democratic theory.

The second core idea is participatory democracy. Behrouzi (2005) viewed the task of “rescuing the true meaning of democracy” (p. 168) as the most important aspect of the project of participatory democracy in the 1960s and ’70s. The central idea is that free and fair voting in elections is not enough: a true democracy requires higher levels of citizen intervention and influence on decisions (e.g., Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1927; Pateman, 1970). Rasch (2004) argued that, in a participatory perspective, democracy must be seen as a goal in itself by contributing to its members’ self-realisation. The idea that active participation will help create truly democratic citizens is essential in Pateman’s (1970) work on participation in local and micro processes in workplaces, and in Dewey’s (1927) emphasis on expanded opportunities for participation. Dewey also challenged the idea of majority rule, claiming that the important issue is how a majority becomes a majority and the antecedent processes.

Third, the idea of deliberative democracy began to develop from the early 1990s. Theories of deliberative democracy arose from participatory democracy in the notion that decision-making processes require deliberation. Deliberative democratic processes are considered to transform individuals’ preferences and opinions to some sort of “morally and rationally justifiable and convergent positions” (Behrouzi, 2005, p. 176). According to Behrouzi (2005), the primary driving forces behind these transformations are the power of reason, participants’ morals and consideration of the common good, as well as the idea that decision-making is first and foremost consensus-building (Cohen, 2002; Habermas, 1995).

These conceptions deal with democracy both as a theoretical ideal and with reactions to democracy in practice. Based on work addressing the quality of democracy, Munck (2014) discussed a minimal and a broadened definition of democracy, meant to unite the two perspectives. His minimal definition was “electoral democracy”, while his expanded definition suggested that democracy includes political freedom, political equality, government decision-making and the social environment of politics. Table 1 presents the analytical concepts I have deduced from this theoretical framework.
The Norwegian Context
Norway can be characterised as a stable representative democracy founded on a parliamentary and multi-party system in a unitary state. This, alongside features of the Norwegian system concerning the relationship between the people and their representatives and between the government, opposition and pressure groups, has caused experts to describe Norway as an example of the Nordic model of government (Arter, 1999) and as a consensual democracy (Lijphart, 1999). In recent years, some have argued that the Norwegian representative democracy is eroding (Selle & Østerud, 2006; Østerud & Selle, 2006). An important factor of this erosion of rule by popular consent is that parliamentary politics, according to some political scientists, is seen as less relevant for voters, while other forms of participation (e.g., signing petitions, participating in demonstrations) have become more important (e.g., Bjørklund, 1999; Offerdal, 2003).

According to Stray (2010), the Norwegian core curriculum emphasises a cognitive approach to citizenship and learning about democracy. The core curriculum also includes elements of preparation for democratic participation (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training [UDIR], 1993). Under the core curriculum, all school subjects are responsible for preparing students for participation in society; however, politics and democracy as concepts and topics are particularly important in social studies. Børhaug (2008) found that the main trend among the teachers in his study was a focus on voting in elections as the main political and democratic activity. In Norway, social studies is an obligatory course during the first year of upper secondary education in the academic track. Competence aims specifically related to politics and democracy focus on political parties and institutions, opportunities for participation, pluralism and the rights of minorities, and challenges for democracy (UDIR, 2013). These also include central democratic skills, like discussing and analysing, which may contribute to the development of a more elaborate understanding of these issues.

Methods
Research Design, Participants and Procedures
This qualitative study consists of data collected in 2014–15, among 23 students in their first year of upper secondary education at three different schools in Norway. I selected the schools, all located in eastern Norway, based on purposive sampling (Palys, 2008). One school is in the highest echelon, one in the mid echelon, and one in the lower echelon of upper secondary schools in the area. With the help of their teachers, I selected students purposively to represent maximum variation in their class (Palys, 2008), including lower, average and high achievers. All the participating students (12 boys and 11 girls) followed the general study programme. The students from the lowest intake school all
attended a general study programme combined with athletics, which has a higher intake than the rest of the school. The data material for this article involved five audio-recorded semi-structured group interviews; four groups with five students each, and one group with three students. I chose group interviews to allow students to build on each other’s responses, to get a broad understanding of students’ conceptions (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996), and to reach several students’ perspectives in a relatively short period of time. All participants signed standard consent forms, and I anonymised all data after data collection (Creswell, 2013).

In line with an explorative approach (Kvale, 2007), I prepared a semi-structured interview guide based on open-ended questions about how students would explain what democracy is (see Table 1). In addition, I asked follow-up questions requiring students to reflect on examples, contradictions and their own responses. For example, following the statements from the two boys in the third interview presented in the section Voting and Elections, I asked the students to imagine how democracy would look without considering elections, and whether they could think of other important characteristics of democracy. The interviews did not involve sensitive or personal issues that could lead the students to experience discomfort during or after their participation.

**Data Analysis**

I conducted three main analytic reading phases to search for patterns across the collected material. First, I read each interview transcript individually to get an overview of the material. Second, I categorised each interview based on the students’ responses (descriptive coding). Lastly, I categorised the material as a whole, based on the commonalities in the preliminary categories (interpretative coding). This thematic analysis was inductive and directly based on words mentioned and explanations given by the informants, i.e., data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). I looked for words and themes repeated by several students, and grouped those closely related (i.e., “elections” and “voting”). From these groups, I selected for further analysis those that represented their group very clearly and had received affirmative comments from other students. Despite the inductive approach, all categories presented in the section on findings represent various aspects of modern democracies and central concepts from democratic theory (e.g., Barber, 1984; Behrouzi, 2005; Cohen, 2002; Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1995; Pateman, 1970; Rasch, 2004; Terchek & Conte, 2001). To analyse and interpret the student data, I deduced some central concepts from the theoretical framework (see Table 1). Students’ responses were then related to the various strands of the theoretical framework. In order to improve transparency, I include extracts from the interviews in the findings.
### Table 1
Examples of Interview Questions, Student Responses, and Analytical Concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of interview questions</th>
<th>Student response examples</th>
<th>Overview of Analytical concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How would you explain the concept of democracy?</td>
<td>“Rule by the people … that the ones who rule should represent the people, and that we kind of rule indirectly” (Girl 2-1) “We have always heard that the majority decides” (Girl 1-1)</td>
<td>Individual preferences, freedom and rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does everyone have the same opportunities to influence in a democracy?</td>
<td>“Not voting is like giving a vote to another party” (Boy 2-3) “All votes count the same” (Boy 5-1)</td>
<td>Aggregation of interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do we have other opportunities than elections to influence democracy?</td>
<td>“Maybe demonstrations” (Boy 2-1) “We can voice our opinions in the newspaper, for example” (Girl 5-1)</td>
<td>Individual preferences, Direct participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do we have any rights or duties in a democracy?</td>
<td>“Following the human rights” (Boy 3-2) “To be allowed to express and demand your rights, like freedom of speech” (Boy 1-1)</td>
<td>Self-realisation, Deliberation, Consensus, The common good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Students are presented according to gender and group affiliation (e.g., Girl 6-3 would be girl number 3 in group 6).

### Findings

Because the five groups had few major differences, I present the findings thematically based on the four main aspects of the students’ conceptions of democracy. They are arranged according to what students emphasised the most, i.e., rule by the people, voting and elections, other forms of participation, and rights and responsibilities. Based on the general findings, the final section presents how the students’ understanding of democracy vary from limited to more elaborate across the four thematic categories.

### Rule by the People

The term *folkestyre* (rule by the people) constituted the students’ main association and explanation of the concept of democracy. The students explained rule of the people primarily in two ways; first, as the essence of modern representative (liberal) democracies where the rulers must represent the people, and second, that this representation is strongly related to majority rule. In practice, this principle is secured through elections. The following interview excerpts illustrate this idea:
Girl 2-2: Eh, rule by the people.
Boy 2-1: That the ones who rule are elected by the people, that the majority think these people are fit to rule the country.
Girl 1-1: We have always heard that the majority decides. From [when] we were little. They start with it in kindergarten, that the majority decides. Because then more people will be happy.
Girl 1-2: … and that is fair.
Boy 5-1: Everyone can participate in decision-making, but those who are the majority can decide the most in a way.

As exemplified above, students were very clear that it is the majority group that wins and gets the power. According to the students, “the majority” is formed when “the people” vote in elections. The students did not go further in describing this majority, and made no distinction between ‘the majority of the people’ and ‘the majority that gained power’ as a consequence of elections. They argued that, when the majority has the power, more people “get their way”, which they considered a fair way of organising society. Several students also compared this system to their personal lives, as highlighted below:

Boy 1-2: It’s like in our everyday lives…. If you’re a group that wants to do something, the majority wins.
Girl 1-2: It’s like this in the classroom and with friends. It’s like, the winner is the winner, and the ones who lose don’t get a say in the matter.

A few students delved more deeply in nuancing the critique of rule by the people through majority rule. One student reflected that, even though the majority elected one party or a coalition of parties, the elected officials may still not have an absolute majority. In essence, some students revealed that the majority is not necessarily a static and stable entity. To sum up, when discussing the concept of democracy and its main features, students emphasised the importance of having elected leaders and the supremacy of the majority. They closely linked this to voting and elections, as presented in the next sub-section.

**Voting and Elections**
Students seemed to view voting in political elections as the most important form of democratic participation for reasons of (a) political equality, (b) citizens’ responsibility and (c) the importance of expressing one’s opinions:
Girl 5-2: [...] There are no economic differences. No matter what condition you live in, you have the opportunity to vote because you are a part of democracy.

Boy 5-1: All votes count the same, and then every person and all people’s opinions also count the same. Everyone has something to say, and everyone has value.

Boy 3-3: Not voting is like giving a vote to a different party.

Boy 3-2: [...] It doesn’t take much of an effort to find a party to support. [...] And the purpose is to get the best possible cross-section of Norway’s needs.

First, many students argued the main characteristic of democracy is that people have the right to vote. This, combined with the belief that every vote is equally important (which in Norway is not technically true), is the main expression of political equality. One student pointed out that, because the right to vote is free and given to everyone, it has clear advantages over other forms of participation. Students also linked this to equality in general and individuals’ equal worth. Second, students described voting as an important responsibility or even duty of a country’s citizens. They saw voting as a central, or even the most important, way of expressing one’s opinions. A large majority of the 16-year-olds seemed to think that their influence before coming of voting age was minimal, confirming their view of the strong position of elections and voting as the main channel of political participation.

Other Forms of Participation
When specifically asked about other aspects of democracy than elections and other forms of participation than voting, many students hesitated before answering. The following quotes represent the most typical responses:

Boy 2-1: Demonstrations….
Girl 2-1: You can send an email….
Boy 2-1: Some people walk around collecting signatures for causes where they feel something is wrong.
Girl 2-2: Yes, and Facebook pages and stuff.

Some students also mentioned participation through traditional news media and membership in organisations, political youth parties and the student body council. Most students agreed that it is important for citizens to stand up for their opinions, and they recognised that action may be necessary even outside of election season. Students’ ideas about participation have been included in the findings because their ideas for influencing democracy can tell us something about what they see as the central characteristics of, and consequently how they understand the concept of, democracy.

Even if students did not include discussions and debates as ways of influencing democracy, they acknowledged these as important activities in a democracy (e.g., that listening to or participating in debates and discussions...
allows one to see different perspectives). Several students also highlighted participation in discussions, including argumentation and being critical, as one of the most important things they learn in school in preparation for political participation.

Rights and Responsibilities
Based on the statements in this category, students were more preoccupied with the rights that are important in democracies than with the duties or responsibilities of citizens. In all the group interviews, freedom of speech was the most frequently mentioned and the most highlighted democratic right. Students related this primarily to fronting one’s opinions, but also to being a part of shaping society and being able to voice criticism toward government. In general, they asserted that “you can say and mean what you want” (Boy 1-2) and that “you need to respect that people have different opinions” (Boy 1-2). In addition to free speech, some students mentioned other human rights, such as freedom of religion, liberty, freedom of thought, free and open elections, free education and central aspects of rule of law.

Their responses to whether citizens have any duties in a democratic country can be divided into three: following one’s country’s laws and rules, voting in elections, and respecting and being nice to other people.

Limited and Elaborate Understanding of Democracy
In the analysed material, there are clear indications of different levels of nuance and depth in students’ understandings that cut across the thematic categories. Although “rule by the people” was the spontaneous definition of democracy, some students offered a more elaborated understanding, often expressed as critical comments (“rule by the people is not really a precise definition” [Boy 1-2]). This is primarily illustrated in attempts at questioning some of the concepts related to democracy or adding new concepts to the agreed upon definition. One student stated that “many people look at democracy and think, OK, if everyone can vote, it’s a democracy … but you have to understand that it is more than that” and “we all have a duty to maintain democracy ourselves. For example, we have to take care of the minorities” (Boy 3-2). This student showed that he could see beyond democracy as rule of the people and respect for basic human rights. He recognised that citizens have personal responsibility in their everyday lives, and that democracy is more than politics (Stray, 2010).

Some students also discussed the role of political parties and politicians more in-depth, and shed some critical light on the relationship between the majority and the minority. The following quote illustrates a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of the democratic election process:
Well, like now, four parties rule together, and they have different opinions about many things. And in order for them to maintain the government, they have to compromise with each other, and then people may feel that they are not doing what they said they would […]. But if people feel that what they voted for isn’t happening, they will lose trust in those parties, and then they probably won’t be re-elected. (Girl 5-1)

This student brought up elements of democracy related to cooperation and compromise, the relationship between elections and their aftermath, the relationship between citizens and government, and the need for voters to do more than vote for the party they agree with the most once every few years.

The main characteristic of the limited conceptualisations of democracy is the tendency for students to repeat simple and brief definitions of democracy and the main characteristics of (Norwegian) democracy. Students defined democracy in terms of freedom of expression, equal opportunities to influence democracy for all citizens and the right of the majority to rule through their representatives in Parliament. One student illustrated this when claiming that, “when more than half of Norway votes for Høyre [the Conservative Party], half the people lose their … don’t have it their way” (Girl 1-2). Other students confirmed this view, for example in the following statement: “We have always heard that the majority decides. From [when] we were little. […] Because then more people will be happy” (Girl 1-1). These kinds of statements represent a somewhat limited, or uncritical, understanding of democracy. Implications are discussed below.

Discussion

The findings presented above indicate that the students in this study identified strongly with certain aspects of liberal democracy, such as majority rule through elections, but they also brought up elements of participatory and deliberative views of democracy, such as other forms of participation and the importance of discussions. Based on these findings, I will discuss students’ understanding of democracy and some implications for teaching and teacher education in social studies.

Students’ Understanding of the Concept of Democracy

A democratic practice limited to elections represents a baseline definition of democracy (Munck, 2014). A common critique of the liberal view of democracy is that it is aggregative and requires citizens only to choose between competing elite representatives. When students define democracy as “rule by the people”, they refer to the origin and meaning of the word. In combination, they highlight individual rights, individual preferences, a system where the majority wins and elections as a way of finding a “cross-section” of the people’s opinions. This is a close fit with liberal democratic theory, and the students’ characterisation of the
democratic citizen does to some extent take on the “reactive role” described by Behrouzi (2005). This perspective also corroborates Børhaug’s (2008) findings from Norwegian classrooms. An explanation for the strong position of elections can be found both in what goes on in the social studies classroom, and in the strong focus on politicians and elections in the media and society. Many scholars would argue that this perspective is not enough, that democracy consists of much more than electing representatives and that broader citizen participation is desirable and necessary (Behrouzi, 2005; Dewey, 1927; Munck, 2014).

Even though the students strongly supported a majority conception of democracy, several of them also talked about fairness. Majority decisions are often considered the fairest alternative in large-scale societies, but fairness can also represent participatory and deliberative views on democracy because what is fair can also mean the search for some sort of common good. According to theorists (Cohen, 2002; Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1995), fairness can be achieved through various forms of political interaction between citizens, through deliberation, discussion and perhaps even consensus. Like Rasch (2004; see also Pateman, 1970; Dewey, 1927), several students argued that participating in and listening to discussions, in and out of school, are valuable for developing critical thinking and learning about multiple perspectives. In spite of this, they were still loyal to majority rule and simple majority decisions. To some extent, this contradicts their support for the ideal of “rule by the people”, depending on how this idea is understood.

An interesting question is how much students’ conceptualisations are influenced by the democratic context they live in (Davies & Lundholm, 2011; Moodie et al., 1995). Is what they have explained simply a mirror of their “normal” and consequently less relevant for students experiencing other “normals”? Students reflected on features of democracy that are prominent in the media and in the social studies curriculum, but they also turned to more general principles and “ideas” of democracy. In addition, the Norwegian students’ responses have clear commonalities with those of other Western youth (Arensmeier, 2010; Moodie et al., 1995; Sigel & Hoskin, 1981; Szalay & Kelly, 1982).

In the findings, I introduced the concepts of limited and elaborate understandings of democracy to supplement the theoretical concepts from democratic theory. These are primarily meant to describe students’ levels of in-depth understanding and ability to critically evaluate information, with the goal of moving more students in the direction of an elaborate understanding. The explanations of the students who demonstrated a limited understanding resonate with Munck’s (2014) minimal definition of democracy, an electoral democracy, and may also reflect Sigel and Hoskin’s (1981) findings that 58% of adolescents gave simplistic (or even wrong) explanations of democracy, while 16% offered more sophisticated explanations. More than favouring participatory or
deliberative conceptions of democracy, the concepts are related to students’ knowledge about how democracy works, and to central skills students are increasingly expected to master during their years in school: critical thinking, evaluating information, reflecting on challenges in society, and discussing concepts in relation to the “real” world. It is important to see these concepts as points on a scale, and not two clear-cut categories of understanding (that students either have a limited or an elaborate understanding of democracy).

This study has some limitations. One is related to the sample, and points to the need for further validation of the findings. This is an avenue for future research, employing different designs. Another limitation relates to the data collection procedures. Interviews provide limited insight into participants’ thoughts and understanding, and the researcher relies on what the informants express willingly in that context. The questions I asked framed the interviews and may have influenced participants’ answers, as may the presence of the other group members.

**Implications for Teaching and Teacher Education in Social Studies**

The findings presented in this article indicate a need to strengthen the efforts of helping students toward more elaborate understanding of the concept of democracy, including both cognitive and emotional aspects. This is in line with a recent Official Norwegian Report recommending that Norwegian education increases its focus on in-depth learning and progression in learning and understanding (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015). These efforts are also increasingly necessary in light of some of the new challenges facing many Western countries, such as increased immigration and political and social tension, which can lead to heated public debate (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Because these debates quickly find their way into the social studies classroom (e.g., through current events discussions and via the plethora of digitally available news and social media), they also become a pertinent matter for the teacher education meant to prepare student teachers for these classrooms.

As demonstrated above, the concept of democracy is both contested and relative (Crick, 2008; Nguyen, 2014). Thus, it is not always clear for student teachers where and how to begin curricular deliberation (Shulman, 1995), suggesting implications for teacher education. The goal is not for teacher educators to define what kind of democracy is to be taught in social studies as a school subject, but to help student teachers identify the different perspectives on concepts such as democracy, and to discuss implications of bringing these perspectives into the classroom.

Based on these findings, it seems necessary to avoid the development of what Edwards (2014) called “local dialects”, where teachers adopt the teaching practices of their school instead of building on new knowledge to bridge theory and practice (Brevik, 2015, p. 71). Linking school practices to teacher education in social studies requires programmes to engage student teachers in the
educational discourse of defining central concepts. This is not merely an educational discourse, but also a public discourse in the media and between politicians, which makes it more important to take ownership of in teacher education. Another more relevant reason is the relationship between the social sciences as scientific disciplines and social studies as a school subject. Social studies teachers have diverse academic backgrounds (e.g., political science, sociology, social anthropology, human geography) and bring with them various perspectives on the school subject they are to teach. Precisely because this diversity brings vitality to the field, teacher education is a vital binding link between various academic disciplines and the school subject (Eriksen & Lund, 2016). In addition, student teachers may face difficulties in translating their newly acquired knowledge in the academic discipline into pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) or professional knowledge and instruction in social studies (Stengel, 1997).

This knowledge is important for two major reasons. First, for teachers to evaluate critically what kind of conceptual view on democracy they teach. Second, if teachers and student teachers do not actively decide which aspects to teach and how to introduce their students to scientific concepts and practices like democracy, others, for example textbook authors (Blikstad-Balas, 2014), will make these decisions for them. In other words, this notion is strongly related to social studies teachers’ and student teachers’ professional development.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that schools and teachers are obligated to teach their students about democracy and give them experience with democratic practices. It is important, therefore, to reflect on and explore how students understand such a central concept as democracy.

Learning about the concept of democracy is also essential for students’ out-of-school democratic participation. A narrow conception of democratic practice may lead to more narrow political participation. The students in this study identified strongly with certain aspects of liberal democracy, but they also brought up elements of participatory and deliberative views of democracy. This knowledge can contribute to finding ways of broadening students’ views on what democracy is and, perhaps more importantly, what it can be. It also highlights the importance of continuing working on central skills, such as critical thinking, in order to plan teaching that fosters elaborate understanding of concepts and social issues.

One central implication is that teacher educators in social studies need to engage actively in discussing and defining core concepts with their students. This engagement is related to supporting student teachers’ professional development and, through this, developing students’ opportunities for
democratic participation. Such a dual focus can provide a knowledge base helping student teachers in their professional development, especially in their first years as practicing teachers.

References


Students’ democratic attitudes and support for democratic values on one hand, and students’ conceptions of democracy on the other, are arguably related. For the purposes of this article, the two issues are kept distinct from each other based on the observation that democratic values and attitudes are well-documented in the literature, and the fact that students’ understanding of the concept of democracy as defined on pages 2–3 (i.e., ideas about central features and characteristics) constitutes the focus of the empirical investigation the article builds on.
Article II
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-old students’ 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 (Amna & 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 & Häkli, 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 Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*: Cross-curricular and integrated approaches</td>
<td>Part of national curricula in all countries</td>
<td>No federal curriculum</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; Mouffe, 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 conceptions 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 explaining more thoroughly, touching upon several dimensions and ways of defining the concept 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 highlighted 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 students’ perceptions of politics (King & Horrocks, 2010). I then counted how many students had mentioned each keyword. In the third stage, I identified thematic commonalities 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 literature 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 perspective 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
This set of responses focuses on phenomena and processes outside the formal institutions of the state. The public sphere is seen as important for citizen participation and for effecting change (e.g. O’Toole, 2003; Leftwich, 2004; Sloam, 2007).

This set of responses focuses on the state as a political entity, and on government and other democratic institutions in charge of law-making-distributing resources and ruling (e.g. Held, 1991; Barry, 2000; White et al., 2000; O’Toole, 2003; Leftwich, 2004).

This set of responses centres on important activities in democratic societies. Discussion and debate are considered important aspects of politics both for citizens and politicians, and are often aimed at expressing and sharing opinions, as well as compromising (e.g. Mouffe, 1993; O’Toole, 2003).

Ruling a Country. However, because students expressed that discussions and debates were an important part of politics, I chose to categorise these responses separately.

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

| Table 4. Overview of interview questions and categorisation of student responses |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **What is politics?** | Society (5)*, related to: Influecing, Shaping, Solving problems | Rule (3), related to: Country, Govern, Rule of law | Discussion (3), related to: Debate, Argumentation, Talk |
| **Who are the participants in politics?** | Everyone (4), related to: Expressing opinions | Politicians (6), Voters (3) | Everyone; both politicians, voters, party members, and other people |
| **Where does politics take place?** | Everywhere (5) | Parliament/in the political parties (2) | Everywhere (5)** | Public places (3)** | School (3)** | Social media (2)** |

*The numbers in parenthesis indicate the number of students who mentioned each word/theme. The words without numbers are words students mentioned in relation to the main keyword. **Although these arenas could potentially also be categorised in Shaping Society, they were placed in Discussion and Debate because they were mentioned in relation to discussions between people.

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
perception of her role and of politics, she represented a third conception based on detachment (conception 3).

**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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References


Article III\footnote{This article was published in *JSSE - Journal of Social Science Education* in November 2018, while this thesis was under evaluation.}
Students’ Perceptions of Citizenship Preparation in Social Studies: The Role of Instruction and Students’ Interests

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Highlights

- Enjoying social studies is strongly associated with perceptions of citizenship preparation
- Aspects of students’ perceptions of the teachers’ instruction are significant factors
- Building on students’ interests may have positive implications for citizenship preparation

Abstract

Purpose:
The main purpose of this study is to explore how 16- to 17-year-old students’ experiences within the social studies classroom and their online political communication are related to their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

Design/methodology/approach:
To meet the purpose of this study, regression analyses were executed based on a survey of 264 Norwegian students aged 16–17. The dependent variable was the students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

Findings:
The analyses indicated that enjoying social studies was strongly associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. The teacher’s contributions,
discussing democracy and politics in social studies lessons, and students’ online political communication were also significantly associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

**Research limitations/implications:**

Some limitations exist in the instrument and in internal and external validity. Future research could add more content to improve the model’s explanatory adequacy. More nuanced explanatory factors from outside school are needed to study factors indirectly influencing students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation.

**Practical implications:**

These results indicate that focusing on students’ interests and quality instruction have positive implications for students’ perceived value of the subject when it comes to preparing them for civic and political engagement.

**Keywords**

Citizenship education, social studies, 16- to 17- year- old students, teaching

1 **Introduction**

A politically competent and engaged citizenry is of vital importance for the political sustainability of Western democracies (Dahl, 1998). Both school education and experiences with politics outside school prepare young people for political participation as youths, as democratic citizenship is not restricted to legal and adult citizenship (Stokke, 2017), and later in life. Therefore, the importance of preparing and motivating young people to participate in local, national, and global contexts is widely recognised (Onken & Lange, 2014; Reichert, 2014). This is not limited to participation in working life and democratic decision-making. It
also entails a broader concept of participation, including the ability and the desire to be updated and to reflect on social, political, economic, and cultural developments, as well as to engage in the public discussion of such developments. That is, democratic citizenship includes feeling a sense of belonging to society and exercising one’s opportunities to improve it. The quality of citizenship education in school education has critical implications for the long-term well-being of a democratic society (Niemi & Junn, 1998), as ‘what happens in classrooms can have a significant impact on students’ commitments to civic participation’ (Kahne & Sporte, 2008, p. 754). In Europe, a substantial part of this kind of citizenship preparation has been assigned to the educational systems, and objectives pertaining to citizenship or civic education can be identified both in general curricula and, more specifically, in social studies or citizenship curricula (Eurydice, 2017). Barton and Avery (2016) noted that ‘teaching these subjects contributes to students’ ability to participate responsibly in the public sphere, and to their desire to do so’ (p. 986), and Whiteley (2005) asserted that ‘exposure to and perceptions of citizenship education, are robust predictors of participation’ (p. 51). However, democratic politics is not a static condition (Biesta, 2011), and theories of political opportunity structure (e.g. Meyer, 2004; Vráblíková, 2014), propose that different political landscapes influence people’s mobilisation and participation. One implication of this is that it is never possible to foresee what characterises the political spaces students will be a part of when they leave school. Subsequently, the concept and content of citizenship education needs to be sufficiently open and dynamic to be able to prepare for the unknown, while providing some firm ground on which to scaffold political curiosity, interest, and reflection.

Research on social studies and citizenship education is a growing field. Large-scale studies, such as the International Civic and Citizenship Education study [ICCS] (e.g., Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, & Agrusti, 2017), have documented the importance of students’ perceptions
of an open classroom climate and room for discussion in school, and several studies have investigated the increasingly important role of social media in young people’s political engagement and participation (e.g., Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Ekström & Shehata, 2016). Few studies, however, have taken an in-depth look at social studies teaching, students’ perceptions of this teaching, or the subject’s aims and contents. This paper investigates antecedents of 16- to 17-year-old Norwegian students’ perceptions of the value of social studies in preparing them for citizenship. In European countries, these young people are often school learners who are on their way towards adulthood and positions as fully legal and responsible citizens. By focusing on 16- to 17-year-olds, this study investigates young people’s perceptions of citizenship preparation in the transition from formal education to formal enactment. The main question addressed in this study is: Which factors are related to students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies?

Based on the premise that healthy democracies depend on an alert and engaged citizenry (Behrouzi, 2005; Dahl, 1998), the main purpose of this study is to explore factors that are related to students’ perceptions of the role that social studies education plays in contributing to their engagement in civic participation. That is, this study examines how students’ attitudes towards social studies, their experiences within the social studies classroom, and their participation in online political activities relate to their assessment of the subject’s success in providing them with the knowledge and skills that enable and motivate them to reflect on, understand, and engage in various ways in society. This study contributes to the field of citizenship education by providing new insights into the role of subjects such as social studies in preparing young people for democratic citizenship through the perceptions of 16- to 17-year-old students. A secondary purpose of this study is to develop adequate measures of citizenship preparation, students’ attitudes towards social studies, and quality aspects of social studies teaching. First, we present some of the central concepts in the study as well as
previous research in the field of citizenship education in schools and the study’s hypotheses. Second, following a short description of the educational context, we provide an outline of the research design and the methodology for a cross-sectional investigation. Third, we present the results of our study. Fourth, we discuss our findings, avenues for further research, and implications for practice, followed by our concluding remarks.

2 Central concepts

Democracy, politics, and citizenship education are central concepts in this study. These are, however, not concrete or agreed-upon concepts. In this paper, democracy is understood as more than a form of government and form of political organisation (Biesta, 2011); specifically, democracy includes the processes, activities, and institutions related to democratic politics. We conceive of politics and the political as having to do with conflict and pluralism, particularly in or related to the public sphere or to society, although politics most certainly involves, influences, and is shaped by individuals (e.g., Mouffe, 2005). Citizenship education is meant to improve students’ capabilities and interest in being a part of democratic politics, and includes values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Johnson & Morris, 2010; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Citizenship is, however, a problematic concept (Biesta, 2011; Hung, 2012). According to Hung (2012), a main problem is that the concept of citizen excludes those who for some reason are not legal members of a given society. Stokke (2017) proposed four key interconnected and mutually constitutive dimensions of citizenship to address such challenges: Citizenship as (1) legal status; (2) rights; (3) membership; and (4) participation. This conception of citizenship is sensitive to people’s feelings of belonging to various communities, as highlighted by Osler and Starkey (2006), and we adhere to this understanding in this paper. However, the opportunities to practice citizenship are often greatly reduced for people who are not citizens of a nation-state, for example immigrants, and
for young people below the legal age. These young people are excluded from certain rights and responsibilities, such as voting in elections, and are sometimes referred to as ‘not yet citizens’ or ‘citizens-in-waiting’ (Biesta, 2011, p. 13).

The goal of citizenship education for young people is to foster their capacity to participate in various aspects of civic and political life both as youths and adults; however, the goal should not be to foster certain kinds of good citizens (Biesta, 2011). Broadly speaking, it is important that ‘people are educated to engage in reflective thought and to contribute to collective action’ (Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004, p. 270). In this sense, participation includes reflecting on and discussing issues, as well as making changes in one’s own life or in some form reaching out to others to effect change. Thus, schools should prepare their students for citizenship, but it is also an elusive construct (Steiner-Khamsi, Torney-Purta, & Schwille, 2002). Although many scholars agree on the wider aims of citizenship education described above, several studies have focused on a narrower outcome, namely expected future participation, as the dependent variable (e.g., Reichert & Print, 2017). However, Wood (2012) found that young people’s liminal status before coming into voting age might lead to marginalisation and alienation from politics. We argue, therefore, that a concept of citizenship in an educational context needs to be meaningful for young people not yet eligible to vote. An important aspect of citizenship or social studies education in this respect is to demonstrate and provide opportunities for students to experience how it is very possible to influence political processes through informal channels of participation, for example through social movements (Satell & Popovic, 2017). In this study, citizenship preparation is understood as how young people can use what they learn in social studies in everyday life, and how the subject challenges them to think, helps them understand the global and social world, makes them curious about the world around them, and prepares them to and makes them want to get engaged in society. In short, citizenship preparation in schools should facilitate students to cultivate interest and participate
in society (Keating & Janmaat, 2015). Because it is important to learn more about what
inspires young people to engage in social and political issues, students’ perceptions of
citizenship preparation in social studies is the dependent variable of the theoretical
framework. By examining these perceptions, we are able to access students’ perspectives in
and on the process of preparing for current and future citizenship.

3 Citizenship education in Norway

According to the most recent Eurydice report, Norway, the context for the present study, has a
combined cross-curricular and integrated approach to citizenship education in school
(Eurydice, 2017). In Norway, the core curriculum (The Norwegian Directorate for Education
and Training [UDIR], 2017) states that all school subjects should prepare students for
participation in society. This aim is clearly expressed through the inclusion of “democracy
and citizenship” as one of three new cross-curricular themes. However, the mandatory 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 (UDIR, 2016). Since social
studies is a mandatory subject from grade 1 in primary school (age 6) through grade 11 in
upper- secondary school (age 16–17), most Norwegian students study political issues and
democracy for 11 years before entering higher education or starting to work. In primary and
lower- secondary school, social studies comprises social science, history, and geography,
which may be considered an integrated approach to citizenship education. This study focuses
on students in upper- secondary school. In year 11 of general and year 12 of vocational
education, the subject is still called social studies, but consists only of topics from the social
sciences (political science, sociology and social anthropology, and some law and economics)
and is studied for three hours each week. The subject consists of five main areas of study: (1)
the Researcher; (2) the Individual, society and culture; (3) Work and commercial life; (4) Politics and democracy; and (5) International affairs. Although all these main areas deal with the relationship between individuals and society, ‘Politics and democracy’ is the area that is most directly focused on citizenship education. Politics and democracy learning outcomes in upper-secondary social studies focus on understanding political parties and institutions, opportunities for participation, pluralism and the rights of minorities, and challenges for democracy (UDIR, 2013). Desired outcomes also include central democratic skills, like discussing and analysing.

4 Citizenship education in school and the present study

To investigate possible antecedents of students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies, we present some previous research on citizenship education in schools, focusing on aspects of instruction and students’ engagement in politics.

The basic educational model is that teachers aim to influence students’ academic work by communicating learning objectives and expectations, explaining the subject content, and facilitating seatwork and group processes among peers (Hopmann, 2007). This study draws on instructional theory focusing on the learner as an active constructor of knowledge. Broadly speaking, this viewpoint implies that quality instruction facilitates learning experiences where the constructions students make as they try to make sense of their worlds are sensible ones (Resnick, 2017). The independent variables contribute to this underlying concept, as exploring and discussing ideas with peers is instrumental for students’ understanding of social and political concepts and processes (Torney-Purta, 1994). Existing research has shown that raising the quality of educators’ work can be instrumental in improving students’ goal achievement (Rockoff, 2004). A premise in this study is that high-quality teaching is
favourable for student learning, also when it comes to aspects of education for democratic citizenship.

Previous research has demonstrated that students’ interest in a subject is associated with their perceptions of it. For example, studies have shown that liking a subject is related to academic performance and confidence in learning (Winheller, Hattie, & Brown, 2013) and interest is related to enjoyment, effort, and learning (Wade, 2001). In addition, large-scale studies have documented significant effects of student enjoyment both on achievement (Kaarstein & Nilsen, 2016; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012) and students’ interest in continued engagement with the topics under study (Ainley & Ainley, 2011). Therefore, we expect that how well students like the subject, of which a substantial bulk is devoted to politics and democracy, is associated with their evaluation of how well the subject prepares them for democratic citizenship. The first hypothesis is as follows (H1):

1. There is a positive relationship between the level of students’ social studies enjoyment and their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

Many school subjects might contribute to citizenship education. However, subjects such as social studies in upper-secondary school have a clear responsibility for adolescents’ citizenship preparation within an often-mandatory syllabus (Eurydice, 2017). Therefore, teachers in social studies play a vital role in schools’ efforts to reach goals of citizenship preparation. We discern two important aspects of teaching which are of interest to our research endeavour: facilitating discussions on the topics of democracy and politics in social studies; and teachers’ instruction in social studies. First, an open classroom climate for discussion is associated with positive student outcomes, such as higher knowledge, more positive attitudes, and interest in civic and political issues (Barton & Avery, 2016; Schulz et al., 2017). Classroom discussions are therefore seen as an arena for practicing competencies
relevant for citizenship. According to Reichert (2014), such competencies include the ability
to analyse and judge political problems and incidents, and to formulate and advocate one’s
own opinions and convictions. Accordingly, social studies’ teachers are expected to carefully
facilitate and manage political discussions among classmates. Carefully facilitating
discussions includes avoiding manipulation, for example by consciously presenting skewed
information or assuming an authoritarian role in the classroom (Freire, 2014). This implies,
for example, for teachers not to impose their political preferences on their students. The
teachers’ task is to constructively channel disagreements between students, which is an
important feature of democracy (Leighton, 2012). Further, researchers have found that
discussion about topical aspects of politics and democracy to engage students in truly
challenging issues that matter to them contributes strongly to commitments to civic
participation (Kahne & Sporte, 2008); as a result, students in social studies education should
be given ample opportunities to voice opinions about political issues (Jahr, Hempel, & Heinz,
2016). From research on young people’s perceptions of democracy and politics, we know that
these concepts are often related to formal institutions, such as elections and government, but
also to ideas of shaping society and making a difference (e.g., Mathé, 2016, 2017; O’Toole,
2003; Sloam, 2007; White, Bruce, & Ritchie, 2000). As discussions of political issues are
important in social studies and citizenship education (Jahr et al., 2016; Kahne & Sporte,
2008), we formulate this hypothesis (H2) on facilitating discussion:

2. There is a positive relationship between discussing the topics of democracy and
politics in the classroom and students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in
social studies.

Second, according to Rowe (2007), teachers and teaching are important factors in students’
experiences of and outcomes in school. The quality of the teacher’s presentation and
facilitation of instructional content, including engaging students in instructional activities, is
arguably an important factor for students’ perceptions of the value of the subject (Fauth,
Decristan, Rieser, Klieme, & Büttner, 2014; Reimers, Ortega, Cardenas, Estrada, & Garza, 2014). For example, students’ perceptions of teaching quality have been linked to their subject-related interest (Fauth et al., 2014) and a study by Sohl and Arensmeier (2015) linked students’ report of engaged teaching to political efficacy. Another study reported that instructional factors have a significant effect on students’ reported quality of experience, and that the participants reported high levels of engagement in the subject of social studies (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). The quality of the teacher’s presentation and facilitation of instructional content, including engaging students in instructional activities, is arguably an important factor for students’ perceptions of the value of the subject (Fauth et al., 2014; Reimers et al., 2014). We deduce this hypothesis (H3):

3. There is a positive relationship between students’ perceptions of the teacher’s contribution in social studies and their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

Citizenship preparation does not only take place within the school setting, and many young people are engaged in different ways in civic and political issues (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013; Sloam, 2014). For example, young people increasingly use social media for political purposes, and they may act upon their political interests in social media. Although, as Keating and Melis (2017) discovered, this certainly does not apply to all young people. While social media might facilitate political discussions for some, these platforms may also constrain political debates (Ekström & Shehata, 2016; Mathé, 2017). Nonetheless, social media are important because formal political activities are only a part of young people’s political engagement (Keating & Melis, 2017). In other words, political engagement could be more broadly defined to include participation in informal, horizontal networks. Based on this previous research, we expect that students’ use of the Internet for political purposes is related to their perceptions of citizenship preparation (H4):
4. There is a positive relationship between students’ interest in online political communication and their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

Finally, previous research makes it reasonable to assume that family and friends are important for young people’s development of political interest and as role models for civic behaviour (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Quintelier, 2015). For example, Andolina et al. (2003) found that ‘young adults who grow up amid regular political discussions are much more involved in a host of activities’ (p. 277), and Quintelier (2015) concluded that students’ discussions with peers and family are much more important for political participation than school factors. Therefore, we formulate this final hypothesis (H5):

5. There is a positive relationship between students’ perceptions of the political interests of and discussions with friends and family and their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies.

To summarise, although previous research has shed light on many aspects of citizenship education and young people’s engagement, there are many mechanisms we do not yet understand (e.g., Keating & Melis, 2017). In this study, we investigate some in- and out-of-school factors that may influence young people’s civic and political interest, engagement, and perceptions of their education. Based on the research and hypotheses presented above, Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model of the present study.

![Image of theoretical model]

*Figure 1: Theoretical model*
5 Methods

5.1 Sample

This study represents the first effort conducted as part of a long-term research endeavour on citizenship preparation among young people today. Data were collected through a 111-item paper-and-pencil questionnaire distributed in person by one of the authors and a research assistant at 11 upper-secondary schools in Eastern Norway. To recruit participants, the heads of the social studies departments at 21 schools in the region were contacted and asked for access to a class of students in the mandatory social studies subject whose teacher would be willing to allow us to use a social studies lesson. We received positive responses from 11 teachers who granted us access to their social studies classrooms, and we ended up with a total of 264 students (43.7% boys and 56.3% girls) in 11 classes (one class at each school). No students declined to participate in the study. The students were 16 or 17 years old when completing the questionnaire. The schools represented in the sample were located in both urban and rural areas in three different municipal counties, and the schools reported having students from mixed to high socio-economic status backgrounds.

5.2 Research ethics

We applied a set of ethical standards required by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (2016). First, the study’s participants were fully informed of the project’s aims and scope. Second, informed consent was obtained from each participant. In addition, the students were informed that they could pass on ticking the boxes in the questionnaire or withdraw from the study at any time. Third, the participants’ privacy and confidentiality were assured since no personal or identifiable information was collected. The code key for the names of the schools was stored in a separate document. All contact
prior to data collection happened only between one of the authors and the contact person at each school. As a result, the respondents were assured that their anonymity was guaranteed.

5.3 Measures

A lack of adequate measurements has plagued those who have sought to study antecedents of schools’ citizenship preparation. Therefore, by using professional standards of multi-item constructs (Haladyna & Rodriguez, 2013), this reported instrumentation is the first phase of a long-term research endeavour to measure perceptions of democracy and politics; perceptions of social studies; leisure time; and background questions. The variables (i.e., citizenship preparation in social studies, enjoying social studies, discussing democracy and politics, teacher contribution, online political communication, and political interest among family and friends) are indices based on 2–6 items developed on the basis of previous theoretical and empirical materials presented above (sections 2 and 4). All the included measures in this paper were scored on a 7-point Likert scale, on which 4 was a neutral value. Therefore, all the variables are assumed to be on an approximate interval level.

Citizenship preparation in social studies is aimed at measuring how students perceive the value of social studies in preparing them for democratic citizenship. We adapted three items from the measure developed by Tuan, Chin, and Shieh (2005) directed at science education. We created the three remaining items to tap into central aspects of social studies and citizenship education (sample item: Social studies helps me understand the world around me).

Enjoying social studies aims at measuring the degree to which students enjoy social studies lessons. The variable consists of three items focusing on learning activities in the subject (sample item: I very much enjoy participating in discussions in social studies).
Discussing democracy and politics was included due to the centrality of the concepts of democracy and politics in social studies and education for democratic citizenship. While the open classroom climate variable in the ICCS study measures how often certain things occur during discussions of politics and civic issues, our variable aims at measuring how frequently students report actually discussing the topics of democracy and politics in social studies lessons. Discussing democracy and politics is made up of two items (sample item: We often discuss the topic politics in social studies). In hindsight, we acknowledge that this measure could have been developed further to include broader and more nuanced conceptions of democracy and politics.

Teacher contribution is aimed at measuring students’ perceptions of aspects of the teaching practices in social studies. The six items focus on the teacher’s demonstration of passion for the subject, quality of explanations, and on the inclusion of multiple perspectives (sample item: The social studies teacher is very good at explaining complex concepts).

Online political communication aims to measure aspects of students’ politics-related communication online, with a focus on political discussions. The variable consists of three items (sample item: I like participating in political discussion online).

Political interest of family and friends is aimed at measuring how students perceive the political interest of their family and friends, and to what extent they participate in political discussions with these two groups. The variable consists of four items (sample item: I often discuss political issues with my friends).

The instrument, which was entirely in Norwegian, was piloted and discussed with a group of twenty 16-year-old students in social studies, which resulted in some changes to wording. The constructs and items can be found in the appendices. The items were written in Norwegian and later translated to English for this article. Table 1 presents bivariate correlations,
descriptive statistics, and Cronbach’s alpha (α) for each construct. The reliabilities are quite satisfactory.

5.4 Analyses

Initially, descriptive item statistics were explored using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences [SPSS]. The item scores were approximately normally distributed in all variables. Then, dimensionalities were cross-checked using exploratory factor analysis, which resulted in the deletion of some items due to their poor psychometric properties. The items in each variable emerged in the same factor in the exploratory factor analyses (see Appendix 1). The items included in the construct citizenship preparation in social studies were found to account for 60.1% of the variance, the items in enjoying social studies for 70.8%, the items in discussing democracy and politics for 83.4%, the items in teacher contribution for 58.4%, the items in online political communication for 64.5%, and, finally, the items in political interest of family and friends accounted for 63.1% of the variance.

The hypothesised model (Figure 1) was tested using two linear multiple regression analyses in SPSS. The assessment of the regression models is based on the adjusted $R^2$. The adjusted $R^2$ is a modified version of the fraction of the sample variance of the dependent variable that is explained by the regressors. The dependent variable is the variable to be explained in the regression analysis. We conducted two ordinary least squares regressions to analyse the relationships between the variables. The first analysis was based on a parsimonious model (Model 1), while the second analysis was based on an extended model (Model 2). The aim of the analyses was to confirm or reject the study’s five hypotheses concerning the strength and significance of the relationships between the independent and the dependent variables.
5.5 Reliability and validity

We used Cronbach’s alpha, which captures the breadth of the construct, to assess the indicators’ measurement reliability for each of the scales (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The measures of alphas are satisfactory (see Appendix 1). Cronbach’s alpha is influenced by the number of items in a test and satisfactory level of reliability depends on how a measure is used (Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013). Our variable discussing democracy and politics consists of only two distinct items, and the high factor loadings indicate that the items measure almost the same thing, i.e. that students seem to respond very similarly to the two items. However, because we believe they are substantially interesting, we have kept both items. Although we acknowledge the need to develop further the instrument discussing democracy and politics, we consider these two indicators’ measurement reliability acceptable at this stage of research.

Internal validity concerns the issue of causation. Although the relationships within the theoretical models were theory-generated, suggesting that the estimated regression coefficients may reveal causal relationships, the identified causal directions may be ambiguous because this study offers only a snapshot of empirical associations. Longitudinal designs or experimental approaches are needed to enable researchers to draw strong causal inferences. Regarding external validity, we make no claims regarding generalisability. We do not suspect selectivity bias to be a clear validity threat because no students refused to participate in our investigation. However, we cannot be sure that the sample is representative of 16- to 17-year-old students in Norway. Except for a small group of four students, all the participants were recruited from the general study programme. A larger sample might improve the validity of the statistical conclusions (Cook & Campbell, 1979), and so might adding control variables such as gender and socio-economic status. In sum, we acknowledge these shortcomings and argue that they can serve as the foundation for future research.
6 Results

This section presents descriptive statistics for the variables and the results of the regression analyses.

6.1 Preliminary analyses

Distribution percentages show that the students in this sample to a large extent evaluated the role of social studies very positively when it came to preparing them for engagement and participation in society (see Appendix 2). Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and Cronbach’s alpha for each construct, as well as the bivariate correlations between the variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities and bivariate correlations.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Citizenship preparation</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Enjoying social studies</td>
<td>.558**</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Discussing democracy and politics</td>
<td>.348**</td>
<td>.348**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Teacher contribution</td>
<td>.450**</td>
<td>.560**</td>
<td>.512**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Online political communication</td>
<td>.264**</td>
<td>.276**</td>
<td>.117</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Political interest of family, friends</td>
<td>.242**</td>
<td>.290**</td>
<td>.287**</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.512**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>.852†</td>
<td>.771†</td>
<td>.801†</td>
<td>.856†</td>
<td>.720†</td>
<td>.805†</td>
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<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>4.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>.998</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.42</td>
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Note: ** p < .01, † Cronbach's α

Most notable is the high correlation between enjoying social studies on the one hand and teacher contribution and citizenship preparation in social studies on the other. Second, Table 1 shows that students’ online political communication is highly correlated with their perception of the political interest of and discussions with family and friends, suggesting that the two variables may be associated and that there may be an underlying, mediating variable accounting for some of the correlation. Third, it is also worth noting that the variables not
directly pertaining to social studies lessons (online political communication and political interest of family and friends) are only weakly to moderately related to the variables pertaining to social studies.

6.2 Results of hypothesis testing

Table 2 presents the unstandardized (B) and the standardised (β) beta coefficients, as well as the standard error for the B, from the ordinary least squares regressions of the parsimonious and the extended model with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies as a dependent variable. These estimators minimise the sum of squared residuals. The analyses indicate that enjoying social studies is the most important predictor of students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. We also found that discussing democracy and politics, teacher contribution, and online political communication are significantly associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. Table 2 presents the results of the regression analyses.

Table 2. Summary of regression analyses for variables predicting students’ perceptions of ‘citizenship preparation in social studies’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Enjoying social studies</td>
<td>0.396</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>0.395***</td>
<td>0.390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Disc. democracy and politics</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>0.118***</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Teacher contribution</td>
<td>0.156</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.156*</td>
<td>0.162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Online political communication</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.120*</td>
<td>0.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Political interest of family, friends</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.354</td>
<td></td>
<td>.352</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05 ** p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 2 shows that hypotheses 1–4 are supported in Model 1. Adding the independent variable political interest of family and friends to the regression model (Model 2) slightly reduces the strength of the associations between variables 1, 2, and 4 and citizenship preparation in social studies, while the association between teacher contribution and the
The variable political interest of friends and family is not found significantly associated with the dependent variable, and hypothesis 5 is consequently rejected.

The results of the regression analyses nuance the pattern found in the correlations between the variables, notably in support of hypothesis 4, indicating that there is a moderate association between students’ political communication online and their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. We tested the regression models for multicollinearity but found no indication of multicollinearity being a problem in the analyses (Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values under 2). The findings reported in Table 2 are discussed in light of previous research in the following section.

7 Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the antecedents of 16- to 17-year-old students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. This research purpose is important because social studies contributes to citizenship education.

First, as expected, we found a strong, positive relation between students’ reported enjoyment of social studies lessons and their perception of the subject’s contribution to citizenship preparation. It is not surprising that students who are able to work with and discuss issues that are perceived as relevant to them and who experience a classroom climate that allows for such discussions also see the value of the subject in helping them making sense of these issues and in preparing them to participate in society. Students who score lower on enjoying social studies to a lesser extent report seeing this value in the subject. In this case the subject may function to strengthen already existing motivations for civic participation but fail to reach out
to students who for various reasons do not look forward to social studies lessons and discussions. We would, however, like to point out that this does not necessarily reflect a permanent situation: There are, arguably, steps that can be taken on policy, school, and classroom levels to include and inspire students who dislike or feel left out of social studies. Between the elusiveness of the concept of citizenship education and the changing nature of the political landscape, it seems like students’ interests in socially and politically topical issues can provide a footing for citizenship preparation in school. Because allowing space for different voices and experiences are essential features of citizenship education (Leighton, 2012), future research could, for example, investigate the importance of student–teacher relations for students’ sense of belonging in and contributing to the social studies classroom community.

The degree to which students reported discussing democracy and politics frequently in social studies was only modestly related to the dependent variable. Students’ interpretation of the questions asked may influence their responses. And, as Wilen (2004) has pointed out, researchers might categorise social studies discussions differently than students (and many teachers) do. Since classroom opportunities with an explicitly civic dimension have been found to develop students’ civic identity (Kahne & Sporte, 2008), a more comprehensive and valid measure might provide different results. If students perceive of democracy and politics in a narrow sense (Mathé, 2016; Munck, 2014), simply equating these concepts with government and elections, discussions of this sort may be perceived as less inspirational and useful, and hence not be strongly associated with perceptions of citizenship preparation. Another interpretation could be that there simply are other factors that matter more, and that it is not the frequency of discussions, but rather the perceived quality and relevance of these that influence students’ perception of the value of social studies in preparing for active
membership in society (Wilen, 2004). We acknowledge that our instrument is not adequate for tapping into this latent variable. This shortcoming is surely an avenue for further research.

Third, we found that the teacher contribution was moderately and significantly associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. If this association reflects causal processes, this finding might underpin our beliefs in the importance of quality instruction in social studies. For example, presenting and discussing different perspectives are arguably the kinds of activities that contribute to critical thinking and analytical skills (Eurydice, 2017) and reflective thought (Olssen et al., 2004). Conversely, some previous research has found that more general academic support, such as perceived teacher support, did not appear to be an important factor in fostering civic outcomes (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). It seems key, therefore, to encourage teachers to incorporate civic practices in everyday instructional activities. The teacher contribution construct is quite broadly defined in this study, and the items tap into different aspects of quality teaching in social studies. A further development could be to discern distinct aspects of social studies teaching, such as teacher explanation, instructional presentation, and classroom management to involve all students in discussions better to understand the mechanisms of high-quality teaching and learning processes in the subject. This endeavour could go in tandem with qualitative approaches, such as observations of teaching sessions, to better understand the fine-grained mechanisms of teaching and learning. Therefore, the next phase of instrument development could tap into more nuanced aspects.

The fourth independent variable in the parsimonious model, online political communication, was also found to be moderately related to students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. This out-of-school construct is an indication of students’ interest in using the Internet to communicate about political issues. The fact that this is only somewhat related to the perceived value of social studies could indicate that it is not the students’ interest in
politics that influences whether they consider social studies as valuable in preparing them for civic participation. One explanation for this may be that social media might strengthen the engagement of young people who are already interested, but are less apt to appeal to those who only consume the political news that pops up in their Facebook feed (Ekström & Shehata, 2016; Keating & Melis, 2017). If so, this could mean that social studies in this context is successful in reaching out to a broader student group. This is also interesting when compared to the stronger impact of *enjoying social studies* because it could give reason to believe that enjoying the subject is more important than political interest, which we would argue could be seen as a positive finding. The students in this sample overall reported higher scores for enjoying the subject than for enjoying engaging with politics online. This could be an argument for the importance of social studies in including and engaging more students than those who report being interested in civic and political life, although the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow for causal inferences.

Finally, peer and parental influence is generally thought to be an important feature of young people’s development of academic and political interests (Andolina et al., 2003; Jennings et al., 2009; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Interestingly, the association between the students’ perceptions of the political interests of and discussions with friends and family and perceptions of citizenship preparation was not found substantial or significant. This unusual finding is, however, in line with Jennings et al.’s (2009) finding that youth political interest could not be predicted by the interest of their parents, even when parent attributes were important factors for other aspects of political socialisation. Although we recognise that this finding could to some extent be caused by weaknesses in the instrument, we believe it strengthens the above findings of the salience of variables pertaining to social studies in relation to the dependent variable. That is, there is reason to argue that the social and
academic setting in the classroom can be important for the development of students’ engagement.

A secondary purpose of this study was to develop adequate measures of citizenship preparation as well as perceptions of social studies, quality aspects of social studies teaching, and out-of-school factors. We acknowledge that we have a way to go to better measure these aspects. What stands out most from our results is the strong association between students’ enjoyment of social studies and their perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. Students’ enjoyment of social studies lessons has the potential to affect their motivation and persistence to study civics. This finding should be validated in contexts where students might not be as motivated to study social studies. The factor loadings of the enjoyment of social studies construct are quite satisfactory (see Appendix 1), but the measure should be developed further and explore broader aspects. An interesting question is: How is enjoyment of social studies lessons related to motivation constructs and volition constructs? This is surely an avenue for further research. As Rapoport (1959) suggested, ‘if the fundamentals have been captured, the work has started and can go on. Variables can be added, relations modified, and results interpreted in other contexts’ (p. 371). In the next phase of our research endeavour, we will add more nuances of students’ preferences and beliefs relevant for social studies, as well as background variables such as gender and socio-economic status, into our research model. Including multi-stage analysis to address contextual factors is also an avenue for future research.

8 Implications for instructional practice

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 show that the students participating in this study to a large extent saw social studies as valuable in terms of preparing and motivating
them for participation in society. To build on the importance of students’ interests and enjoyment of social studies lessons, we consider some implications for instructional practice.

To various degrees, teaching is focused on and constrained by the curriculum. Therefore, the freedom teachers enjoy in choosing the aims and content of their instruction will vary from country to country. In this study, students’ enjoyment of the subject was the most important antecedent of their perceptions of citizenship preparation. This could indicate that focusing on students’ interests in civic and political issues, for example through incorporating big questions and current events, has positive implications for their perceived value of the subject when it comes to preparing them for civic and political engagement. Second, the importance of the teacher’s contribution via quality explanations, incorporation of different perspectives, and passion for the subject suggests that quality teaching is associated with the success of the subject in preparing and engaging students. We argue that social studies or similar subjects, if incorporating explicitly civics-related activities (Kahne & Sporte, 2008), can play an important role in democratic citizenship education. Finally, while the students in this sample only moderately reported liking engaging in online political communication, the analyses indicate that using social media to allow students to communicate about politics could be one way to engage students in the political, for example through discussion groups or the opportunity to create groups and campaigns for issues they care about. We note, however, that not even social media can inspire all young people to engage in consuming political information or producing political content (Ekström & Shehata, 2016; Keating & Melis, 2017). According to Biesta (2011), engagement in democratic politics is ‘a process in which new political identities and subjectivities come into existence’ (p. 151). Although social studies and citizenship education concern more than democracy and politics, contributing to students’ various ‘modes of political engagement’ (Ekström & Shehata, 2016) is certainly at the core of the subject.
9 Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to our understanding of factors influencing students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. However, the study showed that it was somewhat difficult to measure adequately the antecedents of citizenship preparation in social studies. Previous studies have provided an empirical basis for suggesting that both school-inherent factors and external factors are important for young peoples’ political competencies. However, citizenship preparation in schools can be considered a precondition for involvement in politics (Galston, 2001). Therefore, students’ attitudes towards social studies are of the utmost importance. Enjoyment in social studies lessons, as studied in this investigation, is only one aspect of favourable conditions for school learning. More research is needed on students’ motivation, volitional processes, and experiences of the teaching of social studies. We have also shown that teachers’ instruction is associated with students’ perceptions of citizenship preparation in social studies. In other words, we conclude that the school subject social studies can have valuable contributions to citizenship education.
10 References


doi:10.1177/1461444816670325


## Appendix 1

### Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizenship preparation in social studies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. I think social studies is important because I can use what I learn in everyday life</td>
<td>.741</td>
<td>.852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55. I think social studies is important because it challenges me to think</td>
<td>.771</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57. Social studies helps me understand the world around me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58. Social studies makes me curious about the world around me</td>
<td>.794</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59. Social studies prepares students to participate actively in society</td>
<td>.804</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60. Social studies makes me want to get engaged in society</td>
<td>.727</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.770</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enjoying social studies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. I very much look forward to every social studies lesson</td>
<td>.809</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. I very much enjoy participating in discussions in social studies</td>
<td>.746</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. I enjoy most of the work in social studies lessons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.871</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussing democracy and politics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. We often discuss the topic democracy in social studies</td>
<td>.913</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. We often discuss the topic politics in social studies</td>
<td>.913</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher contribution</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.856</td>
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<td>34. My social studies teacher usually shows a lot of passion for the subject</td>
<td>.749</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. My social studies teacher presents several views on an issue in his/her explanations</td>
<td>.775</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. When the social studies teacher has gone through the teaching materials, I understand much more than I did before</td>
<td>.781</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>42. The social studies teacher is very good at explaining complex concepts</td>
<td>.847</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. The social studies teacher is very concerned with students really understanding the concepts</td>
<td>.719</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. In social studies we often discuss different ways of understanding a concept</td>
<td>.673</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online political communication</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.720</td>
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<tr>
<td>91. I like reading blogs with political content</td>
<td>.807</td>
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<td>92. I like participating in political discussions online</td>
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<td>93. I like reading political discussions online</td>
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<td><strong>Political interest of family and friends</strong></td>
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<td>.805</td>
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<tr>
<td>87. I often discuss political issues with my family</td>
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<td>88. My parents encourage me to pay attention to politics</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89. I have several friends who are very interested in politics</td>
<td>.763</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90. I often discuss political issues with my friends</td>
<td>.814</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 2

#### Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Mean values</th>
<th>Std.dev</th>
<th>Skewness/kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizenship preparation in social studies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. I think social studies is important because I can use what I learn in everyday life</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>1.287</td>
<td>-0.480/-0.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55. I think social studies is important because it challenges me to think</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>1.165</td>
<td>-0.232/-0.113</td>
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<tr>
<td>57. Social studies helps me understand the world around me</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>1.184</td>
<td>-0.645/-0.073</td>
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<tr>
<td>58. Social studies makes me curious about the world around me</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>1.333</td>
<td>-0.652/-0.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59. Social studies prepares students to participate actively in society</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>1.320</td>
<td>-0.745/-0.736</td>
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<tr>
<td>60. Social studies makes me want to get engaged in society</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>1.479</td>
<td>-0.335/-0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enjoying social studies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. I very much look forward to every social studies lesson</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.450</td>
<td>-0.245/-0.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. I very much enjoy participating in discussions in social studies</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>1.783</td>
<td>-0.662/-0.510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. I enjoy most of the work in social studies lessons</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>1.384</td>
<td>-0.463/-0.230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussing democracy and politics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. We often discuss the topic democracy in social studies</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>1.258</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. We often discuss the topic politics in social studies</td>
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<td>1.288</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher contribution</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. My social studies teacher usually shows a lot of passion for the subject</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>1.393</td>
<td>-0.835/-0.664</td>
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<td>37. My social studies teacher presents several views on an issue in his/her explanations</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>1.433</td>
<td>-0.577/-0.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. When the social studies teacher has gone through the teaching materials, I understand much more than I did before</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.515</td>
<td>-0.656/-0.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. The social studies teacher is very good at explaining complex concepts</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>1.558</td>
<td>-0.403/-0.270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. The social studies teacher is very concerned with students really understanding the concepts</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>1.375</td>
<td>-0.579/-0.092</td>
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<tr>
<td>47. In social studies we often discuss different ways of understanding a concept</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>1.582</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Online political communication</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>91. I like reading blogs with political content</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.642</td>
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<td><strong>Political interest of family and friends</strong></td>
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<td>87. I often discuss political issues with my family</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>1.807</td>
<td>-0.280/-0.763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88. My parents encourage me to pay attention to politics</td>
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<td>1.860</td>
<td>-0.189/-0.846</td>
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<tr>
<td>89. I have several friends who are very interested in politics</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.662</td>
<td>0.034/-0.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90. I often discuss political issues with my friends</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>1.834</td>
<td>0.060/-0.992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Adjusted $R^2$ is a better measure than $R^2$ because adjusted $R^2$ does not necessarily increase when a new regressor is included.
Errata

p. iv. Minor changes in Acknowledgements

p. x. Article III. Reference changed from ‘in press’ to published, including publication details. The article was published in November 2018, while this thesis was under evaluation.

p. 3. Reference changed from ‘Avery, 2013’ to ‘Avery, Levy, Simmons, & Scarlett, 2012’. In later mentions of this reference, I have altered the text to ‘Avery et al., 2012’.

p. 6. Article III. Reference changed from ‘in press’ to published, including publication details. In the following paragraph, the words ‘or in press’ have been deleted from line 3.

p.6. 3rd paragraph, line 1: ‘Faculty of Education’ was changed to ‘Faculty of Educational Sciences’.

p. 10. 3rd paragraph, line 4: ‘students’ commitment to political participation, political efficacy’ was changed to ‘students’ political efficacy and commitment to political participation’.

p.17. 4th paragraph, line 3. ‘investigating the role citizenship education’ was changed to ‘investigating the role of citizenship education’.

p.32. 2nd paragraph, line 5. The word ‘developed’ appeared twice. ‘I developed this design developed when the first phase’ was changed to ‘I developed this design when the first phase’.

p.40. 1st paragraph, final line. ‘independent and the dependent variables’ was changed to ‘the independent and dependent variables’.

p.45. Final paragraph, line 2: ‘the three conditions’ was changed to ‘there are three conditions’.

p.48. Line 1: ‘analysis phases’ was changed to ‘analyses’.

p. 50. Deleted: ‘At the time of submitting this thesis, Articles I and II have been published, while Article III is in press.’

p. 51. 2nd paragraph, line 12: the word ‘including’ was changed to ‘included’.

p. 53. Article III. Reference changed from ‘in press’ to published, including publication details.

p. 57. 2nd paragraph, line 9. ‘While in part associating ‘politics’ to politicians and government’ was changed to ‘While in part associating ‘politics’ with politicians and government’.

p. 64 – 65. In Table 6.1, + and – symbols were adjusted in the first column. Full stops were added to the text in the second column.

p.68: The reference to Avery, P. G. (2013) was changed to:

The change made to this reference affected the length of the reference list. In the final printed version of the thesis, Appendix A starts on p. 83 instead of p. 81 as in the version submitted for evaluation. The table of contents has been updated.

p. 137. A footnote was added: ‘This article was published in *JSSE - Journal of Social Science Education* in November 2018, while this thesis was under evaluation’ (p. 139 in the final printed version).