Abstract:

In most countries, social studies is the assigned subject responsible for political education. Schools’ overall assignment can be defined using Gert Biesta’s three concepts of the functions of education: socialisation, qualification and subjectification. Firstly, schools have a role in socialising students into society, passing on values and knowledge. Secondly, the school system should contribute to students’ qualification as citizens, helping them advancing their civic and critical literacy. Thirdly, education should give students’ the possibility to be independent individuals. The functions, or dimensions, are separate, but meet in all kinds of education and generally aim at societal participation. In the intersections between the dimensions friction arises and teachers are faced with several educational challenges. One example is the meeting between legitimising perspectives and critical thinking; teachers should both uphold democratic values and trust of political institutions as well as allowing students to critically review them. Thus, there is a tension in allowing students to “be citizens” as well as qualifying them, thus seeing them as “citizens to be”. This paper theoretically examines how Biesta’s educational functions relate to social studies teaching and what challenges this poses for social studies teachers.

Key words: Social studies, socialisation, qualification, subjectification, Biesta, citizenship education
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Introduction

Two of the most highlighted official tasks of schools in liberal democracies are to advance students’ knowledge and abilities in specific school subjects and to prepare them for life as citizens. In this paper, the preparation for life in society is referred to as *citizenship education*. The concept involves attitudes, experiences, knowledge, abilities and skills that students need in order to be active participants in a democratic society (Campbell 2012:1). Historically and presently, the most salient subject in schools aiming at citizenship in western liberal democracies is social studies: a school subject comprised of different disciplines such as history and various social sciences. The common core is human activity in past and present societies and students are taught to inquire social issues and to consider the role of values in these issues (Barton 2011). The advancement of students’ subject matter knowledge and its connection to citizenship education is often implicitly and explicitly formulated in curricula and teachers seem to struggle in connecting the two (Sandahl 2013, 2015).

Furthermore, research suggests that school seem to matter less than other factors in advancing the preferred attitudes, experiences, knowledge, abilities and skills that students need as citizens. Several studies conducted, both Swedish and international with different methodologies, have come to the same conclusion: schools’ impact is small compared to other variables such as socio-economic factors (Ekman & Zetterberg 2011, Torney-Purta 2002, Broman 2009). However, there is a common denominator in most studies: a pre-set idea regarding what a democratic citizen is, including values, virtues, knowledge and skills, where students’ statements and ideas are fit into theoretical understandings of democracy (Olson 2012a & 2012b, Cf. Biesta 2006:124). There are many lessons to learn from these studies of adolescents’ democratic thoughts and behaviours, but also a need to highlight that teaching and learning in school might be a little more complex and that the outcomes might not always be easy to fit into fixed surveys. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that it is time for researchers in political sociology to not just study the outcomes of schools, but also to take on the challenge of contributing in developing a better citizenship education.

In order to do so, schools’ civic education must be studied in all its complexity. In pursuance of the complex reality of teaching and the challenges that face social studies teachers, the educational dimensions of Gert Biesta (2006, 2010, 2012) – *socialisation, qualification and subjectification* – are used in the paper to discuss the case of social studies education. The paper argues that the combination of these dimensions in social studies education need to be considered when we discuss its role in citizenship education. Furthermore, the dimensions present teachers and students with certain dilemmas, such as legitimising society with its political institutions while at the same time advancing students’ critical thinking and encouraging political stances. The primary purpose of this paper is to outline and introduce a different way of understanding the role of social studies in school and what challenges this new understanding poses for teaching citizenship in school.

Citizenship education, social studies and the problem with schools

Citizenship education is often formulated as a cross-curricula assignment, but certain subjects are highlighted as specifically important in students’ preparation for citizenship (Bahous, Nabhani & Rabo 2013, Cf. Sandahl 2015). From an international
perspective these subjects vary in terminology but are here referred to as social studies. The components of social studies are not fixed – rather it can be seen as an umbrella term: in Europe and Asia social studies is often separated from history where it refers to subjects such as human geography, political science, sociology and economics. In the United States and Canada, history is included (Barton 2012, Parker 2010). Nonetheless, social studies include subjects that focus on human activity in society and students are taught to inquire social issues and to consider the role of values in these issues (Barton 2011). Each disciplinary approach within social studies focus on certain specific content related issues and aspects but the common denominator is human life and human decision making in the past, present and future. In history education, historical consciousness and historical agency has been emphasised as important concepts that link the past to students’ contemporary and future citizenship (Ahonen 2005, Barton 2012). In geography education, sustainable development has become a key concept in linking geographical knowledge to present and future challenges for mankind (Bardsley 2004) and in civics-related subjects contemporary political, social and economical issues are at the centre of attention. Civics is often highlighted as the most important theme in terms of citizenship education in its role to discuss topical events (Parker 2010, Campbell 2012, Hess & McAvoy 2015). To conclude: social studies is a wide and pluralistic term but it focuses on topics related to democracy, citizenship, human rights, socialisation, marginalisation and societal changes and challenges (Solhaug 2013, Barton 2011).

The overall concern with schools and its citizenship assignment, cross-curricula formulated or not, is that schools seem to fail in its role in creating the citizens of tomorrow. In political science, researchers such as Joakim Ekman (2013, Cf. Dalton 2004), have described the problem in terms of young peoples’ decreased engagement and knowledge in politics and several studies have come to the conclusion that schools’ impact is small compared to socio-economic variables (Ekman & Zetterberg 2011, Torney-Purta 2002, Broman 2009). Evidence for this development is mainly based on the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), a study conducted periodically in several democratic countries. The results have raised some concerns about schools and its students, but also criticism from different perspectives. One critique has pointed out that engagement does not only mean political participation but might take the form of a “stand-by-mode” to participation. In fact, many of the disengaged students in the study can be considered attentive citizens that are not politically active in a traditional way, but politically enlightened and self-confident. If they were triggered by some societal event, they could go from stand-by to active (Amnå & Ekman 2014). Researchers in educational sociology have raised a more radical critique: the ICCS put too much emphasis on detailed and predetermined imaginations on what it means to be knowledgeable and engaged. The argument is that a fixed idea on what is a “good democrat” easily leads to disappointment because ideals are hard to find in reality and students’ statements and ideas are fit into theoretical understandings of democracy (Biesta 2006, 2010, 2012, Cf. Olson 2012a & 2012b). Furthermore, the focus on knowledge, skills and attitudes only put emphasis on two specific functions in the educational system: the qualificiation of students’ knowledge/skills as democratic citizens and the mediation of preferred democratic values and attitudes. What is left out are students’ own meaning-making and their process of becoming emancipated citizens (Biesta 2012).
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Education as socialisation, qualification and subjectification
In order to discuss social studies and its role in citizenship education, we can use Gert Biesta’s work on the functions of education. Biesta (2006, 2010, 2012) describes the function of education as three separate dimensions. Firstly, education has a role in students’ socialisation into society, passing on social, political and cultural values and behaviours aimed at preserving society. Historically, socialisation has been one of schools’ most important assignments in fostering citizens of the nation state. Secondly, education contributes to students’ qualification: advancing students’ knowledge, skills and abilities for students’ life in various arenas: the labour market, further studies and as citizens. This assignment is perhaps the most underlined assignment in contemporary schools. Thirdly, education has a role to play in students’ subjectification. Biesta uses the term subjectification (derived from the German word subjektivität) but stressed that it is a “bit of a struggle to find the right concept” in English (Biesta 2012:13). The meaning of Biesta’s concept is about the emancipation of students as humans and about providing them with agency as citizens. The functions can be illustrated as in figure 1:

![Figure 1: Biesta’s (2012:14) three functions of Education](image)

The dimensions are separate, but should be seen as an entity describing the functions of education and the dimensions are important when we discuss education and its role in various perspectives, especially the purpose of education:

To engage with the question of purpose in education, so I wish to suggest, requires that we engage with this question in relation to all three domains. It requires that we think about what we aim to achieve in relation to qualification, socialisation and subjectification. (Biesta 2012:14)

Between the dimensions there are tensions, such as between preserving values while these values are being critically reviewed. Biesta describes education in general, but the model can be used to understand the specific role and challenges of social studies in relation to citizenship education (Biesta 2012). For Biesta, subjectification is the most important part: a dimension that school systems in general have insufficiently emphasised. Education should take students seriously, allowing their values to matter and not always deciding in advance what the answers are. This does not mean that students should only give their own opinions in societal affairs but rather meet others’ opinions and experience resistance towards their own worldviews. Becoming an emancipated individual is not just an individual process, as it requires plurality and difference. In this sense, the most important task of teachers in relation to
subjectification is to allow students to express themselves and experience resistance from others. If education only gives the “correct” answers, and does not allow students to express themselves, it is all about qualifying and socialising for an existing societal order. However, this does not mean that qualification and socialisation is unimportant (Biesta 2010, 2012). On the contrary, the knowledge and abilities that schools are meant to advance can also be significant contributions to students’ citizenship education.

Social studies through the lens of the three dimensions

Socialisation is typically formulated in the overall curriculum and contains the values and behaviours that schools are meant to foster. However, within social studies education there are specific features that include imaginations of past and present societies – what Benedict Anderson (1983) called “imagined community”: a sort of uncontested facts describing who we are in specific national contexts. Even though this imagined community is (hopefully) not about fostering the next generation for sacrifices like war, it functions as societal glue that makes citizens willing to contribute to the welfare of their nations. A social studies education focusing on socialisation would mainly mediate preferred knowledge and values of the existing society and could take the form of a historical/societal canon telling the story of the nation and legitimising the institutions of the state (Cf. Børhaug & Christopherson 2012). In liberal democracies, it could also involve the mediation of preferred value systems such as human rights. Socialisation does not necessarily mean a blind faith in existing orders but could in fact aim at fostering students to become rational individuals being able to take a stand in political issues (Englund 1986). However, a social studies education solely aiming at socialisation gives little or no room for criticism and negotiations about existing value systems.

Qualification in social studies has to do with knowledge of our societies and could take form of a core content or powerful understandings produced within the disciplines. However, this knowledge is not just limited to propositional or factual knowledge about our past or contemporary society, but has to do with procedural knowledge within the disciplines: how professionals go about when they “do” their work (Barton & Levstik 2004, Cf. Kincheloe 2001, Cf. Donovan & Bransford 2005:1-2). Thus, in addition to facts and content matter, there are disciplinary and procedural tools that help historians, political scientists and geographers organise, analyse, interpret and critically review their specific domains. Especially within history education researchers have conceptualised these tacit procedural second-order concepts that historians use but often do not reflect upon and some attempts have been made within social science education (Wineburg 1991, Seixas & Morton 2012, Cf. Sandahl 2015). The point of departure in this disciplinary approach is that the epistemological and procedural knowledge of the academic disciplines can help students become critical thinkers and thus qualify their participation in societal affairs. A social studies education focusing on qualification would emphasise a disciplinary understanding of our societies and would distinguish from the “single story” given in the socialisation example above in its focus on analysis and interpretation (Seixas 2000). Qualification does not unavoidably mean that social studies become a mini version of the disciplines; it could be seen as advancing students’ knowledge that can be used to arrive at reasonable and informed opinions about societal issues. However, a social studies education solely aiming at qualification gives precedence to
discursive interpretations rather than students’ normative stances and deliberate discussions.

Subjectification in social studies education typically involves political debate over controversial and unsolved societal issues. School can be seen as an institution that offers a unique arena for different perspectives: even if schools are segregated students would find more pluralistic perspectives at school than at home (Parker 2008, Hess 2009). Consequently, school is a perfect place for deliberative discussions where students can discuss issues and experience real ideas; a democracy in the making (Diana Hess 2008 & 2009, Cf. Englund 2000 & 2006). A social studies education focusing on subjectification would place students’ perspectives in the heart of classroom activities and teachers would principally function as moderators and facilitators of deliberative discussions where students have the opportunity to share and discuss societal issues. An important part of these discussions is the idea of plurality: that students realize that there are other ideas and worldviews than the ones they hold themselves. A pure teaching based on subjectification does not preclude teachers’ intervention when students’ ideas are based on misconceptions, but gives primacy to students’ own sense making of societal issues and risks equating opinions and facts (Cf. Lee 2005).

However, consistent to Biesta’s description, the dimensions constitute an entity and social studies education as solely socialisation, qualification or subjectification is neither desirable nor possible in teaching. For sure, teaching could emphasise certain aspects and play down others but would involve all three dimensions. Within social studies education research the three dimensions have been discussed, often with strong advocacy or criticism for one or the other. A lot of criticism has been aimed at schools’ socialising dimension and the curricula’s tendency to focus on preserving society and prevailing power structures (Englund 1986, Cf. Young 2008). In textbook research there is evidence that legitimizing aspects of society are more present than critical reviews (Børhaug & Christopherson 2012, Cf. Apple, Au & Ganding 2009). Advocates for qualifying aspects, or disciplinary thinking, highlight the possibilities of advancing students’ abilities to critically review through learning the epistemology of the disciplines – often in contrast to deliberation advocates (Lee 2005, Cf. Seixas 2001). However, within social studies education there has been a heated discussion about the disciplinary approach and its focus on “thinking like a scholar”. Tomas Englund (2000, 2006, Cf. Hess 2009) has advocated for deliberative teaching in opposition to a disciplinary approach and others have emphasised the importance of students’ engagement in meaning-making aspects of becoming a citizen and using knowledge for orientation, moral judgement and political action (Barton & Levstik 2004, Sandahl 2015, Barton 2009, Ahonen 2005).

Discussion

The main argument in this paper is that the function of education can be understood through three dimensions: socialisation, qualification and subjectification (Biesta 2006, 2010, 2012). The dimensions describe the overall function of education, but can also be used to understand how social studies could contribute in terms of citizenship education. Using the dimensions gives, in my view, tools to distinguish different aspects of citizenship education as well as discussing the overall assignment that we bestow on teachers. If Biesta (2012:14) is right in his conclusion that we need to
engage in all three dimensions when we speak of the purpose of education the advocacy for one or the other is not enough. We need to consider what we hope schools’ will achieve in relation to qualification, socialisation and subjectification. This question is not a new one and has been touched upon for decades in social studies educational research. Researchers like Walter C. Parker (2003, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, Cf. Kahne & Westheimer 2006) have shown evidence for better results in subject knowledge as well as for citizenship in the choice of authentic questions aimed at being a contributor to a better future. Furthermore, Fred Newmann (1987 & 1990) was an early advocate for using subject knowledge to qualify students’ thinking of such futures, and Keith Barton (2012) has in similar ways promoted history as a lesson in human agency. Thus, in the meeting between students’ perspectives, and the disciplinary perspectives, there is room for both qualification and subjectification. However, Biesta’s (2006, 2010, 2012) way of describing education raises a set of questions that we need to focus on in order to understand how teaching might help advance students’ knowledge, participation and agency.

Firstly, we need to better understand what happens in social studies classrooms in the friction between the dimensions. For instance, frictions arise between socialisation and qualification: when the critical reviewing of societal issues conflicts with the legitimising of democratic values and institutions (Cf. Apple, Au & Ganding 2009). If teaching focuses on the failings of the state such as miscarriages of justice, how does that affect young peoples’ perceptions of society and the legitimacy of the liberal democracy? Other frictions occur between qualification and subjectification: when disciplinary knowledge stands in glaring contrast to political worldviews. How much should these values and beliefs be critically reviewed through the disciplines and how much should teachers corner students when they insufficiently review an issue due to emotional investment? If teachers do corner students it is not unlikely that such experiences influence their view on freedom of speech and democracy. A third friction arises between subjectification and socialisation: when students’ own ideas are contrary to those of the liberal democracy. What happens when students question universal human rights or equality of the sexes? The point is not to list all of the possible frictions in this paper, merely to highlight that there are tensions in social studies teaching that might hold answers to young peoples’ behaviours and values in democratic issues (Cf. Olson 2012a, 2012b), especially in a subject that deals with highly controversial and problematic societal issues.

Secondly, we need to conceptualise what a balanced social studies education could and should look like in relation to the three dimensions. Paraphrasing Peter Seixas’ (2012) question on history education: What does it mean to teach students to think about our society, in a way that is appropriate for society, pedagogically sound, and true to the most current practices in the disciplines? The understanding of subject knowledge, for instance through disciplinary procedural knowledge, provides a key if the desire is to qualify students’ understanding of our society, in both past and present perspectives. In citizenship education terms, a connection between past, present and future can offer students a way to develop a deeper understanding of societies. However, it is important to underline that the subjects within social studies have different sets of tools for achieving an understanding of the world and its societies. Historical second-order concepts can only be a part of students’ qualification if they are used in a way that is based on historical reasoning. If teachers use history to make linear analogies between past and present, it might be convincing to students, but does not present
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them with the complexities of the past. The second-order concepts of social sciences, or civics, are distinctive from history in its focus on ideology and cultural differences and emphasise contemporary time (Sandahl 2015) and it is reasonable to presume that geographers have a similar set of second-order concepts. In citizenship education, all these sets of subject knowledge are needed in order to advance students’ ideas about societal issues.

Thirdly, we need to engage in the specific role of subjectification in teaching. The advancement of students’ ideas does not just relate to understanding the world as political scientists or historians, but also to empower students with political will to participate in democracy. Previous research shows that teaching therefore needs to focus more on authentic questions that matter to students and allow them to think for themselves (Cf. Parker 2003:161, Kahne & Westheimer 2006). Allowing students to take a stand and have deliberative discussions in school is important. Social studies can give new perspectives and qualify their thinking without always giving the “correct” answers. Many issues are deliberative because there is no right or wrong, just different perspectives. The opportunity for students to experience plurality and difference in deliberative discussions with their peers is one way to experience resistance (Cf. Biesta 2006 & Englund 2000). However, I would argue that students could also experience resistance through subject knowledge. History, political science and geography are not disciplines fixated with truths, but they offer ways to understand and interpret the world. In this sense gender theory, gentrification theories or class theories can be ways to experience resistance to ones’ own ideas. Thus, social studies education can contribute to students’ subjectification as well as their qualification. However, education also deals with knowledge and values such as common references in our history and democratic values. It is reasonable to see this socialisation into existing societal structures not as “truths” in the sense that they cannot be subject for deliberative discussions. On the contrary, knowing history, civics and geography as disciplines provide tools to qualify and advance students’ arguments. Consequently, teaching can make it possible to both contribute to students’ subject knowledge and also to their citizenship education. Still, this assumes that students are invited to take part in activities and that students are not merely exercising disciplinary skills in class (Cf. Barton 2012). One of the greatest challenges is to allow students to hold their own understanding of the world, “being citizens”, while at the same time qualifying their ways of understanding social issues, thus seeing them as “citizens to be”. Disciplinary understanding might be seen as “right answers”, but social studies do not only consist of facts – it primarily involves interpretations that can offer different truths. Furthermore, I would argue that this might be a reason to be cautious concerning what a school can and cannot do in terms of allowing students to be emancipated through teaching. Teaching is complex and so many other things are happening in young peoples’ lives besides social studies education. If students have advanced their ability to arrive at informed and reasonable opinions during social studies class, we have come a long way.
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