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Country Report

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## Samhällskunskap (social science education) in Sweden: A country report

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### Highlights:

- Social science education is the core subject assigned responsibility for citizenship education and holds a strong position in Swedish schools (policy and teaching).
- Two reforms of curricula and syllabi through years 1–9 and 10–12 are upcoming.
- There is a growing community of researchers investigating the purpose, design and conditions of social science education.
- Research is mainly small-scale and qualitative and there is a lack of large-scale and/or quantitative studies.

**Purpose:** This report provides an overview of social science education in primary and secondary education in Sweden with the purpose of introducing the international research community to policy-related issues concerning citizenship education, educational institutions and the scholarly state of the art. The principal topics are: a context of Sweden and its educational setting, the current policy documents and upcoming reforms, the state of teaching and teacher education, and the state of the art of Swedish social science education theory and research.

**Findings:** Social science education holds a strong position as the main agent of citizenship education in Swedish schools and is a mandatory subject in every school year. The current and upcoming syllabi both emphasise disciplinary knowledge as well as citizenship education. Sweden has a growing community of researchers, but this community is somewhat fragmented because researchers originate from different disciplines.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The school subject of *samhällskunskap* (social science education, SSE)<sup>1</sup> holds an established position, in relation to both policy and educational content, among the core subjects in Sweden's comprehensive school system. Its roots can be traced back to the introduction of universal suffrage in 1919 when 'citizen knowledge' (*medborgarkunskap*) became an appendix to history education. Its present form and shape – consisting of disciplinary content from political science, sociology, economics and law – was introduced in the aftermath of World War Two, when SSE was seen as important in 'vaccinating' young Swedes against totalitarian ideas. SSE became a mandatory subject when national compulsory school (*grundskolan*, years 1–9) was introduced in 1962, and was introduced in upper-secondary school (*gymnasium*, years 10–12) in 1970. Since its introduction, there have been several curriculum reforms, but the subject has remained fairly intact, without being questioned or challenged as a core subject. SSE in Sweden shares its main features with the corresponding school subjects in other Nordic countries, such as Denmark and Norway, as well as the German subjects of *Sozialkunde* and *Gemeinschaftskunde*. This includes a focus on social scientific disciplinary fields such as political science, sociology and economics and a connection to citizenship education, i.e., developing the attitudes, experiences, knowledge, abilities and skills that pupils will need in order to become active participants in a democratic society (cf. Campbell, 2012, p. 1; Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015). This dual assignment, to equip pupils with knowledge *and* enable democratic participation and deliberations, has in many ways defined SSE in Sweden, and continues to do so. This duality has been described as a tension whereby one or the other is emphasised as the most important – resulting in different conceptions of the ultimate goal of SSE (Bronäs & Selander, 2002; Sandahl, 2000; Tväråna, 2019a).

The construction of SSE in Sweden, and its relation to citizenship education, is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, it is not synonymous with citizenship education because this task is formulated as a cross-curricular assignment in Sweden; i.e., all school subjects are expected to contribute to developing democratic citizens. On the other hand, the policy documents' emphasis on political, social and economic issues (SNAE, 2011a), and a strong tradition among SSE teachers of seeing the subject as the primary agent in this assignment (Björklund, 2021; Olsson, 2016; Lindmark, 2013), suggest that it holds a prominent position in this regard. In this report, we will focus our account on SSE, although we are aware that this choice has implications for important research contributions in other settings and school subjects.

The following country report gives a descriptive summary of the current situation of Swedish social science education in relation to the country's specific context. The aim of

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<sup>1</sup> In this country report, we have chosen the term 'social science education' (SSE) in English. In contrast to many countries, the Swedish subject is mainly a social scientific subject with its disciplinary base in political science, sociology and economics. This distinguishes it from 'social studies' – a subject construction closely connected to history, geography and religious education (cf. Solhaug et al., 2020). Even in Sweden, different English terms are used, such as 'social studies education' or 'civics education'.

this report is to give the international research community an overview of policy-related issues in terms of citizenship education, educational institutions and the scholarly state of the art. The overview begins with a summarised description of Sweden as a nation state and its place internationally. This is followed by a section on policy documents, and the state of teaching and teacher education. Section four elaborates on the state of the art of Swedish social science education theory and research, and is followed by a final section presenting some concluding remarks and a look forward at the challenges and opportunities facing social science education in Sweden.

## 2 BACKDROP AND CONTEXTUALISATION

Sweden is located in northern Europe. It is a large country in terms of size, but small in terms of population – at least by European standards (10.35 million inhabitants, 25 people/km<sup>2</sup>). It is one of the oldest nations *and* liberal democracies in the world. Furthermore, Sweden has enjoyed the longest period of peace in the world (Bjereld & Möller, 2016) and has been a prosperous welfare state since the middle of the 20th century. Like many other small countries, it is dependent on an open and peaceful world order and there is a rather durable consensus among political parties in Sweden on the need for economic, social and political cooperation within the international community. Sweden is deeply involved in Nordic cooperation, the European Union and the United Nations, and is often an outspoken voice in human rights discussions as well as on free trade issues, paired with a strong advocacy for foreign aid. Only recently – due to the Russian invasion of the Ukraine – has a sincere political discussion begun on becoming a member of NATO, and Sweden's application is now being processed.

Sweden is one of the world's top high-income countries (7th place, HDI, 2020) and holds a high position in most international socio-economic rankings. This is also true for socio-political rankings such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, where Sweden ranks fourth in the latest survey from 2021 (EIU, 2022). A similar survey measuring countries' vulnerability based on several different factors shows that in 2021 Sweden was the seventh least vulnerable country in the world (FSI, 2021), with low levels of corruption (4th place in least corrupt countries, CPI, 2021) and a very high level of gender equality (GDI, 2020; GEI, 2021). Measurements such as the ones described above consistently show that Sweden and its citizens are well off and have been so for a significant period of time. Naturally, there is no straightforward definition of what being well off means, but economic prosperity, good health, tolerance and gender equality are usually seen as positive indicators in this context. The latest national survey from SOM (Society, Opinion, Media) on people's levels of trust towards each other and governmental authorities further strengthens this picture (SOM, 2021).

Nevertheless, there are some challenges to consider. Even though Sweden is at the top of the democracy index, voter turnout has fallen, as well as levels of trust in politicians, especially among young people. There is growing concern about disinformation campaigns and fake news. And even though Sweden is one of the most equal countries in

Europe, there is a lot of concern about growing inequalities – particularly between non-immigrant Swedes and first- and second-generation immigrants (Delmos, 2021). Overall, segregation and immigration issues have been much debated in national media, especially gang-related criminality and violence, and topics such as these are likely to be among the top priorities on the political agenda for many years to come. As a country with many immigrants (roughly 20% of the population was born outside Sweden), Sweden is experiencing widening socio-economic gaps, particularly between segregated urban regions, as well as political and economic gaps between urban and rural areas. Taken together, these trends could lead to declining confidence in democratic institutions, and some signs of this can be seen in the SOM survey: even though confidence in society and its institutions is generally high, there are some groups in certain locations within Sweden where trust turns out to be lower – to a large extent coinciding with segregated areas. It is worth noting that the growing attention given to these issues has led to the rise of a far-right populist party – the Swedish Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) – which has attracted growing numbers of voters in the last three elections (5.3% in 2010; 12.86% in 2014; and 17.86% in 2018).

## 2.1 Education in context

In general, Sweden is well prepared for transferring the knowledge and values associated with liberal democracy and an open economy from one generation to the next. Although liberal, Sweden (together with Norway, Denmark and Finland) stands out due to its universal welfare system – a distinctive characteristic that is highlighted internationally as the ‘Nordic model’. However, during the past few decades, the social democratic welfare state has been challenged and reformed and a wave of privatisations has followed. This is particularly true in the field of education, where Sweden’s ‘free school system’ has been described as unique in terms of marketisation (Lundahl, 2016).

The country’s high performance in socio-economic and socio-political rankings does not apply to international surveys concerning education. In the mid-1990s, Sweden was also a top-performing nation in this area. Since then, however, the country has been caught in a spiralling decline in core subjects such as the Swedish language, mathematics and science. This trend is visible in national testing but also in PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS. Educational efforts halted this development in 2015 and the results are starting to point upwards again (SNAE, 2018).<sup>2</sup> The reasons behind the Swedish ‘drop’ is a highly politicised issue in Sweden, but research and assessment discussions have specifically focused on the above-mentioned marketisation and a decentralisation of school governing during the 1990s (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; OECD, 2015). Segregation is a particular concern, with the

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<sup>2</sup> The latest PISA survey became very controversial in Sweden because The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) had removed several individuals with an immigration background from the data (due to a lack of language skills). The agency was accused of trying to bolster the national results, but the OECD (responsible for PISA) supported the agency in this matter (see OECD, 2018/2021). However, The Swedish National Audit Office (*Riksrevisionen*) made a substantial critique of the agency in a later report.

growing gaps between different socio-economic groups and their performances in school being evident in the latest PISA, even though the general trend is positive (SNAE, 2018).

In contrast to these concerns, Sweden stands out in one survey: the “International Civic and Citizenship Education Study” (ICCS), performed by the International Education Association (IEA). Here, Sweden performs among the best and Swedish 14-year-olds display good knowledge of societal issues and issues related to democracy and citizenship. Also, young Swedes display solid and positive attitudes towards various values associated with democracy and citizenship and firm support for democratic governance. Nevertheless, Swedish youngsters are following international trends and are increasingly less involved in formal politics (ICCS, 2018; cf. Dalton, 2004). However, these results have been problematised by political scientists, who focus on a shift from ‘big politics’ to ‘little politics’ (or ‘lifestyle politics’, see Kahne et al., 2013). Here, Swedish contributions to this debate deserve attention. Professor Erik Amnå and colleagues have argued that a growing number of young Swedes are knowledgeable and interested in politics even though they are not active in formal politics, and have labelled them ‘standby citizens’, ready to become active if needed (Amnå & Ekman, 2014). The next ICCS is to be performed in 2022.

### **3 POLICY DOCUMENTS, STATE OF TEACHING AND TEACHER EDUCATION**

#### **3.1 The curriculum and the social science syllabus**

Sweden has several national curricula (Swedish: *läroplan*) developed for different levels and particular educational settings; e.g., curricula for compulsory school for pupils with learning disabilities and for the schools specifically designated for indigenous people (The Sami School). The two principal curricula, however, are the national curriculum for compulsory school and the national curriculum for upper-secondary school. Within a curriculum, each distinct school subject’s aim, long-term goals, core content and knowledge requirements are described and explained in a syllabus (Swedish: *kursplan*). The core content for SSE consists of themes derived from various academic disciplines, with a particular emphasis on political science, sociology and economics. In compulsory school, this content is supplemented with law. However, as well as content, the syllabus also emphasises goals related to citizenship education, i.e., how SSE should strengthen pupils’ democratic citizenship.

##### **3.1.1 The SSE syllabus for compulsory school**

The curriculum for compulsory school consists of three sections for different levels. In years 1–3, pupils first encounter social science as one subject within ‘social studies’, alongside geography, history and religious education, for a total of 200 teaching hours. In years 4–9, these subjects are divided into separate domains with specific allocated teaching hours for each one. However, the notion of a compound ‘social studies subject’ has prevailed in practice, and even within the stipulated time-schedule in the curriculum,

time is earmarked for cross-subject teaching (SNAE, 2011b). The formulated aim and the long-term goals of SSE in compulsory school are the same for all ages. Progression is framed within the context of core content and knowledge requirements (Swedish: *kunskapskrav*) are stipulated for years 3, 6 and 9. In Table 1, below, an overview of the content and allocated teaching hours is presented. It is worth noting that ‘disciplinary perspectives’ are strengthened for each stage, with the wording for years 7–9 being close to that of upper-secondary school. In years 1–6, there is a more general focus on understanding the basic ideas of a (democratic) society, and of Sweden in particular.

**Table 1. SSE in compulsory school**

Years	Examples of core content (SSE)	Allocated teaching hours
1–3	Local democracy, such as school democracy, children’s rights, family finances	200
4–6	The democratic system and the political parties of Sweden, human rights, the role of taxes, mass media	70 (+33)
7–9	Ideologies, democracy and dictatorship, democratic functions, international relations, public finances	75 (+35)

*Core content in years 1–3 focuses on local phenomena and progresses in years 4–6 towards the public sphere. In years 7–9, the core content becomes more ‘academic’ in its focus on the principal concepts of social scientific domains. Time is given to all four social studies subjects in years 1–3, and then becomes more disciplinary in years 4–6 and 7–9. The allocated time in years 4–6 and 7–9 is supplemented with extra time (in brackets above) for teachers to use in order to integrate social science, history, religion and geography (SNAE, 2021).*

This syllabus structure dates back to 2011, and prevails in an upcoming reform scheduled to be implemented during the autumn semester of 2022 (postponed due to Covid-19). The reform includes three significant changes. Firstly, and importantly in the context of citizenship education, there is a strengthening of civic engagement perspectives. In many ways, the 2022 reform could be seen as a return to previous policy, in which SSE is given a specific role in contributing to pupils’ preparation for citizenship in its focus on political, economic and social issues. Secondly, the core content has been reduced because teachers have had problems fitting all of the congested core content into the stipulated time for teaching. Thirdly, there is a shift from ability-based goals to long-term goals, formulated as ‘knowledge’ and ‘abilities’. This is a result of years of public debate in which abilities have been seen as ‘fuzzy’ and too generic, i.e., pupils have not, presumably, acquired sufficient factual knowledge. The syllabus for 2022 states one of the following aims of social science education:

Teaching in the subject of social science aims at developing pupils’ familiarity and accumulated experience of democracy and human rights. It should contribute to pupils’ acquisition of knowledge about values and principles that constitute a democratic society as well as democratic processes and procedures. In this way teaching should give students an understanding of what it means to be an active and responsible citizen. (SNAE, 2021)

This change in direction towards clearer citizenship education objectives is in line with previous critiques by governmental audits, which have underlined the lack of citizenship education in schools. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (TSSI, 2012), for instance, remarked that such perspectives do not permeate teaching and that pupils need to be actively invited to engage in greater participation and decision-making. The Inspectorate also called for more distinct policies setting out the aims of schools in this regard.

### 3.1.2 The SSE syllabus for upper-secondary school

Pupils entering upper-secondary school already have nine years of (mandatory) experience of social science education. In upper-secondary school, pupils are divided for the first time into vocational and academic tracks. Subjects are specific to each programme and are given as individual courses, but there are eight compulsory core subjects, of which SSE is one. Vocational tracks include a compulsory course of 50 credits (approx. 45 hours of teaching) and academic tracks teach a 100-credit course (approx. 85 hours of teaching). These mandatory courses emphasise democracy, the political system and human rights, but also provide fundamental knowledge about economics, the labour market and group identities. Additionally, there are advanced courses for pupils following programmes with a social scientific focus, where the academic perspectives are more clearly present both in a procedural way and in terms of specific core content such as globalisation, international relations and doctrine history in economics. Consequently, the policy documents particularly emphasise citizenship educational goals in the mandatory courses and shift the focus somewhat towards a more academic approach in advanced courses.

**Table 2. SSE in upper-secondary school**

Course	Examples of core content (SSE)	Allocated teaching hours
1a1 (1a2)	Democratic functions, international relations, public finances, social relations, human rights	Ca. 45
1b	Democratic functions, international relations, public finances, social relations, human rights	Ca. 85
2	Theories of economics, economic systems, present-day society, thematic studies	Ca. 85
3	Globalisation, theory of social sciences, thematic studies	Ca. 85
International relations	Foreign policy and security issues, international law, conflict resolution, the international system	Ca. 85
International economics	Trade and commerce, economic integration and cooperation, international financial markets	Ca. 85

*In upper-secondary school, pupils have one compulsory course (1a1 or 1b), depending on their chosen track. Vocational pupils can choose to supplement their studies with an extra course (1a2), which qualifies them for higher education. In terms of content, these courses (1a1 and 1a2) are identical to 1b. Courses 2 and 3, international relations and international*

*economics, are advanced courses in certain programmes, such as the social scientific programme or business programme. In many cases, pupils on all programmes can choose these courses if they are available at their school. The compulsory courses are 'content congested', while the advanced courses are freer for teachers to plan. The coming reform (see below) will change this, however, as all courses in SSE will become more content oriented. (SNAE, 2011a)*

Structurally, the syllabus for each course (in total, seven different courses) is the same as in compulsory school, where progression is represented in core content and knowledge requirements are stipulated for each course. In Table 2, below, an overview of the content and allocated teaching hours for courses in upper-secondary school are presented.

The overall aim and the long-term goals are the same for all seven courses (the goals are formulated as knowledge goals and ability goals). In regard to the aim, the previous reference to citizenship education is of particular interest. In upper-secondary school, the aim is predominantly framed in relation to scientific understandings of society:

Students should be given the opportunity to develop a scientific approach to social issues and an understanding of scientific work on social issues. In addition, teaching should contribute to creating conditions for active participation in the life of society. (SNAE, 2011a)

Here, the citizenship perspectives are formulated as an add-on to the scientific approach. This framing of social science education has been discussed and criticised in the literature on Swedish social science education (Gustavsson, 2014; Sandahl, 2014) – not least in relation to the principles of the Beutelsbach Consensus (Christensen & Grammes, 2020; Reinhardt, 2016). As previously discussed, this framing has been addressed in the reform of compulsory school, where citizenship perspectives have been strengthened.

However, a reform of the upper-secondary school curriculum is imminent. The backdrop to this is a political initiative to rid schools of the course system, under which pupils get a separate grade for each course, in favour of a system of subject grading, i.e., a final grade for all levels in each particular subject. This reform work has a major impact on the syllabus for subjects such as social science and the work has already begun. One issue addressed here is the strengthening of educational perspectives on citizenship. The reform is expected to be implemented in 2025.

### **3.2 State of teaching: How social science is taught in Swedish schools**

It is important to note that there is no major study that maps how social science education is taught in Swedish schools, at least not in a way that makes it possible to generalise. Swedish school agencies have made broad attempts to evaluate different aspects of teaching, but they are rather old and cover SSE alongside geography, religious education and history. In 2003, the Swedish National Agency for Education conducted a larger study (SNAE, 2006), which shows that Swedish pupils find social science interesting and important but that they find the teaching to be dominated by teacher presentations rather than discussions or intellectual tasks. Rigorous and lasting discourse on important democratic themes seems to be particularly absent from classrooms, according to later studies (TSSI, 2012).



Even though there is a lack of large-scale studies, there is plenty of research that provides important insights into the practices of SSE teachers. In a study of teachers' conceptions of the subject, Lindmark (2013) found that there were several different subject conceptions among the teachers participating in his study. The different combinations of subjects in the teachers' academic exams seemed to affect their subject conceptions, as well as their gender – female teachers focused more on gender issues – while political views and years of experience were less influential. In a recent study of how 303 lower-secondary (years 7–9) SSE teachers chose to cover and operationalise their teaching of different topics from the curriculum, Öberg and Bäckström (2021) found that the subject canon contains a core of political science (democracy, the electoral system, Swedish governance and political ideologies), law (crime and punishment, the judicial system and youth criminality) and economics (societal economics and market economics). These results are similar to the findings of an earlier study involving 55 lower-secondary teachers (Wall, 2011). The parts of the subject that originate from sociology and human geography were the least prioritised among the teachers in both studies. In Öberg and Bäckström's study, there was a significant difference between men and women among the teachers, with women covering a greater variety of topics. In addition to the topics mentioned above, female teachers spent more time than male teachers on issues of equality, norms and values, human rights, the situation of crime victims and issues close to pupils' own experiences (Öberg & Bäckström, 2021). Teachers seemed to have a rather extensive 'free space' in which to interpret the curriculum, but were also loyal to the policy documents. Research on SSE teaching indicates that the subject is well established, not just in terms of policy, but also among teachers. This is particularly true for SSE in secondary school. At younger ages, the subject has been described as 'fuzzy' and 'unclear' in relation to history and other subjects with stronger ties to one specific discipline (Kristiansson, 2017).

### **3.2.1 Learning resources and textbooks**

As there is no external auditing of textbooks in Sweden, the authors and publishers carry considerable responsibility for disciplinary accuracy. In the wake of digitalisation, we can assume that the amount of digital material has increased in schools but, since there is no governmental oversight, the use of text material is difficult to evaluate since the individual publishers are not keen to share their figures in a competitive market. Textbook evaluation and research is based exclusively on upper-secondary social science education and has been criticised, for instance, by economists for factual errors as well as a lack of conceptual rigour in dealing with economics (Modig, 2021), and also as characterised by an ideological bias towards problematisation of the market but not the state (Bergh, 2019). Interestingly, the textbooks that Bergh ranks as best at depicting economics are mainly written by experienced social science teachers.

Arensmeier (2018) compared curricula and textbooks for SSE in vocational and academic tracks in upper-secondary school, and found that neither track pays great attention to democratic values or civic engagement, with the exception of voting, but that textbooks for vocational tracks were less focused on complex conceptual understanding and analytical training. Studies of the content of SSE textbooks (Bronäs, 2000; Wicke, 2019) indicate that they often reproduce current norms and structures, rather than critically evaluating them. Hence, they present the Swedish liberal democratic system as self-evident and as maintaining a well-functioning democracy without the participation of citizens, in an autonomous and teleological way (Wicke, 2019). The textbooks warn readers against criticising the current system through, for example, civil disobedience or direct democracy (Wicke, 2019), and urge pupils to maintain, defend and preserve the system. These tendencies of legitimising the current political order seem to be in line with those of other Nordic countries (Børhaug, 2014).

These tendencies also appear in the view of democracy among student teachers in social science education in secondary schools (Bernmark-Ottosson, 2005) and in a conservative teaching practice (Lindmark, 2013; Odenstad, 2010; Wikman, 2003). Simultaneously, teachers of social science often express an emancipatory and participatory view of the subject (Lindmark, 2013; Olsson, 2016), a subject conception that has also been a prevalent norm in social science educational research (Bernmark-Ottosson, 2005; Bronäs, 2000; Englund, 2000; Wikman, 2003). In the national survey of Swedish secondary schools undertaken in 2003 (SNAE, 2006), most social science teachers stated that their own interests and ideas guided their teaching, and that the news and media coverage of recent events are common aspects of their teaching (Olsson, 2016; Öberg & Bäckström, 2021). A governmental inquiry (SOU 2021:70) recently concluded that a national strategy to ensure the availability of qualitative textbooks for all pupils is lacking, and recommended that central government should work more closely with the issue to ensure availability through more extensive public funding.

### **3.3 Teacher training: The education of educators**

In Sweden, teacher training programmes are conducted by universities or university colleges. There are several different programmes, typically aiming at different levels of the school system (class teachers: years 1–3, years 4–6 and subject teachers: years 7–9, years 10–12). All student teachers graduate with a second-cycle degree and follow national guidelines for teacher education (UHR, 1993). Year 1–3 and 4–6 teachers study for four years (240 ECTS) and subject teachers study for between four and five years (240–330 ECTS). The amount of time devoted to subject studies differs – from only five weeks of combined geography, history, religious studies and social science studies for year 1–3 teachers, up to 1.5 years for lower-secondary teachers and two years for upper-secondary teachers. It is common for secondary teachers to combine their SSE teaching with the teaching of another social studies subject (history, religious studies or geography), but in

many cases it is possible to combine it with any subject relevant to the level they are expected to teach. Most social science teacher programmes have a common core of political science, economics, sociology, law and human geography, but there are substantial differences between different universities (Johansson, 2017). While previous research often described the lack of a unified academic equivalent discipline to SSE as a problem, leaving the subject content vague and dispersed (Bronäs & Selander, 2002; Eklund & Larsson, 2009; Linde, 1993), recent studies have argued that there is consistency across content and approaches among SSE teachers (Lindmark, 2013; Olsson, 2016; cf. Öberg & Bäckström, 2021). In 2019/2020, the Swedish Higher Education Authority audited the Social Science Teacher Programme nationwide and one of the criticisms levelled against many universities was the lack of a cohesive programme structure in order to ensure a high level of quality – in terms of both disciplinary studies and cooperation between disciplines and educational studies (UKÄ, 2020; cf. Eklund & Larsson, 2009).

Most of the implemented professional development (PD) is state-initiated, and focuses on areas other than social science, mainly reading, writing and mathematics (Nordgren et al., 2021; cf. the discussion on PISA, above). This situation leaves SSE teachers to fend for themselves when new curriculum content is introduced. One such example was in 2011, when financial literacy was introduced as a topic within SSE in both compulsory school and upper-secondary school, leaving teachers to draw upon either their knowledge of pre-service economics education, or their own personal experience of financial issues (Björklund, 2019). Recent state-initiated reforms for extended PD include a national structure for teacher PD and a merit system for teachers, as well as establishing a nationwide infrastructure for educational research and development in cooperation between academia and schools. For SSE teachers, these reforms could either provide opportunities to develop and update both the subject and subject didactic knowledge, or entail the perils of less emphasis being placed on these issues, depending on how the reforms are implemented.

#### **4. STATE OF THE ART OF SWEDISH SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION THEORY AND RESEARCH**

Theory and research in social science education is surprisingly lacking in Sweden considering the subject's role in the school system. A common explanation for this is the lack of a unified disciplinary counterpart (cf. history education) and diverse backgrounds among researchers (Sandahl, 2018). As stated in the introduction, this poses a challenge for SSE researchers because many interesting and related studies are conducted in other subjects or in settings where subject education is less evident (e.g., teachers' work with anti-racism as part of citizenship educational goals, see for instance Arneback & Jämte, 2022). However, there is a growing community of researchers contributing to the body of knowledge in connection with the school subject of social science, and this report focuses on these. This research community is well represented on the Nordic scene, contributing

with articles in subject educational journals such as *Acta Didactica Norden* and *Nordidactica* as well as attending conferences such as the biannual Nordic Conference on Subject Education (*NOFA*). A sign of the growing presence on the Nordic scene is the formation of the Nordic Conference in Social Studies Didactics (*NOKSA*), bringing together researchers interested in social science education. Furthermore, several researchers have been published in international journals such as *JSSE* and have attended international conferences such as those of the European Educational Research Association (*EERA*) and the American Educational Research Association (*AERA*). It is also worth mentioning that several scholars attend political science conferences such as the European Consortium for Political Research (*ECPR*) and the Nordic Political Science Association (*NOPSA*) – thus connecting SSE with one of the core disciplines in academia.<sup>3</sup>

In the development of this research field, different research schools funded by the government have been important for the growth of the community over the past 15 years (e.g., the two research schools of social studies education at Karlstad University 2008–2014, see ForskUL, 2011). These research schools added ten new scholars to the community over a short period of time and, today, the community is established enough to recruit new researchers within institutionalised channels of research education and ongoing projects. The research community has representation at almost every university or university college in Sweden but is somewhat scattered. However, some clusters are distinguishable, such as the two tightly related nodes – the Stockholm-Uppsala and the Karlstad nodes – focusing on classroom research and citizenship education perspectives. Similar research interests are also present at Gothenburg University (Andersson, 2020; Larsson, 2021), Örebro University (Arensmeier, 2015; Tryggvasson, 2018) and the University College of Dalarna (Persson & Berg, 2021). There are also established research nodes focusing on historical development of the subject and citizenship perspectives in a broad sense across the social studies disciplines at Umeå University (controversial issues, see special issue of *Acta Didactica Norden* edited by Larsson and Lindström, 2020) as well as an ethnographic perspective on social science teaching at Lund University (see Blennow et al., 2021 and other articles in *JSSE* 2021:4). Altogether, there is a growing field where theory and research in social science education is being conducted and developed in Sweden today. Below, we present some of the topics that can illustrate the research field in Sweden. It is noteworthy that this research has a strong focus on secondary schools (particularly upper-secondary) and that studies on years 1–3 and 4–6 are rare.

#### 4.1 Research topics

Research in SSE dates back to the 1980s and the pioneering work conducted by Tomas Englund (1986), with his specific focus on SSE and citizenship education. The interest in understanding the nurturing and formation of democratic citizens is still very much at the

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<sup>3</sup> The focus on democracy and politics in SSE has drawn interest from political scientists, opening up special-interest groups such as citizenship education in international research environments. Similar arenas in economics, sociology, social anthropology or law are absent.

core of SSE research and is emphasised in most of the studies included in overviews of Swedish SSE research (Johnsson Harrie, 2011; Olsson, 2011; Kristiansson, 2015). However, as researchers in SSE originate from different academic fields, we present four different research themes and their main stakeholders, labelled: ‘research on the democratic outcomes of SSE’, ‘research on the prerequisites of SSE’, ‘SSE teacher research’ and ‘SSE classroom-oriented research’. The inclusion criterion is that the research should address SSE, rather than generic themes relating to citizenship education.

Because SSE is closely connected to citizenship education, political scientists have long shown a specific interest in exploring young people’s democratic knowledge and attitudes and their relation to what happens in SSE classrooms. The data source is the ICCS studies and connects the Swedish educational setting to an international community of researchers and the subsequent global debate (Biseth et al., 2021). The findings of the Swedish studies are somewhat disheartening; Zetterberg and Ekman (2011) have argued that the most important factor for the development of political citizenship is the socio-economic embeddedness of the school and not what goes on in the classroom. Broman (2009) came to similar conclusions in a survey-study and argued that schools cannot be seen as a general democratic socialisation agent through teaching about politics and democracy. Sohl and Arensmeier (2015) found little effect on pupils’ political efficacy in academic tracks but some boost among vocational tracks. However, from an educational perspective, the ICCS studies have been challenged by pedagogical researchers, who have criticised the pre-decided and rigid positions on what counts as political participation and democratic attitudes (Olson, 2012). In recent years, this scholarly discussion has been less widespread, but is still visible in debates on what schools can do through their teaching to increase pupils’ interest in, knowledge about and attitudes towards democracy – not least in terms of method issues such as deliberation (see Englund, 2006 and more recently Persson et al., 2020). Some ICCS studies have also tried to deepen the understanding of young people’s understanding of central concepts (Arensmeier, 2015).

Pedagogical research has focused on what can be described as the ‘prerequisites of SSE’, i.e., policy documents and textbooks. Englund’s (1986) early work on deconstructing the curriculum and its ambitions to shape a citizenry has been important in the development of this strand of Swedish research. Since then, there has been an enduring emphasis on an expanded citizenship and a critical view on the educational system’s ambition to socialise youth into becoming compliant citizens (see for example Ledman, 2019; Lundberg, 2020; Tryggvasson, 2018). One question that has not been studied is the extent to which the results of this research in turn inform the development of the curriculum and syllabus. This strand also includes the textbook studies discussed earlier, where the prerequisites of teaching in the form of a textbook can potentially influence pupils’ understanding of central concepts and processes, or even of citizenship itself (Arensmeier, 2018; Bronäs, 2000; Modig, 2021; Wicke, 2019).

During the last decade or so, a shift in focus has been visible in research, whereby scholars have turned their attention towards teaching in schools rather than using or

studying surveys, policy documents or textbooks. A specific interest has been to explore SSE teachers' perspectives on the purpose, design and conditions of SSE teaching. The interest in exploring teachers and teaching coincided with a governmental initiative to fund didactical<sup>4</sup> research schools and to recruit teachers as researchers. This research has resulted in a variety of studies, such as teachers' perceptions of financial literacy (Björklund, 2019), teachers' classroom work with the news (Olsson, 2016) and teachers' insights into working with newly arrived immigrants (Odenstad, 2018). Other studies have employed a broader focus, inquiring into teachers' work with higher-order thinking (Sandahl, 2015) and teachers' conceptions of SSE through interviews and examinations of teaching materials and tests (Kristiansson, 2014, 2017; Lindmark, 2013; Odenstad, 2010).

A final theme of research is the 'SSE classroom-oriented research', which focuses on the teaching and learning processes in the classroom. Tväråna (2019a) has researched learning processes of civic reasoning (defined as a combination of critical judgement, analytic reasoning and contextual knowledge) among pupils from year two to upper-secondary level, and how different teaching practices influence pupils' opportunities to develop a qualified understanding of issues of justice in social science (Tväråna, 2018; 2019b). Likewise, Sandahl (2019; 2020) has researched upper-secondary pupils' ability to engage with perspective-taking on political issues and how disciplinary knowledge interacts with life-world perspectives. Several studies have inquired into pupils' learning in different content-related areas such as migration (Blanck, 2021; Jägerskog et al., 2021), economics (Andersson, 2018; Jägerskog, 2020), financial literacy (Björklund, 2021; Björklund & Sandahl, 2020, 2021) and pupils' performances of sourcing and evaluating online news (Axelsson et al., 2021; Nygren et al., 2021). The results from this strand of research hold great potential for the development of curricula, textbooks and teacher education.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND OUTLOOK

Social science education holds an established position in the Swedish curriculum and as part of the core content in schools. It has done so since the 1960s and exists within a societal context where democracy is not perfect, but stands out in an international comparison. There are, however, some worrying tendencies, such as segregation becoming more of a problem, something that is particularly visible between non-immigrant Swedes and immigrants, as well as between urban and rural areas. As schools are a part of society, these problems are also observable in the educational context. Other important aspects that are increasingly relevant in Sweden, as well as in other parts of the world, are issues of growing political polarisation, and the challenge of building resilience against disinformation. The upcoming ICCS of 2022 will be an important survey to follow

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<sup>4</sup> The term in the Swedish context is *didaktik* (didactics), placing it in a Central and Northern European educational tradition rather than the Anglo-American curriculum tradition. As such, it is closely connected to *Bildung* where teaching and learning are seen as a 'complex nexus of interaction, social learning and content-related acquisition of knowledge and abilities' (Hudson, 2015, p. 109; for further conversation on the similarities and differences between these two traditions, see e.g., Friesen, 2018; Kansanen, 2009).

in relation to whether segregation problems have increased or not, and to the development of other democracy and citizenship issues.

The ongoing changes in the national curricula for compulsory and upper-secondary school are not exhaustive but are intended to strengthen citizenship education by providing more room for democratic perspectives after the reduction of core content. The citizenship education approach seems to be consistently strong among social science teachers, but we know too little to be sure that this is true of their actual teaching. However, prior surveys and research indicate that teachers strongly emphasise the mediation of facts and that social science classroom discussions often lack a focus on critical reasoning and perspective-taking, while studies of textbooks indicate a lack of problematising perspectives.

There is a growing body of research on social science education in Sweden and many efforts have been made to connect this research to multidisciplinary networks across the Nordic countries and Europe, as well as internationally. Research in Sweden is diverse and over the last decade has moved from policy studies and textbook studies towards more classroom and pupil-oriented studies. However, the diversity in research is not coordinated or cumulative in a way that could increase vitality in the research field. In the future, stronger international outreach could be a way forward in order to find common ground and research projects that will benefit all of us who are involved in social science educational research.

## 5.1 Further research

The upcoming ICCS survey in 2022 opens up opportunities for interesting national and international cooperation between researchers from the fields of political science and social science education; for example, the challenges facing socialisation and the potential force of education to tackle some of these is a crucial research field (see a good example in Biseth et al., 2021). Overall, social science educational research in Sweden is in great need of larger studies that can map how social science teaching is conducted, in terms of its form, content and quality. As shown in this report, there is not yet enough generalisable data that can be analysed in order to form a judgement on the state of social science teaching in Sweden in a general sense. Additionally, there is a need to direct attention towards SSE at younger ages, as most Swedish scholarly work focuses on older children.

The shift towards classroom-oriented studies is welcome because the research field is dependent on the legitimacy of contributing to practice. The governmental research schools have been important in establishing a new generation of researchers in social science education, and this is visible in several (at least ten) ongoing projects with external funding (app. 450,000 euros per project). This can be seen as a sign of the growing strength of social science didactic research in Sweden. Many of these projects can be categorised as educational design research, where the aim is to build a body of knowledge on qualitative teaching of subject content and abilities; for example, source criticism, critical thinking,

controversial issues, the use of different economic, social and political models in teaching and social and political trust. Even though political issues have dominated the research field, more researchers are now turning their attention towards economics. The teaching and learning of sociological issues in social science is, however, still a rare topic in research, alongside studies on how media, legal issues and human rights are treated as content in the social science classroom.

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