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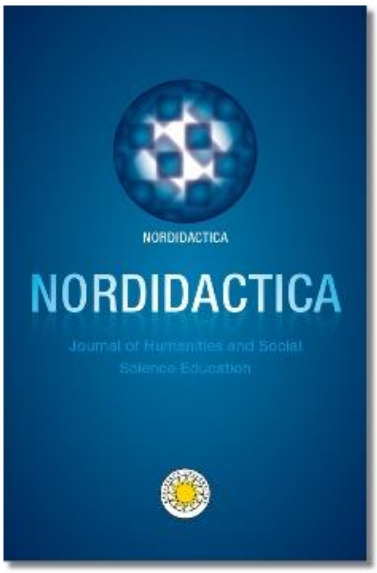

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Abstract: In recent international educational policy discussions, the importance of schools and teachers dealing with controversial societal issues has been highlighted as the role of such issues in the liberal democracies has been discussed. However, we do not know much about the present situation in schools; which controversial issues that teachers choose to bring up in teaching, and how these are related to the curriculum. In this article, we present, based on 80 teachers' survey answers, which controversial issues are being dealt with in Swedish social studies subjects in grades 7–9, and we analyse them comparatively between the subjects and in relation to the curriculum. The study shows that teachers in different ways combine topical problems with curriculum objectives in their transformation of contents into classroom teaching. Based on how the findings of this study can be related to previous discussions about controversial issues education, we argue that to be able to explain the teachers' choices, we need to develop the conceptual and educational theories on this matter to more involve what takes place among the students and in everyday classroom realities.

KEYWORDS**:** CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES EDUCATION, COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE, CIVICS, GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, SWEDEN

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Previous research has noted that teachers find dealing with controversial issues challenging and they do sometimes avoid them (e.g. Ojala, 2019; Anker & von der Lippe, 2018; Pollak et al, 2018; Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, 2011). However, international educational policy discussions has stressed the importance of schools and teachers dealing with these issues. The Council of Europe created a professional development programme for teachers to 'support and promote the teaching of controversial issues in schools in Europe' (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 7). Based on a charter on education about democratic citizenship and human rights, the basic idea of the Council of Europe is that schoolteachers and pupils must work with controversial issues in education since they are essential to the continued development and defence of democracies in Europe and elsewhere.

Teaching controversial issues comprises different didactical aspects. In highlighting the need for dealing with controversy for the sake of democracy, the Council of Europe engages in *why* this teaching should be done. For teachers, the practical issue of *how* to deal with controversial topics and with the reactions they might trigger among pupils call for didactical deliberations. There is also an aspect of the content involved. *What* should be covered in teaching, which controversial topics should be addressed? In Sweden and elsewhere, teachers are expected to make decisions about what to include in their teaching in relation to the subject content that is prescribed by the official curriculum.

The Swedish official curriculum prescribes that all schools should promote a certain set of fundamental values: democracy, the intrinsic value of individuals, respectful treatment of our common environment, the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, gender equality, and solidarity (Skolverket, 2018, p.5). These fundamental values translate into objectives for the development of norms and values expected of Swedish pupils. It is the teachers' mission to clarify and discuss these value-based premises and to help pupils translate them into personal values that guide their actions. Hence, the curriculum has a strong, liberal value-based foundation that is to inform the teaching of subjects. More specific aims and core content for the subjects are described in different subject syllabi, also included in the official curriculum document (Skolverket, 2018).

This study focuses on the content aspect. It explores the relation between teachers' inclusion of controversial topics and the content of the formal curriculum. It is based on a survey, where teachers in social studies subjects in grades 7-9 in Swedish schools indicated which topics they identified as controversial in their teaching. With the ambition to expand knowledge about controversial topics in social studies subjects, we discuss in this article the controversial topics identified by these teachers in relation to subject content from a subject comparative perspective.

Although controversial topics can occur in any subject, we find social studies subjects especially relevant for this study. This group of subjects in Sweden includes geography, history, civics, and religious education, all of which cover content areas that may appear as controversial in some sense on a societal level. Grades 7–9 were chosen as this is the highest level where it is mandatory for all pupils to study all four social studies subjects.

The aim of the study is to determine which controversial topics teachers deal with, and analyse them from a subject comparative perspective in relation to the national subject syllabi. Three questions are related to the aim:

1. Which topics do teachers consider controversial when teaching social studies in Swedish grades 7–9?
2. How do these topics correspond with the national syllabi for geography, history, civics, and religion, respectively?
3. What similarities and differences can be found between the subjects concerning controversial topics and their correspondence with the subject syllabi?

By answering these questions, this study contributes to a greater understanding of the role of controversial topics in teaching social studies subjects.

Previous research

There is an established international research field on controversial issues in education (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). After a few early works (cf. Eulie, 1966; Bailey, 1975), the area began to expand in the 1980s (cf. Dearden, 1981; Stradling, 1985). A large number of studies concerning teaching controversial issues have been presented in the past decade, especially in relation to teaching social studies subjects (cf. Beck, 2019; Anker & von der Lippe, 2018; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016; Kello, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hand & Levinson, 2012). Many studies emanates from the US, but the field is growing also in Europe (cf. Pollak et al, 2018; Cooling, 2012; King, 2009; see also the thematic issues of JSSE 2016, no. 2 and 3). Among the issues that has been discussed internationally, one that is relevant for this study concern how teachers can determine what a controversial issue is and how they should approach it in teaching (for example Hand 2007; 2008; Hess 2009).

Research about controversial issues in education is growing also in Scandinavia (Ljunggren et al, 2015), and this trend applies also to the specific field of social studies didactics. Judging from titles and keywords in the Scandinavian-based journals *Acta Didactica* and *Nordidactica* prior to 2019, no articles were specifically dedicated to teaching controversial issues. Lately, however, several articles were published. Larsson (2019) showed how controversial issues has changed in Swedish curriculum texts since 1962 while Kittelman Flensner (2019; 2020) and Peters & Johannesen (2020) discuss examples of how teachers teach specific controversial issues. Other recent articles discuss principal aspects of controversial issues teaching (Samuelsson 2020; Christensen & Grammes 2020; Kalsås & Helakorpi 2020). There are also studies promoting and/or critically examining models or educational methods for dealing with various potentially controversial phenomena in schools like racism, radicalization, violation and discrimination (see for example Carlsson & Fangen, 2013; Mattsson, 2018; Edling ed., 2018; Lunneblad ed., 2019).

Our article take a different stance than previous studies as it focusses on the content issue by exploring teacher's own notions of controversial topics and their relation to the

subject syllabi. Thereby it contributes to enhancing and complicating the understanding of controversial issues as part of the content of social studies teaching.

Theory

This study has a theoretical base in the part of sociologically-influenced curriculum studies that focuses on the 'curriculum as content' (Forsberg 2011). One basic starting point is that subject content is constructed and expressed differently at different levels, for example in official curriculum texts and in teachers' planning and teaching (Gericke et al, 2018; Bernstein, 2000; Englund, 1997). Based on this, we will in this study examine how controversial issues are constructed at the instructional (teacher) level in relation to the institutional (official curriculum) level (cf. Bråten, 2013). Instead of concentrating on teachers as individual actors, this study focuses on the topics that they identify as controversial and the relation of these topics to the syllabi.

In the international field of controversial issues education, a distinction has been suggested between political topics, problems, and issues (Hess, 2009). *Topics* are content areas of any type, such as the Middle Ages, Australia, financial politics, immigration, climate change, pupils' rights in school, or any other content area wide or narrow. People can regard a topic, or some aspect of it, as problematic in some sense, thus posing it as a *problem,* which can call for political action. An *issue,* as defined by Hess, is a public policy question about how to address a public problem. Examples of controversial political issues, from Hess's perspective, are 'Should Sweden allow euthanasia?' or 'What should the international community do to combat terrorism?'. Hess argues that these types of questions are the most useful in teaching. She maintains that teachers should choose controversial political issues that are authentic (not hypothetical), contemporary (not past), and open (not settled) in the societal context (Hess, 2009).

Our study concerns the topic level from the Hess (2009) perspective. Although the teachers in our survey sometimes clearly stated what they found to be a problematic aspect of a topic, and on rare occasions, stated this as issues in Hess' meaning, we focus on the topics and their relation to the core content in the national syllabi. Therefore, 'controversial topics' is the accurate term for our analytical purposes although 'controversial issues' is more commonly used in public and education research discourses.

In the theoretical discussion about controversial issues in education, there is a lack of agreement on a common definition (Larsson & Lindström, 2020). The design of this study builds instead upon the broad and practice-oriented definition from Council of Europe, saying that controversial issues are "issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society" (Council of Europe, 2015, p.8). However, we will in our discussion relate our results to the well-known and much discussed theoretical distinctions of Michael Hand (2007; 2008). He distinguishes between the controversy of a behavioural, epistemic, or political type. Basically, controversies arise when opposing views on a social problem are defended. Controversies that are conflicts

among groups of people are *behavioural;* people disagree and argue. This first type of controversy can occur even though the defended positions can be factually wrong, for example, in cases where people are not sufficiently informed. The second type of controversy, the *political*, relies on Hand's (2007; 2008) distinction between private values, which are individual and embodied, and public values. The latter are foundational moral values on which governments in liberal democratic states plan and implement policy. The third type of controversy arises when each of the opposing views can be defended through rational reasoning. This is an *epistemic* controversy. Scientific controversies over the correct interpretation of contradictory findings can be of an epistemic nature.

Hand argues that teachers can use these distinctions in their didactical decisions. Only epistemic controversies should be taught as controversial in the sense that the teacher should provide arguments for both sides equally, and make it clear to the pupils that there is no right answer (yet). The epistemic criterion is what determines a 'real' controversy. Political and behavioural controversies should be taught as such and not as real epistemic controversies. Political controversies are not essentially controversial, according to Hand´s reasoning, once they have been settled through a publicly known government position on the matter. Then teachers should teach them as settled, not as controversial. If the behavioural type of issues are to be an indicator of what to teach as controversial in schools, then potentially any conflict among groups of people could or should be taught. This definition is simply too wide and unproductive and is, hence, dismissed by Hand (2007; 2008).

Hand's promotion of the epistemic criterion and dismissing of the political and behavioural criterions has been debated and criticised. Some objections to his promotion of epistemic aspects are that they rely on a narrow view of educational objectives (Warnick & Smith 2014) that fails to take contextual factors into sufficient consideration (Misco, 2012; Evans et al, 2000), and what is controversial is a matter of negotiation and power struggles (Camicia, 2008).

The empirical data for this study are teachers' statements of which topics are controversial in their teaching. Thus, our investigation explores the factual instructional level and we do not discuss what should be done in the schools from one normative standpoint or another. Instead, we use Hand's criteria in our analysis to reflect on our empirical findings.

Method

Methodologically, we have applied a subject comparative perspective in this study. This comparative perspective has its base in curriculum theory, which assumes that school subjects constitute different subject cultures (Larsson, 2019; Kristiansson, 2014; Goodson, 1993). This assumption applies to the subjects in this study, geography, history, civics, and religion, although these subjects are fairly close to each other in the Swedish school context (Larsson, 2012; Samuelsson, 2014).

Subject comparative studies can be conducted in different ways (Larsson & Samuelsson, 2019), for example, through the use of spatial or temporal perspectives (cf. Bråten, 2013, Ongstad, 2012). Our comparative perspective, however, follows the recommendation by Nielsen (2011) to compare a chosen didactical aspect among different subjects. In this study, that aspect concerns subject content.

The empirical material for this study consists of statements on topics that teachers have denoted as controversial in teaching social studies in lower secondary school (grades 7-9). Via interest groups on Facebook for teachers in social studies, we invited teachers to participate in a questionnaire concerning teaching controversial societal topics [kontroversiella samhällsfrågor] in geography, history, civics, and religion in grades 7-9. Participation was voluntary and fully anonymous, and we were not in personal contact with the teachers. As expected, most of the people who visited the questionnaire left it without responding (Peytchev, 2009). Nevertheless, 80 individuals chose to complete and submit the questionnaire.

As has been found in previous research (Bladh, 2014), many teachers in our target group teach more than one or all of these four subjects. The questionnaire asked participants to respond separately to each of the subjects they had taught during the last three years. This resulted in 70 responses for civics, 63 for geography, 64 for history, and 63 for religion. Other than the information provided through the questionnaire, we do not know anything about who these teachers are. This design-related choice is in line with our aim to focus not on the teachers but on their stated topics in relation to the subject syllabus content.

In the questionnaire, the teachers were asked to state which controversial topics they deal with in their teaching in geography, history, civics, and religion. In a pilot study made to test and develop our method, it was clear that the respondents needed a brief definition of the type of topics we asked for before they were willing or able to provide responses. Therefore, we provided a description of what we meant by controversial societal topics. They are:

- particularly contested and difficult to govern in our society,
- topics on which different opinions can be held (among politicians, researchers, and the public) about the nature and causes of a problem and/or about possible solutions to it, and,
- potentially emotionally charged for people, for example, pupils in the classroom.

This definition follows the broad definition that the Council of Europe (2015) used in their teaching material. We also suggested: ‘This might concern refugee politics, climate change, or sexual abuse, terrorism, ethnicity, religious practice, equality, issues of origin, nationalism, animal rights. Or something else. We are interested in your experiences’. Thus, the questionnaire was designed to show what teachers declare to be controversial topics in their own teaching in the subjects.

Although we clearly stated that we asked for the respondents’ own opinions, we are aware that the definition and the examples we provided might have affected the answers we received. On the one hand, as indicated by the pilot study, the definition and examples might have inspired the respondents to think about what they deal with in

their teaching. We also believe that the definition and examples prompted the teachers to participate. On the other hand, the teachers were probably guided to some of the topics stated in their responses by our definition and examples. This might have resulted in a slight quantitative bias towards some topics. In the end, we wanted to create a mainly qualitative set of data. Hence, the advantages of this methodological approach were assessed as greater than the disadvantages.

Through this procedure, we received a body of controversial societal topics from the teachers. This body of topics was analysed in the following subsequent steps. As free text answers naturally vary in precision and terminology, a necessary first analytical step was to cluster the stated topics on a terminological level. For example, one cluster of topics concerned climate change. Words and short phrases included under the label were responses such as 'climate', 'climate change', 'is climate change a fraud?', 'climate threat', 'the climate issue', 'climate issues', and 'global warming'. This and the other clusters were mostly constructed through inductive reasoning but were also based on reference to terminology used in the curriculum texts and public debate. The latter had a certain importance in cases where answers seemed possible to cluster in more than one way. Nevertheless, there were a few responses too difficult to categorise and these were left as singularities.

One example of a controversial issue stated by a teacher is: 'Is it possible to take a flight to Thailand if you become a vegetarian?' This phrase occurs in public debate as an example of the climate impact of people's ways of living, and it was stated in relation to teaching geography in the survey. Hence, we interpreted this as a statement related to climate change rather than, for example, family economy, which it might also concern.

In the second step of analysis, the topics stated by the teachers were related to the official national curriculum. The national curriculum for compulsory education in Sweden is common to and mandatory for all schools (Skolverket, 2018). The document contains an opening section on values, goals, and guidelines, common to all compulsory education. A second section includes syllabi for each school subject. Each syllabus contains subject-specific aims, core contents, and knowledge requirements for grades 1-3, 4-6, and 7-9. We used the parts of the relevant syllabi (geography, history, civics, and religion) that include subject-specific aims and core contents for grades 7–9. The syllabi were scanned for the terms mentioned by the teachers to find correlations between words. We also related the topics mentioned by the teachers to the syllabus text in a content analysis. The common values, goals, and guidelines stated in the opening section of the curriculum document were also taken into consideration in our interpretation. All quotes from the curriculum texts were taken from the official English translation (Skolverket, 2018), and page references refer to this version.

In a third step, we conducted a subject comparative analysis. The topics given by the teachers, as well as how these topics relate to the syllabi, were compared among the four subjects. This resulted in a number of observations, which were interpreted in relation to previous research. Finally, the results were related to and discussed in light of the theoretical discussion about controversial issues education.

Analysis and results

This section is structured in line with our research questions: the topics that the teachers stated, the topics in relation to the official syllabi, and comparisons between the subjects.

Teachers' topics

A wide range of terms or short phrases were used by the teachers in the survey when describing controversial topics in their teaching. Our initial clustering of these terms resulted in a number of topics. These topics are presented in the table below for each school subject (Table 1). Although we do not intend to make any quantitative conclusions, we find it relevant to direct a more thorough consideration to topics that are mentioned by more than only one or two individuals. This is shown in the following table.

TABLE 1

Controversial topics mentioned by the teachers

	Topics stated by teachers, three times or more	**Topics stated by teachers, less than three times**
Geography	Climate change, migration and refugee matters, population development, environment, uneven distribution of (natural) resources, economic development, poverty, sustainable development, borders	Uneven effects on nature/climate, (access to) energy and water, land grabbing, local circumstances, foreign aid, justice, ethical responsibility, international conflicts, Sami people, ethnicity, culture, trafficking, littering, social change, evolution
History	Genocide, nationalism, imperialism, racism, colonialism, the Holocaust/Nazism, war, terrorism, Israel-Palestine, minorities, the use and writing of history [historiebruk]	Communism, fascism, dictatorship, vulnerable groups, ethnicity, antisemitism, antiziganism, sexuality, gender, equality, class, xenophobia, islamophobia, migration, forced sterilization, racial biology, globalization, social Darwinism, the history of the 1900's, oppression, conflicts
Civics	Migration and refugee matters, immigration, xenophobia, racism, ethnicity, extremism, terrorism, nationalism, equality, feminism, HBTQ, identity, drugs, economy, (party) politics, democracy, dictatorship, war, crime and penalties, freedom of speech, distribution of resources	Norms, minorities, diversity, migration politics, human rights, restrictions to individual freedom, class, division of powers, abortion, honour-related criminal acts, religion, begging, antisamitism, antisemitism, Israel-Palestine, social media, public health, mental illness, social issues, sexual crimes, #metoo, trafficking, families, unpleasant values, taxation of fuels

Religion	Islam, islamophobia, freedom of religion, sects, extremism, terrorism, fundamentalism, atheism, equality, ethical dilemmas, personal morals, abortion, assisted euthanasia, culture of honour, veils, sexuality, HBTQ, identity	Jerusalem, religious beliefs vs science, history of religion, veganism, ethnicity, diversity, death penalty, kosher/halal slaughter

Teachers' topics in relation to the syllabi

The official school curriculum in Sweden has a strong base in democratic values (Skolverket, 2018; Lokrantz-Bernitz, 2020). Although these values applies to all school subjects, the social studies subjects are central. They guide teaching about social and political topics, the development of the student's capacity and skills as citizens, and their willingness to participate in cooperative and democratic processes (Ljunggren, 2012; Dahlstedt & Olson, 2019). In this section we will highlight formulations in the subject syllabi, to which the topics mentioned by the teachers can be related. A number of observations were made when the topics in this way were analysed in relation to the national syllabus for each social studies subject.

Geography

In geography, the topics mentioned by the teachers corresponded rather well to the core content as it is described in the geography syllabus (Skolverket, 2018, p. 198–202). As can be seen above, at least three teachers mentioned s*ustainable development, climate change, poverty,* and *migration*, which are topics central also to the syllabus. Other topics mentioned by one or two teachers can be seen as specific subsets of general themes in the syllabus. Examples are *littering* and *trafficking*, which might be related to the syllabus themes 'environment' and 'migration'.

Almost all the controversial topics that were mentioned uniquely in geography were also stated in the syllabus. The only controversial topic that was not included in the syllabus is *borders*, but the concept can be connected to the syllabus contents by its use of terms such as 'place', 'name geography' and 'maps'. It can also be noted that 'borders' is in the national syllabus for civics.

Were there topics or areas in the syllabus that none of the responding teachers found controversial? Yes, the contents in the section on 'Geography, its methods, concepts and ways of working' (Skolverket, 2018, p. 202) appeared to be non-controversial for the teachers. However, some terms mentioned as controversial by the teachers can be seen as examples of what the syllabus calls 'central concepts', such as *borders, migration,* and *access to water.* Also the area 'vulnerable areas and risks and threats posed by nature, such as flooding, droughts and earthquakes, and the consequences of this on the natural and culture landscape' (Skolverket, 2018, p. 200) appeared to be non-controversial as none of the topics mentioned by the teachers were in any obvious way related to this area.

History

The controversial topics that the teachers mentioned for history were mainly coherent with topics mentioned as core contents in the national syllabus (Skolverket, 2018, p. 208–2013). Both the survey and the syllabus include *the Holocaust, genocide,* and *imperialism/colonialism* as well as *nationalism, racism, dictatorship,* and *equality*. The category *use and writing of history* appeared in both the syllabus and the teachers' responses, although it is formulated in profoundly many different ways.

Topics mentioned by the teachers (not exclusively in history) included *islamophobia, antisemitism,* and *antiziganism*. These are not specifically named in the national syllabus, but can be seen as concretisations of the general syllabus formulations 'racism' and/or 'oppression'. The teachers mentioned *war* and *conflicts,* terms that are at the same level of abstraction as the curriculum text, but the teachers also mentioned specific examples, such as *the conflict between Israel and Palestine*.

In some cases, the teachers stated controversial topics on a more general level of abstraction than the curriculum text. Some teachers mentioned *Nazism* and *communism*, where the curriculum states that Swedish schools shall teach pupils about 'The holocaust and the Gulag' (Skolverket, 2018, p. 212), which, although not explicitly mentioned in the syllabus, are related to Nazi and communist ideologies. Some teachers also mentioned very broad phenomena, such as *ethnicity, migration, globalization,* and *terrorism*.

As in geography, some areas in the history syllabus appeared to be non-controversial in teaching, for example, the historical periods before 1900. Approaches and concepts mentioned by the syllabus that are unique to the field of history – 'criticism of sources', 'explanation' and the epoch names – were not controversial to the teachers. A final observation is that economic aspects of historic events or processes appeared less controversial than political aspects.

Civics

In civics, both the national syllabus (Skolverket, 2018, p. 227–232) and the teachers mention *democracy, equality, minorities, crime, political parties, freedom of speech,* and *distribution of resources*. The teachers also mentioned specific isms or political ideologies as controversial: *nationalism, feminism, extremism, terrorism, racism, antisemitism, antiziganism,* and *antisamitism*[1]. Some topics were very general, such as *social issues, relations,* and *economy*. Many topics were mentioned that are tangibly more specific than the syllabus text, for example, *begging, abortion, taxation of fuels, HBTQ, #metoo, prostitution,* and *Israel-Palestine*.

Democracy is the only term mentioned by the teachers that can be found with the exact same wording in the national syllabus for civics. The teachers' controversial topics additionally included *social issues* and *distribution of resources*. It is not obvious that the teachers' terms *drugs* and *mental illness* are part of the national syllabus.

[1] Oppression of the indigenous Sami people in Sweden.

However, these terms can be connected to the core content in the syllabus described as 'Youth identity, lifestyles and wellbeing and how this is affected by such factors as socio-economic background, gender and sexual orientation" (Skolverket, 2018, p. 231).

A few areas in the civics syllabus appeared to be controversial to a limited extent for teachers. Even though some of the teachers touched upon economy and its distribution as controversial, which is rather substantial in the syllabus (Skolverket, 2018, p. 232), it appeared to be a marginal aspect in relation to all other controversial topics mentioned. The same was found for working-life issues and political systems in Sweden and Europe.

The theme 'information and communication' (Skolverket, 2018, p. 231) appeared to be considered controversial to a limited extent by the teachers. *Social media* was mentioned by one teacher in relation to personal offence. However, some mentioned *freedom of speech*, which might codify what is determined as controversial in media.

Religion

The syllabus for religion includes general phrases such as 'how religions and other conceptions of life/world views/philosophical perspectives can form people's identities and ways of living', 'everyday moral dilemmas', and 'conflicts and opportunities in secular and pluralistic societies, for example, freedom of religion, sexuality. and understandings of equality' (Skolverket, 2018, 219). The teachers mentioned the same topics – *freedom of religion*, *identity*, and how religion influences one's personal life, sexuality, or moral dilemmas. However, they also mentioned a range of controversial topics that are clearly more specific than the wording in the syllabus, for example, *veganism*, *HBTQ*, *veils*, *assisted euthanasia*, and *death penalty*.

A distinctly controversial topic concerns *Islam*, which is mentioned by many teachers and is also included as a topic in the syllabus. Some mention *islamophobia* instead, which is not included in the syllabus but might be related to the syllabus term 'religious oppression'. Among the subject-specific terms that the teachers used, *freedom of religion* and *ethical/moral dilemmas* are mentioned also in the national syllabus for religion. *Atheism* might correspond to 'secular worldviews'. *Assisted euthanasia* and *veils* are not explicitly mentioned in the syllabus but can be regarded as examples of the phenomenon mentioned, whereas *fundamentalism* and the dimension religious beliefs–science are not explicitly mentioned in the syllabus.

It appeared in the responses that aspects of Christianity or differences within Christianity are deemed less controversial by the teachers than differences between Christianity and Islam. However, it seems the other way around in the syllabus where Christianity and different aspects of it are given much more space than the religion's relation to Islam or Islam itself (Skolverket, 2018, p. 221–222).

The syllabus mentions 'rites', but that is not mentioned among controversial topics by teachers. However, respondent topics that might be considered examples of rites include *veils* and *kosher/halal slaughter*. Secular worldviews other than *atheism* were not identified as controversial.

Subject comparisons

This section presents the outcomes from two comparative analytical procedures. The first procedure is a subject comparison of the topics identified by the teachers in the survey. The other is a subject comparative analysis of the detected relations of these topics to the syllabi. Findings are also discussed in relation to previous research.

Subject comparison: teachers' topics

Some topics were present in more than one subject. Two topics were mentioned at least once in all four subjects: *conflict* and *society*. Topics that were mentioned at least once in three different subjects are: *Islam, terrorism, ethics, freedom, politics, rights, equality, racism, sexuality, ethnicity, identity, values,* and *migration*. Many of these topics appear to have a connection to current political and media debates (cf. Misco, 2018), but they are also of such a type that aspects of them would be regarded as controversial in any western society (cf. Camicia, 2008).

Most of these topics were general. Many responses did not provide information about which aspects of topics such as *ethics, sexuality, ethnicity* and *identity* were regarded as controversial. These topics were mostly neutrally valued. In contrast, *terrorism* had a clearly negative connotation seen from a democratic point of view. There is usually little debate about the moral dismissal of terrorism (cf. Camicia, 2008). The controversial character of terrorism lies in that the phenomenon renders strong emotional reactions as a threat to personal security and liberal values such as openness and tolerance.

The respondents generally considered 'isms' to be controversial. Examples of isms mentioned are *(religious) extremism* (in religion and civics), *nationalism* (in history and civics), *racism, antisemitism, terrorism* (all but geography), *fundamentalism, atheism* (in religion), and *feminism* (in history and civics). We interpreted the respondents' focus on isms as reasonable, since inherent in isms is a promotion of certain values on behalf of other values, which can cause value-based controversy and conflict.

Many of the controversial topics were mentioned in one subject only. For example, the respondents mentioned *democracy* as a controversial topic only in civics, and *climate change* and *sustainability* only in geography. These concepts are included in the common section in the national curriculum, which governs all subjects. *Democracy* is included in the syllabus not only for civics but also for history and religion, and it seems reasonable that democracy could be a thought of as a controversial topic in all of the social studies subjects. Judging from the responses, only in civics is democracy regarded as controversial. In a similar fashion, *climate change* and *sustainability* could be seen as controversial in other subjects as well, but they were not identified as controversial in the responses. These findings relate, though, to an established division of topics – climate and sustainable development traditionally belong to the field of geography while democracy belongs to civics (Molin, 2006; Larsson, 2012). This implies that subject culture – what teachers understand as the subject – might overrule the formulations in the syllabi. This aligns with previous research, which has noticed the importance of subject culture (cf. Kristiansson, 2017; Olsson, 2016; Goodson, 1993).

Subject comparison: teachers' topics in relation to the syllabi

A substantial correspondence between the controversial topics that the teachers identified and the subject syllabi was found. This finding follows a conclusion from the evaluation of social studies teaching in grades 7-9 where teachers in general are 'faithful' to the syllabi and seldom go beyond the described core content (Skolinspektionen, 2013: 13). This implies that it would not be significantly problematic for the respondents to include controversial topics in their perception of syllabi core content.

However, these topics were often presented at different levels of abstraction. In some cases, the teachers identified controversial topics in more general terms than the national syllabi, such as *identity* or *history of religion*. However, it was more common in all four subjects that the topics identified by the teachers were more specific than in the syllabi. This would be expected as a consequence of the logic of the transformation process from institutional (curriculum) to the instructional (teacher) level (cf. Bråten, 2013). This discrepancy in abstraction, between the topics stated by the respondents and the syllabus, was especially obvious in religion (cf. Falkevall, 2010). The wording in religion seems to be at the highest level of abstraction compared to the other syllabi.

The topics mentioned for each subject varied in terms of internal coherence. Many teachers in geography, history, and religion mentioned certain topics that are unique to the subject. In contrast, only a few topics in civics are subject specific; the majority of topics mentioned in civics are also found in other subjects. Our results seem to correspond with previous studies on the social studies subjects, which indicate that the boundaries of the different subjects are more or less porous (Kristiansson, 2014; Sandahl, 2014) When interpreted using concepts by Bernstein, civics has been found to be the least classified. (Ledman, 2015, p. 21).

Geography stood out as most coherent subject in the way words and phrases are used in the national syllabus and by the respondents. Previous research indicates that the extent to which teachers independently interpret a syllabus is related to level of education and teaching experience (Helleve, et al., 2018). We also know that geography teachers, on an aggregated level, have less subject education than teachers in the other social studies subjects (Molin et al, 2015). This could be a possible reason for the finding that the geography topics in the survey were closest to the syllabus text.

Almost all controversial topics that the teachers identified could be found in or related to the syllabi. The opposite holds equally true; almost everything in the syllabi core contents could be connected to topics that the teachers consider controversial. Only a few content areas in each syllabus did not give rise to controversy; 'disciplinary concepts and methods' in all four subjects were uncontroversial. This is not a surprising finding as the area of disciplinary concepts and methods is more of a referential type than one that explicitly deals with the surrounding society. Other seemingly uncontroversial areas were related to Western culture and religion, older history, media, and economy.

As media, filter bubbles, and fake news are highly topical today (cf. Truedson ed., 2018), it is surprising that the civics syllabus area 'information and communication'

was not related to any of the controversial topics identified in the survey. We also find it surprising that only few of the teachers mentioned economy as controversial, although it is a substantial theme in the syllabi, especially civics. Economy is integral to the understanding of many of the other controversial topics mentioned by the teachers, which might be one reason for its relative lack of attention. Previous research indicates that economy is a theme that teachers tend to find difficult and where they feel they have insufficient knowledge (Modig, 2017; Löfström & van den Berg, 2013; Kristiansson, 2014).

Concluding discussion

Our findings show that teachers deal with a wide range of topics that they find controversial. There is a great deal of correspondence between these topics and the subject content presented in the national syllabi. Almost everything in the core contents at the institutional level can be connected to topics that the teachers identified as controversial; only a few areas in each syllabus do not give rise to controversy at the instructional level. Subject comparisons supported these findings as the distribution of topics over the subjects generally aligned with the syllabi. However, there were also interesting differences, which we related to aspects of subject culture.

Even though the survey did not offer detailed information about how the respondents actually perceived controversy, it is nevertheless possible to relate the body of responses to the different types of controversy defined by Hand (2007; 2008). Using his three criteria, we found that the epistemic criterion – people defending opposing views that are both rationally possible – provides limited clarification. Hardly any of the topics that the teachers denoted as controversial can be understood as epistemically controversial. One example is *climate change*. Given the volumes of research supporting the reality of climate change, it is not epistemologically challenging to conclude that climate change is happening and that the changes result from human activities. Nevertheless, climate change was commonly identified as a controversial topic by the respondents in geography.

The political criterion, as defined by Hand, says that controversial topics are those that are not embraced by the public values of the democratic state. The values and norms stated in the national curriculum reflect a general liberal democratic worldview (Ljunggren, 2012; Skolverket 2018; Lokrantz-Bernitz 2020). These values should not be considered controversial according to Hand and his formulation of the political criterion. In the responses by the teachers, however, these values and norms were identified as controversial topics, two examples being *democracy* and *equality*.

The behavioural criterion identifies any conflict among groups of people as controversial. This appears as the most relevant aspect of controversy identified in the responses as many of the mentioned topics seem to be controversial in this behavioural sense and reflect ongoing public debates. In some cases the respondents' statements of controversial topics to our assessment corresponded more with topical public debate than with the written curriculum, for example in the responses *#metoo, refugee matters*

and *terrorism*, which are not mentioned specifically in any syllabus but can be interpreted as specified examples of syllabus content descriptions.

In general, the topics that the teachers identified as controversial aligned well with the definitions developed by the Council of Europe (2015), as well as with Bailey (1975), Stradling (1985), Hess (2009), and Ljunggren et al (2015). Of course, we framed our survey in this direction. However, the teachers generally thought of controversial topics as publicly disputed areas where groups of people disagree and/or get upset, rather than issues that are controversial in the epistemic or political aspects argued by Hand. In line with the critics of Hand's definition (Warnick & Smith, 2014; Misco, 2012; Evans et al, 2000; Camicia, 2008), our study indicate that Hand's argument that his criteria can be used to guide teaching is not obviously valid.

As many curriculum theorists highlights, the curriculum is expressed differently on different levels (Bråten, 2013; Gericke et al, 2018; Bernstein, 2000; Englund, 1997). Using Bråten's (2013) terminology, controversial topics as stated by the teachers appears on the instructional level, indicating how teachers interpret issues of content. Our study show that these interpretations largely correspond to the official, institutional curriculum expressed in the national curriculum texts.

Hand's normative, philosophical definitions and criteria must not necessarily be seen as mistaken, but might perhaps be useful on an institutional level, for example when formulating new curriculum instructions. As a guide to understand teacher's thinking on the instructional level they do not readily apply. It seems reasonable to conclude that not only philosophical reasoning about the essence of controversiality, but also additional considerations are involved on the instructional level.

These conclusions, however, call for further interpretation. In completing this study, we discovered a need for theoretical development towards understanding the role of controversial issues in teaching social studies. An explanation of what is identified as controversial for teachers must be related to what takes place among the pupils and in everyday realities of the classrooms. In several of the teacher responses, we saw indications of a view that if something becomes, or risks becoming, controversial among pupils in the classroom, the teachers will consider it a controversial issue. One example is this comment from the survey: 'I wish to add that I don't see many of these topics as controversial, but some pupils might'. Everyday realities in the classrooms seem to be more important than what happens in society, politics, or public debate. An issue that is not controversial in an epistemic sense, in relation to political debates or by causing conflicts between pupils might still be identified as controversial by teachers. *Slavery* is an example of this. Slavery was identified by the teachers as a controversial topic despite that there is hardly any public controversy on slavery in Western societies from any of Hand's criterion. However, slavery collides with strong ethical principles and presumably with many pupils' personal morals, which can cause emotional reactions. We found that the keyword is *emotions*; i.e. an issue is considered controversial if it triggers, or might trigger, emotions among pupils. This corresponds with the findings of Blennow (2019), who has examined social studies teaching in a wider sense. She concludes that there is a dissonance between the role emotions are *supposed* to play in

social studies teaching and the role emotions actually *do* play. Hence, we argue that the emotional potential of a controversial topic deserves further attention.

By highlighting this emotional aspect, we wish to join the emerging discussion within the field of sustainability teaching about the role of emotions in teaching and learning about climate and sustainability issues. It has been observed that emotions come forth when environmental and climate issues are discussed in the classroom, and that teachers might find strong emotions among pupils difficult to manage (cf. Manni et al., 2017). It has also been noted that the prevalent theoretical and educational models, by and large, ignore emotional aspects and their impact on teaching and learning (Ojala, 2019). The need for teachers to develop their capacity to deal with emotions has been asserted (Ojala, 2019) in order to help pupils turn strong emotions into political readiness or action (Ojala, 2012; Amsler, 2011). This is relevant for all instruction in controversial issues (Levy, 2019). Thus, we encourage the development of theoretical perspectives that embrace emotional aspects in understanding controversial issues in education.

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