



## ARTICLE

### **What does subject-integrated teaching on key global issues in the social studies subjects in Swedish upper primary school look like, and what does it imply for teachers and students?**

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## **What does subject-integrated teaching on key global issues in the social studies subjects in Swedish upper primary school look like, and what does it imply for teachers and students?**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to describe and analyse two cases in Swedish upper primary school, of subject-integrated theme works in social studies subjects, specifically on key global issues. This research was conducted in the context of subject-integrated teaching in social studies subjects being currently quite rare, and that social studies subjects are sometimes neglected in early school years. However, based on previous research, subject-integrated teaching in these subjects may promote students' learning on key societal and global issues. Working with two student groups in two schools, this study was based on classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and students' written reflections. In the study, it is concluded that in subject-integrated theme work, it is important to permit the subjects to integrate in a rewarding way, with careful and well-thought-out teacher planning. However, there is also a need for openness and flexibility in ongoing teaching, especially when it may be conducive for students' learning to link to other subjects' content. In this manner, a comprehensive view of the social studies subjects can promote students' interest in and commitment to learning on key global issues and on the social subjects overall, particularly regarding their common core. Thus, subject-integrated teaching can develop students' global citizenship skills and their will to engage in solving key global problems, at present and in the future.

**Keywords:** integrated teaching, social studies subjects, key global issues, overarching curriculum objectives, global citizenship skills.

## **Introduction**

Subject-integrated teaching - the interaction of at least two subjects in the same teaching context - in the social studies subjects are considered to have the potential to give students a holistic understanding of the society and the world (Evans, 2004; Jorgensen, 2014). Subject-integrated teaching, often termed as curriculum integration, is often linked to more overarching knowledge (Ferguson-Patrick, Reynolds and Macqueen, 2018), so that subject-integration is considered able to promote learning of such skills as citizenship and collaboration (Drake and Reid, 2018).

However, in the current Swedish national curriculum for the Swedish nine-year compulsory school (Lgr 11, National Agency for Education [NAE], 2011), subject-integrated teaching plays a somewhat low-key role. Concerning the social studies subjects (civics, geography, history, religious studies), however, it is assumed in the national curriculum that in Years 4-6 (upper primary school), the subjects should be separated into individual subjects (Claesson and Lindblad, 2013). This tendency to think that teaching in the social studies should be subject-separated, exists also in other Nordic countries (Samuelsson, 2014) and internationally (VanSledright, 2011). However, language in Lgr 11, the national curriculum for Swedish compulsory school, calls for subject-integrated teaching; for example the teacher should “organise and carry out the work so that the student has opportunities to work subject-integrated” (NAE, 2011, p.8). Olovsson and Näsström (2018) showed, however, based on a survey of 113 schools, that more than 40 percent of these schools do not work in a subject-integrated manner in the social studies subjects in upper primary school. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2013) stated that the extent and quality of subject-integrated teaching in the social studies subjects in Years 7-9 need to be increased, at many schools, to improve students’ opportunities to enhance holistic understanding in major knowledge areas, such as global issues.

At the same time as subject-integrated teaching in social studies is being emphasised, for example, to increase knowledge of global issues - social studies as a whole, in upper primary school, is considered somewhat overlooked (Bladh, Stolare and Kristiansson, 2018). Barnes and Scoffham (2017) emphasised, from an English perspective, that the key significance of these subjects consists particularly of highlighting the global dimension in early school years, in a world with considerable challenges. These subjects, the ‘common core’ of which is considered to be citizenship education (cf. Ross, Mathison and Vinson, 2014; Barton and Avery, 2016), are, as noted, sometimes overlooked, which may imply negative consequences, for the individual and for society (Barnes and Scoffham, 2017; Barton, 2017). Key global issues, such as sustainable development, human rights and migration, are often connected to several social studies subjects. Regarding such global issues, integrated social studies teaching is considered to support in-depth learning and increase students’ understanding (Rennie, Venville and Wallace, 2012; Ferguson-Patrick et al., 2018; Blanck, 2018). Teaching on key global issues in an integrated manner can thus provide global citizenship skills (cf. Zong, Wilson and Yao Quashiga, 2008).

This study, which deals with subject-integrated teaching in the social studies subjects, on key global issues in Swedish upper primary school, was carried out in view of the conditions described above. The study is expected to make a valuable research contribution, by shedding light on specific conditions of

a Swedish context, which have been researched to a small extent in previous studies. However, it will naturally contribute new knowledge from an international perspective, based on the many parallels drawn to international circumstances and research. The investigated teaching was conducted in two classes in two schools in Year 5 (with students aged 10-11 years), in two thematic units into which social studies subjects were integrated. The units consisted of 16 lessons, extended over about three weeks at each school. The thematic units were titled 'UN and the children' and 'The global goals'. They had similar educational content and focused mainly on human rights, people's living conditions and sustainable development. The article, drawing on indigenous insights, intends, in line with the content of the call regarding this special issue of *Education in the North*, to contribute to a deeper conversation on how to find ways to re-evaluate education. The study explores how a more holistic view of teaching social studies subjects can take place, regarding key global issues.

### **Subject-integrated teaching**

Ideas about subject-integration in teaching have existed internationally since the beginning of the 20th century, presented most prominently by progressivist thinkers (e.g. Dewey, 1956). In Sweden, since the foundation of the compulsory school in 1962, separated and integrated teaching of subjects have always existed as alternatives for how to organise teaching, and this has, perhaps, chiefly been the case in the social studies subjects. However, in Years 1-6 as a whole there has been a greater focus on subject-integration, and in Years 7-9 on subject-separation.

Nevertheless, from 2011, with the insertion of Lgr 11 (NAE, 2011), there has, based on the steering documents, been a greater focus on the individual social studies subjects (Samuelsson, 2014). With the introduction of Lgr 11, the social studies subjects were clearly separated, even in upper primary school, with their own core content and knowledge requirements and grading in Year 6. Concurrently, Lgr 11 includes language that advocates subject-integrated teaching, particularly in Lgr 11's overarching objectives, which include "Fundamental values and tasks of the school" and "Overall goals and guidelines", respectively. It is, for example, stated that the principal is responsible for ensuring that "...teaching in different subjects integrates cross-disciplinary areas of knowledge" (p.17). In several places, the overarching objectives have clear links to the social studies subjects, as for example with, "... knowledge of society's laws and norms, human rights and democratic values in school and in society" (p.12). However, the overarching objectives of Lgr 11 can sometimes fall into oblivion with respect to everyday teaching, thereby producing a contradiction between the overarching objectives and the syllabus goals, expressed in each subject. From an international perspective, Evans (2004) advocated social studies as an overall subject, but clearly stated that for a number of years in the US, from a federal perspective, there has been a steering towards subject-separation, and Evans pointed out that this has gone hand in hand with major assessment reforms.

### **Theoretical and Policy context**

#### **Social studies**

The term social studies is used in different ways in different countries' school systems, and varies, for example, depending on various views on subjects (Barton and Avery, 2016). In the US, there is a

general consensus in the view that material linked to geography, history and civics is closely related (Evans, 2004; Barton and Avery, 2016), "An overarching focus of social studies education, [...] is the development of students' understanding of societal structures, relationships and issues" (Barton and Avery, 2016, p.986). Harris, Harrison and McFahn (2011) were on a similar track, regarding citizenship, geography, history and religious education in English secondary school, in which the subjects are called the humanities: "As the subjects are all to do with human activity there is an emphasis on understanding ourselves and others, and being able to fit into and contribute to society (Harris et al. 2011, p.16). In particular, these quotes from Harris et al. (2011) and Barton and Avery (2016) quite evidently point to social studies as a means to educate good citizens, for the public good. Regarding the social studies subjects in Sweden, Odenstad (2016) argued that although they have subject-specific features, they also have much in common. A holistic view of the subjects can enable the elucidation of societal issues from different angles, and give students a broader sense of their own knowledge (Odenstad, 2016). These descriptions of commonalities among the social studies subjects are also close to a description of citizenship education (cf. Ross et al., 2014; Barton and Avery, 2016), which can thus be termed as the common core of the social studies subjects.

Concerning social studies in the primary school years, Barton (2017) described social studies as somewhat ignored and noted that teachers sometimes even avoid teaching it. This implies negative consequences, given the importance of social studies, for students' participation in the social world (Barton, 2017). Barnes and Scoffham (2017) emphasised that the humanities subjects in English primary school are set aside, just when target performance and accountability are in the foreground, and when the curriculum has increasingly narrowed to mathematics and English. Such global challenges as climate change and inequalities evoke a need to strengthen the global dimension in the primary curriculum, with support from the humanities subjects (Barnes and Scoffham, 2017). Given the global challenges, global citizenship skills are needed (cf. Zong et al., 2008). These are closely related to new ways of viewing knowledge and 21st century skills (Ferguson-Patrick et al., 2018), but also to Beanes's (1997) view of curriculum integration, concerning teaching in real life and world issues.

Regarding global issues, often processed in teaching in social studies subjects, Klafki (2018) described epoch-typical key problems, such as environmental issues and inequality, which are important for the global community to have insight into and prepare to solve. Students must achieve deep knowledge of, and become interested in, these issues to enable their involvement in solving them (Blanck, 2018). Several subject perspectives might be needed to sufficiently understand these issues.

Four Arrows (2014) pointed out that such global problems as ecological crises and violence in society require teaching in social studies based on a 'partnership' of Western and Indigenous perspectives of knowledge. In particular, indigenous perspectives can provide a focus on relationships among human beings, as well as with the surrounding living environment. Four Arrows (2014) advocated a holistic educational approach, and a holistic, tolerant worldview that aims for the public good, for people to live harmonious balanced lives, which can be achieved through a more dialogical approach to social studies (Hammond and Gao, 2002 cited in Four Arrows, 2014, p.173). This implies an education based on, for

example, encouraging collaboration and a future orientation, as well as a learning focus that is connected to the whole.

### Approaches to integration

Subject-integrated teaching can take different forms and there is no unanimity in the terminology of the field (Applebee, Adler and Flihan, 2007; Brough, 2012; Ferguson-Patrick et al., 2018). However, over the years, several models have been created that show approaches to subject-integrated teaching.

Gresnigt et al.(2014) presented a model, based on other models in the research. Descriptions of these approaches to integration, according to Gresnigt et al. (2014), can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of approaches to integration (Gresnigt et al., 2014, p.52)

Name	Description
Isolated/cellular/fragmented	Separate and distinct subjects or disciplines.
Connected/aware	Explicit connection is made between the separate disciplines.
Nested/fused	A skill or knowledge from another discipline is targeted within one subject/discipline. Content from one subject may be used to enrich the teaching of another subject.
Multidisciplinary	Two or more subject areas are organised around the same theme or topic. The disciplines preserve their identity.
Interdisciplinary	There may be no reference to individual disciplines or subjects. Skills and concepts are emphasised across the subject area.
Transdisciplinary	The curriculum transcends the disciplines, the focus is on the field of knowledge as exemplified in the real world.

Concerning relationships between subjects in social studies teaching in Swedish upper primary school, Kristiansson (2017) launched the concepts of subject markers (aspects that make a subject visible), subject-switching (when a subject comes into teaching taking place in another subject) and subject-overlapping (when the contribution of an individual subject is not clear). However, Kristiansson's (2017) study was not conducted specifically on the basis of a subject-integrated context, but dealt with how teachers described the relationships among the subjects in their teaching.

In social studies teaching that formally takes place in one subject, Claesson and Lindblad (2013) have studied when Swedish teachers take support from other subjects. The authors emphasised that concepts treated in one subject can be elucidated and explained in a clearer way, if connections to other subjects are made. This was emphasised on the basis that, within each social studies subject, there is an "internal tension" in the sense that some elements in one subject are very close to, or represent a bridge towards, elements from other subjects (Claesson and Lindblad, 2013).

### **Subject-integration in relation to teaching and learning**

Advantages that are usually asserted regarding subject-integrated teaching are that it can increase student engagement, make teaching more interesting, facilitate reflection in more general contexts (Applebee et al., 2007) and that it can improve students' overall understanding (Svingby, 1991; Evans, 2004). More complex approaches to integration can increase teacher motivation (Gresnigt et al., 2014) as well as benefit students' learning of more complex knowledge (Gresnigt et al., 2014; Blanck, 2014). Blanck (2014) called this synthesised knowledge and referred to knowledge found in the overarching objectives of Lgr 11. Gresnigt et al. (2014) and Ferguson-Patrick et al. (2018) argued that general knowledge is an important element of 21st century knowledge. Drake and Reid (2018) pointed out that 21st century skills can be taught effectively with the support of integrated teaching, and that several of these skills, such as communication and citizenship, are found in overarching curriculum objectives in many countries. Integrated teaching is furthermore often connected to teaching methods based on dialogue and cooperation (Fenwick, Minty and Priestley, 2013; Ferguson-Patrick et al., 2018).

However, Klausen (2011a, b) argued that cooperative methods can sometimes have unclear purposes, and may mainly be a means to promote students' individual competences. Regarding subject-integrated teaching in relation to subject-separated teaching, Applebee et al. (2007) and Rennie et al. (2012) argued that the teaching forms should not be seen as mutually exclusive and emphasised that both can add important values to teaching. Harris et al. (2011) pointed out that integration in the humanities subjects can enrich teaching but should be done with some consideration:

"[...] much can be gained from bringing these together. This can only happen successfully where careful attention is paid to the value of each subject and ensuring that meaningful rather than artificial links are made between subjects." (Harris et al., 2011, p.4)

Some asserted disadvantages of subject-integrated teaching are the risk that some subjects will dominate over others and that the focus will be on superficial knowledge (Applebee et al., 2007; Fenwick et al., 2013). Another risk is that it can become more difficult to assess students' learning (Bernstein, 2000; Harris et al., 2011).

### **Subject-integrated teaching, in results-focused education**

An Australian study (Ferguson-Patrick et al., 2018) described integration in Global Education that emphasises global perspectives with such themes as social justice and human rights. Ferguson-Patrick et al. (2018) described a conflict between results-focused education and the learning of more overarching objectives for education. Ferguson-Patrick et al. (2018) concluded that work on the global perspective and curriculum integration has been neglected in Australian schools. To address this, according to the authors, appropriate applications of integrated teaching on global issues should be more clearly described in the steering documents.

Priestley (2009) argued that the fragmented approach to teaching the social studies subjects (history, geography and modern studies) in Scottish secondary schools may imply that the learning quality in these subjects is narrowed, mainly because connections between these closely related subjects will

therefore not be made. A more integrated approach, together with dialogue-oriented teaching, can lead to more meaningful learning, and enhance students' interest in societal issues (Priestley, 2009).

In connection with challenges of the 21st century, and a transition to more generic forms of knowledge with the introduction of a new Scottish curriculum, Fenwick et al. (2013) studied teaching in social studies in a secondary school, in which various attempts were made to integrate the subjects. One reason for the integration was that it can make it easier to bring together different perspectives, for example in education for sustainable development and citizenship. One result of the integration was its promotion of the development of skills common to all subjects.

## **Method**

### **Aim and research questions**

The aim of the study is to describe and analyse two cases of subject-integrated thematic units in Swedish upper primary school, in the social studies subjects, on key global issues.

The research questions are:

- How are the subject-integrated thematic units carried out?
- How do the social studies subjects appear in teaching?
- What does the teaching imply in terms of teachers' and students' approaches to the taught key global issues?

### **Selection and contact of schools**

The two Year 5 classes in the study are located in two schools (herein for anonymity's sake referred to as Elm school and Oak school), in the same municipality in northern Sweden. The class in Elm school consisted of 16 pupils (9 girls and 7 boys) and the class in Oak school consisted of 24 pupils (10 girls and 14 boys).

This study was part of a larger research and development project on subject-integrated social studies teaching in the two schools. Regarding the selection of the schools, initial contact was made with school district managers, who provided suggestions on schools and principals to contact. Thereafter, contact was made with two principals, and project frames suggested by the researcher were sent to the two schools. According to the frames, thematic units would be conducted and involve integration of the social studies subjects, in an optional way, but geography and civics should be included. How the subjects should relate to each other, or the extent of the subjects, should be left entirely to the teachers' discretion. One teacher at each school, who was interested in developing their social studies teaching, agreed to participate in the project. The teachers were encouraged by the researcher, based on the described frames, to plan the thematic units based on how they wished to develop their teaching. Thus, the teachers were completely responsible for the planning and implementation of the thematic units, separately. Besides suggesting the project frames, the researcher did not participate in the planning or implementation of these thematic units. Subject-integrated teaching overall was largely novel for the teachers, even though the Oak school teacher had previously tried it, on a smaller scale, at another school, and both teachers had previously reflected on the possibility of integrating subjects to develop

teaching. Both teachers chose, in their planning, to focus on geography and civics, but in the implemented teaching, there were also elements of history and religious studies. In both schools, social studies teaching is usually, apart from these thematic units, conducted in subject-separated form.

The Elm school teacher is referred to as Eva; she had about 6 years of experience as a teacher in upper primary school. The Oak school teacher, referred to as Lena, had about 15 years of experience. Both teachers were trained in all social studies subjects and taught those subjects for the entire time they were teaching in upper primary school.

### **Fieldwork and implementation**

The fieldwork was carried out October-December, 2017. The data collection methods, which constitute the empirical material, were classroom observations, students' written reflections and individual interviews with students and teachers. To some extent, working assignments have also been included in the analysed material. The approach to data collection was generally aligned with principles that characterise the ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The focus of the observations was the content that was taught, the classroom communication and the teaching methods. The observations were carried out over 16 lessons, each of which was 25-70 minutes. The observations were documented with the support of a running protocol. The recording concerning teaching content and classroom communication took place in the order in which the events occurred, with no categorising supported by, for example, columns in the protocol. Teaching content and communication were somewhat difficult to distinguish, as the communication often included the taught content. These notes were, on later occasions, reviewed and structured in categories. Changes in teaching methods were easier to distinguish and were clearly marked in the protocol. To be able to follow classroom communication that took place in groups, a specific student group was selected and observed during group work.

Written reflections of 39 students were generated after completion of the thematic units, based on a number of questions formulated by the researcher. The questions were aimed mainly at ascertaining the students' thoughts about the thematic unit, including what they had learned and how they viewed connections between the thematic unit and the social studies subjects. Semi-structured (Bryman, 2016) interviews were conducted with sixteen students. Questions asked to the students, were for example, about what in the teaching content was considered most difficult to understand, what was most interesting to learn, and in what way the students preferred to work in social studies - subject-integrated or subject-separated? In addition, specific questions were asked about working tasks within the thematic unit 'UN and the children' and 'Global Goals', to determine whether the students considered the tasks integrated or not and whether, and how, the students experienced these tasks as promoting their own understanding. The teacher interviews, largely semi-structured, were conducted before and after the implementation of the thematic units.

Based on the collected material, in-depth analysis was performed in a way that resembles thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and the three stages of coding, thematisation and refinement. The coding work was carried out by gathering material that was considered to be connected, into categories,

and the categories were assembled into themes. Throughout the analysis work, theoretical concepts were used to understand the collected material. Moreover, the core content from the national syllabuses (NAE, 2011) in civics and geography, on which the teaching was mainly based, served as a guiding principle in the analysis of the classroom observations.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council (2017). Teachers, children and children's guardians were informed about the purpose and approach of the overall study. Written consent for the children's participation in interviews and reflection writing was obtained from the guardians, who were informed that no participants in the study can be identified in reports of the results; they were further informed that the collected material would be protected in such a way that no outsiders can access it.

## Findings

Initially, core content from Lgr 11 in the thematic units on key global issues is presented, and in Tables 2 and 3, the completed subject-integrated teaching are described, with a subsequent description of the teaching. Thereafter, a description is given, concerning the subjects' appearance and integration. Eventually, there is a section regarding the implications of the subject-integrated teaching for the students and teachers. In sum, there are three main sections of the findings, which are divided according to the study's research questions.

Both thematic units were planned based on national syllabuses' (Lgr 11) purposes and core content from civics and geography. However, there was an openness in the teaching of material and core content, which were also from history and religious studies.

### Core content from syllabuses in Lgr 11, according to teachers' planning

#### *Civics*

- Economic conditions for children in Sweden and in different parts of the world. Some causes and consequences of prosperity and poverty. (*Elm school, Oak school*)
- Human rights, their meaning and importance, including the rights of the child. (*Elm school, Oak school*)
- The family and different forms of cohabitation. Gender roles and gender equality. (*Elm school*)
- Social security networks for children in different life situations. (*Elm school*)
- What democracy is and how democratic decisions are made. How individuals and groups can influence decisions. (*Oak school*)

#### *Geography*

- How choices and priorities in everyday life can impact the environment and contribute to sustainable development. (*Elm school, Oak school*)
- Unequal living conditions in the world, such as varying access to education, and some of the underlying causes of this. Work of individual people and organisations to improve people's living conditions. (*Elm school, Oak school*).

**How are the subject-integrated thematic units carried out?**

*UN and the children (Elm school)*

Table 2: Completed teaching in 'UN and the children'

<b>Lesson</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Methods and tasks</b>	<b>Subjects included, based on core content in Lgr 11</b>
1–2	Students' prior knowledge of the UN. What does the UN do for children?  Concepts: Human rights, children's rights.	Teacher review. Film and group discussion.  Whole-class discussion. Poem writing: 'what do children need to live a good life?'	Civics Geography History
3	Human rights.  Concepts: Freedom of speech, democracy.	Dialogue in whole-class.  Group discussion: prioritisation of children's rights.	Civics Geography
4–5	Children's rights and discrimination.  Women's and girls' rights. "Life's lottery", students' work with a country.	Presentation of assignment from lesson 3. Dialogue and discussion regarding concepts.  Teacher review and dialogue. Students' comments are written on the board.	Civics Geography Religious studies
6–8	Work with countries, based on existing risks e.g. poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy.	Teacher review. Group work with countries.	Civics Geography History Religious studies

*The global goals (Oak school)*

Table 3: Completed teaching in 'The global goals'

<b>Lesson</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Methods and tasks</b>	<b>Subjects included, based on core content in Lgr 11</b>
1	"Malala's story", about a struggle for girls' rights. Global goals as a whole.	Processing of "Malala's story". Writing: 'what would I like to fight for, based on the global goals?'	Civics Geography Religious studies
2	"Quality education for all" and equity. Why is education important? Schooling in Ethiopia.	Teachers' review. Students reflect with 'learnmates' and in groups.	Civics Geography
3	Comparisons between Ethiopian and Swedish schools. Students' own thoughts on "quality education for all".	Discussion, based on teachers' questions. Students produce own text.	Civics Geography
4–5	Concepts: prosperity, sustainable development.  Gender equality and reducing inequality.	Teacher review, discussion. Work with concept-boxes.  Whole-class discussion. Students produce own text.	Civics Geography History Religious studies
6	Concepts: resources and living conditions.	Teacher review and dialogue.	Civics Geography
7–8	Human Rights. The concept of democracy.	Discussion with 'learnmates' and in whole-class.	Civics Geography History

The teaching in the two schools was, to a great extent, based on groupwork. In Elm school (teacher: Eva), the group size was usually 3-4 students. In Oak school (teacher: Lena), students often discussed with 1-3 mates, and the teaching was based mainly upon thoughts and methods related to cooperative learning (Kagan and Stenlev, 2017). In both schools, students stated, "During the thematic unit, we work more in groups, usually we most often work individually." This may indicate that the working tasks in this subject-integrated teaching were more suitable for groupwork than for individual work. Eva

commented on this, “I have put in a lot of group assignments in order to give the students opportunities to discuss and thus develop each other’s learning.” In teaching, Eva often emphasised new words and concepts, such as the meanings of ‘malnutrition’ and ‘corporal punishment’. Eva often urged students to “motivate” or “deepen” their thoughts. Lena also allowed the students to reflect on the meaning of concepts and did so similarly to Eva, for example, regarding the concept of ‘poverty’, she encouraged reflection on its consequences for children’s well-being. The concepts that Eva and Lena encouraged students to develop could often be connected to more than one social studies subject, and Eva later explained that she seeks to encourage students to think from different views and not to stop at a first, ‘simple’ explanation of a concept.

A common quote from Lena during students’ discussions was: “Divide the speaking space, let everyone speak!” With this call, Lena aimed to get the students to show respect towards their mates but also pointed out that all group members should be involved, and no one should be left out. Many students emphasised that they learned a lot from the discussions, although other views, particularly from Oak school, also emerged, “How much you learn depends on who you work with” and “Sometimes there is too much talk that does not lead anywhere, then I learn better when I work on my own.” These statements, which questioning groupwork, represent students’ varied views of how learning is best promoted but also raise a question regarding the interplay between collective and individual learning.

#### **How do the social studies subjects appear in teaching?**

The social studies subjects appeared in different ways with regard to the subjects’ core content in Lgr 11. However, civics and geography content was often woven together in such a way that the subject boundaries were barely noticeable. This was true especially for the content on unequal living conditions, economic conditions for children, human rights and sustainable development. Lena emphasised that civics and geography, to a large extent, were interconnected, “They were woven together in that the teaching was about *where* people live together, *how* they cooperate and how society can be improved.” Indications of the interweaving can, for example, be found in students’ assignments, as it appears that some expected responses, consisted of civics and geography at the same time. For example, a country’s location and opportunities to grow in soil could be connected to people’s other living conditions and opportunities to assert their own rights.

However, overall, the content of the thematic units was processed in various ways, regarding the relationship between the subjects. The transitions between different integration approaches were often rather unclear and different approaches even took place pretty much concurrently, often during the same lesson. This can be exemplified through a lesson at Elm school: Eva conducts a review with civics content, but a student asks a question that makes Eva, in her explanation, draw support from content linked to both geography and history. After Eva’s review, the students work on a task, with one of the questions involving content across all four social studies subjects.

The subjects of history and religious studies were not part of teachers’ formal planning, but, at various times in the ongoing teaching, the teachers linked to content that could be connected to core content (Lgr 11) in these subjects. History appeared, for example, in reviews of the origins of the UN and

religious studies was present in descriptions of different living conditions. Lena pointed out, "I used history because we had it in a previous area of work, which could be connected to the global goals." In doing this, Lena showed awareness of the students' prior knowledge, and the extent to which historical knowledge might increase their opportunities to acquire knowledge on the global goals. Overall, most of the content identified in the thematic units was closely associated with parts of the overarching objectives of Lgr 11, which shows the strong connection between these objectives and the content of the social studies subjects.

The observations reveal that teachers and students very rarely used the terms of the individual subjects, e.g. geography. Eva said, "I wanted the students to learn more than if the teaching had concerned one individual subject." Eva argued on concepts, "The idea with many of them is that they will be integrated and give a picture of the whole." When the students reflected on concepts, some students were able to connect, for example, the concepts of living conditions and poverty to all four social studies subjects. A student from Oak school discussed, "Poor living conditions as a child may give you less possibilities later in life. It can be different conditions depending on what you believe in, in different parts of the world, and the conditions have changed throughout history." This statement points out that an overall view of a concept, from several subject perspectives, can provide the students additional learning tools, and thus may provide a greater holistic understanding. Nevertheless, there were also students who argued for subject-separation, "I prefer when the subjects are separated, then it is not as much to keep track of at the same time." This questioning of subject-integration may be due to familiarity with subject-separated teaching but may also be a sign of different students' need for different paths in learning content and concepts.

### **What does the teaching imply in terms of teachers' and students' approaches to the taught key global issues?**

There were several situations and statements from students and teachers that described what the teaching on global issues, implies for them. A student from Oak school reflected, "I learned that there are many problems that need to be solved - such as poverty, a shortage of water and education." Something that many students mentioned was that it was interesting to consider children's lives and problems in other countries. A student from Elm school described, "When I heard that children in some countries have to participate as soldiers in war, I was upset. It is completely crazy!" Eva said, "When teaching is based on children's experiences, the students usually become very interested and motivated to learn." Based on this, children's perspectives as a starting point, appeared to be an effective way to make students show engagement in understanding different living conditions.

In Oak school, students became so engaged that they, for example, continued their discussion outside the classroom after the end of a lesson. The films about Malala, and schooling in Ethiopia, were thought-provoking, and through the films, the students were made aware of differences that exist between children's living conditions. During discussions on this, one of the students exclaimed, "All children in the world should be allowed to go to school!" Moreover, on the same occasion, some students expressed to the teacher that they wanted to raise money, or in some other way support children having difficulties. From this, it can be asserted that the students showed empathy, based on the implemented

teaching, and also showed their willingness to undertake some concrete solutions regarding global injustices. This indicated a will to act as “active global citizens”.

Regarding the teachers’ reflections on what the teaching implies, they emphasised that different subject perspectives, and well-thought-out teaching planning, can provide conditions for students to be given insights into issues that might otherwise have been more difficult to apprehend. Given the current chosen content, according to the teachers, it also became natural to exceed subject boundaries. Lena said, “When I mixed the subjects, it often felt easier to explain complicated things. The interweaving contributed a great deal to make the global goals understandable to the students.” However, the teachers indicated that, at times, it was beneficial to teach in one individual subject, but still remain continuously aware of what the subjects together can provide. The teachers described that they became more motivated when they recognised the empathy that students’ developed from the teaching, as well as students’ motivation, not only to learn about the state of the world, but also to acquire tools to get involved and perhaps to willingly participate in changing the state of affairs. The teaching that brought about the students’ described approach is similar to, and could continue to be, also with other students, further inspired and guided by ideas associated with indigenous knowledge perspectives (Four Arrows, 2014). In these perspectives, a holistic learning focus is central, and a coherent view of social science education is a matter of course.

## **Discussion**

In the thematic units, there was largely a dialogical and cooperative approach to teaching and learning (cf. Priestley, 2009; Four Arrows, 2014) which are often described as common components of integrated teaching (Priestley, 2009; Ferguson-Patrick et al., 2018). Nevertheless, cooperative discussions do not guarantee effective learning (Klausen, 2011a; b). In the study, however, the conditions for developing students’ thinking were considered to be of reasonably high quality, although the structure of some of the discussions may be considered as promoting learning to a lesser degree. This could be related to the quality of the instructions for the discussion, how the students followed the instructions and the students’ individual ability to deepen the discussion topic. In some cases, students deviated from the topic, and in other cases, the discussion staggered because no one really drove it further. Possibly, the more challenging, subject-integrated issues may in some cases have affected students’ straying off the subject – implying that the demands were too high for some students, and as a result, they lost interest in proceeding with the discussion topic. Further, it was often somewhat unclear whether the discussions had the potential to promote students’ collective or individual competencies, or both together (Klausen, 2011b).

Regarding approaches to integration, there were, at certain stages, similarities to the multidisciplinary approach (Gresnigt et al., 2014), which implies that there is a common theme formulated on the basis of different subjects. The subjects sometimes exceeded each other, which means that there were difficulties in discerning the subject boundaries, and in addition, there were very few references to the individual subjects. This also indicates a shift towards an interdisciplinary approach (Gresnigt et al., 2014). In some stages, the teaching could also be categorised as a transdisciplinary approach (Gresnigt

et al., 2014), when the themes were at the centre, and the subjects were de-emphasised. Occasionally, the teaching could be described as isolated (Gresnigt et al., 2014), but when connections were made to other subjects, mainly to history and religious studies, it was sometimes a question of a nested/fused approach (Gresnigt et al., 2014).

Concerning the individual subjects in the study, civics and geography can be termed as main subjects (cf. Kristiansson, 2017), whereas history and religious studies functioned as supplementary subjects. Most often, when history and religious studies appeared, the subject-switching (Kristiansson, 2017) was quite clear. Subject-overlapping was more common between civics and geography, as the subject boundaries were often unclear. According to Kristiansson (2017), there is no 'barrier' in the relationship between civics and geography against subject-overlapping, which implies that there should be possibilities for the combination of civics and geography to lead to "more complex forms of integration" (Gresnigt et al., 2014, p.73).

The key global issues addressed in the thematic units can be connected to epoch-typical key problems (Klafki, 2018). In the teaching, students had opportunities for scrutiny of such concepts as living conditions and poverty. They recognised several aspects that contribute to certain prevailing circumstances, aspects that often connect to more than one school subject. Teaching on the key global issues can provide more complex knowledge, which, for example can consist of global citizenship skills (Zong et al., 2008), and clearly appear in the overarching objectives of Lgr 11. The occasionally high degree of interaction of subject-integrated teaching in the study, in the form of, for example a transdisciplinary approach (Gresnigt et al., 2014), can also create greater conditions for developing more complex knowledge (Gresnigt et al., 2014), and thereby achieving the overarching objectives of Lgr 11.

Barnes and Scoffham (2017) argued that the teaching of the global dimension in primary school is in need of development. Based on the results of the present study, it appears that one way to show the significance of the global dimension through the social studies subjects, in Sweden and internationally, is, to a great extent, to detect what the subjects can bring forth together. Teachers' statements in the study also indicate a view that, in social studies teaching overall, regardless of the form of teaching, it is important to be aware of what the social studies subjects together can provide for students, in terms of being able to understand themselves and others, as well as to understand and contribute to society (cf. Evans, 2004; Odenstad, 2016). In practice, this includes attentively identifying the ways in which the subjects can be connected: undertaking careful planning, while also showing openness and flexibility in teaching when integration offers enrichment, but also when subject-separated teaching may be worthwhile (Harris et al., 2011; Rennie et al., 2013).

The conducted teaching was able to contribute to students' opportunities to understand complex global issues. A holistic view of the social studies subjects, advocating its common core to benefit the public good, is comparable to the basic ideas of the indigenous perspective of social studies (Four Arrows, 2014). Teaching focus in the thematic units was influenced by a striving for a holistic understanding and the students were mainly viewed as contributors, in close interaction with other students (cf. Four

Arrows, 2014). When the teachers recognised what the thematic units implied for students' empathy with others and interest in learning, the teachers became more motivated to teach (Gresnigt et al., 2014), particularly when the teachers recognised the students' enhanced willingness to be a part of solving global problems, which may thus result in students' emergence as more committed global citizens. This was the first time that the two teachers conducted teaching with this content on global issues with this teaching form, which thus differed from their normal pedagogical approach. Both considered this way of teaching to be successful, especially considering that their and the students' commitment became so great. Both teachers expressed their desire to continue to develop their integrated teaching, preferably on global issues, even if there is a need to adapt the teaching to all core content (in Lgr 11) that students must acquire. Lena also, somewhat later in her class, conducted another integrated teaching unit in which global issues were at the centre. She also expressed that she was inspired and very motivated to develop her integrated teaching on global issues with future students.

## **Conclusion**

The study points out, based on circumstances in Swedish upper primary school, how a more holistic view of the social studies subjects, in different forms of integration, may be a course of action to increase the subjects' impact and serve as a rewarding way to promote more complex learning on key global issues, to develop global citizenship skills (Zong et al., 2008). This approach to the social studies subjects may also be beneficial to achieve key parts of the overarching objectives of the national curriculum.

The study also contributes by showing what teaching can imply for students and teachers in a world where global citizenship skills are becoming increasingly necessary to meet major global challenges (cf. Barnes and Scoffham, 2017), which must be carried out with collective efforts. Education that focuses solely on the competitiveness of the individual student is most likely not effective in that context. The study shows that a more comprehensive view of the social studies subjects, well-planned teaching that is carefully thought out in terms of where and how content from different subjects can interact, may be favourable to students' interest and commitment to learning, especially regarding the common core of the social studies subjects. Nonetheless, there are some aspects regarding the cooperative approach in teaching that would be interesting to investigate more carefully in further research – the extent to which cooperation promotes students' collective or individual competencies, or both concurrently.

Finally, Applebee et al. (2007) and Rennie et al. (2013) asserted that subject-integrated and subject-separated teaching should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. This may also be supported by the findings of the present study, regarding social studies. Approaches to integration vary in teaching, and under certain circumstances, subject-separated teaching may be preferable, based on teachers' and students' statements in the study. However, in ongoing subject-separated teaching as well as subject-integrated teaching (if not all subjects are integrated), there must be an openness to involve other subjects if doing so is considered conducive to students' understanding and citizenship skills. However,

it is important to avoid the recurrent omission of some subjects, especially when it comes to longer-term teaching.

In a broader context, a more holistic worldview, from indigenous perspectives (Four Arrows, 2014), and the knowledge that the future of society is something we create together, can be a useful approach to meet major global challenges. But it must be accompanied by a holistic educational approach – and a larger overall view of the social studies subjects may be highly conducive in this effort.

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