

Summary of thesis

In both educational scholarship and educational policy documents, advocacy for the need to teach controversial issues in schools has become increasingly popular and widespread. In many cases, this advocacy is grounded in the aim of promoting democratic discussion and citizenship.

Despite the fact that teaching controversial issues is commonly seen as a desirable aim for democratic citizenship education, educational scholarship also suggests that it is a challenging task that schools and teachers are not always equipped to navigate. Accordingly, students might not be afforded the opportunity to discuss controversial issues in school simply because they are seen as too challenging or too risky to teach.

The challenge of teaching controversial issues is a call to action. For scholars of democratic citizenship education, this challenge signals a need to develop knowledge and understanding about a complicated issue. In response to this call, the aim of this article-based dissertation is to explore the teaching of controversial issues and its relationship to citizenship education by thematizing the ideal of democratic discussion and citizenship embedded in teachers' and students' experiences of educative discussions on controversial issues in Norwegian high schools.

In total, this dissertation consists of four research articles and a unifying text. Together, these aim to answer the following main research question, which is divided into two parts:

1. What is the ideal of democratic discussion and citizenship embedded in teachers' and students' experiences of educative discussions on controversial issues?
2. How can this ideal be utilized to challenge and expand the scholarly literature on this topic?

To answer the main research question, 11 teachers from seven schools and 28 students from two of these schools were interviewed. Nine teachers were interviewed individually, while for practical reasons, two teachers were interviewed together. Students were interviewed in groups of five or six, with five groups in total.

The ideal of democratic discussion and citizenship articulated by teachers and students is embedded in a broader educational environment and affective atmosphere. Certain kinds of environments foster and facilitate educative discussions of controversial issues, and various elements are instrumental in the constitution of environments in which these discussions are likely to occur and can be enacted. These elements include good social relationships: norms for social interaction, such as respect, tolerance, and openness; and the facilitation and moderation of the discussion.

Challenging a strictly rationalist ideal of politics, the ideal of democratic discussion articulated by teachers and students further involves the expression and management of emotions. While educative discussions naturally have a degree of passion to them, they also require participants to manage their emotions in accordance with social and cultural norms. This necessitates an affective atmosphere that is both passionately engaging and emotionally managed for educative classroom discussions on controversial issues to occur. The citizenship ideal embedded in teachers' and students' experiences of educative discussions on controversial issues is both comprehensive and complex. The ideal citizen is active, engaged, knowledgeable, respectful, tolerant, open, and imaginative, knows how to engage in and build social relationships, and can both express and control their emotions and body in ways that are situationally appropriate.

In important ways, the citizenship ideal articulated by teachers and students both reaffirms and challenges cognitivist conceptions of the modern liberal citizen. On the one hand, the importance of typical liberal political virtues, such as being respectful, tolerant, and open toward others and what they have to say, are reaffirmed by these accounts. These virtues can be construed as dispositions needed to participate competently in democratic discussions on controversial issues. On the other hand, however, these same narratives challenge and expand on the typical features of liberal conceptions of citizenship. By bringing in emotion, imagination, the body, and social relationships, the rather cerebral character typical of such liberal conceptions is unsettled, inciting new possibilities for the expansion of the ideals of democratic discussion and citizenship.