Confero | pre-published | 2026 | pp. 1-47 | doi: 10.3384/confero.6410

Political socialization and student participation as the process of becoming (a) political (subject) – from transmission to transaction.

Erik Andersson

Introduction: from transmission to transaction

Political socialization in citizenship education has traditionally been – and is still by many researchers, educationalists, politicians, and others – viewed as a transmission process in which the school, or citizenship education, functions as the active agent and preparatory space. In this view, political attitudes, values, and knowledge are transmitted to the rising generation, thereby reproducing a particular type of citizen (cf. Andersson, 2015, 2020; Biesta, 2011). From a democratic perspective, and with regard to young people's opportunities to become political persons through education, the article argues that this understanding is deeply problematic, especially when combined with the fact that student participation is often reduced to being informed or heard, but without influence (Andersson, 2019, 2024; Hammerin et al., 2018). This is democratically problematic insofar as it constrains young people's opportunities to act as democratic agents and become political subjects; thus, it calls for alternative conceptualizations and approaches. Accordingly, the article advances a specific conceptualization of political socialization in citizenship education – contextualized transactions – that highlights the process of becoming (a) political (subject).

Democracy, understood as both governance and a way of living together (Dewey, 1916/1997, 1927), involves collective inquiry and shared decision-making. *Strong* or *deep* democracy rests on participation, political action, and inclusive, reasoned dialogue that accommodates diverse perspectives (Barber, 2003; Green, 1999). "Deep democracy is both the goal and the process that can facilitate the emergence of "publics" that can exert effective transformative influence within our democratically deficient world societies" (Green, 1999, p. xiv). According to John Dewey, a strong guarantee of collective agency and effectiveness is the "*liberation and use of the diversity of individual capacities* in initiative, planning, foresight, vigor and endurance" (Dewey, 1920, p. 199–200, in Green, 1999, p. 71–72). Moreover, Dewey argues that full education can only be realized when each person, in proportion to their capacity, assumes responsibility for shaping the aims and policies of the groups to which they belong. This fact establishes the significance of democracy, since "*human nature is developed only when its elements take part in directing things which are common, things for the sake of which men and women form groups*" (ibid.). Thus, democracy is not merely an outcome but also a process in which relationships and mutual responsibility matter as much as results. At its core, democracy is constituted through agenda-setting: by determining what counts as a common concern, a community defines both its priorities and itself. From this democratic perspective, what role should citizenship education play in fostering democratic citizens?

One normative answer to the question above is that citizenship education should function as a "vehicle for advancing a more critical engagement in democracy, one that effectively advances social justice and political literacy for the good of all citizens" (Lund & Carr, 2008, p. 18). For this to happen, schools must provide students with opportunities to develop the political skills and habits of mind required for effective democratic participation, thereby cultivating a democratic public "in which the teachers act as the primary stewards of democracy" (ibid.). How teachers understand and enact the democratic mission of schooling not only shapes students' perceptions and experiences of democracy but also influences their preparedness for democratic participation and the forms of democracy they may come to practice and value.

As critical institutions of political socialization, schools "can facilitate for young people the general process of acquiring political culture and becoming responsible citizens" and "positively help students to learn about the processes of democratic identity formation, peaceful coexistence, and respect for human rights, diversity, and difference" (ibid.).

Yet, in stark contrast to democratic citizenship education, schools can also socialize young people into political cultures shaped by individualism, competition, consumerism, fundamentalism, extremism, and political violence (Harber, 2004). Contemporary and historical examples clearly demonstrate that schooling is not inherently beneficial. Schooling has long played a role in the creation, reproduction, and transformation of group identities and stereotypes (Harber, 2004, p. 85). In authoritarian education systems, political socialization is commonly used to control populations and maintain subordination and obedience. A particular worldview and set of values and norms are privileged in ways that are more indoctrinatory than genuinely educational, making such approaches difficult to reconcile with democratic education.

To further illustrate the potentially harmful consequences of political socialization, it is useful to consider what Alice Miller (1984) calls black pedagogy. Miller argues that socialization itself may have devastating consequences. It can suppress what is vital and living in the child and thereby pose a direct threat to society. When destructive, socialization may even be understood as a persecution of life itself. Black pedagogy is an approach whose central aim is the cultivation of obedience and the eradication of the child's will. Its goal is achieved when children willingly do what they are told. In this sense, it constitutes a form of political socialization aimed at making individuals believe that the will of others is their own. Children are taught to regard adults as their masters, to wait, renounce, comply, submit, and discipline their own will – which becomes conflated with that of the adult. Having an independent will, expressing personal opinions, or generating original ideas is viewed as obstinacy and becomes grounds for punishment. The pedagogical formula of black pedagogy is

therefore obedience, coercion, emotional detachment, harshness, and punishment.

As Miller writes, "In the totalitarian state, which mirrors his (the child's) upbringing, such a citizen can participate in torture and persecution of all kinds without experiencing guilt. His 'will' is identical with that of the government" (1984, p. 53, my translation). She further observes that "Among all the leaders of the Third Reich, I have not found a single one who was not raised under a strict and harsh regime. Does this not give cause for reflection?" (p. 74). To illustrate her argument, Miller discusses the cases of Adolf Eichmann and Rudolf Höss.

> They were trained in obedience so early and so successfully that this conditioning never faltered; the structure remained intact, without cracks. Nowhere was there a leak; no feeling ever disturbed it. Until the end of their lives, these men carried out the orders they were given without ever questioning their content. They obeyed not because they believed the orders to be right or just, but simply because they were orders – precisely as *black pedagogy* prescribes. (1984, p. 76, my translation).

Thus, the kind of citizens citizenship education seeks to foster also reflects the kind of society we wish to create and inhabit: "Conceptions of "good citizenship" imply conceptions of the good society" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 238). What kind of citizenship education does society need, and what kind of society does citizenship education need?

The aim of the article is to critically discuss political socialization and student participation in citizenship education, drawing on a contemporary case of student participation in Sweden. The article argues for an action-oriented conceptualization of political socialization as a contextualized, relational, and ongoing process – rather than a unidirectional transmission of political culture – in which student participation is imperative. This theoretical approach does not ask "who is the political person," but rather

"what makes the political person" in citizenship education. With this shift in wording, the focus moves from a substantive, essentialist perspective on the individual to a contextual, action-oriented one (see Andersson, 2020). This conceptualization has implications – in research, policy, and practice – for how political socialization and student participation are understood, explained, and ultimately practiced.

It is argued that becoming a democratic citizen in education is dependent on each individual's opportunities to practice democracy with others, that is, using a collaborative participatory approach in education that allows students to contribute diverse knowledge and values to a shared democratic experience that supports collective transformation. Just to illustrate this point, is it important to learn mathematics, English, and the natural sciences? Yes. But is that sufficient to preserve and strengthen a democratic society? No. Just as students need opportunities to write and calculate in order to learn how to write and calculate, they need opportunities to practice democracy in order to learn democracy. One of the best ways to understand and become familiar with something is to use it – to do it.

It is quite evident that it is not enough for students merely to learn about democracy in school. Citizenship education must also be conducted in democratic forms, safeguard and allow young people to grow as unique individuals, and enable the exercise of democracy – to democratize – and thereby politically socialize democratic citizens within education through students' democratic participation. That is, "a relationally dependent, meaningful, and developmental form of participation that provides opportunities to take responsibility, feel needed, and be involved in influencing one's own and others' educational situation" (Andersson, 2024, pp. 27–28). According to Judith Green (1999, p. 91):

> [...] individuals who experience democratic education in the schools and in the conjoint direction of community life, including problem-focused inquiry, will develop the capacity and the desire to be effective

> participants in the ongoing process of democratic transformation.

A democracy-friendly citizenship education will thus make it possible for students to learn and practice how to participate creatively in addressing shared problems – experiences and capacities vital to being a democratic citizen. Democratic participation involves "playing an active role in directing the groups and institutions that deeply influence our lives", which also "liberates some of our highest and best human potentials" and "assures the most insightful and effective direction of cooperative efforts" (Green, 1999, p. 71).

If democratic participation is both a personal and societal necessity, the question of how schools cultivate such capacities becomes crucial. Democracy remains fragile unless schools actively cultivate the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions needed to sustain democratic institutions (Harber, 2004). More than ever, education must therefore be understood as a crucial arena for maintaining and renewing democracy. Its impact depends on its purposes, priorities, underlying conceptions of education, and the practices these generate (Harber, 2004).

Against this background, the next section provides a brief account of school education as one of the principal societal institutions for the political socialization of democratic citizens. The following section motivates the contextualized and action-oriented conceptualization of political socialization, briefly describes, and critically comments on a contemporary case of student participation in Sweden. In order to better understand the field of political socialization in education, predominant political socialization research is described. This sections serves to further motivate and clarify the need for the article's theoretical contribution – contextualized transaction and the process of becoming a political subject in citizenship education – emphasizing the importance of student participation. The article ends with a set of concluding remarks.

Background: school education as the main institution for socializing democratic citizens (?)

Education must be understood as both an existential and a democratic endeavour (cf. Biesta, 2022). In an era of democratic backsliding and autocratisation, democratic stability can no longer be taken for granted (Nord et al., 2026). Democracy is created and survives only insofar as it is enacted through social practices (Macleod, 2023). Capacities such as respect, critical thinking, cooperation, and openness are not innate; they must be learned, practised, and experienced. Schools therefore play a crucial role in sustaining and renewing democratic life (Harber, 2004) – not merely as sites for transmitting democratic knowledge, but as arenas where democracy is lived, contested, and experimentally developed in pragmatic terms. Students' democratic participation thus emerges as both a foundational value and a core democratic principle, and is crucial to their political socialization, understood as an agent-driven process in which students actively form political orientations through participation, experience, and inquiry (Andersson, 2019, 2022).

Thus, a contemporary challenge in today's Western societies lies in reconstructing conjoint, participatory democratic processes that engage differences and draw on dispersed knowledge in ways that deepen the democratic quality of community life while simultaneously transforming macro-level social institutions – such as national school systems – that should exist to serve it (Green, 1999). In this context, the need to include students as political subjects becomes evident, and particularly urgent, if we are to preserve and strengthen democratic society. However, "politics and the interests of varied groups are often deeply embedded in the ways that we conceptualize and study efforts to educate for democracy" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 264).

For Dewey, democracy depends on education because it cannot rely on externally imposed authority. Instead, it requires voluntary commitment, shared interests, and active participation. Democracy is therefore not merely a system of governance but a way of living

together – formed through shared experiences and collective practice (1916/1997, p. 127). At its core, according to Green (1999, p. ix) and with reference to Dewey, "democracy is *a realistic, historically grounded ideal, a desired and desirable future possibility that is yet to be*". Understood in this way, the democratic ideal points toward "a direction for further evolution of the full range of formally democratic institutions, as well as for growth of democratic habits of the heart and of the processes of inquiry and education that support them" (ibid.). In short, as Dewey famously puts it, "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife" (1916/1997, p.139). For Dewey (1927) – and I agree – the remedy for democracy's shortcomings and ailments is more and deeper democracy. Education is imperative to this ongoing democratization of democracy itself and to the pursuit of a deeper and more vibrant democratic life.

School education has long been considered a key institution for citizen socialization, preparing young people for active societal engagement and compensating for inequalities in political literacy related to family background (cf. Neundorf et al., 2016; Pasek et al., 2008; Wiseman et al., 2011). Schools, as nation-building institutions, have been – and continue to be – used to shape young people's political attitudes, knowledge, and citizenship competences. Public mass schooling can thus be seen as a central engine of political socialization (cf. Wiseman et al., 2011). Research also shows that individuals' educational level and forms of schooling (e.g. classroom instruction, school councils, group work, and deliberation) influence political efficacy, engagement, interest, trust, participation, and knowledge (cf. Abendschön, 2017; Claes & Hooghe, 2017; Hooghe et al., 2015; Neundorf et al., 2016; Pasek et al., 2008; Persson, 2013). A well-established finding is that longer and more advanced education is associated with higher political literacy, although the causal relationship remains contested (cf. Hooghe et al., 2015; Persson, 2013). However, current political socialization research differs from that of an earlier era.

In the 1950s and 1960s socialization was emphasized as a mechanism to ensure political stability, whereas contemporary research "focuses on the question where and how young people

acquire political knowledge, whether they are interested in politics, and on whether they engage, or intend to engage in social and political life" (Hooghe, 2004, p. 334). Of even greater importance for the present discussion is that "structural social changes, like secularization, globalization or individualization are expected to have an impact on the political attitudes and behaviors of the entire population" (p. 333). Political socialization is conditioned not only by shifts in political and cultural contexts at the community and nation-state levels, but also by concepts and vocabularies in theory – that is, by how social phenomena are understood. In other words, several complexities characterize the political socialization process, its conditions, and its outcomes, while the terms in use determine the very meaning of the phenomena. Taken together, this suggests that political socialization cannot be understood independently of the conceptual frameworks through which it is interpreted. The following section therefore turns to how political socialization has been theorized and understood within the field of citizenship education.

Political socialization in citizenship education

Citizenship education "can be readily conceived of in terms of preparing and readying future generations of responsible citizens" (Vincent & Désautels, 2008, p. 290). However, for some schools, and in line with a currently dominant view in the school political debate in Sweden, "it might be very tempting to acquiesce to the social pressure implicitly conveyed by the notion that, in order to solve the ills of society, efforts should first be dedicated to restraining social behaviours, rather than to assisting students in constructing their conduct" (ibid.). The current debate on student participation in Sweden serves as an illustrative example of this dynamic. Should we educate to achieve conformity rather than personal responsibility? Should we educate to subjugate minds or to liberate minds? Should we educate students for 'doing their duty' by simply passing on knowledge, or to critically engage in deep democracy as political subjects?

A strong focus on standardized knowledge, instilling a consumerist conception of knowledge, inculcating conduct of docility, and emphasizing performance "undermines the pursuit of democratic ideals as well as the development, among students, of the personal capacity to weigh evidence and make logical connections" (Vincent & Désautels, 2008, p. 291). Further, the cultivation of unquestioning obedience, passivity, conformity, and deference to external authority stands in direct contrast to political socialization in a democratic spirit (cf. Miller's *black pedagogy* and its political and social consequences). On the contrary, this is what Woods (2005, p. 47) would probably call *conditioning socialization*, that is, a socialization that "reduces humans to objects for political processes which they do not recognize as political". Instead, education should support young people "so that they are able to be competent and autonomous political actors" and "creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients of revealed or already-discovered knowledge" (Woods, 2005, p. 48). In this view, citizenship education is a practice in which *participation* is both the means and the outcome of political socialization: young people become citizens through participation in the social and democratic practices that shape their lives (Biesta, 2011).

Conditioning (or transmissional) socialization is problematic because democracy is inherently fragile and depends on the active engagement and participation of citizens. This underscores the importance of education for democratic citizenship and of an action-oriented understanding of political socialization. From this perspective, political socialization cannot be reduced to the transmission of predetermined norms, values, and behaviors. Rather, it must be understood as a process through which individuals learn to participate in and shape the social and political worlds they inhabit. A crucial starting point, therefore, is how we understand and relate to education's politically socializing and democratic mission.

Viewed in this way, democratic citizenship education should be organized around *participation* rather than transmission. According to Woods and Roberts (2018, p. 25), "collaboration, participation, discussion and learning from others' viewpoints"

should be "part of the everyday life of school staff and students", in which "students can learn what it means to respect, in day-to-day life, values such as justice, tolerance, mutual understanding and a concern for the welfare of others, and to ensure that no one is excluded from opportunities to participate and learn". Accordingly, citizenship education should not be done to students but conducted together with them. Put differently, understanding education as "a transactional experience, instead of a transfer of knowledge, signifies that the complexities and unpredictability of human affairs are embraced rather than simplified" (Henderson et al., 2018, p. 104). In terms of socialization, Ross (1967/2003, p. 174) argues that emphasis should be placed on initiative and independence, together with solidarity, a willingness to cooperate, and a sense of responsibility for the common good. From an intellectual perspective, democratic education should prioritize the independent acquisition of knowledge and critical evaluation, while helping young people understand and orient themselves within the society in which they are to live.

In their influential article – *What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy* – Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2004) notice that "the narrow and often ideologically conservative conception of citizenship embedded in many current efforts at teaching for democracy reflects neither arbitrary choices nor pedagogical limitations but, rather, political choices that have political consequences" (p. 237). The article examines the politics of educating for democracy, presenting three conceptions of citizenship in education: personally responsible, participatory, and justice oriented. It is concluded that "decisions educators make […] often influence politically important outcomes regarding the ways that students understand the strengths and weaknesses of our society and the ways that they should act as citizens in a democracy" (p. 238).

According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004), *the personally responsible citizen* is characterized by obeying laws, working and paying taxes, taking responsibility in everyday life, and contributing to society through activities such as recycling, volunteering, and helping out in times of crisis. The underlying

assumption is that social problems are best addressed through individuals' moral responsibility and good character rather than through political engagement or structural change. Citizenship is thus primarily understood as an individual, ethical commitment to being a law-abiding and responsible member of the community.

The participatory citizen is actively engaged in community organizations and/or collective improvement efforts, organizes initiatives to address social needs, understands how government agencies function, and possesses strategies for accomplishing collective goals. The underlying assumption is that social problems are best addressed through active participation and leadership within existing institutions and community structures. Citizenship is thus understood as engagement in collective action aimed at improving society from within established systems.

Finally, *the justice-oriented citizen* critically examines social, political, and economic structures in order to look beyond surface-level explanations, identifies and addresses injustices, and understands democratic social movements and strategies for achieving systemic change. The underlying assumption is that social problems cannot be resolved without questioning, debating, and transforming the established systems and structures that perpetuate injustice over time. Citizenship is thus understood as critical engagement aimed at structural and systemic change. In a comparative analogy, Westheimer and Kahne write: "if participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, justice-oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover" (2004, p. 242).

In the next section, and against the background outlined above, two basic arguments are offered for understanding political socialization in citizenship education not as a transmission process but as participation in contextualized transactions (which is in line with Westheimer's and Kahne's participatory and justice-oriented citizen). The first argument stresses that (1) personal identity (individuality) and the community are always in a process of becoming – a seemingly banal argument with deep meanings. This

argument is grounded in Deweyan pragmatism and the critique of the psychology of original individual consciousness, as well as Dewey's (1929) recurrent insistence that the old center was mind, whereas the new center is *action*. The second argument stresses that (2) the social is a space of pluralism, disagreement, and dissensus, which may shift in character but always calls for knowledge, judgment, and action on the part of individuals who assume their personal identity in relation to others.

In order to illustrate and motivate the need for contextualized transactions, and to reflect on the kinds of social changes that may make individuals the centers of action in practice (cf. the participatory and the justice-oriented citizen), the next section describes and exemplifies a situation of increasingly politicized student participation in Sweden. The intention is to provide reasons for the theoretical and normative positions by presenting a contemporary political and cultural issue as an illustrative case of relevance to political socialization in citizenship education.

Motivating a contextualized and action-oriented conceptualization of political socialization: the case of student participation in Sweden

According to Ross (1967/2003, p. 233), the most effective socialization into democracy takes place in democratic life and within democratic institutions themselves: "It is only by living in a democratic society that one can fully become a good democrat" (my translation). A synthesis of research on young people's democratic participation in contexts such as school shows that students are often excluded from democratic processes, shut out of collective problem-solving and decision-making, and not fully recognized as democratic participants (Andersson, 2015, 2019, 2022; Hammerin et al., 2018). Marginalizing students is particularly concerning given evidence that participation in educational decision-making strengthens democratic practice, learning, motivation, and school improvement (Messiou et al., 2025; O'Reilly & O'Grady, 2024). Restricting participation therefore undermines both these benefits and students' democratic rights to influence matters that affect

them (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024) – thereby undermining the process of democratic political socialization through which students learn to participate in shaping their shared social and political worlds.

When students are merely informed and, at best, invited to express their views without having real influence, this is problematic because, as Benjamin Barber (2003, p. 265) argues, "the taste for participation is whetted by participation: democracy breeds democracy". Instead, students want to be approached as democratic participants, with greater opportunities for joint decision-making through dialogue, shared responsibility, and clarity regarding what they are able to influence (Hammerin et al., 2018). Many also seek greater comprehensibility, manageability, and control over their school situation. Democratic participation constitutes both a democratic problem for education and an educational problem for democracy – one that can be understood in terms of political socialization. Ultimately, what kind of citizens do we seek to cultivate through education, and what consequences might students' participation – or lack thereof – have for a democratic society in need of democracy-friendly citizens? These questions are fundamental to the future of democratic education in Sweden, as research shows that decades of market-oriented reforms have increased competition, segregation, and accountability pressures while weakening democratic participation and the citizenship-building role of schools (Blossing et al., 2014; Imsen et al., 2017; Lundahl, 2016).

Student participation in Sweden: the debate on student influence

In Sweden, student participation – emphasizing genuine influence – has long been a central democratic principle in education, rooted in the Nordic model's emphasis on inclusion, equity, social cohesion, and participatory democracy (Blossing et al., 2014). This commitment is reflected in the Education Act and national curricula, which require schools to foster democratic citizenship and ensure students' participation in educational development,

responsibilities further reinforced by the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Swedish law. The legislation states that education should promote students' development of knowledge and values and foster respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based (SFS 2010:800). It also emphasizes that students, through their participation, should have genuine influence over their education.

In public debate, where the Swedish school system has long been portrayed as being in crisis, with recurring claims of "knowledge collapse" and growing inequities, students' rights to participation and influence have increasingly been identified as part of the problem. Critics argue that student influence and student-centred teaching have undermined effective instruction, weakened learning outcomes, and eroded teachers' authority as knowledge experts. One example can be found in the advocacy of so-called *No Excuses* models. According to Heller Sahlgren (2023),

> One of the biggest problems is precisely the provisions concerning students' influence over school rules and teaching. Student influence has been enshrined in law since 1991, something that runs entirely counter to the *No Excuses* model. On the contrary, the model is based on principles of school organization in which students, in practice, have no influence at all over rules and teaching [...] These problems can only be solved through changes to the Education Act and the curriculum. The legal requirement for student influence must be abolished. (pp. 21–22, my translation).

Within this line of reasoning, the solution becomes to curtail – or even abolish – students' rights to participate in and influence their education. Such arguments stand in sharp contrast to democratic conceptions of citizenship education, which regard participation not as an obstacle but as a prerequisite for democratic political socialization.

More broadly, it can be argued that *No Excuses* and similar approaches, such as *Zero Tolerance* models, are difficult to reconcile with democratic educational ideals (see Kyere et al., 2020). In these forms of schooling, students are expected to behave appropriately according to externally imposed rules and systems of control. Individual freedom, initiative, and creative agency are subordinated to compliance and behavioral regulation. In practice, this often involves training students in submission, adaptation, and rule-following, with deviations met by immediate sanctions. Control and obedience are prioritized over democratic participation, encouraging students to learn what to do rather than why they should do it. As a consequence, students may become accustomed to treating the will of others as their own, while critical inquiry, independent judgment, and initiative are discouraged.
From the perspective developed in this article, such educational practices bear important similarities to what Miller (1984) describes as *black pedagogy*. Rather than fostering democratic citizenship through participation, deliberation, and shared responsibility, they risk socializing students into passive forms of compliance and deference to authority. If democracy depends on citizens capable of critical reflection, collective problem-solving, and active participation, then educational models that privilege obedience over agency raise fundamental questions about the kind of democratic future they help to produce.

These concerns are not merely theoretical. They are reflected in contemporary debates about the role of student participation in schooling. In Sweden, student participation has recently been called into question in the government committee directive *Sustainably Improved Safety and Study Climate in Schools* (*Varaktigt förbättrad trygghet och studiero i skolan*, Regeringen, 2023). The directive identifies student influence as a problem in contemporary schooling and proposes removing it entirely from both the national curriculum and the Education Act (cf. Heller Sahlgren, 2023). It has subsequently fueled an increasingly intense public debate about the future of student participation in schools, spanning newspapers, social media, and professional educational forums throughout 2025.

The case presented below draws on a purposive selection of contributions to this debate. The aim is not to represent its full range of positions – including both calls to abolish student influence and demands to strengthen it, as well as more nuanced perspectives – but rather to highlight arguments that raise significant democratic and educational concerns and to illustrate the relevance of a more transactional approach to political socialization and participation in citizenship education. The examples presented below have been translated from Swedish into English.

Case: The Swedish debate on student participation

In the spring of 2025, *Vi Lärare* published an investigation on its website under the overarching headline *Teachers sound the Alarm: Student influence has gone too far* (Lärare larmar: Elevers inflytande har gått överstyr). The lead read as follows: "Constant demands, complaints, and a school system in which student satisfaction trumps knowledge. In *Ämnesläraren*'s investigation, teachers warn of far-reaching student influence that undermines teachers and gives students extensive power in the classroom" (Vi Lärare, 2025). The investigation was followed, among other things, by a number of reports and interviews, and several opinion pieces were written in response. In one of the reports, *The Teacher: students' opinions carry absurd weight* (Läraren: Elevers tyckande väger absurt tungt), the following could be read:

> That students are allowed to evaluate their influence and that their judgments are permitted to steer the school's operations is absurd. […] Teenagers who eat chips for breakfast cannot decide what we should do in lessons or determine the quality of teaching. […] If we try to please 30 students and give everyone in a class influence, it becomes a completely unreasonable working environment. Students can vote on whether they are allowed to wear caps or not, but they should stay far away from my teaching. (Vi Lärare, 2025)

In another report, *The Minister of Education slams student influence in schools: "An adult invention"* (Skolministern sågar elevinflytandet i skolan: "Vuxenpåhitt"), the then Minister of Education states – against the background that the Education Act currently grants students the right to influence their education and teaching – that it is fortunate, according to the minister, that most students are unaware of this. The minister argues that current legislation and curricula go too far, are overinterpreted, and that it is evident something must be done about this. The minister agrees that student influence has gone too far and concludes by saying: "Student influence is a kind of adult invention that does not lead to anything particularly good" (Vi Lärare, 2025).

Six months later, Sweden has changed its Minister of Education. The new minister pushes the debate a step further, in an even more authoritarian and repressive direction. Not only is student influence to be abolished, but students are also to be punished if they do not behave properly. In the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (2025-10-23), the following can be read in the report *The Minister wants teachers to be allowed to punish students* (Ministern vill att lärare ska få bestraffa elever): "A cultural change is needed in Swedish schools in which we abolish student influence in order to create a school characterized by discipline", argues the Minister of Education (Dagens Nyheter, 2025). The minister's own party executive "has made a unanimous decision that it wants to remove all provisions stating that students should have influence over teaching from the Education Act and from curricula. In addition, the party executive wants teachers to be granted the authority to punish students who misbehave or cause disruption" (ibid.). Teachers should be able to require students to carry out so-called "restorative measures" (gottgörande insatser). When asked why the party wants to abolish student influence, the minister responds: "We have seen that there has been a lack of order in classrooms, and that this affects academic results as well as children's sense of safety" (ibid.). What is being advocated, therefore, is a form of *authoritarian discipline* in which students are expected to learn submission, adaptation, and compliance with externally imposed rules. Within such a framework, control and obedience are

prioritized over participation, which is instead regarded as a problem to be curtailed or eliminated.

The party wants to "strengthen the role of the teacher and limit students' influence over teaching", stating that students should not "take part in deciding how knowledge is to be produced, or how and when they are to take their tests" (Dagens Nyheter, 2025). The minister argues that "it is a betrayal to make children believe that they are supposed to have power in the classroom" (ibid.). When asked whether it is truly liberal, for a party called the Liberals, to abolish student influence, the minister replies: "Yes, there is nothing more liberal than giving children the right conditions in life, and then we must be clear that we cannot deceive children into believing that they will have power in the classroom" (ibid.). When asked the follow-up question, *Aren't you afraid that something will be lost?*, the minister responds: "No, I am more afraid that we currently have a school where there is no discipline in classrooms" (ibid.).

The chair of *the National Association of Student Councils in Sweden* (Sveriges Elevkårer) and the chair of a local student council at a school in the capital also participate in the report. "They are critical of the proposals and believe that there is a misunderstanding of what student influence actually entails" (Dagens Nyheter, 2025). Both are well informed on the issue and refer to the Official Reports of the Swedish Government, *Strengthened safety and study climate in schools* (Bättre förutsättningar för trygghet och studiero i skolan, SOU 2025:8), stating that:

> The report examined whether students' influence needs to be restricted but instead highlighted what we see every day in schools: that research clearly shows student influence has positive effects, both on the school environment and on students' academic performance.

The two chairs highlight several cautionary examples of what risks occurring if students are not respected and listened to. One example mentioned is the English School in Karlstad, "where

students for years tried to raise the alarm about an employee who displayed boundary-crossing sexual behavior. It was not taken seriously until 2024, when the man was convicted of aggravated child pornography offences" (Dagens Nyheter, 2025). According to the chair of *Sveriges Elevkårer*, the example illustrates what can happen to young people who find themselves in a school culture where no one listens to them. From the perspective of political socialization, such a culture may foster norms of silence, deference, and compliance – encouraging students to remain quiet, refrain from challenging authority, and accept decisions made on their behalf rather than actively influencing matters that affect them.

One may, of course, hold different views on what has been presented above, on what has been expressed in the Swedish debate on student participation, committee directives, political statements, official reports, and the proposed reforms. Below, a number of critical comments are offered, drawing on current research and the article's theoretical framework.

Critical comments: conditioning political socialization and student democratic participation in decline?

The aforementioned reports illustrate that understandings of participation are inseparable from broader assumptions about influence, agency, and the role of young people as political actors in processes of political socialization. For example, portraying them as unreliable individuals who eat chips for breakfast, who need to be disciplined, punished, and 'given the right conditions' by abolishing their influence (as a liberal act!?) is not to view them as democratic and political actors. As an example, in the prevailing discourse, as the Minister of Education uses the concept, *discipline* becomes a matter of obedience – of submission, conformity, and working in accordance with what the teacher says without questioning. This understanding of discipline aligns more closely with an *authoritarian stance* than with a democratic one (cf. Miller, 1984), and it stands in sharp contrast to what, among others, Dewey (1916/1997) defines as discipline.

For Dewey – and in this view I concur – *discipline* is both the means and the end of education, since education should ultimately contribute to the development of agentic individuals who carefully consider their aims and make their thoughts "as clear and complete as possible regarding the consequences of their actions" (p. 171, my translation). The teacher's task thus becomes one of supporting students in thinking through their actions and acting deliberately: holding fast to a wisely chosen course despite confusion, difficulties, change, and disorder. Discipline should instead be immanent in the task itself, grounded in the striving to understand how something is constituted or in the will to achieve a particular outcome. In this sense, discipline is something that can – and should – be learned: through work, one can experience that effort bears fruit, that it is possible to create something new, and to develop meaningful insights. Discipline, in other words, is nothing other than *controlled power* (behärskad kraft) (Dewey, 1916/1997, p. 172) – taking command of what is at hand and carrying out what the individual has undertaken to do. A normative point of departure should therefore be that it is each teacher's primary task to enable students' growth into democratic citizens by fostering this form of discipline and by supporting students' capacity to act and assume responsibility as part of citizenship education. From this perspective, it is not, as the Minister of Education argues "a betrayal to make children believe that they are supposed to have power in the classroom" (Dagens Nyheter, 2025). On the contrary, students' power to act and influence should be actively encouraged, as it is a necessary condition for democratic citizenship education.

Power is admittedly a contested concept, and, broadly speaking, a distinction is often made between *power to* do something, understood as a potential, and *power over* someone or something, understood as a form of domination (Lukes, 2004/2008). What I am arguing for here, within Dewey's conceptualization of discipline, is a productive – that is, a positive – conceptualization of power, in which power is conceived as a force or capacity to influence something in a particular direction. In relation to the case, abolishing *student influence* and enforcing teachers' *power over* students is authoritarian in orientation and runs counter to the conceptualization of discipline and power advanced here, which is

democracy-friendly, action-oriented, and thus political in nature. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's political philosophy (1958/1998), *action* can be understood as the initiation of something new with others in order to address issues and problems central to the community. To act is to connect with others, to be subjected to others, to appear in the public sphere, and to assume responsibility for the world through words and deeds – and thus, to exert *influence*. Accordingly, abolishing student influence in both policy and the lived curriculum undermines the processes through which students become political subjects and democratic citizens.

Obviously, the Swedish debate on student participation raises a range of questions. What, then, is the problem? Is it that student influence is overly individual-oriented, leading to excessive individualization of teaching? Is it that students do not learn when they have influence over their education? Or is there a fear that teachers no longer hold primary responsibility in the classroom – that students have taken over? Or is it that student influence (as customers) becomes difficult to manage in the Swedish 'market school', compared to the 'democracy school', where influence is a fundamental democratic principle and a prerequisite? Whatever the problem may be, a number of different solutions are proposed, which are also supported by the government's reform proposals. Among other things, it is proposed that students' influence be eliminated; that teaching focus on cognition and the acquisition of predefined knowledge; that curricular content and teaching methods be tightly regulated through curricula and the Education Act; and that education be oriented toward the acquisition of predefined, easily measurable knowledge, grades, and national final examinations that determine final grades in compulsory school.

The picture painted in the above-mentioned reports and in the government's reform proposal – that student influence should be removed – is contradicted by current research, which shows quite the opposite (see earlier in this section). This is also acknowledged by the two chairs of the student councils, who argue that there seems to be a 'misunderstanding of what student influence actually entails' and point out that 'research clearly shows that student

influence has positive effects, both on the school environment and on students' academic performance' (further, see Andersson, 2024).

Research makes it clear that students' participation and their genuine influence – contrary to the investigation conducted by *Vi Lärare* and its overarching headline *Teachers sound the Alarm: Student influence has gone too far* – are rather neglected and inadequate. Instead, student participation (with influence) should be safeguarded in a more systematic, conscious, and pedagogically productive way, and understood as a central part of the democratic mission of schooling – an essential concern in the formation of democratic citizens. In relation to propositions advocating a stronger focus on the acquisition of predefined, easily measurable knowledge, grades, and national final examinations that determine final grades, it is particularly interesting to note that "Proponents of the democratic purposes of education, especially advocates of participatory and justice-oriented goals, frequently complain that they are fighting an uphill battle," in the sense that "traditional academic priorities and the current narrow emphasis on test scores crowd out other possibilities" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 263). Somehow, and perhaps tragically, history appears to repeat itself.

This tendency is further reflected in contemporary educational policy debates in Sweden, where several influential actors – including representatives of the current government – have advocated the introduction of *No Excuses* schools. From the perspective developed in this article, such proposals signal a shift toward educational ideals that prioritize control, compliance, and measurable outcomes over participation, agency, and democratic citizenship. In this respect, they bear striking similarities to the forms of discipline and socialization that Miller (1984) associated with *black pedagogy*.

Against this backdrop, the proposed solutions can be argued to be counterproductive, as they risk leading to even greater democratic exclusion of young people – now and in the future – and, ultimately, to a weakened democratic society. More student-, teacher-, and democracy-friendly solutions could instead involve promoting

democratic participation through dialogue; respectful, dignified, and reciprocal relationships; and inclusive, didactically grounded teaching in which both the individual and the group are given space. This also entails ensuring reciprocity between the three purposes of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification (cf. Biesta, 2022), and, as a strong suggestion, abandoning the 'market school' in favour of the 'democracy school'.

The importance of such alternatives becomes evident when considering the consequences of silencing students by removing their influence. Doing so may have far-reaching political and democratic consequences, weakening both the democratic school and the democratic society. When students' opportunities to exercise influence, take initiative, and assume responsibility are restricted, a form of passivity – or habitual compliance – is produced instead, in which silence, withdrawal, and abstention come to function as political forms of expression (Rosanvallon, 2006). Such behaviors may then be interpreted as signs of acceptance, where silence is mistaken for consent – a negative consent based on apparent consensus, a passive consent motivated by relative indifference. What emerges is a 'democracy' of passivity, which can be understood as a turning point in democratic expression – that is, the moment when the voice of the people (the students) turns into the silence of the people (Rosanvallon, 2006).

The case presented highlights the need to understand political socialization in education as an ongoing process rather than something transmitted or achieved through education. This resonates with the Crick Report (1998), which positions schools as key democratic arenas where students develop democratic norms, values, and capacities through participation. In a contingent society marked by conflict, marketization, and cultural controversy, greater attention must therefore be paid to the participatory and action-oriented dimensions of socialization, citizenship, and learning (cf. Lawy, 2014) – that is, to citizenship-as-practice rather than citizenship-as-achievement (Biesta, 2011; Biesta & Lawy, 2006). Whereas *citizenship-as-achievement* treats citizenship as a status attained through education, thereby positioning young people as "not-yet-citizens," *citizenship-as-practice* understands

citizenship as an ongoing, relational process in which young people learn democracy through participation in the social and democratic practices that shape their lives.

However, this understanding differs in important respects from dominant approaches to political socialization. To clarify these differences and further develop the article's theoretical argument, the next section examines recurring logics in political socialization research before introducing the concept of contextualized transactions.

Predominant political socialization research: recurring logics

An authoritative definitions from The Encyclopedia of Democracy describes political socialization as:

> [...] the processes by which individuals learn the political norms, values, and behavior patterns of the nations, groups, or subgroups to which they belong. These characteristics can be thought of as each group's political culture. (Lipset, 1995, p. 1156)

Comparable definitions are found throughout the research literature (cf. Kudrnáč, 2015; Rusnac & Mazur, 2016; Neundorf & Smets, 2017). A shared feature of these accounts is their emphasis on political socialization as a social *process* through which individuals adapt to, acquire knowledge of, or actively reshape the political culture of their community. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* defines *political culture* (the outcome of political socialization) in terms of:

> [...] the set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior in a political system. [...] A political culture is the product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the

> members of the system and thus it is rooted equally in public events and private experience. (Pye, 1968, p. 218)

Based on these definitions, political socialization can be understood as a social process through which political culture is formed and maintained, where "culture" itself is constituted through an ongoing process marked by contradictions and differences. However, political socialization has traditionally been studied using quantitative approaches, in which relationships between variables and elements of the environment – understood in terms of efficient causes (that is, a logic of cause and effect) – are used to explain particular outcomes of political socialization. From this perspective, political socialization is viewed as the product of correlations between elements and of the interplay between the individual and the surrounding environment (Andersson, 2020). One study, often considered groundbreaking and exemplifying this approach, is Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's (1963) measurement of citizens' political participation across five different states, aimed at developing a theory of civic culture – also referred to as political culture – to explain citizens' political involvement or lack thereof. A point of departure in their study, as well as in much kindred and still predominant political socialization research, is a consensual approach that views the democratic political system *ex officio* as a static juridical and political order whose logics and values are to be transmitted to the rising generation.

Earlier research has, for example, examined the relationship between long-term political efficacy and civic education (Pasek et al., 2008); the effects of education on authoritarian–libertarian values (Stubager, 2008); the influence of citizenship education on young people's intended civic and political participation (Lopes et al., 2009); the relationship between education and political participation (Persson, 2013); the impact of education on the development of political trust (Hooghe et al., 2015); the influence of the home, school, and peers on students' political interest (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2015); the effect of civic education on political engagement (Neundorf et al., 2016); the influence of primary

school institutions on children's political learning (Abendschön, 2017); and the effects of political science education on political trust and interest (Claes & Hooghe, 2017). Accordingly, using quantitative methodologies, numerous scholars have explored the relationship between various aspects of political socialization and education.

Predominant quantitative methodologies, together with developmental psychological and cognitivist theories of political socialization, have tended to view political socialization as *a process of generational transmission* of political attitudes, norms, and values, defined as a social mechanism. In practice, these theories largely assume that the rising generation – newcomers – must learn a specific set of knowledge, attitudes, and skills, developed in predefined stages, in which socialization is understood as the process by which individuals internalize society and its norms, conceived as "something apart from society that must be shaped and guided by external forces to become a fully functioning member" (Corsaro, 2011, p. 9). From this perspective, maintaining social order and sustaining society over time renders the efficacy of socialization vital, thereby implying a necessary focus on the successful generational transmission of an ultimately dominant culture. Consequently, the concept of socialization becomes structurally predetermined rather than fluid, participatory, and contextually produced. This argument holds regardless of the extent to which a unilateral socialization into a dominant culture can be empirically demonstrated or politically legitimized.

For decades, scholars of political socialization have called for new methodologies to better capture political socialization processes in young people's everyday lives (e.g. Amnå et al., 2009; Jennings, 2007; Torney-Purta, 2000). As noted in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, the field has long been dominated by survey-based methods (Jennings, 2007, p. 35), prompting calls for stronger theoretical foundations and more sophisticated, multi-level and dynamic research designs to address the growing complexity of participatory spaces (Kaase, 2007, p. 795). Consequently, research needs to move beyond correlations and place greater emphasis on participation, action, and process – an understanding that poses

new theoretical and methodological challenges (see Andersson, 2020).

Political socialization is conditioned not only by shifts in political and cultural contexts at the community and nation-state levels, but also by the concepts and vocabularies of theory – that is, by the ways in which social phenomena are understood. In other words, multiple complexities characterize the political socialization process, its conditions, and its outcomes, while the terms in use help determine the very meaning of the phenomena. Broadly speaking, predominant theories of political socialization, based on the idea of *transmission and conditioning*, face challenges in studying and analyzing the actual process of political socialization within citizenship education. This is not an argument against these approaches, which offer advantages in understanding and explaining, for example, the extent to which a given phenomenon is present in predefined groups or how it varies across groups. Their strengths lie in breadth and replicability; their limitation is a lack of depth and a difficulty in analyzing and explaining political socialization in action, that is, in students' ongoing participation. Moreover, such approaches risk treating the rising generation as depoliticized objects of political fostering and neglecting disputes within and between existing cultures in favour of a simplified notion of transmission from a dominant culture – a tendency not uncommon in institutions such as schools (Andersson, 2019, 2020; Biesta, 2011; Wood & Black, 2014), as illustrated by the Swedish case of student participation.

Contextualized transactions: a process of becoming (a) political (subject) in citizenship education

Democratic values rooted in the liberal state are under threat, and the fact that young people are always already participating in society as situated agents – implicated in and affecting social, economic, cultural, and political domains – provides strong justification for contextualizing political socialization and citizenship education within actual societal contexts. In addition, this justifies viewing students as already citizens, implying that the

task of the school should be to support young people in learning how to act in and within a democratic society, where they can initiate action, respond to the actions of others, and thereby emerge as political subjects (cf. Amnå et al., 2010; Biesta and Lawy, 2006; Lawy, 2014; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) – a process of becoming (a) political (subject).

The relationship between historically defined "transformative duty-based obligations" in citizenship education and the impacts and consequences of curricular challenges can thus be understood in terms of *contextualized transactions*. That is, both individuality and community are always in processes of becoming, and the social constitutes a space of disagreement and dissensus, which calls for judgment on the part of the individual as she assumes her identity in relation to others.

Contextualization as 'a descriptive sense of society'

A theory of political socialization must be grounded in a thorough contextualization of society – what Dewey refers to as a "descriptive sense of society" when he argues that "we cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually exist, in order to have any assurance that our ideal is a practical one" (Dewey, 1916/1997, p. 83).

Using the case of student participation in Sweden, the intention has been to engage one such "descriptive sense of society", echoing Eamonn Callan's claim that acknowledging countervailing cultural and economic pressures compels us to view public institutions as sites of acute ethico-political conflict, where "the triumph of liberal democratic values is by no means assured" (1997, p. 50). This claim is clearly illustrated in the Swedish case, where a liberal party (the Liberals) advocates abolishing young people's individual influence and freedom in education. As Callan further notes, it would be absurd to assume that education and schools could be insulated from tensions between liberal ideals and competing values in the wider social environment.

Citizenship education is thus situated within a politically problematic context in which individuals must critically examine their own prejudices in response to the pluralism embedded in both society and curricula. And, as Virginia Sapiro (2004) points out, the:

> [...] fundamental problem for the field of political socialization as a whole is that its basic questions, theories, and conclusions about how people become part of the fabric of their political communities and how they develop their political orientations and practices are framed by observations of an excessively limited range of political contexts (p. 5).

Besides asking how people become part of the fabric of their political communities and how they develop political orientations and practices, we should also ask *what makes a political person*, where political identities are not understood teleologically or as predefined in advance. Rather, the process of (being and) becoming political concerns political subjectivity and the individual situated between national and global communities, in which cultural, social, legal, political, and ethical ideals and norms jostle and clash. Emphasizing the contextualized becoming of the subject in this way entails an understanding of identity as marked by tension. Although citizenship education has historically – and continues to be – deeply rooted in national interests aimed at transmitting citizenship orientations, individuals may develop allegiances not primarily to the nation-state but to ethnic or ethical communities. Accordingly, political socialization within citizenship education is shaped by pluralism and openness, while simultaneously constrained by norms of reciprocal justification and affective attachment to community. This means that it cannot be taken for granted that every student is automatically open-minded or untroubled by the political ideals embedded in society and the curriculum.

Thus, political socialization is conditioned by shifts in the political context, shaping patterns of political culture – that is, the outcome

of political socialization in terms of the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments that give order and meaning to citizenship education as a political process, and which, following the previous definition, provide the underlying assumptions and rules governing behavior in a democracy. Furthermore, political culture is the product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of its members; it is therefore rooted equally in public events and private experience. This, in turn, presupposes knowledge of society and, ultimately, a norm of reciprocal justification and affective attachment to the community or group. As we know, group membership is a natural and necessary part of an individual's formative process: we become persons in relation to others. The differing insights, values, and norms – which constitute resources for political socialization – can neither be created, preserved, nor transformed by individuals alone. Rather, political socialization depends on political culture, and from a democratic perspective, what is required are creative and courageous individuals who express their own values and cultural preferences within groups that are simultaneously supportive and cooperative (Green, 1999).

Each individual must navigate life within communities, and the school can be the place – more than any other social institution – where the individual, with their values and expectations, is able to test and develop some form of functional personal integration, so that they can function effectively when moving between different communities throughout life (Green, 1999, p. 65).

The basic democratic norm, according to Hanna (2024, p. 158), "is that people should be not only subjects but also architects of their fields of action", that is, active participants. Yet within schooling institutions this ideal becomes difficult to realize, as "mechanisms of power are sustained by practices and governance by systems of compliance, sanctions, and rewards" (ibid.). At the same time, whether different groups – within schools and beyond – can function as *democratic communities* depends on the extent to which all members are involved in directing and carrying out activities in ways that foster the development of each individual's gifts and capacities, and whether they build "a sense of deep, satisfying connection with each other while achieving optimal results from

cooperative efforts" (Green, 1999, p. 72). Accordingly, understanding democracy (and community) as something enacted through participation directs attention to action and experience as vital analytical concepts.

A transactional perspective: action and experience

Approaching political socialization from a *transactional perspective* entails examining what occurs in the encounters between individuals and their political culture, as well as between individuals themselves (Andersson, 2020). In these transactions, meaning emerges through action within the individual–environment configuration. Thus, a transactional perspective focuses on processes rather than isolated elements, highlighting what unfolds in ongoing action. A classic illustration of transaction is provided by John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (1949/1989, p. 242), who compare transaction to a trade:

> This transaction determines one participant to be a buyer and the other a seller. No one exists as buyer or seller save *in and because of* a transaction in which each is engaged. Nor is that all; specific things become goods or commodities because they are engaged in the transaction […] because of the exchange or transfer, both *parties* (the idiomatic name for *participants*) undergo change.

From this perspective, individuals are constituted through their actions in relation to their environment and to others. Political socialization therefore becomes visible in action – as an active, adaptive, and dynamic process in which individuals continually negotiate their relationship with their political milieu. Transaction thus provides a methodological approach that views phenomena as interconnected within the "full situation of organism–environment".

Transactional processes require that students develop the capacity to reconstruct their political values and the confidence to make moral judgments in the absence of foundational certainty. In

teaching, this means that students, as citizens, are recognized as participants in a political culture shaped by both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of its members, and thus rooted equally in public events and private experience. This condition may generate contradictions and conflicts within and between individuals as a result of difference. Through education, citizens in a liberal democracy are expected to develop into distinct political actors capable of participating in deliberation and decision-making on matters of common concern, despite differences, and to do so in knowledgeable and articulate ways. This challenge is closely tied to the situated and relational character of participation.

As Hanna (2024, p.175) argues, participatory encounters are shaped by the specific environments in which they occur, the participants involved, intersectional positions, and the power relations at play, rendering each instance of participation unique. Understanding participation therefore requires attention to how power is exercised and negotiated in context, and how such dynamics are experienced differently by individual participants. This emphasis on context and relation resonates with Dewey's conception of experience as a continuous process arising from the transaction between living beings and their environments (Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 36).

Experience is constituted by an active and a passive side of doing and undergoing in relationship. In other words, "every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences" (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 35). The value of experience produced through doing and undergoing lies in the knowledge of contexts and relationships to which it leads. Experience can only be understood through action; action thus links experience and knowledge. As Biesta and Burbules (2003) note, Dewey's approach implies that "we only know the world as a result of our actions", and that "knowledge is always concerned with the antecedents and consequences of experience and not with experience itself" (p. 55). In education, this means that different forms of participation are crucial for the kinds of experiences,

understandings, and knowledge that emerge, as well as for their consequences for the future.

Dewey distinguishes between *educative* and *mis-educative experiences*, arguing that "any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experiences" (1938/1997, p. 25). Experiences that restrict sensitivity, responsiveness, or influence limit the possibilities for richer future experiences. Accordingly, if activities in school are experienced as distorted, non-influential, or lacking reciprocal communication, they risk becoming mis-educative, since "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 1927, p. 35). School experiences thus shape students' democratic attitudes and knowledge for better or worse, as "every experience influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further experiences are had" (ibid., p. 37). For democratic experiences to be genuinely democratic, they should be educative – that is, they should enable students to act, communicate, collaborate, and work toward shared goals, rather than merely undergo the formal consequences of being taught and instructed.

Characteristic for Dewey's view is that the political culture named democracy contains an idea of experience as *contingent situations* where action is given its specific meaning as identity-creating processes – a specific experience constituted in, and by, action. Dewey's concept of experience is, as Bernstein (1985, p. 53) points out, in strong contrast to "the thin emasculated, subjectivistically tined conceptions", where experience is a matter of perception, and related to a notion of epistemology – learning and knowledge. Rather the individual's actions are *confirmation of the self*, experiences related to specific situation – what Bernstein calls to be *in media res*, or in the process of becoming, which means,

> [...] a thicker, richer, situational notion of experience, whereby experience is capable of being funded with meaning and emotion and given its direction. What emerges from Dewey is a distinctive image of human

> beings and human experience. We are always in media res, there are no absolute beginnings or finalities. We are always in the process of becoming shaped by and shaping our history and our traditions. (p. 54)

Accordingly, when experience is understood as transactional within political socialization, the socialization process is viewed as an active, adaptive, and ongoing process in which individuals seek to maintain a dynamic balance with their environment – that is, the political culture. To maintain this dynamic balance, participation and opportunities to influence the political culture are imperative in a democratic school.

Transactions comprise experiences, and experiences as a process of life continuously change, in which new and uncertain situations are an invitation to respond. This approach allows us to explore unique events not necessarily progressing toward predefined ends or ideal states. Rather, political socialization is what is done in action when subjects are at work with their world in a specific context and situation, and the political person exists and is transformed through this transaction. Thus, every situation is subsumed within a larger cultural and historical context, and at the same time, individual actions represent unique and unpredictable potentials that could influence and change the continuation of the larger political and cultural context. Instead of asking "who is the political person," we should therefore ask "what makes the political person" in citizenship education. With a transactional approach to political socialization, it is assumed that person and context coexist, jointly defining one another.

The relationship between the individual and the community is what Dewey takes to be a central aspect of *experience*, stating that "individuals will always be the center and the consummation of experience, but what the individual actually is in his life-experience depends upon the nature and movements of associated life" (Dewey, 1939, p. 265). Thus, the point is that "associated life", shaped by controversies, antagonisms, and difference, is the basis for political socialization, connecting community and individuality in a process in which individuals learn and make meaning of the

political norms, values, and behavior patterns of the community to which they belong. Accordingly, political socialization is a product of the sociocultural impact of the individual and the group taking part in the community. This means that the sociocultural dimension is not primarily something that the individual acquires through internalization, nor is it about the inculcation of the skills and attitudes necessary for playing given social roles. The view of students as passive recipients within this kind of transfer logic should therefore be considered outdated. Instead, young people should be understood as *agents in the co-production and co-structuring of citizenship education*. The self-defined status of students, and the co-production and co-structuring of citizenship education more generally, are thus needed, rather than the abolition of student influence.

Concluding remarks

Alf Ross argues that a democratic society must be governed and served by democrats if it is to remain democratic (1967/2003), and the school's most important (compensatory) task in such a society is to educate democrats – not autocrats, that is, individuals who exercise power over others without being accountable or bound by democratic processes. A prerequisite for such an education is the ability to participate in collective decision-making and in addressing shared problems, as well as the ability to work together with others. Consequently, the capacities for participation, collaboration, and leadership need to be practiced and thus nurtured through the process of political socialization in citizenship education. Public education therefore bears a significant responsibility for enabling the experience of being recognized as a democratic participant – of being able to engage, to lead, and to experience participation in democratic processes. Put differently, it must ensure that political socialization promotes democratic growth and the possibility of taking one's place as a democratic citizen – i.e., becoming (a) political (subject) – together with others in community.

What, then, is the situation in today's school? How far removed are we from this "vision"? One provocative and possible – but realistic – answer is that teaching within Sweden's extremely market-driven and performance-oriented school system may today foster individuals who are indolent and dependent on orders; irresponsible and passive; uncritical, uninspired, and unimaginative – individuals who follow instructions and are governed by extrinsic motivation (grades) and external control. The Swedish context, in which the government seeks to abolish students' influence in schools and introduce more high-stakes testing, is a clear example of steps taken in this direction and a move away from the vision outlined above. If this comes to further characterize political socialization in citizenship education, will the school become the societal institution that extinguishes young citizens' playfulness, curiosity, creativity, autonomy, and their capacities for problem-solving and leadership? The attempt to reduce or abolish student influence through policy recalls what Dewey identifies as a *temptation*.

Dewey (1983/2005, p. 69, my translation) argues that children's *educability* (bildbarhet) constitutes a *temptation* for those with greater experience and, therefore, greater power – a temptation they rarely resist. The temptation lies in the desire to shape the young child according to prevailing forms, filling the immature with the spirit of the social group to which they belong – a process of bringing the child into conformity with the norms, customs, and aptitudes of the adult group, in which maintenance is seen as imperative. A central problem with this temptation is that the child's *learnability* is not regarded "as a capacity to learn whatever the world has to teach, but as obedience to the instructions of others that reflect their established habits". What Dewey instead means by being learnable "is to be eager to learn whatever an active, inquisitive, and wide-ranging experience has to teach". Yet, "the inertia and sluggishness of established habits transform learning into a willingness to follow where others point the way, into uniformity, limitation, and a betrayal of doubt and experiment". Political socialization thus becomes a matter of taking advantage of the child's helplessness. According to Dewey, this is deeply troubling if we aspire to more progressive communities.

Rather than merely reproducing existing habits, citizenship education should foster the formation of better ones, allowing the future adult society of the young to become an improvement upon the present. What is at stake – educationally and visionarily – for the public school and its task of political socialization is whether it functions as a tradition-retaining or a tradition-transforming institution (Green, 1999).

The vision of *tradition-retaining schools* is, in a broad sense, to serve as "*agencies of cultural preservation of older and better ways of living*", whereas *tradition-transforming schools* are envisioned as "*agencies of cultural as well as individual change toward new and better ways of living* that seek to build on, but go beyond, the achievements of the past" (Green, 1999, p. 66). Tradition-retaining schools are problematic, since "to follow the conservative prescription is to use the schools to reinforce existing patterns of privilege and inequality, an implicit rejection of the feasibility or the desirability of a deeper democracy" (ibid., p. 67). Such an approach is insufficient if the aim is to prepare the rising generation to become "*equal coparticipants in shaping a more democratic future*" (ibid.). Accordingly, a transmission approach to political socialization in a tradition-retaining school is democratically troublesome:

> [...] a formal education that does *not* prepare students to be participants and builders of deep democracy is an education that *perpetuates the unsatisfactory status quo* – and also deprives students of *the stimulation of the real, the knowledge of the different*, and *the richness of subject matter for lifelong reflection* that the world's diverse cultural traditions have brought into being. (Green, 1999, p. 67)

What is needed is to "go beyond equal basic education and training for the existing job market (i.e. narrow qualification, my comment) to assure effective preparation for creating new knowledge, new kinds of opportunities, and new institutional norms and structures" (ibid.). For in what way would *the temptation* to exploit students' educability and transmit a political culture, combined with the

removal of their influence – replaced by obedience to authority (that is, no longer seeing the world through one's own eyes once someone has told you how to see it), learning narrowly focused on factual knowledge, and frequent testing – benefit their ability to listen attentively, read social situations, collaborate in groups, and navigate divergent interests? How would a prescribed curriculum with fixed knowledge content, strictly teacher-planned and manual-driven instruction promote young people's capacities for communication, initiative-taking, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and curiosity? The answer to these questions, based on the article's theoretical contribution, is: hardly at all.

Biesta argues that "If policy makers and politicians are really concerned about young people's democratic citizenship, they should pay attention to and, even more importantly, invest in the actual conditions under which young people can be citizens and can learn what it means to be a citizen" (2011, p. 16). Removing or substantially restricting students' opportunities for participation in school is hardly consistent with such a commitment. On the contrary, it raises questions about whether this development is driven by ideological motives or by a lack of knowledge and understanding. If schools are to be democratic, grounded in democratic values, and contribute to a democratic society, policy makers and politicians should "think very carefully about the impact of their policies and strategies on young people's perceptions of democracy and citizenship" (ibid.). As Biesta concludes, "The educational responsibility extends to the very conditions of young people's citizenship, because these conditions define the context in which they will learn what it means to be a democratic citizen" (ibid.).

Hence, if we wish to safeguard democracy in schools (and in society) and foster the growth of democratic citizens in citizenship education, there is a need for a more situational and action-oriented approach to political socialization – in research, policy, and practice – and for the promotion of student democratic participation. *The process of becoming (a) political (subject)* responds to this call.

Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to Carsten Ljunggren, my supervisor, colleague, and friend, who remains with us through our memories and his significant scholarly contributions. Several years ago, during what would prove to be the final stage of Carsten's life, he and I began working on an article centered on the idea of *contextualized transactions and the process of becoming a political subject*. The article you have just read is a substantially developed, contemporary, and refined version of that original work.

Although we never published any work together, Carsten's intellectual presence is woven throughout this manuscript. In many respects, he has been a background co-thinker and critical friend, continually encouraging me to think critically, reflexively, and with greater conceptual clarity. The ideas developed here owe much to the conversations we shared and to the scholarly example he provided.

References

Abendschön, S. (2017). Children's political learning in primary school – evidence from Germany. Education 3–13, 45(5): 450–461.

Almond, G. & Verba, S. (1963). The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations. Princeton UP.

Amnå, E., Arensmeier, C., Ekman, J., Englund, T. & Ljunggren, C. (2010). Skolornas institutionella karaktär och elevernas medborgarkompetens: en jämförelse av olika kommunala och fristående skolor över tid och rum. Statsvetenskaplig Tidsskrift, 112(1): 23–32.

Amnå, E., Ekström, M., Kerr, M. & Stattin, H. (2009). Political Socialization and Human Agency. The Development of Civic Engagement from Adolescence to Adulthood. Statsvetenskaplig Tidsskrift, 111(1): 27–40.

Andersson, E. (2015). Situational political socialization: a normative approach to young people's adoption and acquisition of political preferences and skills. Journal of Youth Studies, 18(8): 967–983.

Andersson, E. (2019). The School as a public space for democratic experiences: formal student participation and its political characteristic. Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 14(2): 149–164.

Andersson, E. (2020). A transactional and action-oriented methodological approach to young people's political socialisation. Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 15(3): 243–257.

Andersson, E. (2022). Three major challenges in young people´s political participation and a pragmatic way forward. In: Z. Bečević & B. Andersson (Eds). Youth Participation and Learning – Critical Perspectives on Citizenship Practices in Europe. Springer, pp. 17–35.

Andersson, E. (2024). Hur kan lärare och elever förbättra utbildningen tillsammans? Demokratisk skolförbättring och betydelsen av lärares kollektiva vanor. Forskning og Forandring, 7(1): 26–48.

Arendt, H. (1958/1998). The Human condition. University of Chicago Press.

Barber, B. R. (2003). Strong democracy. Participatory politics for a new age. University of California Press.
Bernstein, R. J. (1985). Dewey, democracy: The task ahead of us. In: J. Rajchman & C. West (Eds.), Post-Analytic Philosophy. Columbia University Press, pp. 48–58.
Biesta, G. (2011). Learning Democracy in School and Society. Education, Lifelong Learning and the Politics of Citizenship. Sense Publishers.
Biesta, G. (2022). World-centred education. A view for the present. Routledge.
Biesta, G. & Burbules, N. C. (2003). Pragmatism and educational research. Rowman & Littlefield Publisher.
Biesta, G. & Lawy, R. (2006). Citizenship-as-practice: The Educational Implications of an Inclusive and Relational Understanding of Citizenship. British Journal of Educational Studies 54(1): 34–50.
Blossing, U., Imsen, G. & Moos, L. (Eds.) (2014). The Nordic education model. 'A School for All' encounters neo-liberal policy. Springer.
Callan, E. (1997). Creating Citizens: Political and Liberal Democracy. Oxford University Press.
Claes, E. & Hooghe, M. (2017). The Effect of Political Science Education on Political Trust and Interest: Results from a 5-year Panel Study. Journal of Political Science Education, 13(1): 33–45.
Corsaro, W. A. (2011). The Sociology of Childhood (3rd edition). Sage.
Crick Report (1998). Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools. Final report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship. QCA.
Dagens Nyheter (2025-10-23). Ministern vill att lärare ska få bestraffa elever. https://www.dn.se/sverige/ministern-vill-att-larare-ska-fa-bestraffa-elever/
Dewey, J. (1916/1997). Democracy and Education. The Free Press.
Dewey, J. (1927). The Public and Its Problems. Swallow Press/Ohio University Press.
Dewey, J. (1929). The Quest for Certainty. Minton, Balch.

Dewey, J. (1934/2005). Art as experience. The Berkley Publishing Group.
Dewey, J. (1938/1997). Experience & Education. Touchstone.
Dewey, J. (1939). I Believe. In: L. Menand (ed.). Pragmatism – a Reader. Vintages Books, pp. 265–271.
Dewey, J (1983/2005). Människans natur och handlingsliv. Daidalos.
Dewey J. & Bentley, A. F. (1949/1989). Knowing and the known. In: J. A. Boydston (Ed.) John Dewey. The Later Works, 1949–1952, vol. 16. Southern Illinois University Press, pp. 3–279.
Gillett-Swan, J. & Baroutsis, A. (2024). Student voice and teacher voice in educational research: a systematic review of 25 years of literature from 1995–2020. Oxford Review of Education, 50(4): 533–551.
Green, J. M. (1999). Deep democracy. Community, diversity, and transformation. Rowman & Littlefield.
Hammerin, Z., Andersson, E. & Maivorsdotter, N. (2018). Exploring student participation in teaching: an aspect of student health in school. International Journal of Educational Research, 92: 63–74.
Hanna, A. (2024). Children's right to silence and non-participation in education. Redefining student voice. Routledge.
Harber, C. (2004). Schooling as violence. How Schools Harm Pupils and Societies. Routledge.
Heller Sahlgren, G. (2023). No Excuses – en skolpolitisk lösning för Sveriges utanförskapsområden? Näringslivets skolforum.
Henderson, J. G., Castner, D. J. & Schneider, J. L. (2018). Democratic curriculum leadership. Critical awareness to pragmatic artistry. Rowman & Littlefield.
Hooghe, M. (2004). Political Socialization and the Future of Politics. Acta Political, 39(4): 331–341.
Hooghe, M., Dassonneville, R. & Marien, S. (2015). The Impact of Education on the Development of Political Trust: Results from a Five-Year Panel Study among Late Adolescents and Young Adults in Belgium. Political Studies, 63(1): 123–141.
Imsen, G., Blossing, U. & Moos, L. (2017). Reshaping the Nordic education model in an era of efficiency. Changes in the comprehensive school project in Denmark, Norway, and

Sweden since the millennium. Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 61(5): 568–583.
Jennings, K. M. (2007). Political Socialization. In: R. J. Dalton & H-D. Klingemann (eds.). The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior. Oxford University Press, pp. 29–44.
Kaase, M. (2007). Perspectives on political participation. In: R. J. Dalton & H-D. Klingemann (Eds.). The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior. Oxford University Press, pp. 783–796.
Koskimaa, V. & Rapeli, L. (2015). Political Socialization and Political Interest: The Role of School Reassessed. Journal of Political Science Education, 11(2): 141–156.
Kudrnáč, A. (2015). Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Approaches in Political Socialization Research. Sociólogia, 47(6): 605–624.
Kyere, E., Joseph, A. & Wei, K. (2020). Alternative to zero-tolerance policies and out-of-school suspensions: A multitiered centered perspective. Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 29(5): 421–436.
Lawy, R. (2014). Education beyond socialisation: on becoming and being a citizen-subject in everyday life. Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 35(4): 599–610.
Lipset, M. S. (Ed.) (1995). The Encyclopedia of Democracy, vol. 1. Routledge.
Lopes, J., Benton, T. & Cleaver, E. (2009). Young people's intended civic and political participation: does education matter? Journal of Youth Studies, 12(1): 1–20.
Lukes, S. (2005). Power: A Radical View. (2nd ed.). Palgrave.
Lund, D. E. & Carr, P. R. (2008). Introduction: Scanning democracy. In: D. E. Lund & P. R. Carr (Eds.). Doing democracy. Striving for political literacy and social justice. Peter Lang, pp. 1–29.
Lundahl, L. (2016). Equality, inclusion and marketization of Nordic education: Introductory notes. Research in Comparative & International Education, 11(1): 3-12.
Macleod, C. M. (2023). Children's Rights and Democratic Education. In: J. Culp, J. Drerup & D. Yacek (Eds.). The Cambridge Handbook of Democratic Education. Cambridge University Press, pp. 346–360.
Messiou, K., de los Reyes, E. J., Potnis, C., Dong, P. & Kachollom Rwang, V. (2025). Student voice: bringing about change in

primary schools. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 38(3): 374–389.
Miller, A. (1984). I begynnelsen var uppfostran. Wahlström & Widstrand.
Neundorf, A. & Smets, K. (2017). Political Socialization and the Making of Citizens. Oxford University Press.
Neundorf, A., Niemi, G. & Smets, K. (2016). The Compensation Effect of Civic Education on Political Engagement: How Civics Classes Make Up for Missing Parental Socialization. Political Behavior, 38(4): 921–949.
Nord, M., Altman, D., Fernandes, T., Good God, A. & Lindberg, S. (2026). Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling The Democratic Era? University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.
O'Reilly, J. & O'Grady, E. (2024). 'Our opinions really matter': conceptualising and operationalising authentic student voice through negotiated integrated curriculum. EDUCATION, 52(6): 811–829.
Pasek, J., Feldman, L., Romer, D. & Hall Jamieson, K. (2008). Schools as Incubators of Democratic Participation: Building Long-Term Political Efficacy with Civic Education. Applied Developmental Science, 12(1): 26–37.
Persson, M. (2013). Review Article: Education and Political Participation. British Journal of Political Science, 45(3): 689–703.
Regeringen (2023). Varaktigt förbättrad trygghet och studiero i skolan (Dir. 2023:154).
Pye, L. W. (1968). Political culture. In: D. L. Sills (Ed.), International encyclopedia of the social sciences (Vol. 12). Macmillan, pp. 218–225.
Rosanvallon, P. (2006). Motdemokrati. Politiken i misstrons tid. Tankekraft förlag.
Ross, A. (1967/2003). Varför demokrati? Santérus Förlag.
Rusnac, S. & Mazur, B. (2016). A new method of psychosocial research – the questionnaire of political socialization. INTERTEXT, 3-4: 246–253.
Sapiro, V. (2004). Not Your Parents' Political Socialization: Introduction for a New Generation. Annual Review of Political Science, 7(1): 1-23.

SFS 2010:800. (2010). Swedish Education Act [Skollag (2010:800)]. Ministry of Education and Research. https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/skollag-2010800_sfs-2010-800

Statens offentliga utredningar (2025). Bättre förutsättningar för trygghet och studiero i skolan. (SOU 2025:8). Regeringskansliet.

Stubager, R. (2008). Education effects on authoritarian–libertarian values: a question of socialization. The British Journal of Sociology, 59(2): 327–350.

Torney-Purta, J. (2000). Comparative Perspectives on Political Socialization and Civic Ed-ucation. Comparative Education Review, 44(1): 80–95.

Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (2004). What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. American Educational Research Journal, 41(2): 237–269.

Vi Lärare (2025-03-27). Lärare larmar: Elevers inflytande har gått överstyr. https://www.vilarare.se/amneslararen-svenska-sprak/fokus/larare-larmar-elevers-inflytande-har-gatt-overstyr/

Vi Lärare (2025-03-27). Läraren: Elevers tyckande väger absurt tungt. https://www.vilarare.se/amneslararen-svenska-sprak/fokus/lararen-elevers-tyckande-vager-extremt-tungt/

Vi Lärare (2025-03-27). Skolministern sågar elevinflytandet i skolan: ”Vuxenpåhitt”. https://www.vilarare.se/amneslararen-svenska-sprak/fokus/skolministern-sagar-elevinflytandet-i-skolan-vuxenpahitt/

Vincent, S. & Désautels, J. (2008). Teaching and learning democracy in education: interweaving democratic citizenship into/through the curriculum. In: D. E. Lund & P. R. Carr (Eds.). Doing democracy. Striving for political literacy and social justice. Peter Lang, pp. 283–300.

Wiseman, W. A., Astiz, F. M., Fabrega, R. & Baker, D. P. (2011). Making citizens of the world: the political socialization of youth in formal mass education systems. Compare: A

Journal of Comparative and International Education, 41(5): 561–577.
Wood, B. & Black, R. (2014). Performing Citizenship Down Under: Educating the Active Citizen. Journal of Social Science Education, 13(4): 56-65.
Woods, P. A. (2005). Democratic leadership in education. Paul Chapman Publishing.
Woods, P. A. & Roberts, A. (2018). Collaborative school leadership. A critical guide. Sage.

Dr. **Erik Andersson**, based at the Department of Education and Special Education at the University of Gothenburg, holds a PhD in Education and has a background as a school teacher. His research is situated at the intersection of school improvement, educational leadership, collegial learning, and students' democratic participation.

The terms and conditions of use are related to Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY)