

# Reading between the lines: Democratic citizenship in the history curriculum in lower secondary education in Finland

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the Finnish core curriculum (curriculum framework) for basic education, with focus on how lower secondary education in general, and history teaching specifically, is meant to develop the student's democratic citizenship. Developing the student's democratic citizenship is not an explicit aim of history teaching in the current core curriculum although the aims of history teaching there are very much about civic skills that support deliberative, participatory and liberal democracy. Support to the student's democratic citizenship and the liberal-democratic society is more visible as a goal in the sections of the core curriculum that describe the general goals and principles of basic education. In the paper it is suggested that the emphasis on the skills to construct, analyse and evaluate historical interpretations in the history curriculum overshadows more directly societal aims and political aspects of history teaching that are relevant in developing the student's democratic citizenship. It is suggested also that bringing third-order concepts in the history curriculum could valuably support the student's democratic citizenship and democratic consciousness by focusing on the personal meanings of history to the student – a perspective too often neglected in the curriculum.

## Keywords

Historical consciousness, democratic consciousness, history teaching, curriculum studies, Finland

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## Introduction: Trajectories of democracy and school democracy in Finland, c. 1920 to the present

Internationally Finland scores high as a country where the principle of rule of law and liberal democratic values are widely shared and there is little corruption. Like the Nordic countries in general, Finland is counted in the politically most stable and socially equal countries globally, with a long tradition of active civic society and well-functioning public administration (State Treasury Republic

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of Finland, 2022). Parliamentary and the civic and political rights in the spirit of liberal democracy were included in the first constitution of the Republic of Finland in 1919. But there were also periods of anti-pluralist turbulence in Finland in the twentieth century. A civil war was fought in 1918, and in domestic politics a struggle between authoritarian Right-wing forces, Communists and the supporters of the liberal democratic order continued till the 1930's. Finland remained a parliamentary democracy with a multi-party political system also throughout the 1920's and 1930's. After World War II Finland did not take the road to Soviet-style Communism, as the Central Eastern European countries did. From the 1960's to 1980's, however, a tendency to self-censorship – often referred to as *finlandization* – silenced debates on political issues that were considered irritating to the Soviet Union. This had repercussions also on the content of history textbooks, for example (Ahonen, 2019).

Since the late 1970's politics in Finland was characterised by a consensus-aspiring culture of political parties collaborating in coalitions over the Right–Left-divide, also from the opposite ends of the political spectre. Major decisions about social policy, labour market relations and public finances were negotiated between the state and the labour market organisations which later would be criticised as a form of corporativism that curtails democratic decision-making. From the 2010's onward, the consensus-aiming mode of politics has been replaced by a more confrontational tone. Affective polarisation is now visible in public debate also in Finland, in particular intensified by the rhetorics of The Finns Party that is now one of the biggest parties and has gradually moved from the populist to the radical Right (Kawecki, 2022; Söderlund & Grönlund, 2024). The Finns Party has inspired previously politically passive constituencies to use traditional means of representative democracy as voters in the elections which is positive to democratic participation (Kawecki, 2022). However, anti-pluralist polarizing rhetorics has lately raised concern about the resilience of institutions of liberal-democratic society.

The central role of school in supporting democratic citizenship was recognised in the 1920's when the National Bureau of Education was led by politically liberal civil servants aiming to reconciliation after the civil war by way of citizenship education (Arola, 2003). The union of grammar school students, *Teiniliitto*, was established in 1939 as an organisation that engaged students in civic activities within and outside the school. It was in the 1960's and 1970's that it reached the height of its influence as the engine of school democracy reforms. The law on school councils in grammar school (1971) gave the students more voice, also in pedagogical matters. School council elections took place under party-political banners which reflected the general politicisation in society at the time (Soimetsä et al., 2023). The situation was disliked by some of the teachers and also some political circles found it unwelcome which resulted in abolishing the school councils in the 1980's (Suutarinen, 2008). However from the 2000's on there has been again strong support to school democracy and student participation, fuelled by concern for the vitality of civic society and democracy. Numerous government development programs in the last 20 years show that school is considered central in developing children's democratic citizenship (Tujula, 2023).

Finnish teachers, however, do not see often themselves as civic educators, except in teaching critical thinking and other generic civic skills (Fornaciari and Rautiainen, 2020). In the ICCS International Civic and Citizenship Education Study surveys in 2009 and 2016 Finnish social studies teachers saw as the most important aims of civic education developing the student's critical thinking and providing knowledge about society; developing the students' ability to fight racism and be politically active in the future were prioritised very seldom (Seland et al., 2021). In Finland there is a tradition to see the school as a non-political space rather than an engine of social change (Fornaciari and Rautiainen, 2020; Puustinen and Rantala, 2023). The afore mentioned result in the ICCS studies seems to support this view but the result was very much the same also in the other Nordic countries (Seland et al., 2021).

## History teaching as citizenship and democracy education in Finland

The school subject history has had a central place in civic education in Finland like in many other countries, too. In the early years of the twentieth century grammar school history teachers in Finland were given the task to teach also the basics in economy and law. As society began to modernise rapidly after World War II it was essential that students would study contemporary social and economic issues more. To meet this need a new subject, history and social studies, was introduced in the 1960's. History teachers were responsible for it, and the qualification to teach social studies was linked with history teacher's qualification. The teachers had majored in history and minored in social sciences. In the beginning of the 2000's the subject was split into two separate subjects, history and social studies, but the link between them has remained close, often the same person teaching both subjects (Löfström et al., 2017). Thus it has usually been the history teacher who teaches topics like democracy, citizenship and politics in Finnish school.

There is a lack of Finnish research on connections of historical and democratic consciousness. Discussion on history education in Finland was very much practice-oriented until theoretical discussion began in the 1980's, influenced by the German and British history Didaktik (Virta, 2012). The German and Anglo-American traditions have influenced Finnish research also in recent decades when research has very much focused on historical literacy but also historical consciousness and historical culture (Ahonen, 2020). Connections of historical consciousness and democratic orientation have been touched in some analyses but these do not really tackle how history education supports democratic citizenship (van den Berg, 2007; Löfström, 2021; Mikander, 2016; Satokangas, 2021). Questions about education to democratic citizenship have been addressed more in research on social studies education which is also expected (Helkala and Tomperi, 2021; Mikander and Satokangas, 2023; Satokangas and Mikander, 2023).

History as a school subject and a field of knowledge is often given a central role in education to democratic citizenship in public discussion but how is history teaching actually assumed to contribute to democratic citizenship? This is part of a fundamental question that, for example, Arie Wilschut (2024) has posed: is there a deeper connection between history and democracy? It can be argued that a well-developed historical consciousness is a good platform to cultivate democratic citizenship because the past, the present and the future are then seen to intersect in a way that does justice to the complexity, plurality and controversiality of people's historical experiences (Ammert et al., 2022). At a more practical pedagogical level it has been explored if history teaching may contribute to such a fruitful temporal orientation and, hence, to education for democratic citizenship more efficiently via working with longitudinal lines, "enduring human issues" or historical analogies, for example (van Straaten et al., 2018).

In this paper the question what connection there is actually between historical and democratic consciousness is approached by analysing one selected curriculum document and asking how democracy, democratic society and democratic citizenship feature in there. This document is the current core curriculum (curriculum framework) for lower secondary schools in Finland. In the analysis attention is paid to the chapters describing the general goals and principles of basic education and the task, aims and content of history teaching. The main focus is history teaching but also the general goals and principles of basic school are here relevant to discuss because the core curriculum builds a whole and the subject-specific chapters must be seen in relation to the wider framework that is described in the document. The outline of the Finnish school and curriculum system are briefly described in the next section.

## Method, material, theory: The curriculum and its analysis and the theoretical frame

The current Finnish school system has been inspired by the conviction that school can support social equality. An important step was taken in the 1960's when nine-year basic education for all was designed to replace the system where children at the age of ten went in two tracks, one preparing to academic studies, one to vocational studies. The supporters of the reform saw the need to good education for all children that is free of charge, and in their view the old system perpetuated social inequality of children from different socio-economic background (Ahonen, 2008). Thus the reform was essentially about strengthening the social and cultural foundation of democracy in Finnish society. Compulsory education covered children at 7–15 years, from 2021 children at 7–18 years.

The national core curriculum (curriculum framework) in Finland consists of two documents:

- the core curriculum for basic education (Finnish: *Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet*) covering Grade 1–6 (primary) and Grade 7–9 (lower secondary);
- the core curriculum for upper secondary schools (Finnish: *Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet*).

The core curriculum guides the municipal and school-specific curricula. The work on the core curriculum is led by the National Agency of Education. The process engages representatives of stakeholders like teachers, civic organisations and researchers. A preliminary curriculum is circulated for reviews which can be seen as a measure to add the legitimacy of the curriculum in the stakeholder field, although the final impact of the review has been questioned (Säily et al., 2021). The implementation of the curriculum at the local plan is decided in municipalities. The curriculum describes the value-base of the school and the principles informing the school operational culture, including students' participation. In the curriculum are also the principles of supporting students' wellbeing and the specific needs of Sami and Roma students. Further, it describes the subject-specific aims, content and in basic education assessment criteria. The teaching hours in the subjects are decreed separately by the Ministry of Education. (Halinen, 2018).

In international comparison Finnish teachers have a lot of pedagogical freedom also when the schools follow the same core curriculum. The curriculum can contribute to increased teacher autonomy if the dialogic potential in designing the school-specific curriculum is given space (Haapaniemi et al., 2021; Soini et al., 2021). Finnish teachers experience pressure from the public but less from the school authorities (Salokangas et al., 2019). Teachers' pedagogical autonomy and the absence of regular national tests in basic education have been seen as an explanation to good learning results in Finnish schools in international surveys (Chung, 2023; Niemi et al., 2018). Lately the results have been deteriorating, though.

Since the 1990's the Finnish core curriculum has focused more on competences and skills in the subject-specific chapters in the curriculum. There is also more emphasis on "transversal skills" or cross-disciplinary learning (Lavonen, 2020). The emphasis on skills in the formal curriculum may not always be realised in the classroom because teachers stick to traditions. For example history teachers have only slowly started to focus on skills rather than factual knowledge in assessment of learning (Rantala and Ouakrim-Soivio, 2020). Thus the formal curriculum does not necessarily tell what takes place in the classroom but it shows what the authoritative view of teaching is like.

Authoritative texts like the curriculum are a central object of critical discourse analyses, here abbreviated CDA. Discourses not only describe the social world but construct part of it, CDA is therefore relevant especially in studies of texts whose truth-value is easily taken for granted.

CDA can help identify who is given voice in a text and who are relegated in the margins, how they are named, what values are implied in the description of the social world; what is seen as the desirable or “natural” state of affairs or the direction of development; and what forces are seen behind the social development. In this study CDA is deployed as the method outlined by Wodak (2015; see Introduction to this Theme Issue). The selected parts of the curriculum text have been approached in the analysis with attention to: where and how the concept democracy and democratic appears in the curriculum; what characteristics are attached to these concepts; who or what is presented as the engine of social change; what agency is given to the members of school community and particularly the students in society.

Here the focus is how the Finnish basic education, and its history teaching in particular, are meant to support democratic society and the student’s democratic citizenship in the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014*, here referred to as *NCC 2014* (National Board of Education, 2014a). The document has over 470 pages.<sup>1</sup> The sections of the document in the focus are Chapters 2–4 (20 pages), where the values and general goals of basic education are laid out, and Chapter 15.4.12 (3 pages) where history teaching in Grade 7–9 is described. Also the history section in the *Criteria for Final Assessment in Basic Education 2020* (3 pages) has been analysed. The guiding questions in analysis have been: what expressions are connected with democracy; what population groups are mentioned; how agency and structure appear in the text, what is the relationship between the past, the present and the future; and how are the students expected to engage with society.

The theoretical framework of the paper is presented in more detail in the Introduction to this Theme Issue. It is a categorisation of traditions of democracy, based on Sant’s (2019) meta-analysis of how democratic education has been conceptualised in education research in the 2000’s and 2010’s. The categories are used in the analysis for this paper as tools with which to distinguish between different perspectives and conceptual approaches that are identifiable in the curriculum text. The three categories are the tradition of protective democracy (its sub-traditions: elitist and neoliberal democracy); the tradition of developmental democracy (sub-traditions: liberal, deliberative and participant democracy); and the tradition of interruptive democracy (sub-traditions: participant, multicultural, critical and agonistic democracy). The general characteristics of the three traditions can be summarised briefly so that in protective democratic tradition is prioritised stability, continuity and preservation of current values and practices; in developmental democracy is prioritised the notion of the potential to evolve and the balancing role of human rights in regard to democratic rule; in interruptive democracy is prioritised opportunity to question prevalent structures and norms, bring to the fore subjected experiences, and interpret conflicts as unavoidable in democracy as reactions to injustice and inequality.

## Results of the analysis (I): Democracy as a theme in the general part of the NCC 2014<sup>2</sup>

The first chapters of the *NCC 2014* describe the mission, goals and values of basic education and the pedagogical principles applied in school. In the *NCC 2014* words including ‘democr\*’ (Finnish: ‘*demokr\**’) appear c. 40 times. Democracy is mentioned in connection with human rights, equality, participation, active citizen, civic society and sustainable development. Also words with ‘citiz\*’/ ‘civic’ (Finnish: ‘*kansal\**’) appear c. 40 times whereas words including ‘socie\*’/ ‘socia\*’ (Finnish: ‘*yhteiskun\**’) appear over 300 times, as also words with ‘partici\*’ (Finnish: ‘*osallis\**’).<sup>3</sup> In following are as examples quotes in the chapters “Mission of basic education” and “National goals of education” (all page numbers refer to the *NCC 2014*).<sup>4</sup>

Basic education is built on respect for life and human rights. It directs the pupils to defend these values and to appreciate the inviolability of human dignity. Basic education promotes wellbeing, democracy and active agency in civil society. The development of basic education is guided by the goals and extensive principles of equality and equity. Education contributes to promoting economic, social, regional and gender equality. Education shall not demand or lead to religious, philosophical or political commitment of the pupils. (p. 16)

[Basic education] reinforces the pupils' positive identity as human beings, learners and community members. Education promotes participation, a sustainable way of living and growth as a member of a democratic society. Basic education educates the pupils to know, respect and defend human rights. (p. 19)

Global education as part of basic education contributes to creating preconditions for fair and sustainable development in line with the UN development goals. [...] Basic education exerts influence as a driver for positive change that contributes to society, both at the national and international level. (p. 19)

In addition to respecting life, other people and nature, the Decree [on Basic Education] highlights the inviolability of human dignity, respect for human rights, and the democratic values of Finnish society, including equity and equality. (p. 20)

In these quotes democracy, human rights, citizens' participation and equality/equity appear as the features of a good society. In some respects those features are presented as current reality, for example the democratic values of Finnish society that are "highlighted", and the students' identity as community members that is "reinforced". In some respects they are more like aims that basic education aims to realise by exerting influence as a "driver of positive change" and contributing to promoting economic and social equality. The references to human rights and the prohibition against demanding the students for a religious or political commitment can be taken as an indication of a liberal democratic stance that in the theoretical framework of this paper connects to the developmental democratic tradition.

The actors guiding the students are not singled out in the quotes but they can be assumed to include teachers, other members of the school community, and also school authorities at the municipal and other levels. The students often appear as objects of educational intervention, like in the passages saying education reinforces the pupils' positive identity and the students are directed to defend certain values. But also the students' capacity to take an active role in society is recognised, like in the passage contending the pupils are educated to defend human rights. It appears education and the students' activities are aimed to knowing, respecting and defending certain values and human rights, but at some places also to bringing about change, like in the phrase that basic education is "a driver for positive change". This combination of respecting and defending but also changing the current situation appears compatible with the tradition of developmental democracy but also interruptive democracy, given that aspiration to "positive change" can be based on a radical reassessment of the state of affairs in society.

The subject in the quotes is mostly education as an entity. When students are mentioned they are referred to as a group; the individual student is not visible in the quotes. This may reflect that students are seen as a collective with capacity to concerted action, but one can also make the pessimistic suggestion that an individual student is not recognised as an agent. As will be seen later, in the criteria of assessment the focus is on the individual student's abilities which means there is tension between speaking about the students in the aims of teaching and in the targets of assessment. – Elements of participant democracy are discernable in the curriculum in that the students are expected be educated to participate, but their ability to participate and have impact on the world appears more in the chapters of the curriculum that discuss school operational culture and transversal competences.

Transversal competence is described in the *NCC 2014* as an entity consisting of knowledge, values, attitudes, will and ability to apply knowledge and skills in a given situation (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 21). One of the transversal skills, “Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future”, is particularly relevant here. It is described as follows:

Participating in civic activity is a basic precondition for an effective democracy. Skills in participation and involvement as well as a responsible attitude towards the future may only be learned by practicing. The school environment offers a safe setting for this, while basic education also lays a foundation of competence for the pupils’ growth into active citizens who use their democratic rights and freedoms responsibly. The mission of the school is to reinforce the participation of each pupil. (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 25)

Among the aims is also that the students “learn to practice negotiation skills, arbitration and conflict resolution as well as critical examination of issues” (p. 25). It implies it is important for the student to prepare to handle conflicts in social life constructively. Potential causes to such conflicts are not discussed, however. The significance of rules and trust is mentioned as important to learn, like also learning to evaluate one’s arguments in the negotiation “from the perspective of equality of the different parties, fair treatment and a sustainable way of living” (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 25).

In the section on the transversal skill, “Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future”, there is a passage that speaks of historical consciousness but without using the term. It is stated there that the students need to use the available methods of active citizens but also evaluate them and possibly adopt new methods. This implies discarding old and less relevant solutions. It is also pointed out that the future is open, there are alternative ways forward, and all choices have consequences, at many different levels. The explicit reference to considering interconnections of the past, the present and the alternative, open futures may express linkage to the kind of historical consciousness that in the theoretical framework of this paper is closely connected with the traditions of developmental and also interruptive democracy. The relevant passage is following:

During their years in basic education, the pupils consider the links between the past, the present and the future and reflect on various alternative futures. They are guided to understand the significance of their choices, way of living and actions not only to themselves but also to their local environment, society and nature. The pupils develop capabilities for evaluating both their own and their community’s and society’s operating methods and structures and for changing them so that they contribute to a sustainable future. (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 25–26.)

In the chapter, “Operating culture of comprehensive basic education”, the focus is on how to support structures in school that may conduce to the student’s democratic citizenship. In the chapter are addressed themes like language awareness, environmental responsibility and also participation and democratic action. In the last are discussed democratic school community and way to support students’ democratic participation. In how democratic school community is described are seen elements of developmental democracy in the liberal-democratic tapping but also traces of deliberative and participant democracy:

A school culture that promotes participation, realises human rights and operates democratically lays a foundation for the pupils’ growth into active citizens. [...] The [school] community encourages democratic dialogue and participation and devises operating methods and structures for them. (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 29)

Student's opportunities to plan, implement and evaluate participatory solutions in school are raised, and in addition to class councils and other activities, collaboration with actors outside school, like associations and businesses, is pointed out, which expands what different forms the cultivation of democratic citizenship can take (p. 29). It is also stated that students are to be involved in planning and developing activities in the school (p. 37). Democracy education researchers have been sceptical of the value of those activities because they mostly appear to focus only on recreational events in school (Tujula, 2023). It can be argued however that also such activities may contribute to democratic ethos by supporting a more inclusive community spirit in school. In the *NCC 2014* the importance of students having opportunities to use their voice in school is clearly addressed. Actually the expectation that students participate appears like almost an obligation that student must fulfill, lest democracy loses its vitality:

Participating in civic activity is basic precondition for an effective democracy. Skills in participation and involvement as well as a responsible attitude towards the future may only be learned by practicing. (p. 25)

It is problematic if it is implied that the “good citizens” in democracy must participate in a specific way, by voting for example, but the forms of participation are left open in the *NCC 2014*. The emphasis on developing school operational culture can be taken as an indication that school democracy goes beyond the formal organisations of school councils and student councils and involves diverse opportunities for students to make their voice heard in school. This matches the view of democracy education researchers that also unconventional civic activity should be presented as legitimate for the responsible citizen (Löfström et al., 2017).

## **Results of the analysis (II): Democracy in the history curriculum for grade 7–9 in the NCC 2014**

In the *NCC 2014* the aims, content and assessment criteria for teaching and learning history are described for Grade 3–6 and Grade 7–9. In this paper the focus is Grade 7–9.

Skills of historical thinking, specifically historical reasoning, have had a central place in the aims of history teaching in the Finnish curriculum since the 2000's (Rautiainen et al., 2019). This shows in the *NCC 2014*: among the twelve aims of history teaching in the curriculum only few relate to existential, moral and societal aspects of learning history. No aim is about knowing static historical facts; in all the aims there is an element of student doing something with historical knowledge. The aims for history teaching are (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 447; formulation by the author):

- to strengthen the student's interest in history as a field of knowledge and an identity-building school subject,
- to activate the student to acquire historical information from different kinds of sources and to evaluate their trustworthiness,
- to help the student understand that historical information can be interpreted in different ways,
- to improve the student's ability to understand time and related concepts in history,
- to guide the student to understand factors that have influenced people's actions in different situations in history,
- to help the student consider different causes to historical events,
- to guide the student to analyse historical change and continuity,
- to encourage the student to make interpretations, based on historical knowledge,
- to guide the student to explain intentions in people's conduct,

- to guide the student to explain why historical information can be interpreted and used differently in different situations, and to assess the reliability of interpretations,
- to train the student to make well-grounded interpretations, based on diverse sources and their comparison, and
- to guide the student to assess alternatives to future development on the basis of one's historical knowledge.

Taken as a whole, it is the aim of history teaching that the student – here in singular! – learns to acquire, assess and do something with historical information. This activity of the student is, however, not explicitly connected to societal goals; it is more about the student's intellectual development. Following the distinction by Moisan et al. (2020) and Löfström (2023), such an intellectual development relates to the student's ability to understand the world and know the tools for interpreting and explaining it, whereas personal development concerns the student's personality and connects to the meanings of history to the student. The student's intellectual development as an aim is compatible with education of the student as a citizen, thus also the aims of history teaching in the Finnish core curriculum may well support the growth of the student's democratic citizenship. However, it is not spelled out in the curriculum what this connection is and how the citizen could use his/her understanding of historical knowledge. Ability to explain different uses of history and evaluate alternative visions of the future are likely to be valuable in a democracy but the link between the theoretical grasp of historical knowledge and its societal or political use is not visible in the curriculum.

There are in the formulation of the tasks of history teaching in the curriculum elements that also can well support the student's democratic citizenship in a broad sense, for example the following:

The task of the subject of history is to develop the students' knowledge of history and cultures and to encourage them to adopt the principles of responsible citizenship. Knowledge about the past is used to guide the pupil to understand the development that has led to the present time, to appreciate the value of mental and material work as well as to reflect on future choices. The pupils are guided to perceive the importance of the individual as an historical actor and to comprehend factors underlying activities and human motivations. The aim is to support the pupils in building their identity and to promote their growth into active members of the society who understand diversity. (p. 446)

The student is here expected to see the present as an outcome of historical development rather than a static matter of fact, and to see the future as open and malleable to some degree at least. The role of human agency is brought up clearly, with focus on individuals as historical actors which is noteworthy, considering that actors in history textbooks may be abstract marco-level entities and institutions rather than individuals. In the quote it is stated that active members of society should understand diversity, and it seems reasonable to interpret that diversity should also be valued. These are relevant themes for a citizen in a democratic society to discuss and debate: the value of social diversity, the role of individual agency in historical development, and the malleability of the future. But democracy or democratic citizenship are not explicitly mentioned in this passage. More precisely: they are not mentioned in the Finnish and English version but in the Swedish version of the *NCC 2014* the adjective "democratic" appears in the passage quoted above. In English translation by the author it says:

The task of the school subject history is to develop the students' historical consciousness and knowledge of cultures, and encourage them to develop to responsible and democratic citizens. (National Agency of Education, 2020b, p. 416.)

It is difficult to explain why “democratic” is in one but not in the other language versions, and also why in Swedish it is the student’s historical consciousness that developed and not his/her historical knowledge, like in the Finnish and English version. It seems some central concepts of history education have not been familiar to those translating the curriculum in the National Agency of Education and the democratic element in citizenship has appeared more central to the Swedish-speaking editor of the curriculum. This detail is interesting because it shows that some relevant conceptual and theoretical distinctions may be lost in the process of producing the curriculum and that those involved in the production may fill in content that is according to their interpretation proper but it actually may result in confusing outcomes.

It can be argued that history teaching supports the student’s democratic citizenship because it develops the student’s ability to analyse historical information, understand the historicity and diversity of values and worldviews, and construct plausible explanations to people’s actions (Barton and Levstik, 2010; Seixas and Morton, 2013). Historical consciousness is the ability to make connections between the past, the present and the future which is crucial in making sense of the social world that people are engaged in as citizens (Ammert et al., 2022). But points like these are not made explicit in how the task and aims of history teaching are described in the *NCC 2014*. No agents of historical development are mentioned, except the generic “individuals” and “actors”, but in the aims concerning the interpretation of historical information it is implied that society is a collective of people with different backgrounds and, hence, possibly different agenda in using historical information, for example. In society there can be tensions, as mentioned in a note on the diversity of values:

The instruction of history helps the pupils recognise the society’s values and tensions in them, as well as their change in different times. (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 446.)

Taken as a whole, society appears in the *NCC 2014* as a scene where historical developments take place as a result of systemic input by anonymous forces. As mentioned earlier, there are instances where diversity and, implicitly at least, different agendas in interpreting historical information are recognised but it can be argued this sets the focus on the (important) social aspect of citizenship and leaves its political aspect out of the picture. This is essentially the critique that Gert Biesta (2008) also directed to the new curriculum in Scotland in the 2000’s: in education for citizenship the risk was to focus on the social but not the political dimension of what citizenship is about in a pluralist liberal democracy.

In the criteria for the final assessment in history at the end of basic education, included in the *NCC 2014*, the focus is the student’s skills of historical reasoning and analysing of historical sources and uses of history. The use of these skills in democratic participation could also be an object of assessment but no such aim has been included in the aims of history teaching in the *NCC 2014*. There is a traditional division of labour between two school subjects, history and social studies, so that the latter is the primary context of developing skills of democratic citizenship. Unsurprisingly then, also in the *NCC 2014* the skills and orientations related to democratic citizenship are more clearly visible in the aims of social studies teaching, as in following:

[The aim is] to guide the student in understanding the principles of decision-making and democratic practices on local, national and European Union level [and] in being an active citizen who develops his/her local community. (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 451.)

The content of history teaching in the *NCC 2014* is described in broad strokes which gives the teacher freedom to choose the subject matter that best serves the students. In the section of the

curriculum that describes the content of history teaching democracy or democratic society are not explicitly mentioned. This is noteworthy, considering that the historical period studied in Grade 7–9 is from 1800 to the present, the period of vast expansion of liberal democracy in the world. But some themes that are relevant to education for democratic citizenship can be found in the content of teaching. In the content it is stated, for example:

The pupils familiarise themselves with social ideologies, their significance and consequences as well as how people have been able to make an impact in their time [... The students] learn about crimes against humanity, such as the Holocaust and other forms of persecution as well as the promotion of human rights. [...] The pupils explore [...] the origins of new kinds of political tensions in the world as well as solutions to them. (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 447–448.)

In the quote are references to the role of “social ideologies” in history and that human rights have been violated and defended in history and that there have been political tensions as well as work to solve them. Again, human agency is only implicit in these processes of social and political life. In an other passage is stated that urbanisation and industrialisation “changed the lives of human beings” and the World Wars are studied from the point of “ordinary people”. Categories like human beings and ordinary people fail to notice the differences of historical experience that are connected with social class, age and gender and typically have served as engines of social and political mobilisation and clashes of interests. No other social group is mentioned in the content of history teaching than “service profession”, in the context of the Nordic welfare state. (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 448.)

The concept historical consciousness features in the Finnish and Swedish version of the *NCC 2014*: it is stated that history teaching aims to develop the student’s historical consciousness and that the student’s historical consciousness is a target of assessment (National Board of Education, 2014b, p. 419; National Board of Education, 2014c, p. 418). In the *Criteria for Final Assessment in Basic Education (2020)* the student’s use of historical consciousness is also a target of assessment in the Finnish version but in the Swedish version the target is the student’s skill to use historical knowledge and in the English version the student’s knowledge of history (National Agency of Education, 2020a, p. 252; National Agency of Education, 2020b; p. 250; National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 449). Considering that the concept historical consciousness was central in the theory of history education also at the time when the *NCC 2014* and the *Criteria for Final Assessment (2020)* were produced, it is interesting that the language versions are not identical in terminology. The simple explanation may be that researchers of history education were not consulted when these language versions were edited and harmonised in the National Agency of Education. Regardless of the background, the situation raises questions because the meaning of historical consciousness and historical knowledge are far from identical and it has implications for how the contribution of history teaching to democracy education is understood. Is it primarily knowledge about the subject matter of history or ability to orientate with the help of understanding how the past, present and future intersect in people’s thinking and actions? (Ammert et al., 2022, chapter 12.)

## Conclusions and discussion on the findings

It has been reported here that in the current Finnish core curriculum for basic education there are references to democracy, human rights and equality in the general part of the curriculum, but in the chapter on history teaching in Grade 7–9 they are very few. Words with ‘democr\*’ do not feature much in the *NCC 2014* but the overall goal of basic education is clearly in the direction

of supporting democratic citizenship in the tradition of developmental democracy, particularly in liberal and participant democratic tapping. The aims of history teaching focus on students being active members of the society, understanding diversity and learning about the violation and promotion of human rights. It can be suggested that human rights, diversity and civic participation are all themes that closely relate to liberal democracy. In the aims of history teaching is also found critical analysis of information, critical evaluation of historical interpretations and their uses, and making well-grounded interpretations of the past. It can be suggested these themes relate to deliberative democracy in particular. That the student is able to build and evaluate alternative visions for the future appears as an aim related to participant democracy in particular. Thus the major strands of the developmental democratic tradition in the theoretical frame of this Theme Issue can be discerned in the aims of history teaching.

There are no elements in the *NCC 2014* connected with the tradition of protective democracy. Continuity, order and monolithic notions of the nation do not feature in the *NCC 2014* in the chapters analysed in this paper. Understandably Finnish culture and society have a prominent place in the content of Grade 7–9 history teaching but they do not appear as something static or monolithic. In the aims of history teaching are no references to students building a Finnish-national identity, for example; instead the students are expected to build their own identity. It can be that the emphasis on critical evaluation of historical interpretations in the aims works against monologic narratives in history. It is possible that such narratives are circulated and endorsed in the history classroom, and earlier studies show they have appeal (van den Berg, 2007), but in the current written history curriculum there is little space for them.

There are also elements in the history curriculum that open toward the tradition of interruptive democracy. The plurality and controversiality of historical interpretations is recognised in the aims of history teaching and the criteria of assessment. Understanding the historically specific context of people's thoughts and actions would seem to imply that the students will also learn to problematise simplistic notions of historical continuity. Still, the references to the plurality of historical interpretations in the history curriculum look anemic because concrete examples of social and political differences between groups of people are not mentioned. Thus also the plurality of people's historical experiences as a topic of reflection and exploration remains in between the lines in the history curriculum (Löfström, 2023). Problematisation of historical continuity comes up more clearly in the general part of the *NCC 2014* in a direct reference to the students' transformative action is found:

The pupils develop capabilities for evaluating both their own and their community's and society's operating methods and structures, and for changing them so that they contribute to a sustainable future (National Board of Education, 2014a, p. 25–26).

The characteristics of historical consciousness that connect with developmental democracy in the theoretical framework of the Theme Issue (see Introduction) can be discerned in the *NCC 2014*. There are elements that point to the plurality of historical perspectives, for example in that the student understands causes to differences in historical interpretations. However, the plurality aspect is shallow because no social groups or ideologies are mentioned that could serve as examples of what is relevant to the difference of historical experiences and, hence, plurality of historical interpretations.

There are only few explicit references to democratic citizenship and democracy in the chapter on history teaching. This is perhaps understandable: the history curriculum is strongly focused on the central themes of historical epistemology, like using and evaluating historical sources and constructing and evaluating historical interpretations. The aims and content of teaching are primarily related to learning to understand history as a field of knowledge. Societal and political use of

historical knowledge is discernable as a theme only between the lines in the history curriculum. This is explained by the division of labour between the school subjects history and social studies: themes like democracy, politics and citizenship traditionally are placed in social studies. History teaching used to be focused more on transferring a cultural tradition and supporting Finnish-national identity but more recently understanding historical epistemology has become all the more prominent in the aims of history teaching. In fact one may argue this overshadows the potential to education for democratic citizenship in history teaching. As mentioned, Finnish social studies teachers usually are also history teachers. In the ICCS studies they have considered teaching of critical thinking and factual information about society as the most important aims in social studies teaching whereas skills in political participation and working against racism rarely have been placed among the most important aims of social studies teaching (Seland et al., 2021). Against this relief it is not so surprising that elements of education to democratic citizenship are not visible in the history curriculum that also history teachers have contributed to as invited stakeholders.

Elements connected to the tradition of interruptive democracy can be discerned in the current history curriculum in that there is potential to critique in learning historical epistemology that has a prominent place in the curriculum. But the personal meaning of history to the student is not an object of reflection and enquiry in the history curriculum. This misses the opportunity to approach the “presence of embodied difference” and controversiality of history that in the theoretical framework of this paper connect with interruptive democracy. It has been argued that bringing more meaning-giving third-order concepts in the history curriculum could help the student understand the diversity of historical experiences and, thus, plurality of historical interpretations and uses of history (Löfström, 2023). The current history curriculum does not prevent introducing such concepts in the classroom, and experienced teachers can intuitively invite their students to reflect on the personal meaning of history to themselves. The current history curriculum, however, does not encourage this approach that would be relevant, given that within the tradition of interruptive democracy are found sub-traditions like multicultural democracy, antagonistic democracy and critical democracy, outlined in the theoretical frame of this Theme Issue. In these sub-traditions are addressed particularly the kind of issues that are crucial to democracy and democratic citizenship in the current situation where affective polarisation, displacement of populations and the climate catastrophe scenarios are altering dynamics of political identification and temporal orientation, for example. Raising personal meanings of history to the student to the front in the history curriculum explicitly could be a new way for history teaching to support the growth of student’s democratic citizenship.

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**Notes**

1. Three language versions of the *National Core Curriculum 2014* have been used in this paper: Finnish, Swedish, and English (National Board of Education, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). The quotes are from the English version, but the analysis is based on the Finnish version that can be seen as "the master version". The language-versions are not fully identical, as will be seen below.
2. The author participated in preparing the *NCC 2014* and the *Criteria for Final Assessment in Basic Education 2020*. Hence critical comments on these documents must be understood as self-critique on the author's part.
3. In the Finnish language the nouns flex and the body of the word also flexes. So as to give the exact number in these cases would require checking the documents line by line which has not been considered expedient here.
4. The page numbers refer to the English version of *NCC 2014* (National Board of Education, 2014a).

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