

Does political value diversity in class facilitate an open classroom climate? evidence from linguistic minority schools and majority schools in Finland

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Abstract

An open classroom climate (OCC) is considered an effective tool for schools to fulfil their task of providing young people the necessary prerequisites to participate in the political life of their society. However, little is known about the factors that support or hinder the development of OCC. In particular, while comprehensive education in modern societies brings together students from diverse backgrounds and thus offers possibilities for cross-cutting discussions, diversity may increase the risk of unpleasant conflicts. We therefore examine the relationship between political value diversity among classmates and OCC among 15–16-year-old Finnish- and Swedish-speaking pupils in comprehensive education in Finland (N = 5220). We examine this connection both directly and indirectly through students' sense of class community. In addition, we investigate the moderating effect of language minority status on these relationships. Utilising a generalised structural equation modelling framework, we find a direct and positive relationship between diversity in sociocultural political values and OCC. However, value diversity is negatively linked to class community, thereby creating an indirect and negative connection to OCC. In majority-language classrooms, the total effect of diversity in political values on OCC is positive. Conversely, in minority-language classrooms, greater diversity in political values yields a negative total effect.

Keywords

Open classroom climate, sociocultural values, diversity, class community, minority, Swedish-speaking Finns, civic education

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Introduction

In liberal democracies, schools are tasked with preparing pupils to become citizens who actively engage in political life (Campbell, 2008; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1996). One fundamental aspect of this is political deliberation, which is regarded as essential for robust democracy (Manin, 1997: 183–192; Schmitt, 1923/2017: 5–7), and a key competency for citizens in democratic societies (Hess, 2009). Political deliberation can also, for example, increase participation (Mutz, 2002; Quintelier, 2015) and foster mutual understanding (Miklikowska et al., 2022; Mutz, 2006). At school, political deliberation is cultivated in an open classroom climate (OCC), characterised by diverse and respectful discussions on political issues (Schulz et al., 2025). OCC has shown to positively impact the political engagement of adolescents – including their political self-efficacy (Campbell, 2008; Manganelli et al., 2015), political trust (Claes et al., 2012; Claes and Hooghe, 2017), political knowledge (Alivernini and Manganelli, 2011; Knowles and McCafferty-Wright, 2015), political tolerance (Miklikowska et al., 2022), and intentions to participate in politics (Weinberg, 2022). Consequently, OCC is crucial in the political socialisation of youth in schools, and it shapes adolescents’ perspectives on how politics can be discussed and whether cross-cutting political conversations are valued. These experiences, in turn, influence adolescents’ willingness to engage in similar discussions beyond the school environment.

In today’s increasingly multicultural and diverse societies, schools can serve as a gathering place for young people from a wide array of backgrounds. Consequently, they can offer a vital platform for cross-cutting political discussions that have the potential to reduce prejudice and foster mutual understanding among various social groups (Grönlund et al., 2015; Mutz, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Therefore, it is of paramount importance that we examine how and under what conditions schools can effectively fulfil this role. Previous research has highlighted that active teachers serving as role models, good pupil–teacher relationships, and the lack of social problems such as bullying are essential for creating OCC (Maurissen et al., 2018; Reichert et al., 2018). This article contributes to the existing literature by examining the role of class-level diversity in political values. More specifically, it focuses on diversity in classmates’ attitudes in the so-called GAL–TAN dimension (Green, Alternative, Libertarian – Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist), which captures sociocultural values, such as stances on immigration, multiculturalism, gender equality, LGBTIQ rights, and climate change. In recent decades, this new political dimension has become an important basis for mobilising voters in European democracies, particularly for new or transformed parties (Dassonneville et al., 2024). Moreover, it has shown to be particularly important for young age groups (Ross, 2018). Hence, in this study, we ask the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between diversity in political values within a class and the presence of an open classroom climate (OCC)?
2. How does pupils’ sense of class community mediate the connection between diversity in political values and OCC?
3. Does minority status have a moderating effect on the relationship between diversity in political values and the sense of class community?
4. Does minority status have a moderating effect on the relationship between the sense of class community and OCC?

Drawing on data from a large-scale survey among 15–16-year-old pupils in their final year of comprehensive education in Finland, our analysis is conducted using generalised structural

equation modelling. These pupils are enrolled in either Finnish-speaking majority schools ($n = 4168$) or Swedish-speaking minority schools ($n = 1106$). Although municipalities and schools in Finland have the freedom to design their own local curricula, they all adhere to a unified national core curriculum. This curriculum sets mandatory objectives for all basic education, along with goals and standards for each subject. For example, it emphasises general values such as equality, democracy, cultural diversity and pedagogical principles such as active learning (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). Although the core curriculum defines these overarching goals and core content, it allows local adaptations in municipalities and individual schools. In grades 7–9, subject-specific teachers typically teach each class, and teachers have wide-ranging autonomy, as the curriculum is designed to be flexible.

Finland is a bilingual country, with Finnish and Swedish as its official languages. The Swedish-speaking minority constitutes slightly over five per cent of the population, with significant concentrations in coastal areas and the Åland Islands, and totals roughly 290,000 people. Although the number of speakers of other languages in Finland is growing, the Finnish school system mainly divides pupils into Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking schools based on their native language and is thus largely segregated by the official languages (Saarela, 2021: 52–53). This division aims to safeguard linguistic rights and foster educational settings in which pupils can be taught in their native language. It also promotes the development of distinct school cultures in both Finnish and Swedish language contexts and thus presents an opportunity to examine hypotheses on the influence of minority status on the formation of OCC.

Overall, the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland is characterised by a strong minority identity (Lindell, 2020) and high levels of bonding social capital (e.g., Hannuksela and Tiihonen, 2024). Approximately 75 per cent of Swedish-speaking Finns vote for the Swedish People's Party (SPP), despite its right-wing economic policy and liberal social policy, which not all members of the minority necessarily endorse (Lindell, 2020). This high level of support for the SPP contributes to the political homogeneity of Swedish-speaking Finns because most of them prioritize minority and language issues and tend to vote for the party that specifically addresses these concerns (Karv et al., 2021). These factors can accentuate the importance of shared political values for a sense of class community among the minority or foster a class community even in the presence of differing political values among classmates. Furthermore, minority identity and its associated stress may have a significant impact on the role of a class community in shaping the political discourse climate.

Our findings indicate that diversity in sociocultural political values has a direct and positive connection to the perception of OCC. However, value diversity is negatively associated with a sense of class community, thereby establishing an indirect and negative link to OCC. In language majority classrooms, the overall effect of diversity in political values on OCC is positive. Conversely, in language minority classes, greater diversity in political values yields a negative overall relationship. This divergence stems from the stronger negative association between diversity and class community, and the more pronounced positive association between class community and OCC among minority pupils.

Theoretical framework

Political value diversity and open classroom climate

The term 'open classroom climate' is commonly used to describe a classroom environment that is conducive to political discussion, in which pupils feel encouraged to express their opinions and

ideas (e.g., Campbell, 2008; Manganelli et al., 2015; Schulz et al., 2025: 272; Ward, 2016). OCC is typically investigated in survey research by measuring pupils' perceptions of various statements on classroom climate (Myoung and Liou, 2025). Generally, when the classroom climate is open, pupils can engage in discussions, even on controversial topics, and diverse viewpoints are welcomed and explored (Schulz et al., 2025: 272). By controversial topics, we refer to issues that are politicised in the public debate, such as immigration, climate change, gender equality and LGBTIQ rights. Politicisation refers to the process by which an issue or an idea is given a political tone and becomes a subject of public contestation; hence it is also closely linked to political polarisation (see, e.g., Palonen et al., 2019).

A classroom with an open climate is often characterised by a high level of trust and mutual respect between pupils and teachers, making it particularly valuable for addressing controversial or sensitive topics (Ward, 2016). Importantly, OCC is created through the interaction between pupils and teacher(s), and thus requires the involvement of both (Knowles, 2020; Schulz et al., 2018). However, one intriguing question is how differences in political opinions and values among classmates can influence the development and maintenance of OCC.

Conflict and disagreement lie at the core of political discussions, and one of the crucial roles of political decision-making is to mediate and reconcile these differences. Therefore, appreciation of conflict resolution should be a key focus in civic education (Campbell, 2008; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1996; Mouffe, 1999; Mutz, 2006; Ward, 2016). In this context, value diversity should serve as a platform for meaningful and diverse discussions, thereby positively influencing the development of OCC. Only when a variety of opinions are represented can more diverse and enriching political discussions occur (Ward, 2016). Such diverse discussions offer young people the opportunity to cultivate both the ability and the self-assurance to navigate disagreements in the realm of politics and society (Dahl, 2022).

Among adults, engaging in cross-cutting or deliberative political discussions has been shown to enhance understanding the reasoning behind others' opinions (Mutz, 2002, 2006) and to promote perspective-taking (Gillespie and Richardson, 2011). Conversely, a climate of like-mindedness has been linked to lower levels of OCC. For instance, Ward (2016) explored the connections between the fear of social alienation, like-mindedness and OCC. She found that OCC is more likely to prevail in a diverse environment in which individuals do not fear social alienation. In other words, if the fear of social alienation increases, group like-mindedness may also increase, but at the same time, the classroom climate becomes less open.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that value diversity among discussion partners can increase the risk of conflict, defined as an intense emotional or physical struggle that goes beyond simple disagreement (Guerrero, 2013). Consequently, value diversity may reduce the overall reward of the discussion (Brader et al., 2014; Hayes et al., 2013; Knowles, 2020). Due to a fear of conflicts, individuals may opt to avoid political discussions, especially those involving cross-cutting political perspectives (Conover et al., 2002). In a school context, both pupils and teachers may refrain from broaching controversial topics in discussions to avoid conflict within the group and any potential negative consequences for their social standing (Knowles, 2020; Ward, 2016). Furthermore, if the diversity of political values pushes individuals towards more extreme positions, it can contribute to ideological polarisation, often characterised by the rejection or dismissal of alternative viewpoints, resulting in heightened conflict and the emergence of an 'us versus them' mentality (McCoy et al., 2018; Prooijen, 2021). Value diversity can, therefore, hinder effective communication, collaboration and trust, as individuals become less willing to engage with opposing perspectives and more inclined to perceive those with different beliefs as adversaries (Mason, 2015; Motyl et al., 2014). Consequently, value diversity may lead to pupils withdrawing from discussions

when they perceive their views as unpopular, which in turn poses a threat to the cultivation of OCC (Hayes et al., 2013). In light of these potential pathways, we formulate our first research question as:

Q1. What is the relationship between diversity in political values within a class and an open classroom climate (OCC)?

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the potential negative relationship between value diversity and OCC, we also investigate indirect relationships, which, to our knowledge, have not been explicitly explored in prior research. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) posits that an individual's sense of self is significantly shaped by their identification with specific social groups. Building on this theory, it can be hypothesised that pupils who think in a more similar way to their classmates (their in-group) tend to feel a stronger connection to their class. This implies that individuals tend to categorise themselves and others into social groups on the basis of relevant characteristics, leading to the formation of a sense of belonging to the 'in-group' and a perception of others as part of the 'out-group'. Typically, individuals exhibit a preference for connecting more with those they perceive as members of their in-group, who share similar identities. The existing literature highlights the significant role of a sense of belonging to the class as well as, for example, good pupil–teacher relationships and the absence of social problems such as bullying, in predicting OCC (Eckstein and Noack, 2014; Maurissen et al., 2018; Reichert et al., 2018). Consequently, our second research question is:

Q2. How does pupils' sense of class community mediate the connection between diversity in political values and OCC?

Minority perspective

In minority groups, one's own group often becomes one of the most prominent sources of social identity (Branscombe et al., 1999; Frost and Meyer, 2012). This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that minorities inherently occupy a different and more vulnerable societal position than majorities due to their minority status and the principle of majority rule, even though the degree of vulnerability can vary greatly (Strubell and Boix-Fuster, 2011). This vulnerability, in turn, makes minorities more sensitive to power imbalances and more concerned about discrimination (Binder et al., 2009). It also leads them to place greater importance on preserving their own culture and defending the rights of their own group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Frost and Meyer, 2012). The Swedish-speaking minority analysed in this study exemplifies both the experienced threat and the perceived importance of upholding a minority's position, despite having constitutional equality with the majority, being well-integrated and having no socioeconomic disadvantages (Lindell, 2020: 80–83; Terje, 2020).

A strong in-group identity tends to predispose minorities to exhibiting a robust in-group bias, characterised by a strong inclination to prefer interacting with members of their own minority group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Frost and Meyer, 2012; Uekusa, 2020). This in-group bias is also observed among adolescents (Jørgensen, 2017). In essence, minorities, including the Swedish-speaking Finns, tend to develop bonding social capital, which refers to social connections with individuals who share similar backgrounds or interests (Hannuksela and Tiihonen, 2024; Scholten and Holzhaacker, 2009; Uekusa, 2020). Consequently, although the members of minority groups may hold differing positions on certain political issues, their shared interest in safeguarding

their minority rights may still foster a sense of in-group identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and a sense of community (see, e.g., Karv et al., 2021).

Recent evidence from Wuestenenk et al. (2023) suggests no negative association between value diversity and the expression of one's opinions among individuals in minority groups when they are in the company of fellow minority members (i.e., in in-group conditions). However, this negative association can be found among individuals with the majority ethnic background who interact with other majority members. This suggests that diverse values are more likely to hinder opinion expression among the majority but less so among the minority. Thus, it can be hypothesised that a minority background can mitigate the potentially negative relationship between diversity in political values and a sense of class community.

However, bonding social capital can also reinforce exclusive identities, strong in-group loyalty and solidarity (Lee, 2022; Putnam, 2000: 358). In other words, minorities might be more homogeneous, even in their political views, because their strong bonding social capital exposes them to the opinions of their in-group and promotes shared values and loyalties. In this aspect lies a potential downside of bonding social capital: a tightly bonded group may prioritise conformity and view differing values as a threat to group identity and cohesion (Putnam, 2000: 351–352, 358).

Wuestenenk et al. (2023) find that in an in-group condition (i.e., with members of the same ethnic group), individuals are less likely to express their opinions and more likely to deviate from their own opinions when the whole group or half of the group disagrees with them, in comparison to when the group agrees with them. In discussions with an out-group (i.e., members of a different ethnic group), the others' opinions had no significant effects, although the differences between the in-group and the out-group conditions were not significant for the whole sample. This supports the notion that people in general may be sensitive to their in-group's, but not the out-groups', opinions.

Moreover, Wuestenenk et al. (2023) discover that when individuals with a minority ethnic background discuss issues with in-groups, they tend to express their political opinions less often than individuals with a majority background discussing issues in in-groups. In in-group conditions, the members of an ethnic minority are also more inclined to conform to the group's views than individuals who belong to the majority. However, this difference disappears when they discuss issues in out-groups (i.e., with individuals with a different ethnic background), indicating that the minority may feel a stronger pressure to conform within their own ethnic group than when they are with the majority. Consequently, stronger bonding social capital might signify that shared values carry more weight in fostering a sense of community among minorities than among majorities. In the light of these considerations, we formulate our third research question:

Q3. Does minority status have a moderating effect on the relationship between diversity in political values and a sense of class community?

A class community may also be more significant for the development of OCC in minority classes. This is because members of minority groups may often experience a sense of vulnerability or threat (Strubell and Boix-Fuster, 2011), a sentiment also felt by Swedish-speaking Finns (Lindell, 2021). Minorities may experience a greater threat to their social identity, that is, psychological distress due to stereotypes, negative attitudes or discrimination. The higher the social identity threat, the less willing individuals with a minority background seem to be to communicate with both minorities and majorities (Froehlich et al., 2023). Due to having to cope with a social identity threat, minorities may also need more reassurance to find their social environment safe or welcoming (Klysing et al., 2022). Individuals with a minority background seem less likely than individuals

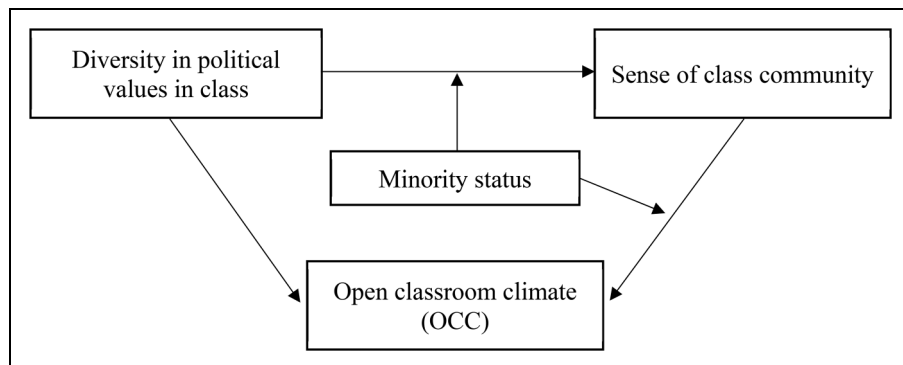


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

with a majority background to express their political opinions and more likely to deviate from them when communicating with an out-group that disagrees (Wuestenenk et al., 2023). All in all, a supportive classroom community seems particularly important for minorities and their willingness to express opinions that might potentially lead to conflicts. Hence, we formulate our fourth and final research question:

Q4. Does minority status have a moderating effect on the relationships between sense of class community and OCC?

Figure 1 illustrates the intricate relationships we have theorised above. We acknowledge the possibility of other relationships and reverse causality, but only include relationships currently under investigation to make the figure more comprehensible.

Data, variables and methods

Sample and procedure

The survey data for this study were collected during the spring of 2021 from 79 Finnish schools (17 of these being Swedish-speaking schools) located in 37 municipalities or local strategic partnerships¹ (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2023). The dataset comprised 5220 pupils aged 15–16, of whom 4133 attended Finnish-speaking schools and 1087 Swedish-speaking schools. This sample included 304 Finnish-speaking classes and 75 Swedish-speaking classes.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select the municipalities and schools for the study across Finland. Sampling took into account factors such as geographical diversity, population density, language diversity, the average education level of the municipalities, the size of the schools and the type of school. Some geographic disparities² arose due to certain schools' reluctance to participate and the uneven impact of the COVID-19 epidemic. Consequently, to address these discrepancies, we applied geographical and linguistic weights when analysing the data (see Appendix A for more detailed information).

The daily routines of the pupils and schools were still affected by the COVID-19 pandemic when the data were collected. Therefore, we adapted the research strategy accordingly. The research

process began with a professionally produced video that introduced the purpose, contents and method of the study, and provided practical instructions for participation. The video also explained that participation was voluntary, all responses were confidential, and the data would only be used in a format in which individual respondents could not be identified. This approach aimed to inspire participation, eliminate the need for a researcher's physical presence, and to standardise the research setting. After watching the introductory video, the pupils responded individually to the survey using electronic devices. The survey was administered either during a classroom session (94.2% of the weighted sample, 90.8% of the unweighted sample) or remotely (5.8% of the weighted sample, 9.2% of the unweighted sample). In the remote learning settings, all the pupils of each class completed the survey simultaneously, with the teacher overseeing the process and offering guidance when necessary to ensure the consistency of the research conditions.

By participating, the pupils gave their informed consent. As they had turned 15, no active parental consent was required. Their parents were informed beforehand via an electronic service used for day-to-day communication between homes and schools, and were given the opportunity to refuse to let their child participate.

Variables

All the survey items are presented in detail in Appendix B.

Dependent variable. Our dependent variable is class-level *OCC*, a scale of six items on the basis of which the pupils rate their classroom environment (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$). These items include pupils' opportunities to initiate discussions on political matters and disagree with their teachers and classmates, and their perceptions of whether teachers consider societal issues from diverse perspectives and encourage pupils to express their opinions and have discussions in heterogeneous groups (see Appendix B). This scale is similar to those employed by the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) (Schulz et al., 2018) and other studies (e.g., Knowles, 2020). First, we recoded each pupil's point estimate to vary between 0 (the lowest perceptions of *OCC*) and 1 (the highest perceptions of *OCC*). Then, we calculated a mean for each class, which we used as the dependent variable in the main analysis. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for *OCC* was 0.13, and the within-group agreement (rWG(J)) was 0.54. This suggests a moderate agreement, which can be deemed acceptable for aggregating *OCC*, given the relatively low mean number of pupils per class (LeBreton and Senter, 2008).

We assessed *OCC* as a class-level construct, cultivated during the interaction between pupils and teachers (see also Isac et al., 2011; Sampermans et al., 2021). Even though there is systematic variation between pupils in their perceptions of *OCC* (Barber et al., 2015), we are interested in *OCC* as a specific type of social learning environment (see Beaumont, 2011). When asking pupils to rate the overall classroom environment as we did, aggregating their ratings at the class level is recommended (Myoung and Liou, 2025).

Independent variables. *Diversity in sociocultural values* at the class level was determined by computing the average disparity between each pupil's individual opinions and the collective class opinions of the GAL–TAN dimension. We measured this underlying value dimension using items that gauged pupils' opinions on immigration, multiculturalism, gender equality, LGBTIQ rights and climate change. These items (see Appendix B) were developed specifically for this study, drawing on established items from previous research. The aim was to create items that were suitable for Finnish adolescents: simple enough for younger respondents and relevant in the Finnish context. We used

exploratory factor analysis to find an adequate factor solution (see Appendix C). By removing poorly-fitting variables, we reached a five-variable solution with all the variables loaded onto a single component. This set of variables had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75, and deleting any single variable would have weakened the reliability statistics.

The scores from this factor analysis were saved as a variable, and recoded so that 0 represented the most liberal values, and 1 represented the most conservative values. Subsequently, a class mean was calculated for each class. Then, the absolute value for the difference between each pupil's individual opinions and the mean opinions of their own class was computed. Finally, we calculated the mean of these individual differences for each class, which served as the basis for measuring the diversity in sociocultural values at the class level.

We assessed the sense of *class community* by asking pupils about the extent to which they felt they were an important part of their class community. This was measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' We recoded the responses to a scale ranging from 0 (lowest sense of class community) to 1 (highest sense of class community). Subsequently, we computed the mean value for each class.

Minority class was operationalised as the teaching language of the school (0 for Finnish-speaking and 1 for Swedish-speaking). When the weights were applied, 99.6 per cent of the respondents who spoke Finnish but not Swedish at home studied in Finnish-speaking schools, and 84.3 per cent of the Swedish-speaking who did not speak Finnish at home studied in Swedish-speaking schools. The weighted sample's bilingual adolescents (i.e., those who spoke both Finnish and Swedish at home) slightly more often went to Finnish-speaking schools (52.6%) than Swedish-speaking schools (47.4%).

Control variables. We included several control variables to account for potential confounding factors that may influence OCC.

First, we incorporated the class mean of the *Sociocultural values* factor scores, ranging from 0 to 1 (as explained previously). Previous research has suggested that individuals with conservative values are more inclined to avoid counter-attitudinal content, whereas liberals are more likely to expose themselves to a wider range of attitudes (Garrett and Stroud, 2014). Thus, we expected the more liberal-thinking groups to have a more open classroom climate, and the more conservative classes to be more inclined to avoid class discussions.

Second, we controlled for socioeconomic status (*SES*), which is measured as the class mean of the pupils' subjective perception of their families' economic situation. Prior studies have found that classes with lower average SES tend to experience lower levels of OCC (Deimel et al., 2020).

As previous research has indicated that classes with more ethnic diversity may experience lower levels of OCC (Campbell, 2007), we included the percentage of pupils with a foreign background as a control variable (*Foreign origin*). This represented the percentage of respondents in each class with at least one parent born outside Finland or who were born outside Finland themselves.

Finally, we included a control variable for the size of the municipality in which the school was situated (*Municipality size*). Our dataset comprised schools located in municipalities of varying sizes, ranging from larger cities with over 1000 grade 9 pupils to small municipalities with fewer than 50 grade 9 pupils. We controlled for municipality size to account for potential variations resulting from different community dynamics: smaller municipalities may foster tighter-knit communities and thus greater pressure to conform, whereas larger municipalities may offer more space for diversity.

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, and independent samples t-test for OCC, diversity in political opinions, class community, sociocultural values, SES, and foreign origin for minority and majority classes.

	Swedish-speaking minority class Mean (SD)	Finnish-speaking majority class Mean (SD)
OCC***	0.68 (0.08)	0.64 (0.07)
Diversity in sociocultural values	0.16 (0.04)	0.17 (0.04)
Class community***	0.62 (0.10)	0.58 (0.10)
Sociocultural values***	0.44 (0.09)	0.41 (0.08)
SES*	0.74 (0.07)	0.75 (0.06)
Foreign origin***	0.19 (0.14)	0.12 (0.12)

Independent samples t-test: *** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$.

Method

Our data exhibit a hierarchical structure, with individuals at Level 1 nested within classes at Level 2, which are further nested within schools at Level 3, and finally, within municipalities at Level 4. However, we assess our dependent variable, OCC, at the class level because we understand it as a social learning context (see also Beaumont, 2011; Isac et al., 2011; Myoung and Liou, 2025; Sampermans et al., 2021) and to make the analysis as parsimonious as possible. Consequently, we disregard variations at the individual level. Thus, we could, in principle, employ three-level models with classes nested within schools nested within municipalities. However, 51% of the municipalities were represented by only one school, and many small schools were represented by one or two classes. Hence, a two- or three-level model would not be likely to yield reliable fixed-effect standard errors, as at least 50 groups with approximately 30 individuals per group are recommended to minimise the risk of Type I error (Lee and Hong, 2021). Therefore, we conduct path analyses within a generalised structural equation framework without a multilevel structure in Stata 17.0.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the continuous variables of the pupils in the Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking classes separately. The analyses are conducted at the class level, with a total of 379 classes, 304 of which are Finnish-speaking and 75 Swedish-speaking. The analyses indicate that Swedish-speaking classes have higher mean OCC values and stronger class communities than Finnish-speaking majority classes. The Swedish-speaking classes are also slightly more conservative than the Finnish-speaking classes and have a higher percentage of pupils of foreign origin. The differences between the minority and the majority are quite small, a few percentage points at best, but they are statistically significant, apart from the difference in diversity in the sociocultural values.

Structural equation

Table 2 presents the results of the generalised structural equation models seeking answers to our four research questions. It shows, firstly, that diversity in the sociocultural values of the class is

Table 2. Effect of diversity in sociocultural values, class community and minority status on OCC. Generalised structural equation model (standard errors in parentheses).

To OCC	Model 1	Model 2
Diversity in sociocultural values	0.15*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.04)
Class community	0.23*** (0.01)	0.22*** (0.01)
Minority class (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	0.04*** (0.00)	-0.10*** (0.02)
Interaction: Class community*Minority class	—	0.23*** (0.03)
Sociocultural values	-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)
SES	0.06*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)
Foreign origin	0.03*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Municipality size (ref. over 1000 ninth-graders)		
501–1000 ninth-graders	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
201–500 ninth-graders	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
51–200 ninth-graders	-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)
50 ninth-graders or fewer	0.03*** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Constant	0.42*** (0.02)	0.43*** (0.02)
Variance	0.0042*** (0.0001)	0.0042*** (0.0001)
To class community		
Diversity in sociocultural values	-0.23*** (0.05)	-0.20*** (0.06)
Minority class (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.08*** (0.01)
Interaction: Diversity*Minority class	—	-0.26** (0.08)
Sociocultural values	0.05*** (0.00)	0.05*** (0.00)
SES	0.38*** (0.03)	0.38*** (0.03)
Foreign origin	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)
Municipality size (ref. over 1000 ninth-graders)		
501–1000 ninth-graders	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
201–500 ninth-graders	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)
51–200 ninth-graders	-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)
50 ninth-graders or fewer	-0.05** (0.01)	-0.05** (0.01)
Constant	0.36*** (0.03)	0.35*** (0.03)
Variance	0.0075*** (0.0002)	0.0075*** (0.0001)

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

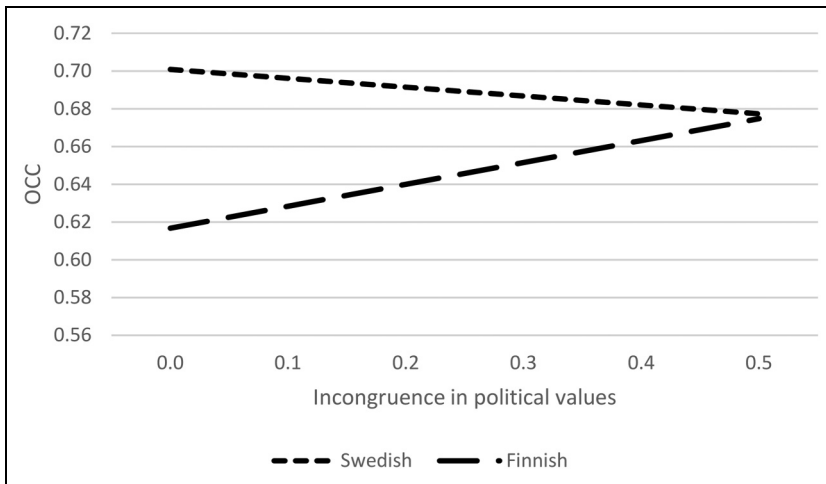
directly and positively associated with OCC. In other words, everything else held constant, the classes with more opinion diversity experience a more open discussion climate.³

However, diversity in sociocultural values is negatively related to the sense of class community. The more diversity, the less the pupils on average feel that they belong to their class. As expected, the sense of class community, in turn, is positively associated with OCC. Hence, diversity in sociocultural values has an indirect, negative connection to OCC through the sense of class community (-0.05 for the majority classes; SE 0.01). In the majority classes, the total effect of diversity in sociocultural values, however, remains positive and statistically significant (0.09; SE 0.04). Table 3 presents all the direct, indirect and total effects.

In the minority classes, the associations we found are reinforced (see Model 2 in Table 3). The negative relationship between diversity in sociocultural values and class community is stronger in the Swedish-speaking classes. This indicates that the minority is more sensitive to disagreement than the majority. Furthermore, the positive association between class community and OCC is stronger in the minority classes, emphasising the importance of class community among the minority. Consequently, the indirect effect of diversity in sociocultural values on OCC is statistically

Table 3. Direct, indirect and total effects. Generalised structural equation model (standard errors in parentheses).

Model 1	Direct	Indirect	Total
Diversity in sociocultural values	0.15*** (0.04)	-0.05*** (0.01)	0.10* (0.04)
Class community	0.23*** (0.01)	—	0.23*** (0.01)
Minority class	0.04*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.05*** (0.00)
Sociocultural values	-0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.006 (0.004)
SES	0.06** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.02)
Foreign origin	0.03*** (0.01)	-0.01** (0.00)	0.02 (0.01)
Model 2	Direct	Indirect	Total
Diversity in sociocultural values: Finnish-speaking classes	0.16*** (0.04)	-0.04*** (0.01)	0.11* (0.04)
Diversity in sociocultural values: Swedish-speaking classes	0.16*** (0.04)	-0.21*** (0.03)	-0.05 (0.05)
Class community: Finnish-speaking classes	0.22*** (0.01)	—	0.22*** (0.01)
Class community: Swedish-speaking classes	0.45*** (0.03)	—	0.45*** (0.03)
Minority class	-0.10*** (0.02)	0.02*** (0.00)	-0.08*** (0.02)
Sociocultural values	-0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)
SES	0.07*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.02)
Foreign origin	0.04*** (0.01)	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.02* (0.01)

**Figure 2.** Predicted OCC by diversity in sociocultural values and language (class community taken into account and control variables held constant).

significantly stronger among the minority classes (-0.22 ; SE 0.03, compared to -0.05 ; SE 0.01 in the majority classes). This leads to a negative yet statistically insignificant total effect of diversity in sociocultural values among the minority (-0.08 ; SE 0.05). Figure 2 illustrates the total effect of diversity in sociocultural values on OCC in both the minority and majority classes. Figure 3, in turn, illustrates the relationship between class community and OCC in the majority and minority classes.

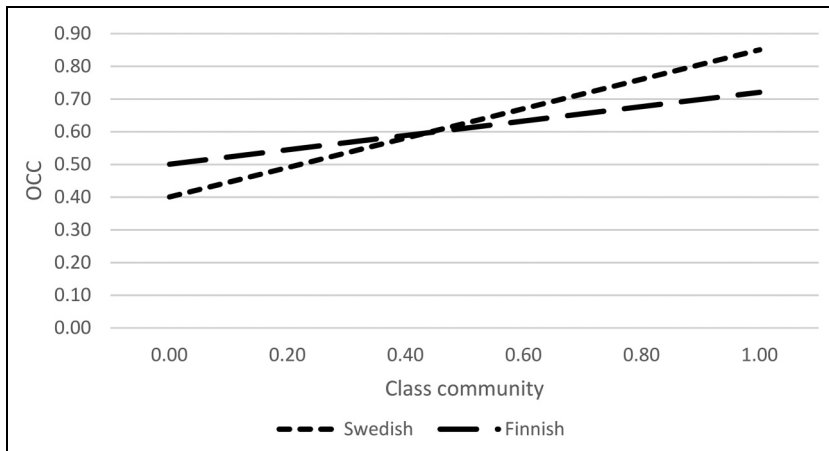


Figure 3. Predicted OCC by class community and language (diversity in sociocultural values and control variables held constant).

Regarding the control variables, the more conservative values are on average associated with a stronger class community. Conversely, green, alternative, and liberal values align with perceptions of a more open classroom climate, as expected (Garrett and Stroud, 2014). Consistent with previous research (Deimel et al., 2020), a higher average SES corresponds to a stronger class community and a more open classroom climate. However, contrary to previous research (Campbell, 2007), the share of foreign-origin pupils is moderately but positively associated with OCC. The total effect remains positive and statistically significant (0.03; SE 0.01), despite a statistically significant negative association between the share of foreign-origin pupils and class community. The differences across municipality sizes reveal somewhat mixed patterns. In comparison to large cities with over 1000 ninth-graders, municipalities with 501–1000 and municipalities with fewer than 50 ninth-graders seem more conducive to OCC, and municipalities with 51–200 ninth-graders less conducive to OCC. Cities and towns with at least 501 ninth-graders seem to foster a class community to a greater extent than smaller municipalities.

In our main analysis, we disregard the variation between the individuals in each class, even though they may have quite different experiences of OCC (see, e.g., Maurissen et al., 2018) and their own sense of class community and they may agree with their class to varying extents. Therefore, we ran a robustness check on the individual variation in OCC, controlling for the test variables on both the aggregated level (the class mean except for the individual) and the individual level (the individual position) (see Appendix D). This robustness check yields similar results to the main analysis. However, several significance levels drop because our model is designed to measure OCC at the class level and therefore includes more uncontrolled variation at the individual level. Individual perceptions of OCC seem to benefit from diversity in sociocultural values at the class level rather than from individual deviations from the class mean values. On the other hand, the individual sense of class community seems to matter more than the class average. Diversity is not statistically significantly associated with an individual sense of class community, partly because the latter is measured categorically. Other unmeasured variables, such as the gender of the respondents or the fact that they belong to minorities other than ethnic minorities, may also have confounded the results.⁴

Discussion and conclusions

In liberal democracies, schools are expected to prepare pupils to become citizens who are capable of active political participation. Civic education in general and fostering an open classroom climate (OCC) in particular serve as concrete, effective tools for this task. OCC enables diverse political discussions, making it possible to transcend specific subjects and contribute to the development of informed and engaged citizens, who value cross-cutting political conversations.

As disagreement can sometimes discourage individuals from engaging in political discussions (e.g., Conover et al., 2002; Knowles, 2020), our study has explored the relationship between diversity in political values and OCC among 15–16-year-old comprehensive school pupils. We have examined this relationship both directly and indirectly, through the pupils' sense of class community. We also investigated whether these connections are modified in minority classes. This consideration is important because disagreement may pose a greater challenge to minorities, who might experience a heightened social identity threat.

Through the analysis of a nationally representative dataset from Finland, including an oversample of Swedish-speaking Finnish minority adolescents, we find – contrary to the previous results of Knowles (2020) – that diversity in sociocultural values has a direct positive connection to OCC. However, diversity in sociocultural values is negatively related to the sense of class community, and therefore, has an indirect negative association with OCC. Despite this, the total effect of diversity in sociocultural values remains positive and statistically significant in the majority classes. Conversely, in the minority classes, both the positive relationship between the sense of class community and OCC and the negative relationship between diversity in sociocultural values and the sense of class community are more pronounced than in the majority classes. Consequently, among the minority, the indirect negative effect outweighs the direct positive effect on OCC.

Our findings suggest that the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland requires a greater degree of shared values than the majority to foster a sense of class community and to engage in political discussions than the majority. We believe that this is because minorities may perceive themselves as more vulnerable and consequently may need more reassurance than majorities when participating in political dialogues. Such reassurance could manifest in the form of reduced conflicts stemming from shared values or a heightened sense of in-group belonging. Despite the potential positive influence of bonding social capital on political engagement among minorities, our findings also caution against the potential downside of bonding social capital, which can lead to group conformity.

Importantly, our results suggest that diversity in opinions seems to foster active and diverse political discussions in class. This may, on the one hand, result from the fact that diverse discussions require at least some opinion differences to emerge. Moreover, diversity might make discussions more interesting and thus more frequent. However, it is still important to acknowledge that diversity itself does not guarantee a respectful environment for discussions. Although diversity can provide a ground for dynamic discussions, other factors, such as classroom climate, teacher facilitation and trust and respect in the classroom, also affect whether discussions remain constructive. Moreover, expressing contrasting opinions may be harder if most other people in the group agree. In other words, individual pupils may withdraw from discussions into a 'spiral of silence' when they perceive their views as unpopular, a phenomenon also found in previous literature (e.g., Hayes et al., 2013).


However, our results indicate that more agreement in sociocultural values fosters the formation of a sense of class community. Because such a sense of class community is integral to the formation of OCC, according to both our results and previous research (Eckstein and Noack, 2014), the direct positive connection between diversity in political opinions and OCC posits a pedagogical challenge. In order to establish the optimal environment for political discussions in the classroom,


teachers must find a balance between nurturing a sense of class community among pupils and promoting diversity.


Rather than examining specific classroom practices in detail, this study focuses on the relationships between OCC, political value diversity and sense of class community. However, previous literature suggests several strategies that teachers can use to promote both a sense of community and value diversity. Although OCC measures pupils' perceptions of the classroom's discussion climate, classroom discussions are also a flexible instructional method that can be implemented in various ways (Parker and Hess, 2001). Discussion-based pedagogical practices that encourage pupils to engage with diverse viewpoints – fostering critical thinking and mutual understanding – include structured debates, discussions on current events and inquiry-based activities (Siegel-Stechler, 2021). Additional methods, such as the teacher taking the role of 'devil's advocate' (Oulton et al., 2004), perspective-taking activities (Sandahl, 2020), deliberation (Enslin et al., 2001), digital games and simulations (Bachen et al., 2015) and role-playing (Blokland et al., 2021) further support these goals. At the same time, they help create a collaborative classroom environment in which pupils feel included.

Although this study is among the first to examine the association between value diversity and OCC, and to our knowledge, the first to focus on a minority group, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, we consider the phenomenon at the class level, disregarding 87% of the variance in OCC, and this limits what conclusions can be drawn. Therefore, we cannot account for the potential systematic causes of variability on the pupil level found by other scholars, linked to factors such as political discussions outside school (Barber et al., 2015; Campbell, 2008; Isac et al., 2011; Sampermans et al., 2021). Moreover, the Finnish context, though marked by political cleavages, is not highly polarised; thus, value diversity in more polarised societies may lead to different outcomes. Additionally, we cannot assess whether other minority groups or ethnic minorities in other contexts respond similarly to value diversity or rely as heavily on a sense of class community as Swedish-speaking Finns in Finland. Further, diversity within other political cleavages (e.g., left–right) may yield varying results. Accordingly, although our findings suggest that fostering both political diversity and a sense of community is important for an optimal classroom climate that supports political engagement, further research across different contexts and minority groups is needed to expand on these insights. We suggest that further research dives deeper into individual differences in OCC and considers diversity in political values among other variables. Moreover, we also argue that it is important as well to consider phenomena with class-level features, such as OCC and diversity in political values, also at the class level. We find that our method of operationalising diversity as mean differences to the class mean opinions is particularly suitable for measuring diversity in political values.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. several municipalities jointly organising education
2. Pupils from larger cities are overrepresented in the data, see Appendix A.
3. We reran the models, limiting the sample to the classes with an intraclass agreement of over 0.5, over 0.6 and over 0.7. These analyses confirm the results of the main analysis, with some differences in coefficient sizes.
4. We ran a robustness check controlling for gender, which gave almost identical results to those of the other tested variables.

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