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Recreating Democracy: Education as Democratic Hope

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21-22 October 2026

Edited by David Hammer

Linnæus University

#RecreatingDemocracy

Book of Abstracts

Recreating Democracy: Education as Democratic Hope

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Wednesday, 21 October 2026

Keynote

Teaching Uncommon Values:
Reconnecting Democracy and Education in the Impulse Society

Gert Biesta, *University of Melbourne*

Ever since John Dewey published his book Democracy and Education (1916) it has been understood that education has a crucial role to play in the maintenance and renewal of democracy. Democrats, after all, are not born but 'made,' and education is uniquely placed for fostering the conversation between the generations about the importance of the democratic life, of democratic values and institutions, and of human rights and the rule of law. This task has become even more urgent in a time in which democracy is under pressure from populist, authoritarian and even explicitly anti-democratic tendencies and developments. The question I will raise in my presentation is what the work of education for democratic citizenship can and should entail and how it can provide an effective and meaningful response to the emerging erosion of democratic life and democratic institutions. I will focus my discussion on the suggestion that education for democratic citizenship should be understood as a form of values education in which we teach the common values of democracy to the new generation. In my presentation I will raise a number of more fundamental questions about this set-up. I will highlight the vulnerability of a value-based defence of democracy and will suggest an alternative approach. I will argue that democracy and education share a common 'concern' and a common 'principle', which brings different educational possibilities into view. And I will characterise contemporary society as an 'impulse society' in order to show the new dynamics within which education for democratic citizenship is positioned.

Session 1 Parallel sessions

Session 1:1 Double symposium Part I

Education for democratic citizenship: Affirmative or non-affirmative?

Gert Biesta, *University of Melbourne*

Although there is consensus amongst citizenship educators and citizenship education researchers that democrats are "not born but made," thus suggesting that education has a critical role to play, the answer to the question what kind of role education can and ought to play, remains unsettled. Although the idea that education can simply 'produce' the good democratic citizen is popular with policy makers and politicians, the more common approach focuses on programmes that seek to promote conditions for democratic citizenship, particularly by cultivating particular qualities in children and young people. A major example of such an approach is the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, which consists of 20 competences and 447 descriptors, of which 135 are considered to be 'key descriptors' (see Council of Europe 2018). In my contribution I will explore the underlying question about the 'modalities' of education for democratic citizenship. Taking inspiration from Dietrich Benner's distinction between affirmative and non-affirmative educational approaches (Benner 1995), and with reference to insights from Martin Buber's work on character education (Buber 1951), I will make a case for a non-affirmative approach to education for democratic citizenship, and will explore what that may look like in practice, highlighting the importance of non-discursive, aesthetic approaches.

Civic literacy: The pedagogical task before us

Ninni Wahlström, *Linnaeus University*

When a democracy goes down, it usually happens gradually, as a result of deliberate policies pursued by elected politicians. The warning lights also flash in Sweden. V-Dem points to an incipient weakening of freedom of expression, as well as the role of public debate for political decisions. Respect for political opponents and the existence of rational argumentation are declining. This type of tendency correlates with an increasing polarization between different groups in society. School is the only institution which is common to *all* children and young people in society and which, in its capacity as a societal institution, provides students with a common frame of reference. The question I will try to answer at least in part is: How can we understand the role of the school in terms of offering knowledge and insights into a democratic approach in a time when democracy in itself is being questioned? The theoretical framework in this paper is constituted by combining the Swedish term "bildning" with pragmatism. A link between bildning and pragmatism is the philosophy of Friedrich Hegel. Hegel thought that the individual in the process of the formation of oneself should learn from the different expressions of human culture in all its richness and through different eras. The individual *form* him- or herself as part of the whole and thus the whole is also reshaped by the individuals. Human culture and the individual develop in a constant interaction where the individual and the whole mutually influence each other. This starting point leads to the concept of self-realization, rather than subjectification. I argue for an emphasis on liberal democracy because populism raises the question of a fundamental principle: is democracy

an association of free and equal citizens wherever their roots are, *or* is democracy an association of an ethnic community in terms of a homeland for generations? The question is, how can teachers and students take a democratic stance in teaching and learning? To take a democratic stance in education is to educate for what I suggest to call "civic literacy". According to Robert Westbrook, (2005), the term *civic literacy* includes a willingness to participate and act with consideration and deliberation in a pluralistic world, to think critically and to act with empathy in relation to others, despite potential conflicts of interest. This meaning of civic literacy is closely linked to a pragmatism understanding of knowledge as transactional, based on shared experiences and communication in a world of physical and social objects. As Westbrook (2005, p. 8) points out, "[p]ragmatic enquiry shares a "discourse ethics" with democracy".

Discipline beats democracy: Tracing citizenship education in the current reform storm

Matilda Wiklund, *Stockholm University*

In the run-up to the 2026 election, the Swedish government referred a package of reforms aimed at teacher education, as well as eight reform bills containing amendments to the Education Act, to the Council on Legislation. On the government's website, these reforms are presented as solutions to identified educational deficits and as a response to a perceived golden era of education.

> Teacher training programmes need to do a better job of preparing students to work with pupils in the classroom. [...]
>
> "Schools must get back to basics. We need more discipline, both in the classroom and within the education system. We need to re-establish a safe and robust education system based on knowledge, with clear expectations and a focus on fundamental knowledge and skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic".

This study analyses these reform bills, press releases and debates to investigate how citizenship education is constructed discursively. Drawing on insights from problematisation analysis and third-generation curriculum theory, the study interprets policy as discourse (Ball, 2015). Third-generation curriculum theory focuses on how discourses, institutions and social systems shape educational knowledge. Rather than viewing a curriculum as a fixed set of facts or a top-down mandate, this framework analyses how power, language and cultural contexts dictate educational policy. Following Foucault discourse is understood as productive, and policy discourse is seen as actively shaping what is considered problematic, desirable, and possible within a given context (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Discourse thus constructs the frameworks within which the meaning of education is defined, how teachers and learners are positioned (Mockler, 2022), and which ideals are considered legitimate and which are not. This study focuses on citizenship education.

The possible implications of discursive constructions of citizenship education are discussed. Further, the tendency of education reform packages in election years to shift from long-term, technocratic planning to highly visible, voter-centric pledges that propose simplistic solutions and the deprofessionalisation of teachers is discussed, using earlier research as a point of comparison. As Bernstein (2000) argues that the deepest threat to democracy is not external enemies, but the internal erosion of the institutions established to sustain it, it is of the utmost importance to study the construction of citizenship issues in education.

Becoming someone among others:
Children's belonging processes in preschool discursive practices
Karin Rang-Larsson, *Linnaeus University*

This paper examines children's social belonging in Swedish preschool. It identifies the social and ethical values that emerge as children strive to experience a sense of belonging and feeling at home within preschool communities. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the *politics of belonging* (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011) and informed by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), this study conceptualises belonging as a relational and power-laden process constituted through everyday interactions.

The empirical material for this research consists of interviews, video observations, and field notes collected from two preschool settings. By analysing the talk and actions of teachers, children, and guardians, the study explores how belonging is constructed, negotiated, and contested in everyday practices. Attention is devoted to processes of inclusion and exclusion as well as to how identities and social positions are produced in preschool as a discursive practice.

The findings reveal that belonging is shaped by a dynamic interplay between individual agency and institutional norms. Being part of preschool therefore implies not only physical presence but also active engagement in play, routines, and activities. Through such engagement, children participate in the construction of meaning through place and in doing so, also create themselves as individuals who belong. At the same time, the analysis shows that belonging is not equally accessible to all; it is influenced by factors such as social norms, language, cultural background and social competence. Children's belonging is shaped through the interplay between three overarching levels of categorisation: translocality, transcality, and transtemporality. Together, they constitute a politics of belonging that influences children's opportunities for participation, recognition, and inclusion in everyday preschool life. This politics reflects a broader tension between conceptualisations of children. In summary, belonging is shaped by complex politics in which children are expected to both act independently, require support and to be active co-constructors of their social worlds while also being recipients of care. These conflicting expectations are not merely pedagogical challenges but expressions of deeper normative structures that shape the conditions under which children are able to belong in preschool.

Session 1:2 Paper session

Whose childhood counts?: Education in an age of inequality
Helena Ackesjö, *Linnaeus University*

The differences in children's upbringing conditions in Sweden are now substantial. Socioeconomic disparities are growing, and a significant proportion of low-income parents struggle to meet their children's everyday needs. The contemporary child poverty includes missing out on a standard of living considered reasonable in relation to broader societal norms. This presentation contributes to the conference theme by examining how contemporary childhoods are constructed and what this implies for equitable participation and democratic life. Drawing on a large-scale qualitative study based on 5,933 children's drawings and 4,682 conversations with children aged 6–12 in Swedish school-age educare (SAEC), the presentation foregrounds children's lived experiences as a foundation for rethinking educational practices and democratic inclusion.

Grounded in the sociology of childhood, the study conceptualizes childhood as socially constructed through the interplay of agency, structure, and place. Children are understood as competent social actors, while their opportunities for participation are shaped, and often constrained, by socioeconomic conditions, spatial environments, and broader political rationalities. The analysis is informed by the concept of governmentality, highlighting how power operates through institutions, norms, and resource distributions to shape children's everyday lives and possibilities for agency.

The findings identify four overlapping constructions of childhood: the *Scheduled*, *Isolated*, *Digital*, and *Restricted* childhoods. These constructions illuminate how children's opportunities for participation and belonging are unevenly distributed. In the scheduled childhood, children enjoy access to organized activities but may experience stress and limited autonomy due to highly structured lives. In the isolated childhood, geographical distance and lack of societal infrastructure restrict social interaction and participation. The digital childhood cuts across contexts, offering new arenas for belonging and agency, yet also reflecting existing inequalities in its purposes and meanings. The restricted childhood, primarily found in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts, reveals how poverty, overcrowding and limited resources constrain children's everyday lives, participation, and well-being.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate how growing social inequalities and spatial segregation shape children's conditions for democratic participation. While education, in this case within SAEC, holds potential as a compensatory and democratic space, it is also embedded in broader structural conditions that may reproduce inequalities. The study argues that recreating democracy in education requires recognizing the plurality of childhoods and actively addressing the material and structural barriers that limit children's agency and participation.

The study highlights the need for educators and policymakers to recognize children's diverse realities in an emerging class-based society and to promote more just and equitable conditions for all children. By centering children's perspectives, the importance of educational practices that are responsive to diverse lived realities is underscored. It calls for renewed attention to welfare infrastructures, equitable access to leisure and learning opportunities and pedagogical approaches that enable all children, not only the privileged, to participate meaningfully in shaping their lives and communities. In doing so, education can function as a site of democratic hope, grounded in justice, recognition, and inclusion.

Special educational didaktik* as a democratic project:
A didaktik voice for equitable, just, and tactful teaching in preschool

Linda Palla, *Malmö University*
Ann-Christine Vallberg-Roth, *Malmö University*

Special educational didaktik is a relatively recent and still under-explored concept – a didaktik voice situated at the intersection of special education and general didaktik theory. First introduced in 2020 (Vallberg Roth & Palla, 2020), the concept has since been further developed. In this paper (Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2026), special educational didaktik is defined as the didaktik approach applied in a qualified and ethically responsive manner when general didaktik is considered insufficient to ensure children's right to both support and challenges within preschool teaching.

In this sense, special educational didaktik should not be understood as separate from, or fundamentally different to, general education and didaktik in preschool. Rather, it complements

and works in close relation to general didaktik, contributing to a more nuanced and responsive understanding of teaching. The concept is grounded in a Nordic educare tradition, where education and care are intertwined, and where ethical, relational, and contextual considerations are central.

The aim of this conceptual paper is to further develop and clarify the notion of special educational didaktik by delineating it from related concepts, exploring boundary crossings, and identifying its core dimensions. Through a theoretically driven analysis, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions in didaktik research by articulating how special educational didaktik may serve as an analytical and practical lens for understanding teaching practices in preschool.

Importantly, the conceptualisation is also discussed in relation to education as a democratic project. By foregrounding equity, justice, and tactful teaching, special educational didaktik addresses how preschool education can support children's rights to participation, inclusion, and meaningful engagement in teaching practices. In this way, the concept contributes to understanding how early childhood education can sustain and renew democratic values through everyday didaktical work. The paper concludes by discussing implications for future research and theory development, highlighting the need for further empirical and theoretical studies on special educational didaktik in relation to equitable and democratic education.

* We use the German word 'didaktik' (with use of the letter k), which is common in the didaktik tradition in continental Europe and the Nordic countries, and not the English word 'didactics'.

Deweyan democracy and classroom culture:
Evidence from an action research project in a multicultural school

Luis S. Villasañas-de-Castro, *University of Valencia*
Frederic Torres Úbeda, *Associació Cultural Punta de Llança*

Research topic/aim: This proposal shares the findings of an action research project that aimed to revitalize John Dewey's project of democratic education through Lawrence Stenhouse's notion of 'classroom culture'—wherein teachers and educators build an enriched social life around the curriculum.

Theoretical framework: Stenhouse's notion of classroom culture can be instrumental in revitalizing Dewey's ideal of democratic schools, and to that extent also of democratic societies. Beyond 'occupations'—Dewey's key pedagogical units (Dewey, 1916)—we draw on a long tradition of research into schools' institutional cultures—how these often go unnoticed, and how they present a major obstacle to fostering Deweyan growth (Sarason, 1991; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Deal & Peterson, 2016). The presentation examines Stenhouse's notion of 'classroom culture' as an instance where institutional spaces fulfill their role by taking on a cultural quality themselves, becoming 'a complex of shared understandings which serves as a medium through which individual minds interact' (Stenhouse, 1967, p. 16). For Stenhouse, educators had a dual responsibility: to respect the classroom as a cultural matrix (by affirming students' own cultures and the quality of their social interactions) while also enriching this matrix and maximizing growth through the artistic and scientific traditions of the curriculum, which, in turn, had to be brought to life in practice to sustain a vibrant social life. A new classroom culture thus emerged in the third space where students' cultures were enriched and the curriculum was socialized.

Methodology/research design: The potential of these concepts was explored in an underprivileged, multicultural primary school at the outskirts of Valencia, Spain. The actual setting

were the weekly sessions of an extracurricular digital fiction workshop involving 13 children and 3 educators, one of whom served as teacher-as-researcher. The action research project developed during two school years, and examined the degree to which the sessions harnessed children's friendships—woven from their family cultures, cultures of childhood, interests, and identities—while embedding critical reflective tools and aesthetic wonder into their social life. The key indicators were whether children sustained a social life throughout the sessions but also whether they demonstrated new forms of reflection and communication, through parallel linguistic utterances and literacies, both written and oral. Qualitative data were collected via observation (journal entries and photographs), interviews and focus groups with students, and analysis of their multimodal written and artistic work. This work was inspired by the digital fictions, and was later exhibited in a neighborhood exhibition for their families.

Expected results/findings: Although the data analysis is still ongoing, two research cycles have already yielded ample evidence that the digital fiction workshop sessions realized Stenhouse's vision of 'classroom culture' and fostered Deweyan growth. We will display fragments from interviews, photographs, and children's work that show how children's friendships were sustained and allowed to flourish alongside their interests, through new, more reflective dialogues that incorporated diverse forms of aesthetic judgment.

Affective dissonances in a school development project on antiracism

Ida Hummelstedt, *University of Helsinki*
Joséphine Gram, *University of Helsinki*

This presentation investigates affective dissonances in a school development project on antiracism in a Finnish elementary school. It asks, what kind of affective dissonances (Hemmings, 2012) occur when antiracism is put on the agenda for pupils and staff during a school year, and if the dissonances result in openings for antiracist un/learning (Staunaes & Vertelyté, 2026). The background for the project is the many recent studies showing that racism permeats both schools and society in Finland and the harder and exclusionary political climate regarding race. Both the development project and the analysis are based on critical theories of race and whiteness in education (Ladson-Billings, 2021), as well as antiracist education (Kishimoto, 2018). The analysis also draws on affect theories (Ahmed, 2014; Hemmings, 2012) and a pedagogy of affective dissonance (Staunaes & Vertelyté, 2026).

The data consists of one year of autoethnographic observations on teaching made by the two researchers on racism and antiracism with primary school pupils, as well as trainings and discussions with school staff on the same matter. It also includes interviews with pupils and school staff at the end of the year. The data was coded in atlas.ti and situations coded with affective dissonances were chosen for thematic analysis.

The preliminary results consist of four themes: *White teachers and pupils resisting to see themselves as 'bad' when talking about whiteness*, *The school's self-image as inclusive being challenged by racist incidents or norms of whiteness pointed out*, *White pupils questioning the importance of talking about injustices like racism*, and *Expectations on oneself as race-conscious and able to disrupt racism being challenged by pupils' reactions*. In some of the situations related to the first two themes, the emerged affective dissonance led to defensivity and resistance towards (un)learning by teachers or pupils. However, in some cases there was a change overtime, with later openings for (un)learning about whiteness through mutual listening.

Like Hemmings (2012), we argue that affective dissonance seems to be central for a person or institution to be moved by injustices like racism, which can in turn be the catalysator for desiring change. We also argue as Staunaes and Vertelyté (2026) that staying with the affective dissonances can enable valuable openings for un/learning and creating new more race-conscious forms of being in school. This demands acknowledging our affective investments both as educators, pupils and racialised beings, and regarding the dissonance not as a failure, but as a pointer to where more dialogue is needed.

Session 1:3 Paper session

Democracy in everyday school life: Communicative participation and symbolic power

Anne Kjellsdotter, *Linnaeus University*
Peter Erlandson, *Linnaeus University*

This study explores how students participate in democratic processes through everyday interaction and communicative practices within school settings in Sweden. Drawing on linguistic ethnography (Erlandson & Beach, 2014; Snell, 2015) and inspired by Bourdieu (1989, 1991) alongside social literacy research (Heath et al., 2008; Street, 1995), the study examines how democratic participation is shaped through interactional communicative practices, symbolic power, and institutional norms. Attention is given to how students position themselves, negotiate influence, and make their voices heard in interaction with peers and teachers during collaborative activities, classroom discussions, and everyday social encounters. The empirical material consists of two- sited ethnographic participatory observations generated through fieldwork in Swedish compulsory school and extended education contexts.

The analysis focuses on activities related to sustainability issues, collaborative meaningmaking, and everyday communicative practices where participation becomes socially negotiated. Rather than approaching democracy primarily as formal knowledge or institutional structures, the study examines democracy as lived and interactional practice emerging in everyday educational situations, inspired by Dewey's (1930) understanding of democracy as something enacted through participation, communication, and shared social experience. The analysis demonstrates how opportunities to participate, negotiate influence, and shape collective activities are unevenly distributed within school practices. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1989;1991) concepts of symbolic power and cultural capital, study highlights how certain communicative styles, forms of participation, and ways of contributing acquire greater symbolic value and legitimacy than others within everyday educational interactions. Democratic participation therefore emerges not simply through formal teaching about democracy, but through ongoing negotiations of voice, influence, and social positioning in school life.

The study contributes to research on education and democracy by offering ethnographic insights into how democratic life is continuously produced through everyday school practices. Furthermore, the study contributes to discussions on democratic education by illustrating how possibilities for participation, and access to legitimate forms of cultural expression become important conditions for students' opportunities to speak, act and position themselves within contemporary educational settings.

Working democratically with democracy:
When the democratic mission becomes an object of inquiry

Annelie Mickelsson, *University of Gothenburg*

Across many democratic societies, democracy can no longer be taken for granted. Increasing political polarization, declining trust in public institutions and growing challenges to democratic values place renewed expectations on schools as democratic institutions.

Teachers are expected not only to teach about democracy but also to enact the democratic mission in everyday educational practice. Yet research consistently shows that many teachers experience uncertainty about what this responsibility means in practice and how it can be realised in everyday school life.

The aim of this paper is to explore how teachers, through participatory action research, come to investigate the democratic mission as a shared object of professional inquiry rather than as a set of policy expectations to be fulfilled.

The study investigates this through a one-year participatory action research project organised around a research circle involving six teachers and one student welfare coach in a Swedish primary school. Data were generated through research circle discussions, reflective journals and collaboratively designed inquiry projects, and analysed through an iterative interpretive analysis informed by Dewey, the theory of practice architectures and Biesta.

Together these perspectives provide an analytical framework for examining how democratic understandings are constituted through collective inquiry in everyday educational practice.

The findings show that the democratic mission gradually shifted from a taken-for-granted responsibility to a shared object of professional inquiry. Initially, participants approached the democratic mission primarily as a mandate requiring clarification and correct enactment. Through collaborative inquiry, however, their attention gradually shifted towards questions of participation, responsibility, relationships and how democratic values are constituted in everyday educational practice.

Rather than asking whether they were "doing democracy correctly", participants increasingly explored how participation, responsibility and relationships could be negotiated and sustained in their everyday practices. Democracy thus became less a matter of implementing predetermined principles and more a matter of collectively investigating how democratic practice takes shape in everyday school life.

The paper therefore argues that one response to contemporary democratic challenges is not simply to strengthen teachers' knowledge about democracy, but to create professional spaces in which democracy itself becomes an object of collective inquiry. In this perspective, democracy is not simply the object of professional learning but the very practice through which such learning becomes possible.

Teaching as moral practice:
Student participation and power sharing in a Norwegian upper secondary school

Tobias Werler, *University of Oslo*

Democratic education is a foundational aspiration of Norwegian schooling, yet empirical evidence on how classroom democracy is actually experienced by students in everyday instructional interactions remains limited. While policy frameworks such as Kunnskapsløftet mandate student

participation (*elevmedvirkning*), relatively little is known about the mechanisms through which teachers' pedagogical practices shape students' sense of influence and power in the classroom. This study investigates how students' perceptions of teachers' democratic practices relate to their active participation and perceived power sharing in classroom decision-making at a Norwegian upper secondary school.

The study draws on two complementary theoretical traditions. First, it builds on David T. Hansen's (2001) conception of teaching as a moral practice, which holds that the ethical orientation of the teacher — expressed through respect, attentiveness, and communicative openness toward students — shapes the relational conditions of classroom life in ways that go beyond technical instruction. Drawing on this framework, the study proposes a sequential conceptual model linking teacher democratic practice to pedagogical opportunities, student participation, and perceived power sharing. This study examines how teachers' democratic behaviour shapes students' experience of participation and power in the classroom. Drawing on survey data from 586 students across 37 classes using a purpose-built 20-item questionnaire measuring five constructs on a six-point Likert scale: teacher democratic practice, pedagogical opportunities, school commitments, student participation, and power sharing at a single Norwegian upper secondary school (2024–2025).

Reliability analyses confirm strong internal consistency across all five scales (Cronbach's α ranging from .842 to .884), and a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of .957 indicates excellent factorial validity. Correlation analyses reveal significant positive relationships between all constructs ($r = .54$ to .77, all $p < .001$). The regression models support the theoretical model: teacher democratic practice is a strong predictor of pedagogical opportunities ($\beta = .644$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .415$), and both teacher practice and opportunities predict student participation ($\beta = .235$ and $\beta = .478$ respectively, $R^2 = .429$). In the final model, perceived power sharing is primarily explained by student participation ($\beta = .507$) and pedagogical opportunities ($\beta = .379$), together accounting for 67.5% of the variance ($R^2 = .675$). The direct effect of teacher practice on power sharing is non-significant once participation and opportunities are controlled, indicating full mediation.

The central empirical finding is that teacher practice does not produce power sharing directly. Instead, it works through a sequential process: teachers whose moral orientation toward students is perceived as open and respectful create structural pedagogical opportunities for student input. Then, those opportunities in turn enable active participation; and it is participation itself - students exercising voice in discussions and decisions - that most strongly predicts whether students feel they hold genuine influence. The direct effect of teacher practice on perceived power sharing disappears once participation and opportunities are accounted for.

A Mathematics education for democracy?: The democratization of mass media and shifting priorities

Jay Bradley, *George Mason University*

This project discusses the promise and perils for mathematics education during the current transformation of the general public from being consumers of mass media to becoming its editors and publishers. As Habermas predicted over sixty years ago, the economic incentives of the market would contribute to the failure of traditional mass media outlets to serve as effective facilitators of public discussion. As researchers have shown, mathematics education research within these traditional news media sources were limited to narratives that questioned its value, focused solely

on its utility in creating a STEM workforce, or engaged in pseudo-debates designed to engender conflict, i.e. "math wars". Although the introduction of new digital platforms has emancipatory potential from these narratives, the absence of meaningful regulation and the proliferation of false and misleading information has led many to question whether it is possible to create digital environments that can facilitate positive change for any societal concern, much less mathematics education. Nevertheless, it is arguable that the current dominance on social media of political actors who benefit from societal fragmentation and zero-sum mentalities require that those who imagine mathematics education as a space for "emancipation and transformation" engage in these digital environments to counter their destructive arguments. This project envisions possibilities, rationales, and the necessity of transnational advocacy networks to engage productively and fruitfully in this new media environment if hopes for an equitable and inclusive mathematics education are to be realized.

Session 2 Parallel sessions

Session 2:1 Double symposium Part II

The dual nature of juridification: Enacting children's rights at the local meso level

Andreas Bergh, *Örebro University*

This paper takes as its starting point an argument advanced by Jürgen Habermas (1987): that legal regulation, on the one hand, constitutes a foundation for a democratically functioning society, but, on the other hand, may also undermine democratic and civic values. This dual nature is also characteristic of juridification, which broadly refers to processes through which a situation or issue acquires a legal character or a changed legal status (Brännström 2009; Habermas 1987; Teubner 1987). In the context of education, juridification has been shown to reshape the power relations between education, politics, and law (Bergh & Forsberg 2024). Particularly over the past two decades, there has been an expansion and intensification of legal discourses, institutions, judicial measures, and legal expertise in policymaking, educational governance, and teaching.

Since January 1, 2020, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been incorporated into Swedish law. Prior to this decision, legal experts warned of unpredictability and an expected increase in court cases. Five years later, research indicates that national authorities have struggled to implement the law (Arneback et al, 2023), resulting in limited support for local authorities and schools, which must navigate its ambiguous provisions largely on their own.

The *purpose* with this paper is to present how the new CRC Act is enacted at local meso levels of the Swedish education system and to discuss implications for the relations between children, school staff and parents. To examine how the CRC Act is enacted, the concept of recontextualisation (Bernstein 2000) is used as a theoretical framework, drawing on the distinction between the Official Recontextualising Field and the Pedagogic Recontextualising Field. In previous studies where the enactment of the CRC Act has been studied, it has been characterized as a *weakly classified* policy object (Nylund et al, 2026). Based on that result, the central question for this presentation is how such an object is recontextualised in local settings by superintendents and headmasters. The data consists of interviews from five different schools with a variation of socio-economic context.

The results show that the way in which the CRC Act is enacted in local contexts reflects tensions between *guiding goal-oriented management* and *accountability-oriented exercise of power*. Compared to the nationally elusive interpretations, these are broadened in both directions at the local level. Based on local socio-economic differences, this result is used to discuss whether the CRC Act contributes to more equal conditions for the development of children and young people or whether it rather reinforces inequality.

Democratic resilience and the role of education

Ylva Bergström, *Uppsala University*

At a time of global democratic decline and increasing moral and political polarization, the role of education as a condition for open societies, autonomous citizens, qualification of critical knowledge is under increasing scrutiny. The proposed paper addresses three interrelated challenges to

contemporary democracy, each with important implications for education and its relation to democracy, and discuss the significance of critical reflection.

First, socioeconomic divisions have become less salient in politics, instead educational attainment has emerged as a key structuring dimension of political conflict, whereas school segregation and the social structures in recruitment patterns to educational programs (upper secondary and higher education) reinforce education-based divides.

Second, the political landscape has grown increasingly complex. A neglected discussion is what implications a changing structure of political opinions, and in turn, social conflicts might have. While conflicts are characteristic of a pluralist society, muddling through one conflict after another leaves behind a residue of integration. Conflicts along the left-right scale, position takings on re-distribution, equality, labor market issues, highly varied though they are, tend to be divisible negotiable conflicts. In contrast conflicts over identity issues, abortion, ethnic and cultural values, which have become more prominent, tend to be non-divisible. Having a lengthy experience dealing with negotiable conflicts we are now liable to experience the depth that participants feel about issues involved and students' ability to "tend" new conflicts are put to test (Hirschman 1994).

Third, besides political cleavages, and based on the urgency by which societies liberal democratic principles are challenged, disguised by an apparent democratic rhetoric, the paper address student's capability to recognize situations in which liberal democracy are threatened.

The proposed paper rests on results on ongoing research of upper secondar students' knowledge of democratic principles as well as position-takings on political and moral values. The proposed paper revisits Nussbaums (1997) emphasis: democracy needs citizens that can think for themselves rather than concede to authority and draw on three concepts of capabilities that function as critical reflections: "[l]ike a gadfly on the back of noble but sluggish horse […] waking democracy up so that it could conduct its business in a more reflective and reasonable way" (Nussbaum, 1997, p 10). Nussbaum's defense of liberal democracy was published when the threat to democracy had more to do with a decline in political participation by the younger generations. Today, the challenge of democracy is different.

The proposed paper focusses the capability to recognize oneself as bound to others by relations of *responsibility*, and the capability to "read the world", not only being engaged with the perspectives of others but *capable* to disclose when liberal democratic principles are under threat. Which is a form of democratic resilience—akin to the "gadfly" that sustains critical reflection in democratic life.

Cultivating democratic capability

Erik Gustavsson, *Linnaeus University*

Both the Swedish national curriculum for compulsory school and the curriculum for upper secondary school begin with the statement that "the school system is rooted in democracy" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, p. 5), an idea that is increasingly important to uphold and cultivate in a time when populism and polarization are on the rise. Contemporary Western liberal democracies often encompass a plurality of cultures and worldviews, which in turn gives rise to different understandings of the expressions and forms of democracy. For education to be "rooted in democracy," a conception of democracy is therefore required that recognizes and values the right to different ways of life, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of integrating this pluralism into the formulation as well as the management of shared interests. The

purpose of this presentation is to explore the possibility of understanding the democratic aims of education through the lens of Amartya Sen's (2009) *Capability Approach*.

In the Capability Approach, Sen emphasizes individuals' capabilities to achieve functionings—beings and doings—that they have reason to value. It is not a classical distributive theory of justice that argues for universal principles; rather, Sen argues that the most basic capabilities in a society should be identified through public reasoning and democratic deliberation.The perspective offers a context-sensitive understanding of democracy and justice that acknowledges the existing plurality of values and viewpoints, and may therefore be well suited to addressing the democratic challenges facing Western societies—and schools—today. The presentation examines the implications of understanding citizenship education through the lens of the Capability Approach. Inspired by Dewey's notion of "imaginative rehearsal" (Dewey, 1932/1985; Gustavsson, 2022), the analysis can be understood as an attempt to engage in a critical conversation about the foundations of democratic education. I begin by clarifying the relationship between capabilities and functionings in relation to schooling, and then discuss the implications for citizenship education, drawing on examples from the curriculum. The analysis highlights three key aspects of citizenship education, from the perspective of the Capability Approach: (1) the importance of equal democratic capability; (2) knowledge for participation; and (3) critical thinking and autonomy. The potential of the Capability Approach lies in its overarching view of citizenship education as linked to a broader process of human development. At the same time, a standards- and performance-oriented curriculum creates a number of didactic challenges to this approach. The presentation concludes by highlighting some of these challenges, including the selection of educational content and the assessment of capabilities.

Vocational teachers and progressive citizenship ideals:
A history from below of citizenship education in Sweden, 1906–1948

Carin Fröjd, *Örebro University*

Contemporary democracies are today facing growing challenges related to political polarization, declining democratic trust, and unequal patterns of civic participation (Levitsky, 2018). These challenges are often shaped by social and educational inequalities, as well as differences in geography and gender (Hoskins m.fl., 2021; Borhan, 2025). Similar patterns are reflected in Swedish upper-secondary education, where students enrolled in vocational programmes consistently report lower levels of democratic trust and civic engagement than students in higher education preparatory programmes (Knekta m.fl., 2025; Andersson, 2015; Persson, 2012; Hoskins m.fl., 2016). While such differences have frequently been explained through curriculum design, educational stratification, or hierarchal workplace socialization, the historical traditions of educational citizenship ideals that emerged *within* vocational education remain largely underexplored.

Drawing on a critical history-from-below perspective, this study examines how teachers within the lower vocational education engaged with, translated, and reshaped progressive democratic educational ideas during a formative period of Swedish democracy. Focusing on the years 1906–1948, from the establishment of the first vocational teacher associations to the formation of the federative union *Svenska Facklärarförbundet*, the study explores how vocational teachers developed distinctive understandings of democracy, citizenship, and social responsibility despite the absence of formal curricular requirements concerning citizenship education. The empirical material consists of debates, articles, and organizational documents produced within four

vocational teacher unions. Central to the analysis is how their educational perspectives and citizenship ideals were shaped by their experiences, assumptions, and immersion in a Swedish working-class culture.

The findings suggest that vocational teachers constituted a highly heterogeneous group whose views evolved alongside broader economic and social transformations in Swedish society. Nevertheless, many educators articulated what may be described as a form of *democratic solidarity*. Rather than aligning fully with either bureaucratic social-efficiency ideals or liberal-progressive educational philosophies, they developed a distinct form of citizenship ideal rooted in collective responsibility, occupational experience, and social cooperation.

By highlighting vocational teachers as active participants in debates about democracy and education, the study nuances dominant narratives of Swedish educational democratic progressivism and offers historical insights into the political tensions that continue to shape and re-shape our societies and classrooms today.

Session 2:2 Paper session

Towards Eco-democracy through *Bildung*: Insights from science education

Jesper Sjöström, *Malmö University*

The paper develops a conceptual framework linking eco-*Bildung*, expanded worldviews, and eco-democratic citizenship (science) education. Eco-democracy is understood here as democratic participation informed by ecological responsibility, relational forms of citizenship, and collective capacities to respond to sustainability challenges. Worldviews are understood as configurations of ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that shape how people interpret human–nature relations and societal futures.

The paper examines theoretically how expanded worldviews and visions informed by eco-*Bildung* perspectives can enrich education for democracy in our era defined by global complexity. Drawing on recent scholarship in the field of science education (e.g., Sjöström, 2025a) as well as about *Bildung*-oriented European *Didaktik* (e.g., Werler, 2024; Vogt & Wahlström, 2025; Deng, 2026), it synthesizes alternative approaches to scientific literacy and education that foreground ethical, socio-political, relational, and existential dimensions of knowing. These approaches challenge conventional Western epistemologies by emphasizing pluralism, engagement, and responsible action.

A central argument is that eco-*Bildung* perspectives offer powerful conceptual resources for re-visioning education (e.g., Wilhelmsson & Paulsen, 2026). Building on these insights as well as a literature review on Vision III, the paper outlines several alternative curriculum emphases compared to the classical ones in science education: ethico-socio-political perspectives, STS perspectives, agency, philosophical values, cultural-existential perspectives, and embodied knowledge (Sjöström, 2025a). The paper further elaborates the ontological, epistemological, and axiological positions underlying different worldview perspectives (Sjöström, 2025b). An integrative worldview—characterized by relational thinking, holism, place-based and spiritual knowledge, plurality, and transformative reflection—is explored as a promising foundation for reimagining education in ways that align with complexity, relationality, and eco-democracy.

The paper concludes that eco-*Bildung* offers important conceptual resources for reimagining (science) education beyond narrow epistemic goals. By fostering relational, ethical, and existential

dimensions of knowing, education can contribute to the cultivation of eco-democratic citizens capable of responding thoughtfully to contemporary societal and ecological challenges.

The study thus contributes to a small but growing body of empirical work that takes the philosophical literature on teaching seriously as a source of testable theoretical models. Its limitations - a single school, cross-sectional design, self-report data - are acknowledged, but its scale lend credibility to the process model it proposes. The findings suggest that cultivating teachers' moral and relational dispositions matter as a precondition for the kind of classroom practice in which students can experience democratic participation.

External actors in science education: A systematic review of research

Ylva Setterby, *Kristianstad University College*
Lena Hansson, *Kristianstad University College*
Maria Andrée, *University of Stockholm*

External actors are engaged in school science education, both nationally and internationally, through classroom activities, teaching materials, and professional development. Companies, non-governmental organisations, philanthropic foundations, and public agencies provide such resources free of charge. Swedish examples include industry-funded teaching resources on plastics and teaching materials on marine biodiversity produced by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as WWF. These initiatives reflect broader shifts in educational governance that remain insufficiently understood (Lubienski et al., 2022). Even though the involvement of external actors may enrich science education, research on educational policy has raised concerns that increasing private-sector influence may weaken the emphasis on citizenship and democratic values in schooling (Giroux, 2019; Robertson et al., 2012). Although research on external actors' engagement in schooling has expanded in recent years, studies of their involvement in science education remain fragmented across fields, highlighting the need for a comprehensive synthesis of empirical research.

The aim of this study is to systematically map empirical research about the involvement of external actors in (primary and secondary) science education. By identifying types of research questions, thematic orientations, and methodological approaches, the review seeks to identify patterns as well as underexplored areas in the field.

A structured literature review has been conducted. An initial exploratory phase was used to refine concepts, delimit the scope, and develop search terms (Hart, 2025). Boolean searches were subsequently carried out in ERIC and Education Source, and the review process follows the PRISMA framework to ensure transparency and rigor.

The study is ongoing and its final results will be presented at the conference. Although preliminary results indicate considerable diversity in research foci and methodological approaches, the research seems mainly oriented towards increasing students' interest in and knowledge about STEM through the involvement of external actors, while empirical research concerned with critical perspectives on the influence on education seems more rare. An additional preliminary finding is that the teaching studied in the reviewed literature was unevenly distributed across STEM disciplines.

This study contributes to the research field by mapping research on the involvement of external actors in school science. It identifies gaps in the empirical research such as the need for

empirically grounded research that explicitly addresses how values are embedded, communicated, and negotiated both explicitly and implicitly in science education involving external actors.

Sustainability education as a democratic balancing practice:
Teacher perspectives from an action research study in a Danish lower secondary school

Diana Rigtrup, *University College Absalon*

Research aim: This paper examines sustainability education as an ongoing negotiation between normative educational aims and democratic ideals. The study is based on an action research project conducted in collaboration with teachers in a Danish lower secondary school. The project focused on interdisciplinary sustainability education across science and ethics education. The paper investigates how teachers understand their role when teaching sustainability in a democratic context and asks: How do teachers negotiate between promoting sustainability-related values and supporting students' democratic autonomy and critical reflection? Across the empirical material, teachers repeatedly describe sustainability education as a "balance" between responsibility, value-oriented guidance, and respect for students' independent judgement.

Theoretical framework: The analysis combines perspectives from John Dewey, Martha Nussbaum, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Dewey's understanding of democracy as participatory inquiry and experiential learning provides a framework for analysing sustainability education as a democratic practice rather than merely behavioural instruction (Dewey, 1916). Nussbaum's work on democratic citizenship and critical thinking is used to explore tensions between education, moral responsibility, and student autonomy (Nussbaum, 2010). Wittgenstein's later philosophy contributes a practice-oriented understanding of meaning and language, highlighting how concepts such as "sustainability" gain meaning through social use and educational practices (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Methodology: The study is designed as an action research case study involving collaboration between researchers and teachers. Empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews with five teachers participating in an interdisciplinary sustainability project and thematic school day involving approximately 100 students. The analysis is inspired by hermeneutic and practice-oriented approaches and uses concept-driven thematic coding informed by theories of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD1/ESD2) developed by Vare and Scott (2007).

Expected findings: The analysis shows that teachers do not position themselves exclusively within either normative or democratic approaches to sustainability education. Instead, they continuously negotiate between these orientations in practice. Teachers simultaneously express responsibility for addressing climate and sustainability issues while emphasising students' right to think independently and critically. The paper argues that sustainability education in schools is best understood as a democratic balancing practice rather than as either behavioural regulation or unrestricted relativism. Furthermore, the findings suggest that interdisciplinary collaboration and a critical-utopian approach to sustainability education may create spaces for more reflective and dialogical forms of teaching, enabling students both to engage critically with existing societal conditions and to imagine alternative and more sustainable futures.

There are no flowers in our schoolyard:
Ecological attention and democratic formation in early primary education
Helle Eeg, *University College Absalon*

Research topic/aim: This paper explores how literature-based and digitally mediated teaching practices may reshape attention to shared environments in early primary education. The study investigates how literary and digital practices in the language arts classroom can reconfigure children's relations to their immediate environments, with a particular focus on ecological attention, aesthetic experience, and democratic questions concerning visibility, attention, and "voice" in shared environments.

Theoretical framework: The paper is situated within Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) research and draws on ecological perception and attention from environmental humanities and ecocritical literary studies, which understand perception as culturally and pedagogically shaped rather than given (Goga, 2019;). Literature is understood as a medium through which attention may shift from the text itself toward the shared world beyond it (Henkel, 2023).

Methodology/research design: The project was conducted in two first-grade classrooms. Inspired by plant blindness, the teaching centered on the picture book *Blomsten der elsker mig* [The Flower that Loves Me] by Hanne Kvist (2019). Through literary interpretation, visual production, Minecraft, photography, block programming, and QR-based sharing, children were invited to personify and narrate plant life in and around the schoolyard. At the outset, teachers described the schoolyard as containing "no flowers." During the process, however, both teachers and children began to identify previously overlooked plant life. Empirically, the study draws on field notes, teacher interviews, photographs, and children's productions from the intervention. Methodologically, the study is positioned as an exploratory practice-based case study combining elements of design-oriented educational research and qualitative classroom inquiry (Hanghøj et al., 2022).

Expected results/findings: The paper argues that literature, aesthetic production, and digital technologies enabled children to reimagine the schoolyard as a shared living environment rather than a neutral backdrop for school activities. Crucially, the project is framed as a democratic inquiry into what is granted visibility, attention, and "voice" in shared environments: what becomes perceptible and meaningful. In this sense, redistributing attention toward previously overlooked plant life is understood as a democratic issue, as educational practices shape what can appear as part of a shared reality. In particular, QR-installations transformed the children's interpretations into invitations for shared attention among peers, teachers, and parents, extending their ways of seeing into public space. The paper suggests that such literary and digitally mediated practices may contribute to ecological attention and democratic formation by supporting new ways of noticing and sharing the more-than-human world in everyday school spaces.

Session 2:3 Paper session

Local hope-based explorations:
Everyday acts of democratic resilience through pedagogical critique and group governance
Pernilla Jonsson Severson, *Linnaeus University*

Research topic/aim: This paper explores how everyday pedagogical activities function as vital acts of democratic resilience in educational settings challenged by authoritarianism, populism, and societal polarisation. Rather than relying on large-scale institutional reforms, the study aims to conceptualise and empirically illustrate "local hope-based explorations" as situated, relational practices through which democratic life is sustained and renewed in classrooms via ordinary interactions and routines (Jonsson Severson, & Ricknell, in press). In doing so, it frames hope not as naive optimism, but as an action-oriented, future-making force and a collective orientation sustained under conditions of uncertainty.

Theoretical framework: The analysis is grounded in John Dewey's (1927) pragmatist philosophy of democracy as a lived, experiential practice enacted through communication, participation, and shared inquiry. Building on the "everyday democracy" framework (Jonsson Severson, & Ricknell, in press), democracy is approached as a cumulative, daily accomplishment shaped by how individuals navigate difference. The paper integrates critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994), educational approaches emphasising plurality (Todd, 2015), and agonistic democratic theory (Mouffe, 2000) to conceptualise "solidarity-based critique". This framework understands critique as a pedagogical stance that combines critical engagement with relational responsibility, fostering reflexivity and sustaining social bonds in pluralistic classroom communities.

Methodology/research design: Employing a qualitative case study approach, the paper examines teachers' use of two interrelated pedagogical tools: solidarity-based critique in classroom discussions addressing contested issues, and micro-democratic governance mechanisms for group work (such as negotiated roles and collective decision-making). Empirical material is generated through a multi-method design consisting of classroom observations, autoethnographic explorations, and the analysis of lesson and planning materials. This interpretive design allows for an in depth examination of how democratic ideals are practically enacted and negotiated in everyday pedagogical arrangements.

Expected results/findings: The analysis is expected to demonstrate how solidarity-based critique and group governance mechanisms successfully foster key democratic dispositions, including active listening, negotiation, shared responsibility, and a tolerance for disagreement. The findings will show how these practices build classroom communities capable of engaging productively with controversy rather than avoiding conflict or defaulting to authoritarian solutions. Ultimately, the paper argues that democratic resilience is cultivated through modest, everyday pedagogical routines that sustain trust and agency, offering a vital infrastructure for "futuremaking" and resilient democratic habits.

When audiences diverge:
Computational framing of religious genocide discourse on YouTube

Mohammed Ahmed Taiye, *Linnaeus University*
Mohammed Sadiq, *Massey University*
Rasaq Muhammed Adisa, *University of Ilorin*
Fredrick Ifeanyi Okonkwo, *NOUN*
Lucky Isioma Okonkwo, *Veritas University*
Abdulwahab Funsho Atanda, *University of Technology Sibu*

Background: Digital platforms have transformed how sensitive narratives, including claims of ethnic and religious violence, are shaped and consumed. YouTube has become a significant arena for such discourse, where unmoderated comment sections enable civic engagement while

simultaneously accelerating the spread of contested narratives, deepening polarization along national and ethno-religious lines [1]. The Nigeria Christian genocide claim offers a compelling case for comparing how foreign and domestic media frame the same event and how audiences respond. Despite growing interest in computational discourse analysis, existing scholarship remains largely centered on Western and Middle Eastern contexts [2], [3], leaving a significant gap in understanding how genocide narratives circulate within African geopolitical settings. Moreover, while framing theory has been widely applied to news content [4], few studies have used computational methods to examine audience-level framing reception at scale, particularly where foreign and domestic media ecosystems produce divergent narratives. We address this gap through: how sentiment emotion, and stance differ between foreign and Nigerian YouTube audiences; what discourse frames characterize each group; and how well NLP pipelines generalize across diverse YouTube channels.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology: Grounded in Entman's framing theory [4], we examined how media actors shape problem definition and moral judgement through selective framing, while Goldman's epistemic authority theory [5] interrogates how genocide claim credibility is constructed across geopolitical contexts. A dataset of 23,463 YouTube comments from three foreign and three Nigerian news channels was analyzed using a multi-stage pipeline covering varying text analytical approaches, stance and framing analysis, validated through statistical tests.

Initial Findings: Findings reveal divergence between foreign and Nigerian audiences across sentiment, emotion, stance, and topic dimensions Link. Foreign audiences showed higher emotional intensity and alignment with genocide confirmation frames driven by fear. While Nigerian audiences expressed counter-narratives anchored in anger, disgust, sovereignty, and institutional misrepresentation. Six discourse clusters were identified, with stance and emotion showing the greatest divergence between the two groups. These findings suggest geopolitical positioning fundamentally shapes how audiences engage with contested atrocity claims, raising questions about epistemic and algorithmic inequality. Future work should focus on longitudinal tracking, African-language NLP models, and platform audit studies.

Creative listening: Recreating democracy in AI-mediated education

Johan Deltner, *Malmö University*

Research topic/aim: Democracy depends on habits of openness and shared inquiry through which people remain open to difference and willing to reconstruct meaning together. This paper argues that creative listening offers a democratic practice through which AI-mediated educational encounters can become occasions for collaborative inquiry rather than individualized AI interaction. At a time when democratic life is strained by polarization and fragmented discourse, generative AI is reshaping the conditions of education. Dominant framings of AI as tutor, tool, or threat obscure a fourth possibility: AI can function as one voice in inquiry whose contributions invite collective interpretation. Creative listening transforms the educational significance of AI by turning individual AI encounters into objects of collective interpretation within shared inquiry, thereby reshaping the conditions of democratic inquiry and the reconstruction of educational experience.

Theoretical framework: Grounded in Dewey's conception of democracy as a mode of associated living and education as the reconstruction of experience, creative listening is understood as a way of attending and responding that opens space for exploring uncertainty and emerging

meanings together. Creative listening is conceptualized through three interrelated dimensions that suspend premature certainty in shared inquiry: other-regarded attentiveness to the perspectives of others, aesthetic attunement to emerging meanings and possibilities, and co-vulnerable responsiveness to uncertainty and difference, which together form an explorative dance of shared inquiry. These dimensions illuminate the limits of dominant AI interactions, which cannot fully participate in the embodied, situated, and vulnerable relations through which democratic inquiry is sustained. This framework positions creative listening not as a communicative technique but as a democratic practice grounded in the possibility of renewing democratic forms of associated living under changing conditions.

Methodology/research design: The paper is philosophical and conceptual. Grounded in Dewey's accounts of transactional experience, the aesthetic dynamics of inquiry, and the co-vulnerability of democratic life, the paper develops creative listening as a framework for analyzing how engagement with AI-generated material shapes habits of inquiry, relationality, and democratic participation. Classroom examples illustrate how AI interactions can narrow or expand the experiential conditions of democratic learning.

Expected results/findings: The analysis suggests that the dominant interactional logic of commercially available generative AI (efficiency, personalization, and rapid closure) risks weakening the relational and exploratory habits through which democratic dispositions develop. Yet the problem lies less in AI itself than in the forms of engagement this logic encourages. Shifting the focus from what AI is (tool, tutor, threat) to what people can do together with AI, the paper shows how engagements with AI-generated material can generate ambiguities, contradictions, and unexpected associations that become educational resources when situated within practices of creative listening. Under such conditions, AI becomes one voice within an ecology of inquiry rather than an authoritative source or isolated tool. Recreating democratic inquiry in AI-mediated education depends on practices of creative listening through which people reconstruct.

Beyond scarcity: Democracy through self-limitation

Linus Bylund, *Gothenburg University*

Democratic societies are increasingly confronted with intertwined ecological, political, and social crises (Orr, 2023), raising urgent questions about how education should respond to environmental limits. Contemporary educational discussions of sustainability frequently frame such limits through concepts such as planetary boundaries, ecological footprints, and what Le Grange (2026) terms "limits thinking," presenting ecological limits as external constraints to which individuals and societies must learn to adapt (e.g., Hart & Hart, 2026). This paper questions that framing by drawing on Giorgos Kallis' (2019) reinterpretation of Thomas Malthus, and his conception of self-limitation.

The aim of the paper is to explore how Kallis' conception of self-limitation opens new ways of thinking about democratic education. To address this aim, the paper develops Kallis' reinterpretation of Malthus and his conception of self-limitation as a theoretical lens for rethinking contemporary educational understandings of limits. Particular attention is given to Kallis' engagement with Cornelius Castoriadis' distinction between heteronomy and autonomy, through which democracy is understood as the collective capacity to question and institute its own limits rather than submitting to external authorities, whether religion, science, technology, or the market.

The paper argues that Malthusian, neoclassical economic, and much environmental thought share a common premise: that human wants are naturally unlimited and that scarcity therefore constitutes the unavoidable condition of human existence. Once the world is understood as inherently scarce, the central political question becomes how societies can sustain economic growth as a means of relieving scarcity. Kallis challenges this premise by asking a different question: what if the world is better understood as abundant rather than scarce? The problem then no longer lies in the presumed scarcity of the world but in the assumption that human wants are naturally unlimited. Rather than treating unlimited wants as a natural fact, Kallis argues that they are socially instituted and therefore open to democratic reflection and transformation. Self-limitation is consequently understood not as adaptation to externally imposed limits but as the democratic practice of collectively determining which limits are desirable, necessary, or unjust.

The paper suggests that this shift has important educational implications. Rather than simply preparing students to adapt to predetermined ecological boundaries, democratic education may be understood as cultivating the capacity to deliberate collectively about what kind of society people wish to create, for whom, and which limits ought to shape collective life. From this perspective, self-limitation becomes not a constraint on democracy but one of its defining educational practices.

Session 3 Parallel sessions

Session 3:1 Paper session

Cultivating collective agency: Democracy, education and the capacity to live with a wicked world

Niclas Rönnström, *Stockholm University*

Contemporary debates on democracy are dominated by concerns about democratic backsliding, populism, polarization, misinformation and the dominant influence of market logics. Democratic theory, meanwhile, continues to focus primarily on legitimacy: how political power should be justified, constrained and distributed in accordance with democratic ideals. While these remain indispensable concerns, they tend to overlook what this paper identifies as a defining democratic challenge: the growing mismatch between increasingly wicked collective societal problems and increasingly individualized understandings of agency, responsibility and problem solving.

The democratic institutions and educational ideals that proved remarkably successful during the twentieth century evolved under historical conditions different from those confronting contemporary society. Today's challenges are increasingly *wicked*: they are interdependent, uncertain and resistant to individual or organizational solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Beck, 2009). Yet democratic societies continue to organize responsibility and problem solving primarily around individuals, organizations and markets. The paper argues that this mismatch reflects a longer historical relocation of the locus of legitimate democratic agency. Democratic development has gradually shifted from collective self-government towards individual rights, market participation and meritocratic achievement. While this transformation has generated gains in freedom, autonomy and choice, it has also weakened many of the institutions and practices through which citizens develop shared understandings, common orientations and the collective capability required to address shared problems.

Drawing on Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Rittel and Webber's theory of wicked problems and Beck's analysis of world risk society, the paper argues that educationally relevant democratic theory needs to complement its longstanding concern with legitimacy with a renewed concern for collective capability. Twentieth-century democratic theory asked how political power could remain legitimate under changing social conditions. This paper asks a complementary question: how can democratic societies cultivate the collective capabilities required to understand, coordinate and transform shared and wicked problems?

This shift has important implications for democratic education. Twentieth-century democratic education primarily prepared citizens to participate in democratic institutions by cultivating civic values, democratic dispositions and deliberative competence. While these remain essential, they are no longer sufficient. Democratic education must also cultivate the collective capabilities through which people develop shared understandings, coordinate action and exercise collective agency. Democracy cannot endure if citizens repeatedly experience that participation is possible while collective influence remains elusive. The democratic task of education is therefore no longer merely to reproduce democratic norms and institutions, but to cultivate collective capability for living with a wicked world.

Populism as a lens on the complexity of contemporary democracy: Implications for educational thought

Rafał Włodarczyk, *University of Wrocław*

Contemporary liberal democracies are increasingly confronted with populist movements and parties that challenge established political institutions and dominant understandings of democratic legitimacy. While populism is often approached primarily as a threat to democracy, this presentation adopts a different perspective. It argues that populism is analytically valuable because it reveals important and frequently overlooked dimensions of democracy itself. In particular, populism exposes the complexity, internal tensions, and unresolved contradictions that characterize contemporary democratic societies.

Drawing on the works of Margaret Canovan and Pierre Rosanvallon, Autor argues that populism should be understood not simply as an external pathology of democratic systems but as a phenomenon rooted in democracy's own principles. Populist demands for the restoration of popular sovereignty highlight a constitutive tension between democracy as a promise of rule by the people and democracy as a complex set of institutions, procedures, and mediating structures. Contemporary democracies require institutions, expertise, bureaucratic structures, legal frameworks, and transnational forms of governance that frequently exceed citizens' capacity for direct understanding and control. Populist critiques often emerge precisely in response to this complexity. The complexity of democracy, as revealed by populism, raises important questions for the philosophy of education: How this complexity should be understood, taught, and experienced by citizens? Do educational practice and the philosophy of education require such a complex understanding of democracy? And what new insights might emerge when this approach to democracy is applied to research on civil education and educational theory? What implications might the complexity of democracy have for educational practice? Furthermore, what else can the conflict between liberal democrats and populists teach us about democracy? And which other aspects of democracy's complexity become visible when we examine other challenges confronting contemporary democracies, such as the climate crisis?

Making sense of democratic education: Multiple educational purposes and the challenge of practice

Sara Hasselrot, *Linnaeus University*

Democratic education is widely regarded as a central purpose of schooling, and in the Swedish context, this commitment is explicitly articulated in the national curriculum, which states that education should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values, that students should be prepared for active participation in society, and that teaching should be conducted through democratic practices (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2025). Yet despite broad agreement regarding its importance, there is considerable disagreement concerning what democratic education should involve in practice. Research on democratic education points to several competing understandings of what democratic education should aim to achieve. In a synthesis of democratic education research, Sant (2019) identifies a number of recurring traditions, including liberal, deliberative, participatory, and critical approaches. These traditions rest on different assumptions regarding participation, authority, citizenship, and the purposes of education, suggesting that democratic education cannot be understood as a single or self-evident educational

project. Rather, it involves ongoing questions about what democracy should mean in educational practice, and what schools are expected to achieve through it. This paper is related to an ongoing doctoral dissertation exploring how teachers understand, interpret, and enact the democratic mission of education. Rather than presenting empirical findings, the paper develops a theoretical problem underpinning the project. The central argument is that teachers are expected to enact a democratic mission characterised by multiple understandings of democracy as well as potentially competing educational purposes. If democratic education can be interpreted in different ways, and if education simultaneously serves multiple purposes, what does it actually mean to enact the democratic mission of education in practice? To explore this problem, the paper draws on Biesta's (2010) distinction between qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. While these dimensions are often presented as complementary functions of education, democratic education may bring their tensions into particularly sharp relief. Efforts to promote participation, responsibility, independent judgement, shared norms, or subject knowledge may foreground different educational purposes and therefore raise questions about what should be prioritised, why, and under which conditions. Against this background, teacher agency is approached as a lens for exploring how teachers navigate educational purposes and democratic ideals that may pull in different directions (Priestley et al., 2015). The focus is therefore not on whether teachers implement democratic education, but on how they make sense of and respond to competing expectations concerning participation, authority, knowledge, responsibility, and student influence. The paper concludes by considering how these theoretical questions can be explored through an ongoing qualitative study, combining observations, interviews and focus groups. The study seeks to investigate how teachers understand democratic education, how they navigate competing educational purposes and democratic ideals, and how these interpretations may shape classroom practice.

Responsibility for Self and Others: Ethical awareness in democratic education

Sturla L. Nordlund, *University of Inland Norway*

In the Norwegian Core Curriculum, ethical awareness is presented as a core value within the school's mission of education and all-round development (Bildung). Bildung is described as a lifelong process with the goals of developing pupils' intellectual freedom, independence, responsibility, and compassion for others (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 12). At the same time, ethical awareness is only briefly defined in the curriculum and has had limited impact on educational research and school practice compared with, for example, critical thinking. This paper draws on an ongoing PhD project examining the school's mission of all-round development and the concept of ethical awareness. The dissertation argues that ethical awareness is closely connected to the four goals outlined in the Core Curriculum by understanding responsibility as both inward-looking, towards one's own intellectual freedom and independence, and outward-looking, in relation to others. In this conference paper, I develop this argument further by drawing on philosophical perspectives inspired by Kant's notion of maturity and agency, and Løgstrup's relational ethics of responsibility for the other, to examine responsibility as a pivotal value that gives substantive content to intellectual freedom, independence, and compassion for others. Although their approaches are often regarded as contrasting in the philosophical literature, the paper argues that they can be read as complementary for understanding ethical awareness in democratic education. In line with the conference theme, the paper discusses ethical awareness as part of a broader democratic project. It argues that democratic citizenship requires responsibility

both for oneself and for others, while also addressing a central tension in democratic education: how can schools cultivate autonomous individuals without promoting excessive individualism, and foster commitment to the common good without undermining individual freedom? By drawing on Kant's (1784/2003) conception of Mündigkeit and Løgstrup's (1956/2010) ethics of responsibility, the paper suggests that ethical awareness offers a way of understanding autonomy and compassion for others as mutually constitutive rather than opposing ideals. Methodologically, the paper adopts a hermeneutic approach, combining an interpretive reading of the Core Curriculum with philosophical analyses of Kant and Løgstrup. Rather than seeking to test empirical claims, the aim is to develop a richer conceptual understanding of ethical awareness as an under-theorised dimension of the school's mission.

Session 3:2 Paper session

Juridifying systematic quality assurance: Analysing a failed regulatory reform in Swedish education

Håkan Eilard, *Karlstad University*
Malin Kronqvist Håård, *Örebro University*
Lena Öijen, *Karlstad University*

In 2023, the Swedish government commissioned the Swedish National Agency for Education (NAE) to develop legally binding regulations for systematic quality assurance (SQA) in compulsory education. The initiative followed a formal request from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI) after the Swedish Supreme Administrative Court overturned an injunction concerning deficiencies in a school provider's SQA (HFD 2020 ref. 28). The Court concluded that the relevant provisions of the Education Act were too broadly formulated to justify the use of financial penalties. The proposed regulations sought to address this perceived legal deficiency by specifying in detail how SQA should be conducted, despite the original policy being designed to provide teachers and principals with considerable professional discretion. Although the regulations were later withdrawn before implementation, they provide a unique opportunity to analyse juridification as a governing rationality. The study addresses two research questions: (1) Which dimensions of juridification are evident in the government's commission and the proposed SQA regulations? (2) How can these dimensions be understood as expressions of the juridification of education?

Theoretical framework: Research on the juridification of education has shown how educational problems are increasingly framed and addressed through legal concepts, regulation and judicial mechanisms (Murphy & Bergh, 2025). In Sweden, SSI has become a central governing actor through legally based supervision and sanctions (Eilard, 2022). Building on this literature, the study examines how legal regulation is constructed as a policy solution and what this reveals about broader processes of juridification in educational governance.

Methodology: The analysis applies the six dimensions of juridification developed by Blichner and Molander (2008) and extended by Rosén et al. (2021). The empirical material consists of the government's commission to NAE, the Agency's draft regulations, and related policy documents produced before and during the regulatory process. Although the regulations were never enacted, this is of secondary importance; analytically, the case provides insight into juridification as a governing strategy rather than its practical implementation.

Expected findings: Systematic quality assurance has become a central instrument of educational governance in Sweden. At the same time, previous research demonstrates that SQA is characterised by competing policy logics, combining formative, professionally oriented ideas of school development with accountability-oriented demands for measurable outcomes and legal compliance (Edvik et al., 2025). The study is expected to show how the proposed regulations strengthened the latter logic and illustrate how juridification reshapes the balance between professional discretion, accountability and legal regulation in educational governance.

Juridification as democratisation through an agonistic lens

Maria Rosén, *Stockholm University*

This presentation takes an interest in juridification as a political initiative to democratise education. Although rarely addressed in the democratic education research field, the phenomenon appears in studies of education policy and practice, particularly in the Swedish context. In the early 2000s, Sweden introduced enforceable rights, legitimised as strengthening a democratic school. This reform was part of a broader societal shift toward a greater emphasis on liberal values such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law. Initiatives pursued in the name of democracy are, however, difficult to question—even though they may paradoxically challenge the very ideals they seek to uphold. While Chantal Mouffe critically discusses the tendency toward juridification and its threat to the political, as well as its contribution to deepening democratic deficits, her critique has not been substantially taken up in theoretical discussions of agonism within the scholarly field of democratic education, where attention has instead been directed primarily toward deliberative democracy. This presentation brings these discussions into conversation by examining juridification as a political initiative to democratise education through an agonistic lens. The presentation particularly focuses on the conceptual themes of legal conflict/agonism and legal identities/political identities. It demonstrates how juridification generates high expectations for law as a strategy of conflict solving at all levels of the education system, as well as risking the ossification of identity categories. From an agonistic perspective, I argue that legal mechanisms for resolving conflicts may, at best, help manage disputes, but more often obscure underlying tensions and, in the worst cases, generate new conflicts. Taken together, the presentation expands the theoretical scope of agonistic democratic education and identifies juridification as a critical scholarly concern, given its implications for the democratic life of education.

Gender equality reconnecting to democratic principles:
Educational policy challenges and contemporary didactical STEAM affordances

Birgitta Nordén, *Malmö University*
Pia Ulvenblad, *Halmstad University*

Gender disparities in compulsory school education remain a key concern across Europe, affecting educational outcomes and shaping contemporary opportunities for girls and boys differently. This study aims to highlight gender equality and democratic principles. Although, the gender equality in general in the EU is positive in a global comparison, there is still potential for development. The World Economic Forum presented in 2024 Europe as the highest gender parity on their ranking list of global regions. Seven European countries including the Nordic countries of Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Sweden are among the 10 countries with the highest gender equality. Further, the

gender equality index gives the member state a score from 1 to 100, where 100 would indicate that a country has reached full equality between women and men. The index is based on the following six core domains Health, Knowledge, Money, Power, Time, Work and two additional domains Violence against women, Intersecting inequalities, and 27 countries in the EU are ranked. The overall score for the EU is 71,0, where Sweden and Denmark have the highest scores. Altogether, both the countries ranked high in the World Economic Forum and in the Gender Equality Index are also recognised as democracies practicing clear democratic values and principles.

The theoretical approach refers to Dewey (1916) and the crucial role education plays in the maintenance and renewal of democracy. The analysis tools developed rely on a contemporary dynamic understanding of five forms of democratic participation, namely; deliberation, agency, creativity, critical reflection and authenticity. Besides comparative policy analysis within a framework of educational science, the future-oriented methodology used, includes descriptive statistics and secondary data sources together with data from the EU project STEAMbrace to explore an ongoing journey for gender inclusion from STEM to STEAM education. Thereby, together with tools for questioning the taken-for-granted norm system on "gender trouble" (Butler, 2007), gender equality is reconnected to democratic concerns. It also addresses variations in academic achievement gaps, STEM subject preferences, and socio-cultural STEAM influences. Special attention is given to examining the didactical affordances for implementing STEAM within EU in general, and Sweden, in particular, with the purpose to illustrate diverse policy environments and contextual challenges. The primary results reveal the need of new dynamics in education to enhance gender inclusion and reconnect to democracy through a common concern and renewed understanding. The study intends to shed light on areas for targeted intervention in a classroom context, facilitate knowledge formation – and sharing – among EU member states, and inform policymakers and educators on strategies to promote equitable educational outcomes for all students.

Reimagining education for human dignity and democratic inclusion: Lessons from the IIDEMIC project on transforming refugee communities from displacement to empowerment in Kenya and Somalia

Marguerite Miheso O'Connor, *Kenyatta University*
Adelheid Bwire, *Kenyatta University*
Francis Mwangi, *Kenyatta University*
Priscilla Ndegwa, *Kenyatta University*
Beatrice Bunyasi, *Kenyatta University*
Mildred Nawiri, *Kenyatta University*

The growing global displacement crisis has intensified the need to rethink education systems beyond humanitarian response frameworks toward approaches that promote human dignity, democratic inclusion, and sustainable empowerment for refugee and migrant communities. This paper examines the transformative potential of the Inclusive and Innovative Digital Education for Migrant Communities (IIDEMIC) Project, an European Union-funded initiative led by Kenyatta University in partnership with institutions working with displaced populations in Kenya and Somalia. The study seeks to explore how inclusive and context-responsive educational interventions can transform refugee communities from states of displacement and vulnerability into empowered participants in democratic and socio-economic life. The study is anchored in Human Dignity Theory, which emphasizes the inherent right of every individual to equitable access

to opportunities, and Democratic Inclusion Theory, which advocates participatory educational systems that recognize diversity, agency, and social justice as central to learning processes. These frameworks provide the lens for understanding education as a tool for empowerment rather than mere access provision. Using a qualitative case study research design, the paper draws on project implementation experiences across refugee and internally displaced contexts including Dadaab, Kakuma, Mogadishu, and Baidoa. Data were generated through project documentation analysis, stakeholder engagement reports, training evaluations, and reflective implementation experiences gathered during the execution of the project's educational interventions. Findings indicate that educational models integrating teacher capacity development, multilingual and culturally responsive pedagogy, digital and assistive technologies, employability-oriented soft skills, and democratic classroom practices significantly enhance learner participation, resilience, identity affirmation, and agency among displaced learners. The study demonstrates that when education systems recognize learners' languages, cultures, and lived experiences as valuable assets, learning becomes transformative and contributes to social inclusion and community empowerment. The paper concludes that reimagining education through inclusive and democratic frameworks offers a sustainable pathway for transforming refugee communities from displacement toward empowerment, providing important lessons for policymakers and institutions seeking equitable educational futures in increasingly diverse global societies

Session 3:3 Paper session

B**etween *Education for Bildung* and *Knowledge for all*: Changing educational claims on the democratic subject**

Tove Franzén Lindholm, *Örebro University*

Recent Swedish educational reform and curriculum development have embarked on a path towards a "strong, knowledge-focused school with the mission of knowledge at its centre". This proposed paper explores the new knowledge orientation and epistemological stance articulated in Swedish educational policy, focusing on conceptions of knowledge, bildung and democracy. The analysis draws on the renegotiated concept of bildung for democracy following the Second World War, as outlined by critical theorists affiliated with the Frankfurt School. In addition, a Critical Policy Analysis3 perspective is applied to examine the relationship between these articulated competing educational-philosophical positions and their implications for the democratic subject in education. The empirical material consists of two Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU). The first, SOU 2025:19 'Knowledge for all', was published in 2025 as part of the ongoing curriculum reform process. The second, SOU 1992:94 'Education for bildung', is included because its conceptions of knowledge and bildung are explicitly articulated as an antithesis in the 2025 report. This tension makes for the starting point of analysis. Preliminary findings suggest that a central argument of SOU 2025:19 is critique of SOU 1992:94, whose conception of bildung and knowledge is said to overemphasise the social constructivist view of knowledge production, thereby potentially undermining trust in the intrinsic value of knowledge and, consequently, the stability of democracy. SOU 2025:19 argues that knowledge in compulsory school should not be regarded as subjective or relative, but on the contrary be "the best available knowledge within the field, based on science and proven experience". Accordingly, the report proposes a fixed knowledge orientation, in which basic

knowledge and skills are emphasized as a stable and reliable knowledge base consisting of permanent knowledge, that "is not perceived as fleeting or soon outdated".

The two reports thus represent contrasting epistemological positions. In SOU 2025:19, bildung is promoted as a means of strengthening democracy through the transmission of permanent objective knowledge and stable scientific truths, thereby establishing a common frame of reference and fostering cultural integration to Swedish society. By contrast, SOU 1992:94 conceptualises bildung as an open-ended, reflexive and emancipatory process of critically engaging with and co-constructing knowledge. To reflect on democratic implications of these contrasting positions, the analysis draws on the post-war reconceptualisation of democratic bildung developed in affiliation to the Frankfurt School. This reconceptualisation emerged as a response to educational traditions associated with cultural conservatism, authoritarianism and the transmission of fixed truths, while simultaneously (re)introducing emancipatory and critical dimensions of bildung, in order to reconcile with its nationalist connotations By examining how the two reports articulate educational claims concerning the relationship between knowledge, bildung and democracy, the paper sheds light on seemingly agonist constructions of the democratic subject and their possible positions in contemporary Swedish curriculum reform and highlight the renewed significance of epistemological questions in ongoing democratic struggles over educational policy.

Recreating democratic legitimacy in the classroom:
Negotiating knowledge in a homogeneous school context

Johanna Lüddeckens, *Linnaeus University*
Hennie Kesak, *Linnaeus University*

Research topic/aim: In the context of increasing politicization of education and growing skepticism towards the legitimacy of educational institutions, this paper explores how democratic legitimacy can be recreated through everyday teaching practices understood as sites of participation and inquiry. The study investigates how internationalization, grounded in an inter-cultural approach, can support students' capacities for critical engagement, perspective-taking, and participation. The aim is to analyze how classroom practices can function as sites where knowledge is opened to scrutiny and negotiated, thereby strengthening the democratic role of education in a relatively homogeneous school context.

The study draws on interactionalism, as described by Svedberg (2016), and intercultural theory (Lahdenperä, 2008, 2021) to analyses how recognition, power, and difference are enacted in teaching and school development. It is further informed by a Deweyan understanding of democracy as a lived and communicative practice enacted through participation and inquiry (Dewey, 1916).

Interculturality is conceptualized as a professional and organizational approach that enables democratic engagement with diversity. In addition, Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking is used to explore how meanings of knowledge and legitimacy are constructed in school practices.

The study also conceptualizes the classroom as a site of epistemic negotiation, where students and teachers examine, question, and negotiate what counts as valid and relevant knowledge. A whole-school approach (European Commission/Eurydice, 2020) frames the study, emphasizing the alignment of teaching, leadership, and organizational processes.

The study is designed as a qualitative intervention study combining action research and design-based research, conducted over one academic year in a Swedish lower secondary school

(grades 7–9). The intervention is organized through iterative cycles of planning, implementation, reflection, and revision within teacher-led process groups. Data collection includes longitudinal focus group interviews with students and teachers/paraprofessionals, interviews with school leadership and local authorities, teacher reflection logs, collegial observation data, and researchers' field notes. The material is analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with a longitudinal perspective to capture how understandings of knowledge, participation, and democracy evolve over time.

The study is expected to demonstrate how teaching practices that open knowledge to multiple perspectives create conditions for negotiating knowledge in the classroom. In a context with limited everyday exposure to diversity, such practices enable students to critically engage in different ways of understanding the world and to reflect on their own positions. The findings are further expected to show that when knowledge is experienced as meaningful and connected to global contexts, students' trust in education as a democratic institution is strengthened. At the organizational level, the study is expected to highlight how democratic legitimacy is continuously produced through shared professional language, collegial learning, and collective sensemaking. The paper contributes to research on education and democracy by showing how democratic hope can be enacted through everyday teaching practices that enable participation, inquiry, and critical engagement with knowledge.

Teaching as a human rights profession: Rethinking human rights education in schools

Christina Johnsson, *Malmö University*

Research topic/aim: Human rights education (HRE) aims to promote a global human rights culture grounded in democratic values, while democracy itself depends on the protection of human rights. This interdependence positions HRE as central to schooling. However, teaching is often confined to learning about human rights rather than engaging pupils in practices that embody them. This paper argues for a conceptual and empirical shift towards understanding teaching as a human rights profession. The aim is to examine how such a perspective may deepen pupils' experiences of participation, agency, and social responsibility, and to address a gap in the enactment of human rights in everyday educational practice and professional judgement.

Theoretical framework: The study draws on theories of human rights education, democratic education, and professions research. Building on Johnsson (2026a; 2026b), it distinguishes between learning about, through, and for human rights, emphasising pedagogical practices that embody human rights. Professions research informs the conceptualisation of teaching as a knowledge-based profession with a societal mandate to uphold and enact human rights. Central concepts include professional responsibility, discretionary judgement, jurisdiction, and accountability in contexts of normative complexity. The framework also engages with theories of subjectification (Biesta, 2022), highlighting teachers' roles in fostering pupils as autonomous and responsible subjects.

Methodology/research design: The paper combines a conceptual analysis with an exploratory empirical study. The conceptual part synthesises research on HRE, teacher knowledge, and democratic pedagogy alongside relevant policy frameworks. The empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews with student teachers at the end of their secondary teacher education. The analysis focuses on how future teachers understand human rights, professional responsibility, and their role in enacting these in practice. Consistent with previous research, student teachers are expected to demonstrate limited legal literacy regarding human rights, indicating a weakly

developed understanding of the profession's legal and normative knowledge base (Molander & Terum, 2008).

Expected results/findings: The study identifies a tendency to treat human rights as one value domain among others rather than as a foundational professional mandate. Data are expected to show limited conceptual and legal tools for understanding human rights as integral to professional responsibility, including the ability to exercise informed discretionary judgement. By framing teaching as a human rights profession, the paper shifts attention to teachers' situated judgement, relational practices, and accountability, and highlights how schools shape pupils' experiences of dignity, inclusion, and participation, and democracy. It concludes that a human rights-based approach must permeate curriculum, professional norms, and institutional practices for students to experience democracy.

Reconstructing Bildung through care:
Deweyan democracy and professional practices in AI-infused education

Tobias Björklund, *Jönköping University*
Ylva Lindberg, *Jönköping University*
Anders Buch, *Jönköping University*

This paper argues for a reconstruction of *Bildung* as a democratic, practice-oriented educational ideal capable of responding to sociotechnical transformations generated by AI in contemporary professional education. Drawing on John Dewey's understanding of democracy (2011/1916) as a mode of associated living and education as participatory inquiry, the paper critiques competence-oriented approaches that reduce education to measurable skills, adaptability, and employability. Such approaches risk subordinating professional education to logics of optimization and technological adjustment while marginalizing judgment, responsibility, and collective world-making, i.e., *Bildung* dimensions (Buch 2026).

Inspired by Dewey's pragmatism and practice theory, the paper develops a practice-ontological reconstruction of *Bildung* in which normativity is understood as immanent in social and sociotechnical practices rather than externally imposed through abstract principles. Within this framework, the concept of *care* (Guchet 2021; Johnsson 2023) is elaborated as an orientation for democratic professional formation. Care is not treated as sentiment or an additional competence, but as a situated and relational mode of attending to the fragility, continuity, and transformation of practices. It holds together and gives direction to critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration within educational activity. In this sense, normativity and care function as analytical lenses for how *Bildung* is enacted in practice – as the formation of participants capable of transforming shared practices (Buch 2022). AI is thus understood not as a neutral tool, but as a co-constitutive participant shaping the normative organization of educational and professional life.

The method combines philosophical reconstruction with critical autoethnographic inquiry. The conceptual argument is empirically informed by documented teaching experiences from a Swedish professional education program for teachers, including course design, student interactions, course evaluations, and institutional responses. These materials function as analytical entry points for examining how educational norms are enacted, negotiated, and contested within AI-infused practices. The analysis proceeds abductively, moving between theoretical concepts and practices to illuminate tensions between competence-oriented institutional logics and inquiry-based pedagogies.

The findings suggest that normative institutional responses to AI reinforce reductive competence models. In contrast, the autoethnographic analysis shows how practices grounded in care, dialogue, and sustained interaction support capacities for critical inquiry, reflexivity, and responsible participation. Treating AI as a reflective, dialogical resource further strengthens these processes. Thus, the reconstruction of *Bildung* through care enables professional education to move beyond narrow competence frameworks toward a democratic pedagogy that cultivates responsible actors capable of shaping sociotechnical futures. In this way, education is repositioned as a site of democratic hope in an AI-infused world.

Session 3:4 Paper session

A subject-specific pedagogical approach to democracy education: The example of foreign language teaching

Angela Marx-Åberg, *Linnaeus University*

According to the Swedish national curriculum, education for democracy is a responsibility shared by all subjects. This is often referred to as the school's 'dual mandate'. On the one hand, knowledge is to be imparted; on the other, pupils are to be educated to become democratically active citizens. Whilst the first mandate is set out in specific guidelines for each subject, the second is primarily addressed in the overarching national curriculum. However, this provides teachers with only indirect guidance for their day-to-day teaching. Often, the democratic mandate is neglected due to time constraints, or because it is not seen as core goals for the subject-specific teaching. However, the meaningfulness of the concept of the dual mandate is being called into question. Ninni Wahlström highlights that considerable societal attention is focused on the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge, whilst a school's performance in the area of democracy education is rarely discussed (Wahlström 2022). She questions the notion that the schools' mandate should be viewed as divided. It is not a matter of a dual task, but rather of determining which pedagogical qualities are required to fulfil the school's sole task – the education of tomorrow's democratic citizens: "To sustain and develop democracy, we need knowledgeable, discerning and engaged citizens," (Wahlström 2022, 29). To sustain and further develop a democratic society, therefore, both subject knowledge and democratic competences are required. Their development cannot be separated from one another without valuable aspects being lost. This paper proposes that, democratic education should be tighter linked to subject teaching, by seeing it within the rationale behind the subjects and their content: • How can the core subject knowledge of each discipline help to empower new generations to sustain and further develop democratic societies? This question serves as a starting point for the suggested subject-specific approach to democracy education. It will be examined by the example of the extent to which Swedish foreign language teaching (with regard to the subject 'Moderna språk') contributes to the formation of a democratic culture. The theoretical framework for the discussion is mainly the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe 2016). The question is answered by analysing the Swedish national curriculum and the subject-specific guidelines for the subject 'Moderna språk'. The analysis shows that the subject 'Moderna språk' to contributes to the democratic education of learners by to key subject-specific skills: the development of intercultural and communicative competences (Marx Åberg 2025).

Hopeful futures in children's literature depicting societies facing democratic challenges: Negotiations at the intersection of aesthetics, ethics and pedagogy

Elin Nilsson, *Malmö University*

In my ongoing doctoral research, I am investigating how hope for possible futures is portrayed in children's literature that depicts societies characterised by democratic challenges and tensions and/or climate and environmental issues. I am also investigating how children's book authors themselves reflect on writing endings in depictions of worlds facing democratic challenges, how they view hope as a potential requirement in children's literature, and what artistic and professional choices they make within the tension between aesthetics, ethics and pedagogy. The questions the project aims to answer are as follows: What professional pedagogical, ethical and aesthetic choices do children's book authors face when portraying hope and possible futures in dark worlds, particularly at the end of a story? How do authors reflect on these choices? To what extent, according to authors, does aesthetic freedom interact or conflict with ethical and pedagogical responsibility? How are hope and possible futures portrayed at the end of a selection of children's literature works? The project is based on a philosophical approach to pedagogy, drawing on a theoretical framework developed by Klaus Mollenhauer and Hannah Arendt. Mollenhauer contributes to the project with his view of education and upbringing as a cultural phenomenon passed down from the older generation to the younger through presentation and representation, but also through the child's Bildsamkeit, which can never be fully predicted or controlled (Mollenhauer, 2014). The open and unpredictable future that lies ahead for the child forms part of the child's very identity. Arendt contributes to this project with her view of the adult's dual task of introducing the child to the existing world, whilst at the same time giving the child the opportunity to create something new and thereby renew the world, a view she develops in her text The Crisis in Education (Arendt, 2006). Through an abductive analysis of the empirical data, other theories and perspectives on hope are also brought to the fore. The authors are interviewed using semi-structured qualitative interview methods or in focus groups. The interviews are analysed thematically. The analysis of the children's literature works is based on the following questions: what kind of world is left to the child protagonist at the end of the book? What opportunities does the child have to introduce something new into that world? How is any sense of hope portrayed? What future is possible for the child? The project is still at an early stage. It is expected that the project will demonstrate how authors navigate, reflect upon and adopt various positions (including distancing themselves) in a complex manner when it comes to aesthetic, ethical and pedagogical choices, and that hope can be expressed through, for example, a return to the 'small world', hints of continued struggle, acceptance or the complete overcoming of dangers.

Traces of democracy, values and hope in students' narratives about the future

Bodil Liljefors Persson, *Malmö University*
Frida Wikstrand, *Malmö University*

Questions about the future and the nature of a good life constitute key existential concerns in many young people's lives. One aim of education is to prepare students to become active democratic citizens and responsible adults. At the same time, media frequently highlight students' stress related to assessment and their anxieties about the future, including global challenges such as climate change, war, social sustainability, anti-democratic tendencies, economic uncertainty, AI, and the

labour market. This research project focus on these tensions and aim to explore how students in grade nine in compulsory school imagine their future and how they formulate thoughts about democracy, values and hope in short written essays.

Conceptions of democracy, values, and hope for a good future are of interest in understanding what Year 9 students consider important to strive for (Ojala, 2019; Rosa, 2019; Tianen et al., 2019). In the students' narratives the possibilities and tensions that may exist between the demands and expectations of school and society, and the students' own aspirations and desires becomes visible. Furthermore, the study relates to school curricula on core values, democracy, existential questions, and citizenship education.

In this study we will present results from a first sub study that is part of a larger research project, funded by the Swedish Research Council, on existential questions and future orientations in various educational contexts. The empirical material consists of written narratives produced by 100 grade 9 students, analysed thematically with inspiration from Fairclough (1992, 2003). The analytical focus centres around the student's imagination about their futures and what is described as desirable and worth striving for (Rosa 2019; Ahmed 2010).

Expected results from this study centres around three central themes: 1. family values and gender equality, 2. work and the economy, 3. traces of democracy, value and hope. The preliminary conclusion indicates that students' conceptions of the future are characterised by notions of security and everyday stability, but also by limited reflections on structural issues such as inequality, climate change and transformations of the labour market.

Discussing politics as part of democracy education in upper secondary school: Important prerequisites

Johanna Jormfeldt, *Linnaeus University*

Democracy is questioned in large parts of the world (V-dem, 2026), and schools play a fundamental role in preserving it. Contemporary political discussion is altered by affective polarization, which makes it difficult to teach about political conflict as an integral part of democracy (Kahne & Rogers, 2024; Leiviskä, 2024). Still, youth need to learn that disagreement is an essential part of liberal democracy (Mouffe, 1999). Discussing politics in school as part of democracy education is often considered difficult and risky (see e.g. Larsson & Ledman, 2025). The aim of this paper is to explore the prerequisites for political discussions as part of democracy education in schools, with the research question: What are the opportunities and risks of political discussions as part of democracy education?

The analytical framework draws on research on classroom political discussions, distinguishing between teaching methods (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Kauppi & Drerup, 2021), discussion content (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Cassar et al., 2021; Journell, 2021; Kindlinger & Hahn-Laudenberger, 2023), and contextual conditions (Wanders et al., 2020; Hattie, 2023). The central theoretical reasoning deals with the issue of keeping the legitimate political conflict alive while also ensuring a safe learning environment for all students. The empirical basis consists of two different materials. First, a semi-structured group interview was conducted with three qualified and experienced social science teachers. Second, two focus group interviews were conducted with student teachers in their fifth and last year of education. Combining interviews with experienced teachers and student teachers enables an analysis of both enacted and anticipated challenges in the pedagogy of political discussions.

The results show a genuine commitment on the part of teachers and student teachers to teaching students to appreciate legitimate political conflict. They particularly highlight strong relationships as an important prerequisite for political discussions in education to work. The main risk is that students will be offended by other students, and teachers feel a great responsibility to prevent this from happening. Besides relationships, time is a critical factor among the prerequisites. This study adds to existing research by highlighting relational trust and temporal resources as important prerequisites that are often acknowledged but insufficiently theorized.

Politics is often perceived as conflict-filled and unpleasant. Therefore, teachers need support in how they can teach about the important role of politics in democracy without exposing students. After all, democracy without politics is just an empty shell. The findings of this paper underscore the need for professional support that helps teachers navigate political conflict pedagogically without compromising student safety.

Thursday, 22 October 2026

Keynote

Difference and Education

Andrea English, *The University of Edinburgh*

Difference has been a significant theme in a range of recent discourses that have aimed to counter dominant, exclusionary narratives around what education means and who it is for. In this talk, I discuss a line of thought from philosophy of education that I argue offers a strong theorization of the educational meaning of difference in a way that draws these discourses together. In articulating this integrative theory, I aim to make difference visible as a unique and irreplaceable value that we must not just accept as a fact, but also intentionally foster. Ultimately, I argue that a renewed understanding of difference as a foundational educational value can help meet the urgent need to reconnect education and democracy.

Session 4 Parallel sessions

Session 4:1 Symposium session

Symposium on Anti-Racism as democratic practice in education

Ways to deal with racism in teacher education

Charlotte Silander, *Linnaeus University*
Henrik Nilsson, *Linnaeus University*
Reza Arjmand, *Linnaeus University*

This study investigates how teacher education policy addresses racism in relation to democracy and diversity. Given that racism is an urgent issue in Sweden, schools are seen as key arenas, and the national action plan stresses the importance of equipping teachers with tools to combat it. Recent reforms underline schools to counter discrimination and the Swedish national curriculum states that diversity are fundamental values. However international research shows that racism is often treated rudimentary and that broader diversity discourses obscure direct discussions on racism. The study seeks to investigate how racism is defined and related to the broader concept of diversity, and addressed in relation to other grounds of discrimination, paying attention to the intersection between race and other social categories such as gender and sexual orientation. The study focuses on the *policy discourse* meaning the broad understanding of "curriculum," referring to the overarching philosophy and conceptions underlying the actual curriculum document. We follow the theoretical approach of Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), supported by Bacchi (2009) investigating ideas on 1) *policy level* refereeing to specific policies proposed by policymakers, 2) the *programmatic level* encompassing more general and basic programs that underpin policy by defining the problems to be solved and 3) the *philosophical level* relating to general values and principles such as how racism is conceptualized. This layered analyze enables a comprehensive understanding of how racism is addressed in teacher education policy. The study analyzes ideas and discourses about racism and diversity in policy-related documents concerning teacher education in Sweden during the period 2008–2025 with the purpose to examine the contribution of various key documents to historical policy development. Documents include guidelines for national degree qualifications for teachers, relevant legislation, and curricula as well as documents from the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Higher Education Authority, which formulate regulations for activities and evaluate teacher-education programs. Analyzing the policy and programmatic level is expected to shed light on how racism is viewed on the philosophical level in Sweden. Preliminary analysis of key policy documents (national curricula, Degree Ordinance, and evaluations from SNAE and government commissions) shows the concept of *race* is absent and explicit references to racism are rare. Instead, documents emphasize *ethnicity*, empathy, and diversity. The recent *Action Plan Against Racism and Hate Crimes* and associated SNAE guidelines are among the few explicitly addressing racism, positioning schools as central for anti-racist efforts. This support previous work on teacher education indicating a lack of initiatives to deal with racism in Sweden. By bridging policy studies, curriculum theory, and educational sociology the study contributes to our understanding of how the Nordic model of education grapples with diversity and racialization and contributes to understanding how democratic and anti-racist education can be made more effective within Nordic institutional and cultural conditions.

Antiracism in teaching: A Swedish school example

Sara Johansson Lopez, *Linnaeus University*

This presentation focuses on a study on how opportunities for antiracism emerge in teaching. From a structural perspective on racism (van Dijk, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 1997), initiatives for antiracism risk being embedded in structural racism in society. At the same time, social structures that permeate institutions depend on actors who can enable change (Fairclough, 1992; Lund and Sundberg, 2004). Against this background, this study examines a lower secondary school's antiracism practice in teaching and identifies discursive patterns that reflect structural racism and resistance to them. Resistances show transformative opportunities for antiracism. The study examines antiracism as a discourse practice, inspired by studies of critical discourse and pedagogical practice (Fairclough, 1992; Lund and Sundberg, 2004). Analytically, the focus is on discursive strategies in language use. On the one hand, strategies are analysed as denials of racism, reflecting the ideology of racism at a structural level as displayed in expressions and practices of silencing, minimising, and denying racism, upholding privileges for people conforming to white norms (see van Dijk, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Lipsitz, 2019). On the other hand, strategies are analysed as resistance to denials. The focus is also on patterns in how actors, such as teachers and students, in antiracism practice draw on a variety of discourses and sources. This helps in understanding the elements and contemporary interests that condition antiracism practice. Methodologically, the study employs a critical discourse approach and seeks a variety of data to understand language use in antiracism practice. The data consists of classroom observations, student interviews, the national curriculum, and commentary material on syllabi. The lessons observed are the teacher's yearly planned lessons on racism, and lessons where racism is addressed spontaneously and unplanned. The preliminary results show a constant discursive interplay between denying and resisting racism. An emerging theme is the temporal and spatial shifts in teaching perspectives that make critical discussions of contemporary racism in Sweden difficult. Resistance to racism manifests as attempts to move beyond primarily international perspectives in antiracism practice and to identify contemporary discourses similar to past discourses. There is a tendency to focus on wrongdoings internationally, past racism that centres on violent and "evil" individuals, and making arbitrary connections to today. Still, references to contemporary events and political situations open possibilities for antiracism.

Racism, reflection, and teacher formation

Osa Lundberg, *Malmö University*

This paper contributes to the symposium by examining anti-racism as a democratic practice within teacher education. While the symposium as a whole explores how racism and anti-racism are constructed, negotiated, and institutionalised across policy, teacher education, and school practice, this contribution focuses specifically on student teachers' experiences of racism during school placements. Drawing on narrative accounts and participatory group analysis, the paper shows how racism is encountered in everyday pedagogical settings through microaggressions, silence, racialized humour, and professional uncertainty. It highlights how student teachers' reflections on these situations illuminate the tensions between policy expectations, democratic ideals, and the practical conditions of becoming a teacher. In this way, the paper addresses how anti-racist responsibility is lived, interpreted, and negotiated in teacher education, and argues that supporting student teachers'

capacity to recognize and respond to racism is a necessary part of recreating democracy through education.

Representing racism in Nordic education policy: Policy discourses on racism in Swedish and Finnish basic education

Jenni Helakorpi, *University of Helsinki*
Charlotte Silander, *Linnaeus University*

In research, racism has been identified as an urgent educational and societal issue in Europe (Arneback & Jämte, 2021; Gillborn et al., 2017), and even recent EU policy identifies education as a key arena for advancing anti-racist work (European Commission, 2026). Sweden and Finland have also committed to antiracism through national antiracism action plans (SWE; Ministry of Justice, 2022). Despite a growing policy attention to anti-racism, less is known about how racism is actually constructed as an educational problem in national policy, and how schools are assigned responsibility. Hence, this study will analyse how schools are expected to address racism and anti-racism in Sweden and Finland. Analysing policy representations of racism and antiracism is crucial for understanding the conditions under which anti-racist work in schools becomes possible. This is of particular relevance in the Nordic context, where education systems are strongly associated with ideals of equality, democracy and inclusion, ideals that can serve to create normative commitments to combating racism but also can shape how racism is recognised or obscured in policy (Ahmed, 2012; Matias, 2016). A comparative analysis of Sweden and Finland therefore offers an opportunity to examine how two education systems, both embedded in Nordic welfare-state traditions and European equality policy, formulate the role of schools in relation to racism and anti-racism. The study further contributes to knowledge about how anti-racism is institutionalised in Nordic education policy, and how schools are assigned or stripped of responsibility for addressing racism. It also highlights similarities and differences between Swedish and Finnish policy discourses, including the strategies promoted for preventing, addressing and teaching about racism in basic education.

The study examines how racism and anti-racism are discursively constructed in policy-related documents concerning basic education in Sweden and Finland during the period 2004–2026. Theoretically, the analysis draws on Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to be?" approach and Schmidt's discursive institutionalism (2008). This framework makes it possible to analyse how policy documents represent racism as a problem, which assumptions underpin these representations, and how particular understandings of the role of schools are legitimised over time. The empirical material consists of national curricula, government strategies and policy documents on racism, equality and inclusion, as well as documents produced by national education agencies and other governmental bodies in Sweden and Finland. By analysing these documents comparatively and historically, the study explores how ideas about racism, racist practices and anti-racist education are formulated within national education policy.

Session 4:2 Paper session

Academic scholar in the accelerating university: A narrative account of navigating the timescapes of research, teaching and outreach

Daniel Sundberg, *Linnaeus University*

This paper examines how changing temporal conditions in higher education reshape academic work and identities, and discusses the implications for education for democracy. The aim is to analyse how different "timescapes" of research, teaching, and outreach are reconfigured under conditions of social acceleration, and how these transformations influence academic identity work in contemporary universities.

The study is theoretically grounded in sociological perspectives on temporality, particularly Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration (Rosa, 2013, 2018), and Barbara Adam's concept of timescapes (Adam, 1998). These frameworks enable an analysis of how time is socially organized, experienced, and contested across institutional practices. The paper also engages with literature on academic capitalism, knowledge ecologies, and the changing norms of science (e.g., Ylijoki, 2013; Vostal, 2017), to situate temporal transformations within broader political and economic shifts in higher education.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative narrative research design. The empirical material consists of two corpora: (1) published "exit reflections" from 14 senior scholars in the field of education, and (2) six semi-structured interviews with academics at different career stages. Through narrative analysis (Ricoeur, 1983), the study explores how temporal experiences are articulated, negotiated, and embedded in professional life histories. A historical contextualization of Swedish educational research, spanning an establishing phase, an expansion phase, and a contemporary fragmentation phase, provides an analytical backdrop.

The findings are expected to show that academic life is increasingly structured by competing temporalities, including project time, bureaucratic time, pedagogical time, and process time. While acceleration fosters productivity and responsiveness, it also generates tensions between short-term demands and long-term scholarly practices. These tensions contribute to what is conceptualized as "rhythmic dissonance," affecting both identity formation and knowledge production. The narratives suggest that scholars engage in boundary-work and strategic time management to navigate conflicting expectations, often at the cost of pedagogical depth and reflective inquiry.

The paper contributes to ongoing discussions on education and democracy by highlighting how temporal regimes shape the conditions for critical knowledge production and meaningful teaching. It argues that reclaiming temporal plurality, particularly spaces for slow, process-oriented and pedagogical time, is crucial for sustaining the university as a democratic institution.

"…unfolding disobedient solidarity": Creating and maintaining forums for ethical dissent, political discontent, and democratic research

Gunnlaugur Magnússon, *Uppsala University*
Ruth Unsworth, *University of Glasgow*

Research topic: Education is increasingly politicised, with austerity and a culture of rankings shifting definitions of effective teaching towards an "evidence-based" model (Biesta, 2026). This, in turn, shapes both education research and teacher education, influencing curriculum content and the focus of research conducted by teacher educators.

In response to these pressures, the International Teacher Education Research Collective (ITERC) was established, grounded in principles of solidarity, collegiality, creativity, criticality, and discomfort (Magnússon et al., 2024). ITERC aims to counter isolation within an evidence-based performative culture, foster international insight, and create collaborative spaces centred on

dialogue and democratic dissensus (Heimans et al., 2024). Alongside regular meetings, members engage in activities such as reading groups, conferences, and collaborative projects, which, despite prioritising conversation over outcomes, have led to various publications.

This paper explores the democratic and educational potential of research communities through reflections on ITERC. Using an autoethnographic approach, it critically examines its practices and argues that democratic research communities must foster inclusive dissensus and collective creativity to support responsive and relevant education and research.

Research design: We use an autoethnographic approach to examine ITERC through our experiences, situating these within the network's development. This enables a reflexive analysis of how personal, institutional, and relational dynamics shape the collective (Chang, 2016). We consider how democracy is conceptualised, particularly in relation to dissensus and collective creativity, and explore how the network is developed and sustained. This approach allows us to both document and critically engage with the collaborative and evolving nature of the collective (Adams et al., 2016). In recognition of this method as inherently subjective and limited by our positional perspectives as members of ITERC, we focus our reflections on the systems and processes by which ITERC organises itself, compare these to research on democratic research practices (e.g. Wenger, 1999; MacBeath and Moos, 2003) and draw on reflections provided by fellow ITERCers new and old.

Findings: We emphasise the collective's democratic nature as both an ethical commitment and a focus of inquiry. Ongoing challenges include sustaining dissensus and collective creativity, particularly around inclusion in a geographically and temporally dispersed network, where participation and interests vary. This raises questions about how to welcome new voices and avoid exclusivity. Despite this, the collective's strengths lie in members' strong engagement, the meaningfulness of the work, and the sense that participation is both rewarding and enjoyable.

Living with uncertainty, pursuing hope: A study into what makes higher education 'higher'

Fredrik Portin, *Malmö University*

This presentation is part of an ongoing philosophical study asking: what makes higher education "higher?"

The issue has come to the fore as higher education is being challenged from (at least) three fronts within an Anglo-European context: political actors increasingly question the authority and legitimacy of universities and other institutions of higher education; the advent of generative AI tools risks radically reshaping the conditions for teaching and research; knowledge isn't necessarily grounded in common facts or sound scientific practice. These challenges require higher education to reflect on and clarify its purpose – it is an opportunity born of necessity to redefine it in a way that highlights why it is unique, invaluable, and irreplaceable. In other words, higher education needs to reexamine what makes it "higher."

As part of the ongoing study to answer this question, a theoretical and argumentative paper will be presented that examines *uncertainty* as a fundamental characteristic of higher education and its relation to hope.

The paper focuses on student learning and argues that several of the challenges facing higher education also affect students today and will do so in the future. If higher education is to be relevant in a time characterized by political polarization, technological acceleration, and weakened common

claims to truth, students need not only to acquire knowledge and skills but also to develop the ability to negotiate situations where given answers are lacking.

In this sense, uncertainty can be understood as an educational and formative condition rather than a problem to be eliminated. Support for this argument comes from the philosopher of education Ronald Barnett. He shows that the purpose of higher education has become uncertain with the (postmodern) loss of universal goals, ideologies, and knowledge. But instead of resisting this development, Barnett argues that institutions of higher learning should embrace uncertainty by, for instance, helping students learn to live with it through teaching aimed at personal maturity. This is a prerequisite for what Barnett describes as "genuine" higher education, which involves the student's personal development.

As the paper further elaborates on, uncertainty is a condition of hope. As the philosopher Terry Eagleton argues, hope differs from optimism and pessimism. Specifically, the optimist believes the future is known and will be beneficial. The pessimist is likewise knowledgeable about the future but believes it is bad. The hopeful person, however, does not know what the future brings but believes it will be beneficial. Therefore, the paper argues that the hopeful person is someone willing to live with uncertainty and still believes the future will be beneficial.

Consequently, by embracing uncertainty, higher education emerges as an arena for hope.

The paper will thus highlight the need to teach for uncertainty in relation to students' learning. Methodologically, the paper is philosophical, and theoretically, it aligns with transformative learning theory. In addition to Barnett, the study focuses on the work of the educational philosopher Gert Biesta on the existential conditions of education, as well as that of the sociologist Hartmut Rosa on uncontrollability and resonance.

Exploring the democratic potentials of the academic seminar: Teacher and student perspectives

Johan Wickström, *Uppsala University*
Ulrike Schnaas, *Uppsala University*

Research topic/aim. In academic seminars, students and teachers meet to discuss and examine problems, texts, or scientific questions (Wickström, 2024; Exley & Dennick, 2004; Jons, 2015). Historically, seminars represented a pedagogical innovation where ideas could be freely explored, comparable to experimentation in scientific laboratories (Öberg, 2015; Dahlgren, 2016). However, they may also reproduce power structures, where open dialogue is replaced by domination, monologues, or conflicts between perspectives (Schnaas, 2011; Ehn & Löfgren, 2004).

This study investigates how teachers and students in the humanities and social sciences at one of Swedens largest universities with extensive research and teaching activities, conceptualise the democratic potentials of seminars. It contributes to discussions on how higher education can support democratic values. Anchoring the study in disciplinary contexts is essential, as interpretations of democratic dialogue may vary between subjects. Including student perspectives is equally important, since democratic potential is realised in interaction. The study thus offers context-specific knowledge about seminars as a central teaching form in these fields.

Theoretical framework. The study builds on a pragmatic perspective in which education and democracy are closely linked (Dewey, 1997). Deliberative dialogue is seen as a key democratic teaching practice in higher education (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2020). Disciplines are

understood as communities of practice (Wenger, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991), where seminar environments are shaped by norms, rules, and forms of knowledge (Säljö, 2023).

The concept *democratic potential* is used as an open analytical lens to capture how participants understand democracy in seminars. At the same time, the study aims to give this concept empirical substance by identifying how it is expressed in specific disciplinary contexts.

Methodology. The study is based on focus group interviews conducted separately with teachers and students from five disciplinary settings at Uppsala University. These settings differ in epistemological assumptions, teaching traditions, and student composition. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Preliminary findings. Teachers and students conceptualise the democratic potential of seminars in two main ways: *the seminar as democracy* and *the seminar for democracy* (Culp et al., 2023).

First, seminars are seen as democratic spaces in themselves, characterised by equality, freedom of expression, influence, and collective meaning-making within education.

Second, seminars are viewed as preparation for democratic participation beyond education, where students develop abilities such as critical thinking, dialogue, and defending democratic values.

The results also reveal tensions between freedom and control, as well as between epistemic authority and exploratory knowledge-seeking. These tensions highlight inherent challenges in balancing structure with openness.

Disciplinary differences are evident. Professional programmes tend to emphasise preparing students to uphold democracy in their future roles, whereas more general disciplines focus on transferable democratic skills. Additionally, different subjects highlight distinct aspects of democratic potential: history emphasises critical thinking, language studies stress communication, and religious studies focus on challenging prejudices and fostering personal transformation.

Overall, the findings underscore that while seminars hold significant democratic potential, this potential is shaped by disciplinary traditions, pedagogical practices, and the interaction between teachers and students.

Session 4:3 Paper session

Exploring principal: Student relationships in and for democratic education

Erik Andersson, *University of Gothenburg*

The democratic mission of schooling emphasises students' right to participation, yet research shows that such opportunities are often constrained by organisational structures and unproductive professional practices (Andersson, 2024). In Sweden, schools are legally mandated to function as democratic arenas, with student participation established as a central principle and principals explicitly responsible for facilitating it (SFS 2010:800). Despite this responsibility, little is known about the significance of principal–student relationships (PSRs) in and for democratic education. It remains unclear how PSRs may enable or constrain students' democratic participation and democratic education.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of principal–student relationships (PSRs) in and for democratic education by examining how principals and students in Swedish compulsory schools describe principal–student relationships in relation to students' democratic participation and educational leadership.

Theoretical framework: *Strong democracy* conceptualises democracy as an ongoing process of participation, collective inquiry, and inclusive deliberation in which citizens act as co-creators of the common good rather than merely expressing individual preferences (Barber, 2003; Young, 2000). It emphasises shared judgement, agenda setting, and active participation in decision-making, making it particularly relevant for understanding students as co-inquirers and legitimate participants in shaping democratic education.

Research design: This study draws on qualitative interviews with principals and students from five Swedish compulsory schools. The sample was strategically selected to include principals who actively and consciously prioritise PSRs in the leadership practice. Students connected to three of these principals were also included in the study.

Expected findings: Based on previous research, PSRs can be expected to be important for students' democratic participation, particularly when characterised by trust, respect, care, dialogue, and accessibility (Roorda et al., 2011; Kudlats & Brown, 2021). Such relationships are likely to strengthen students' sense of belonging, voice, safety, and willingness to engage in school development and decision-making processes, thereby supporting democratic education.

PSRs are also likely to constitute an influential dimension of educational leadership by providing principals with a deeper understanding of students' experiences, which may enhance the legitimacy, responsiveness, and capacity for improvement of schools. Students may emerge as an important resource for school development and educational leadership, contributing to the advancement of democratic education.

Democratic leadership and school leader autonomy in Norway and Sweden

Rikke A. Sundberg, *University of South-Eastern Norway*

School leadership in the Nordic countries is often described as democratic, with decision making shared across several actors and levels (e.g. Gunnulfsen et al., 2023). Education policy tend to promote broad involvement in decision-making; however, responsibility often rests on the shoulders of the formal school leaders. In the literature, concerns have been raised about shared forms of leadership being used primarily as an instrument for motivating eAectiveness and performativity rather than as a way of involving more actors in leadership processes based on inclusive and democratic principles (e.g. Hargreaves et al., 2008). In the Nordic countries, diverging policy trajectories, traditions and cultures also create diAerent conditions for school leadership, which presumably lead to variety in challenges or tensions for school leaders. This paper aims to illuminate nuances and identify possible tensions in democratic leadership and school leader autonomy in Norway and Sweden, and to discuss implications this might have on schools as democratic institutions. The paper draws on theory distinguishing shared forms of leadership, such as distributed leadership, from democratic leadership; where the former provides a possibility for democratic leadership through a collective culture, the latter depends more on leaders' willingness to espouse democratic ideals and actions then on the number of leaders or organisational structures (Gronn, 2008; Woods & Gronn, 2009). From this perspective, democratic leadership means that both values and actions align with democratic ideals, and that schools as democratic institutions provide possibilities for informed and critical participation in decision making (Apple & Beam, 2007). The study is part of the research project CLASS (Comparisons of leadership autonomy in school districts and schools), and is designed as a comparative case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). It draws on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 15 Norwegian and 16 Swedish

school leaders, from five municipalities in each country, and focus on questions related to assessment. Results indicate that school leaders in both Norway and Sweden display similar democratic ideals and values. Nuances are however identified in school leaders' actions of involving students and parents in decision-making, indicating variety in tensions between democratic leadership and school leader autonomy.

Principal's pedagogical leadership: A value-based choice

Katarina Ståhlkrantz, *Linnaeus University*

Principals' responsibility to act as pedagogical leaders has been emphasized since the establishment of the Swedish compulsory school system (Ståhlkrantz, 2019). In the late 1990s, in connection with the decentralization of the school system, the principal's responsibility for pedagogical leadership was explicitly incorporated into the national curriculum. Since then, this explicit regulation of pedagogical leadership has remained a central feature of Swedish curricula.

Expectations of pedagogical leadership are high, as research has demonstrated that principals who exercise pedagogical and instructionally focused leadership can positively influence students' learning and academic achievement. As concept, however, pedagogical leadership lacks a clear and consensual definition regarding what it entails and how it should be enacted. Pedagogical leadership is often translated in harmony with the international concept *instructional leadership*, referring to leadership that is directly involved in the development of teaching practices with the aim of improving student learning outcomes. In Sweden this has become apparent in a recently presented government commission report (SOU 2026:4), which propose that the regulation of principals' pedagogical leadership will be moved from the national curriculum to the Education Act and be defined as instructionally focused leadership.

According to the Swedish Education Act the purpose of education is to promote students' development and learning through the acquisition and development not only of knowledge but also of values. Consequently, the role of the principal as a pedagogical leader extends beyond academic achievement to encompass the school's democratic mission, human rights, and sustainable development. Based on an understanding of pedagogical leadership as curriculum leadership (Ylimaki, 2012) and a value-based choice (Fonsén et al., 2022), this study aims to explore principals' choice of direction and priorities of their pedagogical leadership practices.

The study is based on a curriculum theory framework, which makes it possible to conceptualize principals' pedagogical leadership from both historical and societal perspectives. Through a curriculum theory perspective, pedagogical leadership can also be studied in terms of how it is recontextualised from the national societal arena to the programmatic arena, and further to the local arena of principals' practice (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). The data draw upon semi-structured interviews with 11 Swedish principals from different school forms and were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Although there is an opportunity for alternative interpretations of the meaning and practice of pedagogical leadership (Ståhlkrantz, 2022), the findings of the study indicate that principals' choice of direction and priorities are profoundly influenced by the international understanding of pedagogical leadership as instructional leadership. It is highly uncommon for principals to describe aspects of their pedagogical leadership as extending beyond teaching practice and encompassing values such as democracy and the well-being of children and students.

Discretion and equity in early childhood education:
Preschool principals' compensatory work in disadvantaged areas

Lise-Lotte Bjervås, *Linnaeus University*
Maria Magnusson, *Linnaeus University*

Preschool plays a central role in promoting equitable educational conditions, particularly in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Despite strong policy ambitions regarding equity, variations in preschool quality persist. This study examines how preschool principals enact the compensatory mission in practice. The aim is to explore principals' discretion in compensatory work in relation to national educational policy, governance conditions, and local contexts.

Theoretical framework: The analysis is informed by Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, which conceptualises frontline professionals as key policy actors exercising discretion under conditions of limited resources and competing demands. In addition, Habermas's (1987) concepts of system and lifeworld are used to analyse tensions between bureaucratic governance structures and the everyday practices and values of early childhood education. Together, these perspectives enable an examination of how policy is interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in local preschool settings.

Methodology/research design: The study is based on qualitative interviews with 23 preschool principals working in areas classified as disadvantaged, at risk, or particularly disadvantaged. The interview data were analysed thematically, focusing on how principals describe their roles, decision-making processes, and strategies for addressing inequities. Particular attention was given to how principals relate to policy demands, resource allocation, and local needs in their compensatory work. The study follows the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2017).

Expected results/findings: The findings identify two overarching themes: principals as task-oriented actors and principals as system-critical actors. As task-oriented actors, principals work pragmatically within existing frameworks, adapting resources and practices to meet children's needs. As system-critical actors, they articulate tensions between policy ambitions and structural conditions, calling for changes in governance and resource distribution. The results highlight that principals play a crucial role in promoting equity through discretionary practices, but their work is constrained by limited resources and organisational conditions. Consequently, compensatory efforts risk becoming dependent on individual commitment rather than sustainable structures. The study points to the importance of aligning responsibility, authority, and resources, as well as strengthening governance arrangements that enable professional discretion. Incorporating principals' knowledge and experiences into policy development emerges as essential for advancing equity and quality in early childhood education in disadvantaged areas.

Session 5 Parallel sessions

Session 5:1 Symposium session

Symposium on Teaching controversial issues

Interactive simulation training in teacher education to make every students' voice heard

Kerstin Hansson, *Linnaeus University*

This contribution discusses how simulation training of teaching competences in teacher education might contribute to better prepare future teachers for dealing with challenges at school. In turn, if teachers are prepared and confident in facing difficult classroom situations, school can be a safe place where democratic principles are respected and lived, and every students' voice can be heard and listened to. Bandura (1997) advances that teachers with a high level of self-efficacy2 provide a higher quality in teaching, have a better job satisfaction and are less prone to burnout. Gundel et al. (2019) report a significant increase in self-efficacy after training in an interactive semi-virtual context as well as a correlation between the time of training and the amount of the increased self-efficacy. The guiding hypothesis for this contribution is therefore that interactive simulation training in a mixed-reality context during teacher education might enhance the self-efficacy of teacher students, which in turn generates more confident teachers at work (Bandura 1994, 1997; Gundel et al. 2019; Samuelsson et al. 2022). Confident teachers are likely to empower students with the necessary competences for sustaining, defending and further develop democratic values, at school and in society.

Between neutral facilitation and moral responsibility:
Student teachers' negotiation of global 'hot topics' in international virtual exchange

Mirjam Hitzelberger, *University of Education Weingarten & Karlsruhe University of Education*

Against the backdrop of increasing demands on teachers to respond to global challenges in their teaching, teacher education is faced with the task of creating respective learning opportunities. In this context, international exchange is associated with the hope of contributing to student teachers' qualification in the sense of Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and to support them in creating educational processes enable their students to critically engage with complex, global 'hot topics'(Kolikant & Pollack, 2009). In recent years, this issue has gained increasing attention in teacher education (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2019; Bergmüller et al., 2025; Helm et al., 2024; Räsänen & Lehtomäki, 2023) and numerous studies show that, particularly in the context of value-based educational approaches such as GCED, teachers' values, orientations, and attitudes play a significant role in how they address global issues in the classroom (Costa & Singer-Brodowski, 2024; Costa & Weselek, 2023; Timm et al., 2023). However, evaluations of qualification approaches in teacher education often do not take this into account, since values and orientations are not directly accessible in the analytical process (Nohl et al., 2013). Therefore, student teachers' implicit orientations in their engagement with controversial global issues in an international learning setting remain largely unexplored. This forms the starting point for this study that presents selected results from the evaluation of a qualification concept that brought together student teachers from five different countries in virtual exchange formats on teaching global 'hot topics'. Drawing on

participants' self-reflections, the exchange meetings themselves and group discussions reflecting on them that were analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2015) and the Documentary Method (Bohnsack, 2010), the study explores the impact of internationally collaborative qualification concepts in teacher education from different angles, taking into account not only the explicit learning results but also the implicit orientations that shape the way student teachers negotiate global 'hot topics' in relation to their teaching practice. Ultimately, the study shows how international exchange formats not only have the potential to engage student teachers with controversial global issues as such, but how learning spaces can be created that allow future teachers to engage with overarching questions of their professionalization such as their pedagogical responsibility and own role in imparting controversial issues.

Exploring Controversiality in Teacher Education:
Cultural Complexity, Professional Judgement and Democratic Learning

Thomas Wiedenhorn, *Weingarten University*

Contemporary classrooms are shaped by migration, multilingualism, religious diversity, political polarisation and competing understandings of democracy, identity and belonging. In such contexts, controversial issues are not simply abstract topics for classroom debate; they are also connected to students' lived experiences and to broader social conflicts. The Council of Europe defines "controversial issues" as questions that arouse strong feelings and divide opinion within communities or society. In today's increasingly diverse and interconnected societies, teaching in culturally heterogeneous classrooms has become a defining aspect of professional practice for educators across Europe and beyond. This complexity, however, also presents significant pedagogical and ethical challenges, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as racism, gender roles, religious expression, heteronormativity and normative assumptions. Although teaching such issues is central to education, research and policy reports suggest that many teachers feel insufficiently prepared to address them. Teachers may avoid controversial issues because of fear of conflict, uncertainty about their professional role, lack of pedagogical tools, or concern about causing harm to students.

The aim of this study is to explore how student teachers and teacher educators understand and respond to controversial issues in culturally complex teaching contexts. More specifically, the study seeks to unpack "controversiality": what makes an issue controversial, how this is shaped by cultural and national contexts, and how future teachers can be prepared to teach culturally complex questions in culturally complex classrooms.

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative, workshop-based research design where data was collected through written testimonials submitted before the workshop, recordings of mixed-group discussions and case-design activities, focus group interviews, and final written reflections by student teachers and students educators in different European countries. The analysis will focus on the topics students identify as difficult, embarrassing or controversial; the reasons they give for this; the cultural, historical or national references that appear; and the pedagogical strategies they propose.

The theoretical approach combines research on controversial issues in democratic education with perspectives on teacher professional judgement and intercultural learning. The study distinguishes between societal, epistemic, democratic and pedagogical understandings of controversiality. It also draws on theories that emphasise education as a situated and uncertain

practice requiring professional judgement, rather than the mechanical application of one method. By analysing student teachers' narratives, discussions and case designs, the paper contributes knowledge about how teacher education can support future teachers in addressing controversy, cultural complexity and democratic learning in more reflective and pedagogically responsible ways.

Session 5:2 Paper session

Equity, powerful knowledge and the digital in nordic education: A comparative analysis of curricula and policy in Denmark, Finland and Sweden

Marie Nilsberth, *Karlstad University*
Marie Falkesgaard Slot, *University of Southern Denmark*
Lars Bo Andersen, *University of Southern Denmark*
Laura Louise Saurow, *University of Southern Denmark*
Petra Magnusson, *Kristianstad University College*
Annal Slotte, *University of Helsinki*
Marie Wejrum, *Karlstad University*

In what has been described as a post-digital society (Jandrić & Knox, 2022), education systems worldwide are facing new challenges related to rapid technological development, post-truth dynamics and polarisation, increasing disparities between schools, and global political instability. This paper examines how three Nordic countries - Denmark, Finland and Sweden - address these shared challenges in educational policy and curricula. Using a comparative approach, the study focuses on how digital technologies are constructed both as educational problem spaces and as solutions, in relation to principles of equity, knowledge, and democratic participation through education - long regarded as core ideals of Nordic education (Telhaug, 2006). More specifically, the paper explores how the Nordic post-digital student is positioned in relation to: (a) digital technology as educational problem spaces and solutions; (b) diversity, equity, and democratic citizenship; and (c) the forms of knowledge and teaching framed as necessary responses to post-digital challenges.

The study is informed by perspectives from post-digital theory and the sociology of education. Post-digitality (Jandrić & Knox, 2022) frames education as embedded in complex socio-material, technological, and political relations rather than as a separate domain. To analyse the role of knowledge and equity, the concept of powerful knowledge (Young, 2014) is used as a lens for examining how policy discourses frame access to specialised, systematic knowledge as both a curriculum principle and a response to educational inequality.

A qualitative comparative policy analysis is conducted on the most recent reforms and policy documents in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Using text-based critical policy analysis, policy is approached as a site where educational purposes, knowledge forms, and student identities are constructed (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018; Stacey & Mockler, 2024). Focusing on digital technology, selected documents are analysed along two dimensions: (a) descriptive constructions of challenges related to digital technology, and (b) normative orientations concerning knowledge, equity, and student positioning.

The analysis highlights similarities and differences in how the countries respond to societal challenges related to digital technology. By comparing these framings, the study makes visible taken-for-granted discourses in current policy debates: what is defined as a problem, what knowledge is considered necessary, and how education is expected to prepare the post-digital

Nordic student for democratic citizenship in an uncertain future. The study contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of Nordic compulsory education in responding to digital and societal change.

The compensatory role of school-age educare in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas

Jens Gardesten, *Linnaeus University*
Helena Ackesjö, *Linnaeus University*

This presentation reports findings from a study that explores the compensatory role of School-Age Educare (SAEC) in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Drawing on interviews with SAEC staff, the study addresses two research questions: What kinds of social experiences do pupils encounter in SAEC settings located in disadvantaged areas, and how can these experiences be understood in relation to other social contexts in their lives? How can SAEC practices be understood in terms of their potential to foster pupils' social capital?

The study adopts an abductive methodological approach and uses the concept of social capital as a theoretical lens for interpreting the empirical material. Social capital highlights resources that may benefit individuals both in the present and in the future, while also pointing to broader societal resources with democratic implications. Through this perspective, the study examines how SAEC may contribute to pupils' opportunities to build relationships, expand social networks, and access social environments beyond their immediate everyday contexts.

The respondents describe how they organize visits and excursions that introduce pupils to 4H farms, universities, sporting events, cultural institutions, and other social environments that many of them might not otherwise encounter. Preliminary analyses suggest that these activities can be understood as opportunities to develop bridging social capital—that is, social connections that extend beyond pupils' immediate social circles. Such "weak social ties" have the potential to strengthen social cohesion at a societal level, while "strong bonding ties" contributes to solidarity within close social networks, including family ties, friendships, and peer relationships.

At the same time, the findings indicate that SAEC may be one of the first arenas in which adults recognize signs of what has been termed the "dark side of social capital." Through informal interactions and everyday conversations, staff sometimes observe emerging attitudes, symbols, or affiliations linked to criminal environments. When peer relationships are formed within groups characterized by closed normative systems and strong internal sanctions, forms of "social capital" may develop that strengthen cohesion within the group in the short term while carrying significant long-term costs for individuals, communities, and society at large.

In response, SAEC staff describe an ongoing effort to create a social environment in which democratic values, inclusion, and mutual respect are actively practiced in everyday interactions. This may also involve challenging norms rooted in conservative religiosity or stereotypical gender norms. The compensatory potential of SAEC in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas can therefore be understood through three interconnected dimensions: *identifying* and understanding pupils' social contexts and relationships; *creating* a social environment characterized by democratic values and meaningful participation; and *broadening* pupils' social experiences through activities and encounters that connect them to social worlds beyond their immediate surroundings.

Instrumental qualification, unintended socialisation, and constrained subjectification: An ethnographic study of literacy in the general subject Swedish within VET

Håkan Johansson, *Kristianstad University College*

This study examines the educational value of general subjects in Swedish Vocational education and training (VET) by exploring how the subject Swedish is practised in a Building and Construction programme class. Considering the ongoing discussions about education's democratic purposes, it asks how literacy practices in VET shape the educational value of the subject. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork informed by New Literacy Studies and Biesta's domains of educational purpose, the analysis focuses on how Swedish is taught, motivated, and contested in everyday classroom practice.

The findings suggest that Swedish is shaped by a tension between formal qualification, unintended socialisation, and constrained subjectification. Simplified teaching affords a form of literacy oriented towards instrumental compliance aligned with the norms and values of the construction trade. While such practices support students in meeting formal requirements, they also risk limiting access to more complex literacies and opportunities for self-formation. At the same time, moments of compliance and engagement indicate that subjectification remains possible, although contested.

The study argues that the educational value of general subjects in VET is dependent on how they are shaped and practised in VET contexts. A potentially systemic tendency to underestimate, underchallenge, and understimulate VET students raises questions about social justice and, more broadly, about the democratic purposes of education.

Session 5:3 Paper session

Between acceleration and structure:
Temporalities of documentation, professional becoming, and agency in special education

Lisa Dalsgaard, *Malmö University*

Documentation is a central practice in special education, used to identify needs, legitimise interventions, and support democratic, equitable, and inclusive education, yet research shows it functions as a discursive practice where language, categorisations, and administrative conditions shape both problems and solutions (Palla, 2018). In a profession marked by ambiguous mandates and shifting organisational contexts, documentation becomes a key site for negotiating professional identity and authority (von Ahlefeld Nisser, 2014), while variations in special education teacher programme influence how it is understood (Aspelin & Östlund, 2020). Although prior studies show that documentation can reproduce individualised perspectives, guide resource allocation, and mediate professional negotiations, it remains unclear how documentation practices shape professional identity across education and careers, as well as how variations in training and practice affect understandings of documentation as a tool for democracy, equity and inclusion.

This upcoming dissertation examines documentation as a pedagogical practice in special education, focusing on how it shapes professional agency and identity across different career stages. It highlights how documentation both enables and constrains efforts to promote democracy, equity, and inclusion. Grounded in an integrated theoretical framework combining Bandura's social

cognitive theory, Rosa's theory of *social acceleration* and *resonance*, and a temporal perspective inspired by Bergson's concept of *durée*, the study analyses how professional agency (*self-efficacy*) develops in relation to documentation practices and their institutional conditions. The study further explores how organisational and temporal demands, such as efficiency, standardisation, and continuous monitoring, interact with experiences of continuity, reflection, and experiential knowledge, shaping professional practice and development over time.

This dissertation adopts a mixed-methods design drawing on multiple sources of empirical data, including survey data from pre-service and in-service special educators, qualitative interviews, and observations in both educational and professional settings in Sweden. These data are complemented by analyses of relevant policy documents.

No hope without hopelessness?: Democratic Education in Uncertain Times

Jasmine Bylund, *University of Gothenburg*
Emma Arneback, *University of Gothenburg*

Democratic education, understood here as practices engaging students in societal, moral and political communication, must create spaces where hope *and* hopelessness are acknowledged, examined and pedagogically addressed. Deliberative approaches to hope in democratic education often emphasise communication that engages students in political and moral questions, fostering reflection and the imagining of alternative possibilities (Dewey, 1916; Englund, 2006). We regard this aspiration as important yet suggest that democratic education must attend more carefully to experiences of hopelessness as a part of young people's lives in times of multiple crises, violence and war.

In this explorative paper we argue that democratic education needs to address hope *and* hopelessness as two sides of the same coin, while recognising that their relation is neither symmetrical nor equally experienced by all students. Rather, hope and hopelessness must be examined in relation to students' different life conditions and future horizons. Hopelessness without hope can lead to resignation and disengagement (cf. Freire, 2014; hooks, 2003), while hope without acknowledging hopelessness risks becoming naïve, false or even cruel (Berlant, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Following Duncan-Andrade (2009), we argue that hope must always be understood in relation to material resources, as well as the emotions and experiences that shape young people's lives. We extend this argument by foregrounding the implications of unaddressed hopelessness, especially when students encounter urgent societal problems but are given limited opportunities to interpret their causes, examine how responsibility is distributed, or consider the possibilities and limits of change.

To develop our argument, we draw on an ethnographic case from a lower secondary school, where students, over the course of one day, were introduced to issues such as toxic clothing, gang crime and the Holocaust. The case illustrates how hopelessness can become present yet remain unnamed and pedagogically unaddressed. The point is not that difficult issues should be avoided in education. Rather, the case raises questions about how teaching can help students examine both their own possible and impossible responsibilities and the structures that allow or constrain change. Such an approach neither dismisses action nor places the full burden of change on young people themselves. The paper uses the case to discuss how a commitment to hope that remains disconnected from experiences of hopelessness may obscure the unequal responsibilities that shape young people's lives. Attending to both hope and hopelessness can support democratic engagement

that is neither naïve nor resigned, but attentive to responsibility, power, and the possibilities and limits of change.

The practical and aesthetic school subjects: Democratic hope, but what about students' learning outcomes?

Jorunn Spord Borgen, *University of South-Eastern Norway*

Research topic/aim Nordic countries have long traditions for integrating specific practical school subject such as physical education, arts and crafts/visual arts/sloyd, food and health/home and consumer knowledge and music in compulsory education. These practical school subjects are encompassed by great hopes for how contribute to education by virtue of being and offering 'something different' than other school subjects to education and formation. The idea is that the subjects, through their unique practical and aesthetic content and working methods, meet the diversity of students and thus contribute to democratic education. We have little knowledge of how these subjects are put into play in the classrooms. In the reform the context of the Norwegian National Curriculum reform "Kunnskapsløftet 2020" (LK20), students also have had their right to participation and co-responsibility in the learning community strengthened. However, there are several barriers to meaningfully giving students' voices a place and consequences within education (Lundy, 2007). The consideration of the subjects' uniqueness and especially the expectations for the practical nature of the subjects may stand in opposition to other expectations. The research aim is to investigate in what ways students describe their learning practices in the subjects in LK20. 3. Theoretical framework Based on practice architecture theory (Kemmis, 2022), the problem is illuminated through three research questions. Educational practices are connected in characteristic ways through language, actions, and relationships, according to practice architecture theory. In this study we focus on student learning practices and teacher practices. 4. Methodology/research design We have chosen a multi-method research design and produced observation from classrooms in primary and lower secondary education, interview data based on focus group interviews with students and teachers for describing, understanding, and interpreting learning and teaching practices in practical and aesthetic subjects in interaction between national curriculum, local governance and classrooms 5. Expected results/findings The results show that practical and aesthetic school subjects offer students a space for action that is perceived as more elastic, flexible and different than in other subjects. The practical and aesthetic subjects are included in many constellations and understandings of the differences between academic and non-academic school subjects. The somewhat unclear role for the subjects may appear to be a strength in terms of the qualities that students describe in their learning practices, but also a disadvantage in that students have an unclear picture of what they are supposed to learn in the subjects.

Academic Freedom in the Face of Distrust: Pursuit of Truth, Contestation, and the Democratic Role of Universities

Kristoffer Holt, *Linnaeus University*

Contestation lies at the heart of democracy. Yet, when contestation turns against the very institutions tasked with sustaining free pursuit of truth, democracy faces a paradox. Drawing on research into alternative media and the logic of contestation that underpins much of today's mediated public sphere, this paper examines how universities can promote academic freedom in

an era marked by growing distrust of epistemic authority. Across many democracies, populist narratives and partisan media ecosystems have reframed academia as a site of activism and ideological bias rather than independent inquiry. Such framings, while rhetorically aligned with democratic pluralism, risk eroding the institutional preconditions for meaningful contestation itself—namely, the existence of commonly trusted arenas of knowledge production.

The paper argues that defending academic freedom today requires acknowledging both the democratic necessity and the destabilizing potential of contestation. Universities must navigate this tension by reaffirming their role as arenas for respectful and considered disagreement—spaces where truth is pursued through reasoned debate rather than partisan struggle, especially in connection to sensitive and possibly controversial issues. By drawing on theories of deliberative democracy and my own research on alternative media and public discourse, the paper discusses how academia can reclaim legitimacy and reinforce its democratic function without retreating into elitism or defensiveness. The goal is to articulate a constructive vision for academic freedom that recognizes contestation not as a threat to truth, but as its democratic condition.

Session 5:4 Paper session

Democracy as a way of life under institutional pressure: Inclusion, differentiation, and school leadership

Johanna Lüddeckens, *Linnaeus University*

In the mid-1930s, John Dewey expressed concern that democracy was threatened not only by authoritarian regimes but also by more subtle forms of social fragmentation. When communication is narrowed and shared experience weakened, democracy risks being undermined from within. Democracy, in this sense, is not merely a political arrangement but a way of life sustained through communication, relationships, and participation (Dewey, 1933/1989).

Building on earlier findings (Lüddeckens, 2025/2026; Lüddeckens & Hammarqvist, under review), this presentation examines how similar tensions characterize the contemporary organization of schooling. Although inclusive education is widely framed as a democratic and justice-oriented commitment, the institutional conditions under which inclusion is enacted are increasingly shaped by juridification, standardization, accountability, and marketization. These arrangements, often justified in the name of equity and quality assurance, also reshape the meaning of inclusion in practice.

The analysis combines a systems perspective on school leadership with neo-institutional theory, particularly the concepts of institutional logics and sensemaking (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Weick, 1995). Principals are understood as actors navigating multiple and sometimes conflicting expectations. Dewey provides a normative understanding of democracy as lived and communicative practice, while neo-institutional theory offers tools to analyze how institutional arrangements shape action and meaning. From a Deweyan perspective, justice concerns the quality of associated life—whether people are enabled to participate, communicate, and inquire together (Dewey, 1916).

Within the organization of schooling, several institutional logics operate simultaneously: inclusion as a moral and legal imperative; differentiation as a pedagogical response; accountability with an emphasis on measurable outcomes; and efficiency as resource management. These logics generate tensions that shape what forms of participation become possible.

Drawing on qualitative policy analysis and studies of school leadership, the presentation explores how democratic ideals of inclusion are translated within such institutional environments. Schooling for students with autism serves as a lens through which tensions between participation and categorization become visible. Research shows that physical placement does not automatically ensure participation (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2019), while differentiation may both support inclusion and contribute to categorization and segregation (Persson & Persson, 2012; Eikeland & Ohna, 2022).

The findings build on and extend earlier studies (e.g., Lüddeckens, 2026), showing that principals operate within a form of institutional congestion. They are required to implement legal expectations related to inclusion while managing organizational demands and limited resources. Sensemaking becomes central as principals interpret policy and local conditions and balance individual rights, collective responsibility, and standardized expectations. School leadership thus becomes a site where democracy is either narrowed to administrative procedure or sustained as relational practice.

In some cases, inclusion becomes procedural compliance; in others, dialogue and shared responsibility are fostered. Democratic erosion may occur when inclusion is reduced to administrative obligation, when accountability prioritizes measurable outcomes, and when differentiation becomes synonymous with sorting. Democratic education thus depends not only on professional intentions but on the institutional logics that organizes everyday practice.

Science, futures, and agency:
Students' constructions of nature of science in climate change education

Johanna Andersson, *Kristianstad University College*

Growing environmental, technological, and societal uncertainties have intensified interest in futures in education. Futures-oriented science education aims to challenge deterministic views of the future and support students in envisioning multiple possible futures where they act as agents of change. However, prior research shows that students often construct futures in which science and technology appear as autonomous problem-solvers, locating agency in distant actors rather than themselves (Rasa et al., 2023). These imaginaries relate to how students understand science and its societal role, making Nature of Science (NOS) perspectives relevant. NOS encompasses understandings of what science is, how it works, its limits, and its relations to society (McComas & Clough, 2020). Scholars argue that NOS education should support social justice by contributing to questioning for whom science is and by empowering student agency (Yacoubian & Hansson, 2020). Integrating futures-oriented science education with NOS for social justice may therefore support students in envisioning and shaping desirable futures. However, empirical classroom studies remain limited.

This study, situated in Sweden, explores how NOS is constructed in students' futures-oriented climate action planning. It is based on a design-based research approach, involving collaboration with a science teacher in an upper secondary biology classroom. A teaching sequence covering four lessons in the context of climate change were conducted. This study focuses on one lesson which involved students' group work imagining change-oriented action against climate change. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a discourse analysis inspired by Bacchi's (2025) "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" (WPR) approach.

Findings are presented as three vignettes from three of the student groups. Group 1 focuses on technological development (trains and aviation), positioning science as a solution producer constrained by political and economic structures. Group 2 focuses on changing norms around packaging in grocery stores, constructing science primarily as a source of legitimacy for societal action. Group 3 plans for a children's book to raise awareness and respect for nature, framing science as a knowledge base that needs to be translated and distributed for societal change. These constructions highlight different NOS perspectives, including the science–society relationship, the social embeddedness of science, and the limits of science in addressing complex problems. These results might contribute to understanding how NOS can be relevant in futures-oriented science teaching and to aims of social justice in science education.

Where almost anything is possible:
Freedom, authority and contemporary artistic teaching practices in folk high school art education

Tova Björkquist, *Skarpnäcks folkhögskola & University of Gothenburg*

This paper explores how contemporary artistic teaching practices take form, are enacted, and are experienced in art courses at Swedish folk high schools. Situated within the Nordic tradition of non-formal adult education, these contexts operate outside national curricula and standardized assessment, enabling pedagogical approaches shaped by artistic experimentation, relational processes, and open-ended inquiry. The study takes its point of departure in an understanding of education as involving questions of action, plurality, and the possibility of responding to what is not yet determined. Drawing on Biesta, Arendt, and Rancière, the paper attends to situations where participants orient themselves in relation to others, to the material world, and to conditions that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled. Empirically, the study is based on focus group interviews with art teachers, complemented by field visits and interviews with course participants. The analysis is abductive and thematically oriented. Five themes are identified: artistic practice as a foundation, relational and participatory practices, the expanded classroom, the independent participant, and disruptive stagings. The analysis shows how teaching is organised through collective processes and shared explorations, where dialogue, responsibility, and experimentation are central. At the same time, these practices are marked by tensions. Invitations to independence may take on normative forms, for example through expectations of self-direction or forms of anticipated disobedience. Openness and participation do not suspend relations of authority, but reconfigure them. Moments of disruption, through shifts, displacements, and unconventional uses of materials or instructions can unsettle established ways of acting and making sense, although such moments remain uneven and contingent. Rather than identifying specific outcomes, the paper follows how teaching situations unfold as spaces where participants encounter uncertainty, negotiate shared conditions, and act in relation to others. In this way, the study offers a situated account of how contemporary artistic teaching practices engage questions of participation, authority, and plurality, and engages ongoing discussions on education and democracy without resolving the tensions they entail.

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