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# Powerful knowledge in the social studies classroom and beyond

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how teachers and students connect disciplinary knowledge to contexts outside the classroom in naturally occurring teaching in 80 Nordic lower secondary social studies lessons using a standardized observation manual. We found evidence that teachers often connected disciplinary knowledge to students' experiences and wider societal issues. However, our findings highlight interesting differences in the extent to which teachers unpack such connections to situations outside of school. Departing from the discussion on powerful knowledge within subject-specific education, we discuss the educational potential and limitations of recontextualising and establishing interactions between horizontal and vertical discourse in social studies teaching. Our findings provide empirical insights that are relevant for the ongoing discussion on powerful knowledge as well as for teachers' professional development.

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powerful knowledge; social studies education; connectedness; recontextualisation, horizontal and vertical discourse, classroom practices

## Introduction

The subject of social studies<sup>1</sup> plays an important role for students. It enables them to acquire knowledge about society, which they are members of and participate in. Therefore, drawing connections between disciplinary knowledge, social and political institutions, and students' social and political life outside school are critical when teaching social studies. Topics such as the economy, socialization, migration, racism, and sustainability are closely linked with contemporary societal situations, and they can also mirror the lived experiences of many students in social studies classrooms. Existing literature on social studies education has discussed teachers' connections to students' life outside school in the contexts of student engagement and motivation (Børhaug & Borgund, 2018), citizenship education (Mathé & Elstad, 2018; Wood et al., 2018), furthering students' conceptual understandings (Blanck, 2021), authentic pedagogy, and intellectual challenges (Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative (SSIRC), 2013; Saye et al., 2018).

While the didactical potential of connections between disciplinary knowledge and everyday knowledge outside school has been widely agreed upon, current research has expressed concerns for approaches that emphasize everyday knowledge at the expense of disciplinary knowledge (A. S. Christensen & Grammes, 2020; Randahl & Kristiansson, 2022; Wood & Sheehan, 2021). For example, A. S. Christensen and Grammes (2020) argue that increased emphasis on students' everyday experiences can function as an echo chamber if the students are not confronted with the knowledge underlying disciplinary thinking and presented with perspectives that are alien to them.

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These subject-specific concerns lie within the broader debate on *powerful knowledge* within curriculum studies and subject didactics (Gericke et al., 2018; Hudson et al., 2023; Muller, 2023). Young launched powerful knowledge as a sociological concept and curriculum principle to strengthen the role of disciplinary knowledge in education (Muller & Young, 2019). This was in response to the growing movement towards skills, competence, and outcome-based education that, along with the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Learning movement and constructivist approaches, has been prominent in the last few decades. The theory of powerful knowledge is based on the idea that disciplinary knowledge is epistemologically powerful based on how it is made and utilized in society (Muller & Young, 2019). For Young, school subjects should foreground disciplinary knowledge to be able to provide students with reliable ways to understand different aspects of the world and navigate complex societal debates. Thus, powerful knowledge serves democratic educational purposes (Rata, 2017).

Powerful knowledge is widely debated within curriculum and subject didactical research. A recurrent argument within subject didactics is that theory has little to offer educators in terms of teaching practice (Gericke et al., 2018; Muller, 2023). In response, Muller (2023) cautions against automatically linking powerful knowledge to teaching, as it has roots in the sociology of knowledge and is meant as curriculum theory. It is an argument that supports a knowledge-led curriculum, and it is not a theory for teaching. However, as argued by Klette (2007), Hopmann (2015), and Gericke et al. (2018), a recurrent problem in curriculum studies is the weak link that exists between curriculum theories and classroom teaching. As per Muller (2023), the theory of powerful knowledge requires adaptation to become relevant for teaching practice, which he proposes is a theoretical and analytical challenge for subject didactics. He argues that powerful knowledge has value as a common ground and shared language between curriculum studies, didactics, and classroom studies.

This raises the question of how powerful knowledge can be 'transformed into something teachable and relevant for students' (Gericke et al., 2018) in actual classroom settings. A common trait of classroom studies that highlight powerful knowledge is the assertion that creating connections between disciplinary, institutional, and everyday knowledge contributes to students' epistemic access to powerful knowledge (Blanck, 2021; Randahl & Kristiansson, 2022). However, research has demonstrated that building on students' everyday knowledge to actualize and support their understanding of disciplinary knowledge can prove to be challenging (Khawaja & Puustinen, 2022; Randahl & Kristiansson, 2022). An example of this is how to integrate everyday knowledge and disciplinary knowledge, which Bernstein (2000) has termed *recontextualization*.

In line with Hudson et al. (2023), teaching of powerful knowledge demands connections to students' experiences and lifeworld knowledge outside the classroom. However, there has been inadequate examination of the role of everyday and lifeworld knowledge in the powerful knowledge literature and classroom practices regarding the role of everyday and lifeworld knowledge, especially in terms of how connections are constructed across multiple classrooms and contexts. The present article aims to investigate how teachers and students connect disciplinary knowledge to outside-classroom contexts in the teaching of naturally occurring, lower secondary social studies in three Nordic countries: Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In particular, we discuss the opportunities and limitations of creating connections between everyday, institutional, and disciplinary knowledge in classroom teaching in the context of powerful knowledge. The present article will discuss the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How prevalent are connections between disciplinary knowledge and contexts outside school in a sample of social studies lessons from Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish lower secondary classrooms?

**RQ2:** What are the key characteristics of the connections related to the generative dimensions of powerful knowledge?

In the section that follows, we discuss two concepts that are of particular interest in this present article: Powerful knowledge and recontextualisation. In the methods section, we present data and data sources and conduct analyses by combining a predefined observation manual, *Authentic Intellectual Work* (AIW; Newmann et al., 2015) and thematic analysis (TA).

## Theoretical background

### *Powerful knowledge*

The theory of powerful knowledge is based on a distinction to Young's (1971) earlier view of *knowledge of the powerful* being indistinguishable from the power interests of dominant social groups. Departing from Bernstein's sociology of knowledge, it has been argued that disciplinary knowledge can have its own power (Muller & Young, 2019; Young, 2007, 2013). Besides social interest, the power inherent in disciplinary knowledge is conceptualized as being a non-zero-sum property. In this view, power can potentially be available to all who acquire disciplinary knowledge (Muller & Young, 2019). However, knowledge of the powerful may restrict peoples' access to powerful knowledge. This is especially true when people acquire powerful knowledge that enables them to do something in society without necessarily exercising power over others. Muller and Young (2019) refer to this as being the *generative aspect* of powerful knowledge. All students should thus be entitled to epistemic access to 'the best knowledge we have in any field of study they engage in', according to Young (2013, p. 115).

Young does not treat disciplinary, potentially powerful, knowledge as being fixed. Rather, it is fallible, open for revision, and distinct from everyday or experiential knowledge. This is because it is (i) *specialized* in the way it is produced in academic and other highly specialized groups; (ii) *systematic*, which means that it is comprised of coherently and conceptually interrelated concepts; and (iii) *differentiated* from students' everyday experiences in the manner in which it is 'expressed in the boundaries between school and everyday knowledge' (Young, 2013). Powerful knowledge is not an independent *form* of knowledge; it is a principle to provide students with equal epistemic access to disciplinary knowledge and has the potential to empower them by providing 'new ways of thinking about the world' (Young, 2007, p. 14).

In the didactical debate on powerful knowledge (in the European tradition; see Krogh et al., 2021; Vollmer & Klette, 2023), it is generally argued that powerful knowledge should not be reduced to its epistemological features (Deng, 2021; Maude, 2018; Nordgren, 2017). Maude problematizes Young's emphasis on the epistemological aspects and scientific rigour of powerful knowledge in Geography education. Maude (2018) identified the interrelated characteristics of powerful knowledge that underpinned what it enables students to do in society. Powerful knowledge can thus be classified as being the following:

- Knowledge that provides students with 'new ways of thinking about the world'.
- Knowledge that provides students with powerful ways of analysing, explaining, and understanding.
- Knowledge that gives students power over their own knowledge.
- Knowledge that enables young people to follow and participate in debates on significant local, national, and global issues.
- Knowledge of the world. (p. 181–183)

These identified characteristics foreground the components of powerful knowledge that involve the power to act upon knowledge students encounter in school.

Maude's conceptualization of powerful knowledge in Geography is helpful for social studies education, because of its focus on human activity in society. It is also relevant to the present article in the manner in which Maude emphasizes how disciplinary knowledge must be made productive to contribute to students' life outside school as members of society; that is, citizenship education.

In the Nordic region, social studies subjects are responsible for citizenship education. This involves examining complex social, political, economic, and cultural issues that are relevant to the current societal situation and students' lives (Mathé & Elstad, 2018; Reinhardt, 2015; Solhaug, 2013). This requires a combination of approaches that integrate disciplinary and everyday knowledge about society and politics. We will discuss this in terms of *recontextualisation*.

### **Recontextualisation**

Young classifies issues of moving of knowledge into curricula, syllabi, and teaching as *recontextualization*. This draws on Bernstein's (2000) sociology of knowledge and the *pedagogic device*. For Bernstein, recontextualisation is the process of selecting, sequencing, pacing, and refocusing knowledge (understood as dioceses) into curricula, syllabi, and classroom talk. These processes where knowledge is transformed and legitimized as school knowledge happen outside of the school context.

The principle of recontextualisation applies in the classroom when teachers and students move knowledge from one place (everyday experiences, disciplines, textbooks, etc.) to another (classroom talk, activities, etc.) (Moore, 2013, p. 103). When teachers or students incorporate everyday experiences or address issues from their lifeworld in the classroom, it can be seen as a recontextualisation process. This is because it involves the movement of knowledge from one context to another.

Muller and Young (2019) suggest that 'teachers are the crucial mediators of the transformative capacity of [powerful knowledge] in their subjects' and raise the question of how '[powerful knowledge] can best articulate with the lived world meanings of learners, making it accessible without boring or alienating them' (pp. 209, 211). Recent research has shown how teachers actively recontextualise knowledge (make-curriculum) in school subjects including social studies (Alvunger, 2021; Kitson, 2020). In the next section, we argue that recontextualisation in classroom settings involves recontextualisation within both everyday and horizontal disciplinary discourse.

### **Horizontal and vertical discourse**

Bernstein (2000) initially distinguished between two forms of discourse: *vertical discourse* (knowledge produced in specialized fields) and *horizontal discourse* (everyday or common-sense knowledge). Vertical discourse is described as 'coherent, explicit and systematically principled' (p. 159). It consists of condensed specialized languages, concepts, theories, and specific ways of reasoning. It is not linked to restricted objects and contexts or the immediate experiences of people and social groups. According to Bernstein, this enables disciplinary knowledge to be used flexibly across different contexts to explore new perspectives (p. 30). In social studies, knowledge from vertical discourse may include facts, such as about political institutions and structures; social scientific concepts, such as democracy and globalization; or subject-specific modes of inquiry that enable students to understand and engage with complex social issues.

Everyday knowledge is a form of horizontal discourse. Bernstein (2000) describes horizontal discourse as being 'contextually specific' and 'context dependent, embedded in ongoing practices, usually with strong affective loading, and directed towards specific, immediate goals, highly relevant to the acquirer in his/her life' (p. 161). He further notes that knowledge structured as horizontal discourse is 'likely to be oral, local, context dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered, and

contradictory across but not within contexts' (p. 159). Bernstein uses the term *lifeworld knowledge* to refer to horizontal knowledge (p. 155). This is in line with recent research within the field of social studies education (T. S. Christensen, 2022; Grammes, 1998; Körber, 2021), which we will discuss in the next section. Social studies horizontal discourse, for example, consists of knowledge from personal lived experiences or social, cultural, economic, and political phenomena that are not specialized, e.g. from social media or conversations with family and friends.

It is difficult to imagine social studies teaching that does not draw on knowledge from horizontal discourse. However, when recontextualizing knowledge from everyday experiences into teaching, it is crucial to distinguish between the disciplinary, the institutional, and the everyday, as it would be insufficient to provide students with the capacity to move beyond what they already know from their everyday experience (Bernstein, 2000; Young, 2013, 2008).

### **Determining teaching of powerful knowledge in the social studies classroom**

According to Hudson et al. (2023), teaching of powerful knowledge occurs through connecting different types of knowledge in the classroom. They assert that when disciplinary knowledge meets and interconnects with the students' previous experiences and knowledge of their life-world, it can contribute to empower students' participation in society. Accordingly, teaching of powerful knowledge demands a 'connecting interaction between the teacher, the student and the powerful knowledge of the discipline and life world knowledge, all being important constituents or elements in developing knowledge of the powerful' (p. 124). This resonates with generative aspects of powerful knowledge that foregrounds students' life trajectories (Muller & Young, 2019).

If a critical facet of the teaching of powerful knowledge lies in the connections between different types of social studies knowledge as made available in the classroom (Hudson et al., 2023; Maude, 2018; Muller & Young, 2019), it would be critical to examine when and how teachers and students connect social studies content and concepts with their everyday experiences, life and potential use in their present or future life. To examine how connections between different types of social studies knowledge are made, there is a need for a theoretical account of social studies knowledge, as it can enrich and provide greater subject-specificity to the study of how teachers and students bring in and make connections between different types of knowledge in classroom settings, which is the recontextualisation processes.

Theories of knowledge in social studies education are based on the distinction between everyday knowledge (often termed *lifeworld knowledge*) and social science disciplinary knowledge, including conceptual and procedural (T. S. Christensen, 2022; A. S. Christensen & Christensen, 2015; Grammes, 1998; Körber, 2021; Sandahl, 2015). A normative educational aim of the social studies subject is to develop students understanding of institutions and other members of society for democratic purposes. A concept of social studies knowledge, therefore, needs a notion of *institutional knowledge* (T. S. Christensen, 2022; Grammes, 1998; Körber, 2021). Institutional knowledge is positioned between abstraction and practice, thus in the middle of the horizontal-vertical scale (Bernstein, 2000; T. S. Christensen, 2022; Hordern, 2016). Examples here include knowledge produced in professional disciplines such as journalism, politics, and bureaucracy. Since institutional knowledge, like disciplinary, is not a type of knowledge all students acquire at home, it entails the potential to take students beyond their existing experiences (Young & Muller, 2013). Furthermore, institutional knowledge may be beneficial for effective participation in social and political debates, which is central in Young and Muller's (2013, 2019) description of powerful knowledge.

In summary, given how an interplay between disciplinary, institutional, and everyday knowledge is required to develop powerful knowledge, important aspects of teaching of powerful knowledge may be identified in instances when teachers and students make connections between different types of social studies knowledge. It is important to note, however, that

powerful knowledge is not developed within a single lesson and a single shot but need to be increasingly built over several years. Furthermore, by emphasizing connections between different types of social studies knowledge, we further give primacy to generative aspects of powerful knowledge (Muller & Young, 2019) over the epistemic quality of the knowledge students encounter in the classroom, as generative facets are an important feature of powerful knowledge (Hudson et al., 2023, p. 124).

## Study context: social studies in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

The *Nordic educational model* provides important context for the present article. This model, which is prominently used in the Nordic countries involved in this study, includes a non-tracked and non-streamed K-9 education that is focused on equal education for all students regardless of their family backgrounds or geographical location (Blossing et al., 2014; Klette & Blikstad Balas, 2018). However, the model has been challenged by neoliberal reforms (Blossing et al., 2014). Teachers in the three Nordic countries share relatively high degrees of professional autonomy and freedom to select their own teaching content and methodology (Klette & Blikstad Balas, 2018) for active and systematic recontextualisation (Alvunger, 2018; Kitson, 2020).

Social studies education has long been taught as subjects in school in the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish educational contexts, which stems from the early 1900s. Social studies subjects in all three countries share core characteristics, including a focus on democratic citizenship education (T. S. Christensen, 2023; Sandahl et al., 2022; Solhaug et al., 2020). However, there are certain differences in social studies education at the lower secondary level that are important. Social studies are compulsory in grades 8–9 in Denmark (120 allocated teaching hours), while it is so in grades 8–10 in Sweden (70 allocated teaching hours, with the possibility of additional 35 hours). In lower secondary schools in Norway, social studies is compulsory for grades 8–10 and allocated 249 teaching hours. Unlike in Denmark and Sweden, the social studies syllabus in Norway is merged with history and geography. While it can be tempting to consider social studies subjects in the three Nordic countries as being the same, it would be more accurate to consider them as having similar subject constructions with similar, yet idiosyncratic, traditions (T. S. Christensen, 2023).

## Methods

### *Data and design*

The research design of this study was inspired by the larger Quality in Nordic Teaching (QUINT) project and LISA Nordic study, which was conducted to study the teaching practices in Nordic mathematics, language arts, and social studies classrooms (see Klette et al., 2017 for an overview). This project is led by Kirsti Klette. During the school year 2020–2021, the QUINT research team collected video data of naturally occurring teaching, i.e. data collected without intentional researcher intervention (Klette et al., 2017). To obtain high-quality video data of whole-class teaching and teacher–student interactions, we used a two-camera filming system that recorded from the front and back of the classroom at the same time. Additionally, we used two wireless microphones to capture the audio of conversations and speech by both the students and teachers. The video data was supplemented with artefacts from the different classrooms, such as teacher-made handouts and PowerPoint presentations.

In this article, we draw on the video data from grade 10, lower secondary, social studies classrooms in Norway and grade 9 classrooms in Denmark and Sweden. The students studied would likely be between 14 and 15 years old. The sample consisted of 18 schools, 23 social studies classrooms, and 80 video-recorded lessons (see Table 1). To capture reliable data of teaching practices, we filmed 4–6 consecutive lessons in each classroom (Klette et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2016). The lessons lasted from between 45 and 60 minutes. Occasionally, two double



**Table 1.** Overview of classrooms and video-recorded lessons ( $N = 80$ ).

Geographic context (country)	Grades	Number of schools/classrooms	Number of lessons
Odense-area (Denmark)	8–9	8/10*	25
Oslo-area (Norway)	9	6/6*	24
Värmland-area (Sweden)	9	4/8*	31
Total		18/24	80

Note: \*In the Danish and Swedish samples, two classrooms/teachers were often sampled in each school.

**Table 2.** Connectedness to the world beyond the classroom (Newmann et al., 2007, p. 45).

5 = Students recognize the connection between classroom knowledge and situations outside the classroom and the connection leads them to try to influence a larger audience beyond the classroom by communicating knowledge to others (including within the school), advocating solutions to social problems, providing assistance to people, and/or creating performances and products with utilitarian or aesthetic value.
4 = Students study or work on a topic, problem, or issue the teacher and students explicitly recognize as being connected to their personal experience or actual contemporary public situations, and they explore these connections. However, there is no use of knowledge in ways that go beyond the classroom to actually influence a larger audience.
3 = Students recognize some connection between classroom knowledge and situations outside the classroom, but they do not explore the implications of these connections that remain abstract or hypothetical, and there is no effort to actually influence a larger audience.
2 = Students encounter a topic, problem, or issue that the teacher <i>tries</i> to connect to students' experiences or contemporary public situations, but the teachers' explanations are too brief, general, or unconvincing for students to see or value the connection.
1 = Lesson topics and activities have no clear connection to anything beyond the classroom, and the teacher offers no justification for the learning material beyond the students' need to perform well academically.

**Table 3.** Overview of thematic categories and examples.

Category	Theme	Description	Examples of phenomena
Personal	Connections to personal experience and everyday life	The teacher or students connect the disciplinary foci of the lesson to horizontal discourses from their personal experiences or everyday life. This includes explanations about how knowledge can be used by students in their everyday lives. Alternatively, teachers prompt students to make such connections themselves.	Youth culture, sports, media, the local community, work, shopping, family, people, food
Societal	Connections to prior knowledge about contemporary social and political phenomena	The teacher or students connect social studies knowledge to horizontal discourse about contemporary social and political phenomena. This includes explanations about how students can utilize the knowledge in their lives as citizens. Alternatively, teachers prompt the students to make such connections themselves.	Contemporary events, local and national elections, citizenship participation, the welfare state, sustainability, culture, activism
	Connections to institutional knowledge about social practices	The teacher connects to institutional knowledge about societal practices. This category does not include knowledge about contemporary issues unless the episode includes concrete text that offers insights into institutional knowledge.	News, documentaries, social media, webpages

lessons (90–120 minutes) were sampled instead of four single lessons (45–60 minutes), which depended on the schools' timetables.

We conducted the analyses for the present paper in two phases. First, we used a pre-defined observational manual to answer RQ1 about the extent and quality of the connections in the observed lessons. Second, we conducted a TA of instances where the teachers and students created



connections between disciplinary and everyday discourses to illuminate RQ2 about the characteristics of connections linked to powerful knowledge.

### ***First phase of the analysis: Authentic intellectual work analysis***

Observational manuals are valued for being analytically rigorous, especially regarding validity and reliability. They enable observation of the extent and qualities of practices within and across contexts and large data materials (Klette & Blikstad Balas, 2018). They can thus be used as a systematic way of conducting secondary targeted analysis of the characteristic features of teaching. Furthermore, observation manuals provide a common language to operationalize the teaching practices that clarify the inherent ambiguities of teaching as a field (Klette, 2023).

Theoretically, we have argued that teaching powerful social studies knowledge creates connections and promotes the integration of disciplinary knowledge and students' personal experiences, identities, and knowledge of the current societal and political situations that affect their lives (T. S. Christensen, 2022; Grammes, 1998; Hudson et al., 2023; Körber, 2021). To obtain an overview of the prevalence and quality of practices where teachers and students create such connections across multiple contexts, we used a rubric derived from the AIW framework (Newmann et al., 2015). The AIW framework was developed for social studies teaching (Scheurman & Newmann, 1998), especially being connected to the world beyond the classroom. The manner in which the framework operationalizes some of the assumptions Bernstein made about trade-offs between vertical and horizontal discourse (Williams & Wilson, 2010, p. 432) further supports testing it out in a Nordic setting. In addition, its use aligns with Hudson et al. (2023), who demonstrated that connecting students' experiences and lifeworld knowledge in social studies is a prerequisite to teach powerful knowledge (p. 13).

Newmann et al. (2015) make it clear that while the single rubrics from the AIW framework are necessary, they must occur together to produce teaching quality. Since we used the framework to measure the extent and quality of connections of the lessons, rather than their overall quality, we only employed the *Connections to the world beyond the classroom* rubric (CWBC) in this article. This rubric comprises of the following three dimensions: Whether lessons contain (i) disciplinary knowledge; (ii) connections between the disciplinary knowledge and everyday experiences or significant societal and political phenomena, and (iii) the degree of engagement to explore the connections constructed in the lessons (Table 2).

In line with the AIW manual, we scored CWBC at the lesson level. At the low end of the rubric (scores 1–2), teaching activities' goal is framed as being good performance in school rather than establishing relevance to other, practical spheres of life. At scores 3–4, teaching provides explicit connections to the larger social contexts that students live in, either by connecting theory to contemporary societal problems or students' personal experiences. At score 5, the boundaries between the classroom contexts outside school are breached. An example would be to engage students in enquiries about actual problems or social studies phenomena that occur in their local community.

A limitation presented by observation manuals is scoring inconsistency (Klette & Blikstad Balas, 2018; White, 2018). To ensure scoring accuracy in this article, three researchers with previous experience in working with observational manuals developed a common understanding of the CWBC rubric in a coding workshop. They double-coded 8 of the video-recorded lessons (10% of the entire sample). Their agreement was high: The coders identified connections in the same segments of the lesson, obtained an exact interrater agreement of 87,5%, and were able to reach a consensus on exact scores after discussing disagreements.

## **Second phase of the analysis: thematic analyses episodes rated at different levels of connectedness**

The video data also allowed for secondary TA of the connections made in whole-class teaching and teacher—student interactions. To analyse the characteristics of connections at different levels, we identified instances where teachers or students in whole-class teaching explicitly connected classroom knowledge to outside-school concerns. We chose not to analyse lessons that were rated 1 on the CWBC rubric, as they did not contain explicit connection attempts by either teachers or students. This resulted in a subset of 63 lessons. We partially transcribed the instructional episodes that contained connections to the social and political scenario outside of the classroom, including teachers' and students' personal experiences. These episodes demonstrated the potential to connect to multiple phenomena of out-of-school life. Each was labelled with the lesson's score on connectedness and disciplinary foci in NVivo.

Through a deductive (theory-based) approach, we coded the episodes in terms of what kinds of phenomena they connected to (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we divided the episodes into two categories: A *personal (experience) category* that emphasized the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and the personal experiences or everyday phenomena that students are likely to encounter (emphasis on everyday life, personal biographies, and identities) and a *society category* based on the correspondence with societal and political phenomena (with a broader emphasis on relationships between disciplinary knowledge, activities, and the students). We are aware that the distinction between the personal and the political/societal has been criticized across various strands of research including critical and postmodern theories. In our data, the personal category includes political dimensions. For the present article, however, we use these categories to describe how teachers and students frame connections to life outside school.

We further divided the society category into two themes: *institutional knowledge about societal practices* and *prior knowledge about societal and political phenomena*. (see Table 3). This corresponds with (T. S. Christensen's, 2022) study. Previous empirical research by Khawaja and Puustinen (2022) also informed these themes. The categories and themes were not constructed to be generalized into theory, but they aimed to capture the most important elements of the connections created by teachers and students in our material (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Limitations and research ethics**

This study has several limitations. Reactivity due to being monitored by a camera may have altered and affected teachers' and students' behaviour in the observed classrooms. However, a recent review on reactivity in video studies in educational research displayed how reduced salience of reactivity was often reported with small and fixed cameras, and potential camera effects are observed to fade over time (Lahn & Klette, 2022). Our sample size is small, and our study thus cannot be considered representative of social studies lessons in Denmark, Norway, or Sweden. On the other hand, the schools and classrooms studied were sampled to represent a variety of factors, such as students' socio-economic backgrounds, rural/urban classrooms, and number of multicultural students, all of which were reported as being crucial in creating differences among Nordic lower secondary classrooms (Schleicher, 2019). Observational manuals and the process of videotaping classroom teaching and then transcribing video data involve complexity reduction. Thus, there might be occasions where we might have overlooked some features of recontextualization, for example the epistemological quality of the social science disciplinary knowledge recontextualized into the teaching, incorporation of texts into teaching, and magnified others, such as classroom talk and connectedness (Blikstad Balas, 2017).

The LISA Nordic study received approval from the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish research ethical committees before data collection. Voluntary and informed consent was collected from all participants.

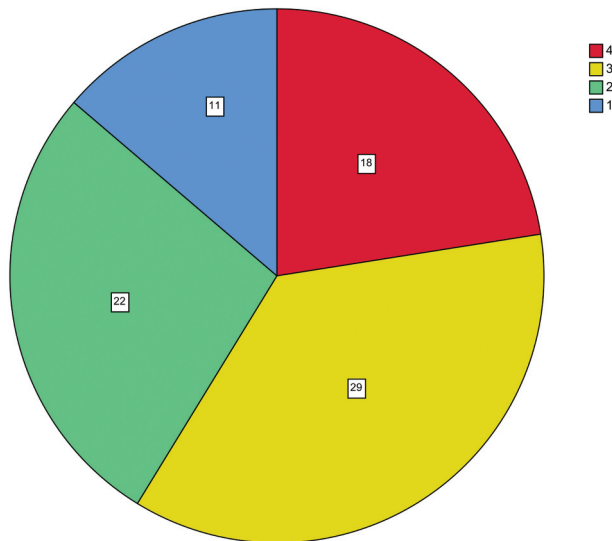
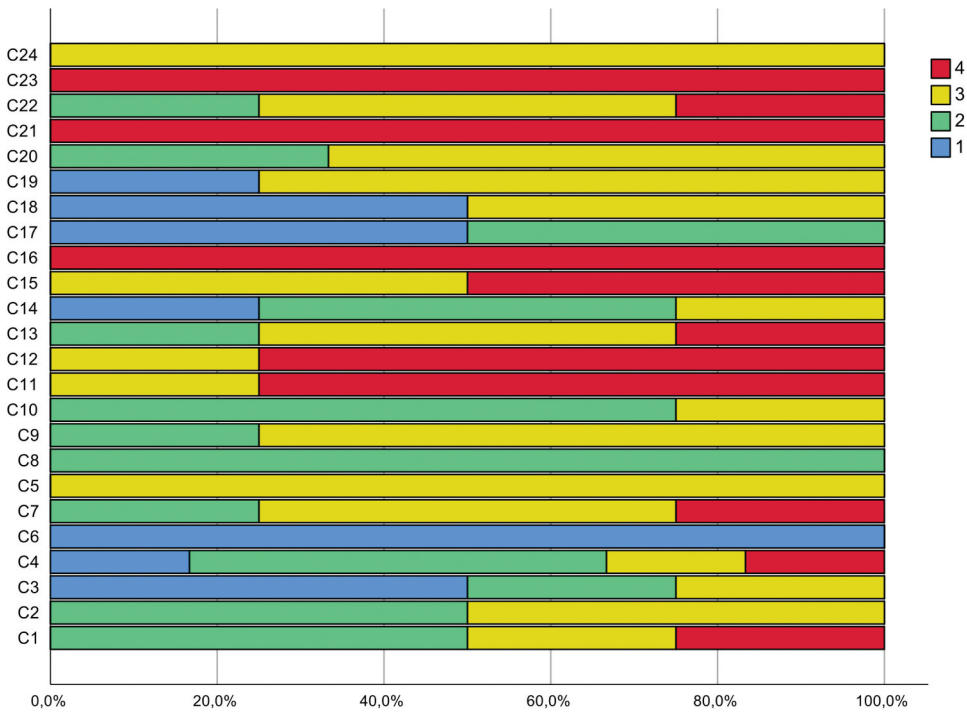


Figure 1. Distribution of percentages in the CWBC rubric ( $N = 80$ ).

### Findings: prevalence and quality of instructional connections to the world beyond the classroom

A main finding in this article is that the teachers and students studied frequently made connections to the world beyond the classroom. Figure 1 presents the CWBC-rubric scores across the 80 video-recorded, lower secondary social studies lessons. The percentage distributions over the five-point scale show that teachers and students attempted to connect the subject knowledge to everyday social or political situations in 89% of the lessons that we observed. The remaining 11% were scored 1, which indicated no such attempts. 22% of the lessons were scored 2, which indicated that we found evidence of teachers attempting create connections to phenomena outside school, but the connections were not necessarily recognized. This was often because the connections were vague, brief, or framed in ways that did not require student responses. 29% of the lessons scored 3, meaning that we identified evidence that the students recognized interconnected traits between disciplinary knowledge and life outside school. Furthermore, 18% of the lessons were rated 4, which indicated that the class explicitly worked with and explored the constituted connections. These lessons demonstrated greater potential to identify abstract underlying principles in everyday occurrences, which enable new perspectives.

It is important to note that none of the lessons in this study were rated 5. This would require surpassing the contextual borders of the classroom, such as by focusing on active and participatory approaches to citizenship education or inquiry-based methods that make use of the local community. While this is an interesting observation, it conforms to previous AIW research in social studies that demonstrated that a score of 5 rarely occurs in day-to-day social studies classroom teaching (Saye et al., 2018, p. 879). We regard this as reasonable, and acknowledge that the highest level of connectedness is often difficult to achieve in typical classroom contexts (Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative (SSIRC), 2013, p. 102), which was the focus of this article. We could also argue that level 5 requires action and participation beyond the scope of the classroom level, which can be problematic in terms of the light regulations put forward by Nordic school laws and national curricula.



**Figure 2.** AIW CWBC rating for the 24 classrooms. Each vertical bar represents one class's percentage distribution of lesson connectedness ratings.

The scores on connectedness were unequally distributed among the 24 observed teachers. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), the score distribution varies. This is especially true for the number of lessons rated 4, a score that indicates opportunities to work with and explore constructed connections. We do not expect teachers to receive high ratings in every lesson for two reasons: First, teachers can focus on teaching disciplinary knowledge as a strategy to support students to make sense of and explore everyday or political phenomena in other lessons. Second, connections rated 2 or 3 demand less effort to enact and may be used more frequently in daily social studies teaching.

However, lessons that score 4 on the CWBC arguably have an increased potential for students to use what is familiar and accessible for them to unlock new perspectives on society. If powerful knowledge involves developing more than knowledge of high epistemological quality, such as awareness about how to use knowledge in everyday life and as citizens (Maude, 2018), social studies teaching that does not make concrete connections to everyday or lifeworld knowledge is not without its problems. In our data, nearly all teachers connected disciplinary knowledge to a social or political context in at least one of the lessons observed.

[Figure 2](#) displays percentage distributions on the CWBC rubric for the observed classrooms in our dataset. As shown, almost all the teachers made connections at level 3 or 4 in at least one of the lessons we observed them. Notably, two classes (23 and 16) consecutively scored at level 4 across all observed lessons. To score at level 4, teachers and students need to thoroughly explore the implications of the connections. However, one class (7) did not meet the requirements to score at level 2, indicating that neither the teacher nor the students made attempts to connect abstract disciplinary knowledge to everyday or wider societal concerns during the observed lessons.

## Episodes of personal and societal connectedness

We draw our reporting from the thematic analyses conducted and examine representative episodes of student—teacher utterances where they created connections in lessons rated across different levels of connectedness in line with the AIW framework. These episodes also illustrate the themes of personal and social connectedness.

### *Connections to personal experiences and everyday life*

The following episode from a Swedish classroom shows how a teacher used a story of buying a videogame to contextualize price elasticity. The lesson that the episode occurred in scored a 3 on connectedness:

1. Teacher: If we are to translate this scenario [supply and demand] to the real world, I play FIFA19 with my 9 year old (. . .) I am buying him FIFA20, but it is closing in on Christmas, and I am short on money. What am I supposed to do?
2. Student: You should wait?
3. Teacher: Yes, I wait for two months and buy it on sale. You know this. It is a part of your everyday life.

In this short episode, the teacher connects the disciplinary concepts of prices, supply, and demand to multiple everyday phenomena, such as his own personal life, FIFA20, Christmas, and the experience of being short on money. The teacher thus recontextualises multiple segments of horizontal discourse to explain how prices are generated by supply and demand, which are examples of vertical discourse. It is also likely that many of the students in the classroom are familiar with the teacher's references. In line 3, the teacher explicitly connects the story to the students' daily life. Although, the teacher did not cover the concept of price elasticity in detail during the short episode, more conceptually complex explanations were provided later in the lesson.

Understanding financial concepts like prices, supply, and demand can be considered powerful. First, it is a robust way to understand price formation and fluctuations of different commodities. Second, it has the potential to provide young people with economically sustainable ways of financial reasoning. This episode mirrors how several teachers in our study introduced horizontal discourses from everyday life into their classrooms, and how this can be used to actualize otherwise abstract concepts. However, the connection is brief, and the students do not actively take part in constructing the connection.

The next episode is from a classroom in Norway that was rated 4 on connectedness. In it, the teachers lead with students' experiences instead of using them to illustrate an abstract idea that was already introduced in the lesson, as was done in the previous episode. In the excerpt, the teacher connected the concepts of urbanization to students' aspirations of moving to a bigger city in the future:

1. Teacher: Ok. Urbanization; to move to urban areas. Can any of you think about any reasons why people are moving to cities? Move to the city. Why do you think do people do that?  
Yes?
2. Student1: Work

3. Teacher: Get a job, yes. (. . .) How many of you think that you are going to live in a city that is bigger than [town name]?
4. *((Almost all the students in the class raise their hands))*
5. Teacher: Are you really moving from [town name]? Why, you guys? I am going to ask a follow up question. Why are there so many of you that want to live another place than [town name]?
6. (. . .)
7. Student2: I like to dance. For me, there is a higher level in big cities than in small places.
8. Teacher: Yes, so you meet people at your level, and more people that share the same interest. Yes, [Student2]?
9. Student3: Universities.
10. Teacher: Yes. It is possible to live in [town name] and study in Oslo, but it might be more fun to live there.
11. Teacher: What does [town name] have that Oslo does not?
12. Student4: [place name]
13. Teacher: Haha, true. It is often because of the people that people choose to continue to live here; friends and family. There are many reasons why people move to the city. One of the main reasons is that one wants to study or get a job. Are there any challenges, now I am thinking from an international perspective, of many people moving to cities?
14. Student5: There are people everywhere.
15. Teacher: Yes, people everywhere. It gets crowded, as you say. Yes, [student name].
16. Student5: While there are many people in the cities, there are fewer people on the countryside.
17. Teacher: Yes, some areas have problems with population decline.

The teacher connects the concept of urbanization to students' prior and present experiences of living in a mid-sized town and their plans of moving to Oslo, which is a bigger city. As opposed to the previous episode, the students contribute more to making the connections; that is the process of recontextualising horizontal discourse from the students' life into the classroom. The teacher uses several social science concepts that are categorized as vertical discourse, such as population decline, urbanization, and migration. However, the students' utterances are characterized by everyday horizontal discourse.

While the teacher does not prompt the students to use vertical discourse in their answers, she makes use of the connections to the students' experiences by expanding it to an international perspective on challenges of urbanization and migration. As such, the horizontal discourse is not connected only to the concept of urbanization but also a wider international perspective on the

world. Later in the lesson, the teacher covered the concept of urbanization push- and pull factors in more depth.

The next episode illustrates how teachers used the students' everyday lives and aspirations for the future to engage with the concepts of urbanization and migration. Similar to the previous episode, this can be interpreted as a way of breaking down abstract concepts by making them more concrete. This episode is also relevant because it shows how teachers can broaden students' perspectives by linking their experiences to different outlooks and the lives of people from other places. If students adopt this way of generalizing, it could be powerful (Maude, 2018; Sandahl, 2020). At the same time, students' responses demonstrate the potential to support them to draw on a disciplinary vertical discourse.

### **Connections to contemporary social and political phenomena**

The following episode is from a lesson on the position of different political parties in Denmark and the left—right political scale. In the episode, the teacher mentions that the aim of the following lessons is to learn about political parties and their functions, and the concepts of distributive and value politics. The topics are framed as being relevant for students when they 'cast a ballot' and 'understand the political debate and take a stance'.

The following excerpt is from a lesson rated 3 on connectedness. The connection to students' personal beliefs about politics was brief and not applied in the teacher's detailed explanation of the concepts of the political left—right scale, socialism, and liberalism later in the lesson. The episode starts when the teacher asks the students to name political parties they strongly disagree with:

1. Teacher: Are there any political parties you strongly disagree with? [Student name].
2. Student1: *Stram Kurs* [Hard Line; a far-right political party]
3. Teacher: Ok. Why?
4. Student1: Because they do wrong things.
5. Teacher: What do you think they are wrong about?
6. Student1: They hold those demonstrations.
7. Teacher: Yes, what does Hard Line, or Rasmus Paludan [party leader], what is he famous for other than just demonstrations? What does he protest against? [Student2]?
8. Student2: He protests immigration.
9. Teacher: Yes, at least he has anti-Islamic opinions. Some would also call him a racist. How does he provoke with his demonstrations? What does he do?
10. Student3: He burns the Quran.
11. (...)
12. Teacher: It is extremely provoking. It is a problem. His actions are a part of his freedom of speech; he can protest and say the things that he does, at the same time he must accept responsibility.



13. Teacher: What political parties do we have at the *Folketing* [the Danish Parliament]?
14. Student4: DDP.
15. Teacher: Which means?
16. Student4: The Danish People's Party.

This episode illustrates how the teacher establishes a connection between the topic of Danish political parties and the political passions and engagements of students. In line 1, one student voices that he disagrees with Hard Line, a far-right political party, because 'they do wrong things'. However, he does not provide any evidence for his reasoning. In line 4, the teacher compels the student to explain his statement. The student responds minimally and criticizes the party's controversial demonstrations. In response, another student adds that these demonstrations are anti-immigrant. The teacher revoices and reconceptualizes the student's answer using the concepts of anti-Islamic opinions and racism. Although the episode touches upon some social studies concepts, the discourse in the episode is mainly horizontal.

The function connection in this episode has to do with illustrating how the topic of politics should be considered worthwhile for students, both by framing it as useful for their practices as citizens and connecting instruction to the students' emotions towards political parties by inviting students to recontextualise their lifeworld knowledge about society and politics into the classroom talk (T. S. Christensen, 2022; Hudson et al., 2023).

While the teacher acknowledges the students' statements in the episode, he does not use their examples to explain the political left—right scale later in the lessons, for example to demonstrate the far-right politics of Hard Line. Thus, the connection may function as a way for students to share views and engage in classroom dialogues about political parties, but it remains unclear if the teacher uses horizontal discourse to further students' institutional or disciplinary understanding of the Danish political landscape.

### **Enabling students to recontextualise knowledge**

The final episode took place in a classroom in Denmark was rated 4 on connectedness. The lesson was about international relations. Before the episode, the class had chosen an international conflict that they wanted to know more about and constructed their own research questions related to the conflict. In the episode, a group of four students sat on their laptops browsing for information on Danish intervention in the Syrian civil war:

1. Teacher: You have written [which international conflict] you would like to explore. It is important that you do not simply apply facts when you work with this. You should use different perspectives. Take for example the issue of Denmark's intervention in the Syrian war. What do you want to contribute with? It should not be description only: 'Denmark chose to participate in Syria'. You should view it from a political perspective or ask: 'Did we gain something from that participation?' (. . .) When you have chosen a source, it is important that you explain why.

In their research question, the students link the Syrian Civil War and Danish military intervention, thus bringing the civil war 'nearer home'. While the teacher chose the disciplinary focus of the lesson, she is not positioned as responsible for the recontextualising process that takes place in the episode. The students themselves are instructed to identify and criticize different media sources about the civil war. They thus actively engage in recontextualising everyday knowledge and institutional

knowledge into the classroom. Compared to the previous episodes, the teacher has a more limited role in this episode: She prompts students to take different perspectives when analysing the conflict, use empirical data and facts to support their arguments, and draw from and justify the use of multiple sources. This highlights institutional knowledge as being an uncertain knowledge that warrants criticism. Like the episode about urbanization, the teacher highlights perspective taking rather than simply learning facts or definitions (Sandahl, 2020; Wood & Sheehan, 2021).

The episode is an example of how teachers can support students' own recontextualisation processes. In terms powerful knowledge aspects, the episode indicates that the students are given power over their own knowledge by supporting the evaluation of knowledge claims and the credibility of different sources. They are also provided the opportunity to engage with a global issue, what Maude (2018) called knowledge of the world.

In summary, our findings show that social studies classrooms are sites where teachers and students actively engage in recontextualising knowledge from different discourses. Vertical discourse of disciplinary social science knowledge is related to lived experience, and societal and political questions emerge from both everyday and institutional knowledge in different ways: The first episode illustrates how a teacher used a story from his own life to illustrate the economic relationship between prices, supply, and demand. He aimed for it to resonate with the everyday experiences of the students. The second episode mirrors how a teacher employs horizontal discourse from the students' personal experiences and generalizes it to an international perspective. In the third episode, the teacher connects to the students' political engagement. In the final episode, the connection is mainly to institutional knowledge. Here, the teacher positions and supports the student as being responsible for the recontextualization process and taking on different perspectives. The episodes also point to challenges related to students being 'stuck' in everyday horizontal discourse.

## Discussion

In this article, we aimed to shed light on three interconnected research questions. The first research question examined the prevalence of the connections to social and political issues outside school, the second explored the quality of the constructed connections, and the third dealt with how characteristics of the connections relate to powerful knowledge. We analysed 80 social studies lessons in three Scandinavian countries using a combination of an observation manual and TA of episodes where teachers and students made use of everyday or knowledge contemporary situations that were derived from horizontal discourse in daily social studies teaching.

### *Prevalence of connections*

Regarding the prevalence of connections, our results show that the social studies teachers in our data frequently connected the lessons' disciplinary focus to students' or their own everyday experiences with the relevant social and political phenomena. In most lessons, the students recognized the constructed connections. A contributing factor to the prevalent recontextualisation and use of horizontal discourse in social studies teaching could be the weak grammar of the subject in combination with a horizontal knowledge structure (Bernstein, 2000).

Almost all teachers in our data attempted to connect the social studies content and concepts to life outside school within the at least four consecutive lessons we observed in each classroom. However, in one classroom, no such efforts were made. In relation to powerful knowledge, the absence of explicit connections could limit the potential generative power of the disciplinary knowledge worked with (Muller & Young, 2019), which is understood as the potential use in students present and future life in society.

A difference between our study and previous research (Khawaja & Puustinen, 2022; Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative (SSIRC), 2013; Saye et al., 2018), is the prevalent connections

between disciplinary and everyday knowledge. However, the use of connections to life outside school was not always able to support students' disciplinary understandings, which corresponds with previous research on recontextualisation in classroom settings in history education in the Nordic context (Khawaja & Puustinen, 2022).

The prevalence of connectedness reported in this article is higher than previous AIW studies on social studies in the U.S. context (Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative (SSIRC), 2013; Saye et al., 2018). However, some clarifications are important. While observation manuals provide a common vocabulary for teaching, they can be interpreted differently, a phenomenon that might emerge across geographies and different research groups. This makes comparisons between contexts challenging to undertake due to systematic biases (Luoto et al., 2022).

### **Characteristics of connections**

Answering the question of how teachers create connections to the world beyond the classroom related to powerful knowledge, we first identified two categories of horizontal discourse: everyday and lifeworld knowledge. We divided these into two main categories: personal and societal. Then, we divided the societal category into connections to everyday knowledge about social and political phenomena and institutional knowledge. Previous empirical research has pointed out that the motivation and enjoyment of social studies is tied to existential dimensions of the subject, content that students can relate to (Børhaug & Borgun, 2018), and citizenship participation (Mathé & Elstad, 2018). The present study supports this research by illustrating practices where the teachers and students create connections to both the students' lifeworld and wider institutional, social, and political issues.

Even if social studies teaching involves knowledge from both vertical and horizontal discourses, creating meaningful connections requires more than identifying a relationship between the different forms of social science knowledge. The capacity to recontextualise and integrate disciplinary and everyday meanings is essential for the disciplinary knowledge to not be constrained by a particular context (Bernstein, 2000, p. 30), thus become powerful for students (Muller & Young, 2019). The teacher's role seems crucial in this regard. In our study, we observed that making students view different perspectives highlighted how disciplinary knowledge is flexible and transferable across contexts (Sandahl, 2020; Wood & Sheehan, 2020).

Some of the teaching episodes analysed in this study show how teachers often took the lead in initiating and creating connections, thus doing the majority of the recontextualising work. However, we also observed how a teacher's willingness to relinquish a certain amount of control over the recontextualising process and, instead, guide students as recontextualisation agents (Kitson, 2020) resulted in epistemic agency, what Maude (2018) termed 'giving students power over their own knowledge'.

### **Conclusion**

Social studies subjects draw on multiple social science fields that do not have unified bodies of disciplinary knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). In combination with a high autonomy curriculum context, this allows teachers to draw on students' experiences and contemporary societal issues in their teaching (Alvunger, 2018; Hudson et al., 2023). This combination likely accounts, in part, for the more prevalent incorporation of everyday knowledge and contemporary societal issues that was observed in this study (Alvunger, 2018) than previously reported in other social studies contexts (Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative (SSIRC), 2013; Saye et al., 2018). Studies of student engagement from Nordic lower secondary language arts classrooms (Klette et al., 2018) underscore a high degree of interaction and teacher—student exchanges, including linking student experiences with school subject matter.

Hudson et al. (2023) stressed that connecting disciplinary knowledge and students' lifeworld is a prerequisite for students to learn the generative aspects of powerful knowledge. In this article, we provided examples of how educators can do so in actual teaching practice. In addition, we have argued for including institutional knowledge in the understanding of powerful knowledge in social studies education (T. S. Christensen, 2022; Grammes, 1998; Körber, 2021). Lifeworld approaches to social studies teaching have their own set of limitations. In our data, we observed that classroom conversations connecting to horizontal lifeworld knowledge often 'get stuck', as opposed to linking back to disciplinary knowledge. This was especially true for student responses. That said, teachers also demonstrated perspective-taking strategies (Sandahl, 2020; Wood & Sheehan, 2020) and granting students the freedom to partake in individual recontextualisation that was guided by the teacher. This was better aligned with rather flexible use of the subject knowledge (Wood & Sheehan, 2020).

Furthermore, the findings of the present study are relevant for future AIW research. Our discussion of teaching episodes gives a detailed description of connections at different levels of connectedness as well as a subject-specific distinction between different types of connections.

In conclusion, to frame disciplinary knowledge through a viable and flexible lens that can be used beyond the classroom by students, there is a need to strike a balance between disciplinary, institutional and lifeworld knowledge, that is, knowledge types with different degrees of verticality and horizontality (Bernstein, 2000). If we want students to be able to use academic knowledge to be able to understand their own, as well as others', social and political contexts, it is key for educators to select and connect disciplinary, institutional, and everyday knowledge that complements with one another as well as the overarching purpose of the connection. There might also be the potential to consider the quality of the disciplinary knowledge when creating connections. It is for example possible to question the epistemological quality of the content and concepts illustrated in the teaching episodes discussed in this study. However, this specific finding is a contribution to the discussion of how practices related to teaching powerful knowledge may look like in actual classroom settings by considering how different forms of knowledge are framed as relevant for students' lives, including as members of society (Muller, 2023; Alvunger, 2021; Deng, 2022; Hudson et al., 2023). This finding can also be relevant for teachers' professional development by addressing the opportunities and challenges of knowledge recontextualisation from horizontal and vertical discourse into teaching practice. Reasonably, this is especially important in high-autonomy curricula contexts (Alvunger, 2018; Wood & Sheehan, 2021).

## Note

1. In this article, we use the term 'social studies' to broadly refer to the school subjects of *samfundsfag* (Denmark), *samfunnsfag* (Norway), and *samhällskunskap* (Sweden) (see the section about the study's context for further explanation about the similarities and differences between the subjects).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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