



Not willing to participate in society? Vocational students' perspectives on citizenship education

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Abstract

Contrary to curricular objectives, vocational education and training programmes in Sweden and elsewhere do not appear to foster all students' willingness and abilities to participate actively in society. Furthermore, previous research into students' perspectives on such education is both limited and inconclusive. The aim of this study is to add to current knowledge about Swedish vocational students' perspectives on education for active participation in society and their expectations of such participation in the future. The study was a part of a joint research and development project, focused on developing citizenship education in the subject areas of history, religious education, science studies, and social studies in Sweden. A questionnaire about the perceived importance of citizenship education and expected future participation in society was distributed to all students in grade three of all vocational programmes in one Swedish municipality (n = 140). Most participants favoured citizenship education, but their expectations of future participation in society varied substantially, depending on the activity in question. Differences in views between students on different vocational programmes were minor. The results are discussed in relation to established types of citizens and action (individual, collective, direct, and indirect).

Keywords: citizenship education, civic engagement, students' perspectives, science education, social studies, history, religious education



Introduction

Current societal challenges such as the war in Europe, climate change, and the spread of fake news highlight the importance of preparing *all* students – regardless of age and choice of study – for their roles as democratic citizens by providing them with opportunities to develop willingness and abilities to participate actively in society. Several fields of research focus on education for active participation in society: it is for example central within research about citizenship education (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement [IEA], 2022; Veugelers & de Groot, 2019; Westheimer, 2015) and education for sustainability (Mogensen & Schnack, 2010; Sass et al., 2020, 2021). Westheimer (2015) elaborate on what kind of citizen we need to support an effective democratic society. In his description of different kinds of citizens, he puts focus on the importance of citizens being responsible, helping others and paying taxes but also the importance of citizens that take an active part in organising community efforts and citizens that critically are assessing social, political, and economic structures, and exploring strategies for change. In the sustainability field, Sass et al. (2021) distinguish between direct and indirect ways in which citizens try to solve issues, and between individual and collective action. Educational philosophers such as Biesta and Bernstein have also shed light on education for active participation in society: Biesta (2020) specifically uses the function subjectification to problematise students' opportunities to meet the world as a subject and to transform themselves and society. Bernstein (2000) focuses on pedagogical rights, the right of all individuals to acquire the means for critical understanding and new possibilities, the right 'to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally' (p. xx), and the right to participate in 'procedures whereby order is constructed, maintained and changed' (p. xxi). Examples of abilities for active participation in society mentioned in these research fields include critical thinking, awareness of different perspectives, ability to reflect on different norms, ability to participate in diverse and changing contexts, and ability to take a stand. As we will show, there are indications that students on vocational education and training (VET) programmes do not always get opportunities to develop the willingness and abilities to participate actively in society.

In this study we explore VET students' perspectives on education for active participation in society and their own future participation in society, in one Swedish municipality. The study was part of a joint research and development project initiated by teachers in one municipality in Northern Sweden. During times when more people openly express undemocratic values, and fake news and conspiracy theories are spreading, these teachers felt the need to jointly develop education for active participation in society. A strong driving force for the

teachers initiating the project was a belief that teaching should be based on, or exploit, the students' perspectives.

Also, previous research points towards a need to better understand VET students' perspectives on education for active participation in society. In Nordic countries, as elsewhere, there are longstanding tensions between the multiple aims of VET which include preparing students for employment, mobility in labour markets, democratic citizenship, and higher education (Jørgensen, 2018; Michelsen & Stenstrøm, 2018; Olofsson & Panican, 2020). Several studies indicate that VET focuses on educating students for employability while democratic citizenship gets much less attention (Jørgensen, 2018; Nylund et al., 2017, 2020; Nylund & Rosvall, 2019; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). There is also a general discourse among politicians, school leaders, and teachers that vocational students have little motivation to learn and limited interest in theoretical studies (Olofsson & Panican, 2020; Kärnebro et al., 2025; Terning & Tsagalidis, 2020), and teachers engaged in vocational programmes have low expectations of their students (Johansson, 2009). However, there are few existing studies into vocational students' perspectives on education, either in general or for active participation in society specifically, and these do not unanimously confirm the notion that VET students are unmotivated (Högberg, 2011; Ledman, 2015; Rosvall, 2012; Savage et al., 2021). Negative preconceptions and low expectations of VET students combined with a focus on preparation for employment may result in VET students not getting the same opportunities to develop the willingness and abilities to participate actively in society as students on higher education preparatory programmes. Further, existing pre-conceptions that vocational students are uninterested may increase the risk of education researchers reproducing standard stereotypes and reinforcing bias (Brockmann, 2010; Rosvall, 2015). Thus, existing research might present an unfairly negative view of vocational students' views on education. In line with general motivational design principles (Linnenbrink-Garica et al., 2016), we argue that developing education that prepare VET students for active participation in society involves meeting their needs for both a sense of competence ('I can do this') and positive values and goals ('I want to do this'). To meet students' needs we need to know more about what they value and their perspectives on future participation.

The aim of this study is to add to current knowledge about Swedish vocational students' perspectives on education for active participation in society and their expectations of such participation in future (cf. Westheimer, 2015; Sass et al., 2021). Swedish VET programmes are heterogeneous in terms of gender and the labour market sectors they target, therefore differences in the views of students on different programmes were also analysed. The study focuses on the school subject areas of history, religious education, science studies, and social studies,

and builds on the results of a student questionnaire about their perceptions of education for active participation in society and their expected future participation in society. During the project, the Swedish term *medborgarbildning* was used for 'education for active participation in society' and we have chosen to translate this as *citizenship education* for the remainder of the article.

Vocational education and training in Sweden

After nine years in compulsory school, all young people in Sweden have the right to three years of upper secondary education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012) during which they can choose one of 18 national programmes (12 VET programmes and 6 higher education preparatory [HEP] programmes). At present, 30% of upper secondary school students in Sweden are enrolled on a VET programme (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024). The VET programmes largely reflect gender divisions in the labour market, with students on care-oriented programmes being predominantly female, while students on production-oriented programmes are mostly male (Nylund et al., 2017). In addition to these two groups some programmes focus on work in the service sector and most of these programmes are more gender-balanced. All of the VET programmes offered in Sweden are listed in Table 1.

In Sweden, VET and HEP programmes follow the same overarching upper secondary school curriculum and were at the time of this study based around courses.¹ All students had mandatory courses in English, history, physical education and health, mathematics, science studies, religion, social studies, and Swedish or Swedish as a second language. Each programme also included further specific courses, some of which were elective. Since the autumn of 2023, all students obtain basic eligibility for higher education if they do not actively opt out of certain core courses. Our study primarily focusses on students' views in relation to mandatory courses in history, religious education, science studies, and social studies. In the VET programmes, these courses were worth 50 credits each, broadly corresponding to 50 hours of study, while in the HEP programmes the corresponding courses in history, science studies, and social studies were worth 100 credits.

Citizenship education within vocational education and training

Previous research in Scandinavia, England, and Germany has indicated that VET students have fewer opportunities to develop willingness and abilities to participate actively in society than students on HEP programmes (Hjelmér & Rosvall, 2017; Hoskins et al., 2016; Nylund et al., 2018; Savage et al., 2021). Nylund et al. (2017, 2020) showed that VET students encounter less academic

content that prepares them for exerting influence in society than HEP students do, particularly little that questions or encourages active engagement with the construction of social order. Also, policy documents on VET reflect a strong focus on socialisation into future professional roles. For example, in Dutch policy documents citizenship education in vocational programmes mainly focuses on socialising students into existing norms and values in society (Zuurmond et al., 2023). In Sweden and other Nordic countries, educational policy goals have, in recent decades, shifted from promoting active participation in society towards promoting competition and employability (Jørgensen, 2018; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). In Sweden, less time is being allocated to mandatory subjects in VET programmes and curricula have narrowed (Ledman, 2014; Nylund et al., 2017). It has even been argued that the objectives of vocational education and citizenship education are diametrically opposed (Brockmann, 2010; Olofsson & Panican, 2020; Sandersee, 2021).

This aligns with a wider view that education can either focus on a 'vertical' discourse (Bernstein, 2000), which highlights theoretical, formal, abstract knowledge and critical perspectives which enable students to become active and deliberative citizens, or a 'horizontal' discourse which emphasises everyday informal and contextual knowledge which enables students to become productive citizens (Bernstein, 2000; Olofsson & Panican, 2020).

Students' attitudes towards citizenship education

As highlighted above, prevailing preconceptions and expectations of VET students tend to be negative in terms of theoretical studies in general and citizenship education in particular (Johansson, 2009; Olofsson & Panican, 2020; Terning & Tsagalidis, 2020). In an interview-based part of our project, school leaders expressed the belief that VET students need citizenship education but also seemed to feel that VET students generally have little interest in history, religious education, science studies, and social science, or lack the ability to assimilate knowledge in these subject areas (Kärnebro et al., 2025). Teachers who participated in the study shared this perception, at least to an extent (Kärnebro et al., 2025). Students at lower secondary school also seem to regard VET programmes as being for students with relatively low abilities for and interest in studying (Panican, 2020a).

Some studies focusing on VET students' perspectives confirm this negative view of VET students' perception of theoretical studies in general, and citizenship education specifically. VET students participating in a large-scale study in Germany reported significantly lower political interest, intent to vote, and behaviour linked to acquiring and sharing political information than students on academic programmes (Savage et al., 2021). Similarly, Hoskins et al. (2016) found that students entering VET in England had low political self-efficacy

and intentions to vote. Nordby (2019) found some indication that vocational students in Norway regard the education they encounter in science studies as irrelevant. Studies into VET students' perspectives in Sweden support such negative views. For example, Kärnebro (2013) and Rosvall (2012) found that undemocratic views are articulated by students on male-dominated VET programmes. Since Willis (1977), a recurring finding is that vocational students, particularly boys, resist the middle-class ideals of education, most clearly in mandatory theoretical subjects (see, e.g., Högberg, 2011). Persson (2012) also found that VET students tend to participate less in political activities than HEP students. However, research has also shown that Swedish VET students do value theoretical studies in general and specifically citizenship education. For example, Forsberg (2011) found that Swedish VET students engage in discussions and show interest in politics in social studies classes, and Ledman (2015) showed that VET students value knowledge that enables discussions about past, present, and future society. Studies have also revealed that students on the Swedish vehicle and transport programme want to learn about critical thinking and citizenship processes (Asplund, 2010), and regard their studies in Swedish, English, and mathematics as important (Rosvall, 2012). Moreover, students interviewed by Korp (2012) and Rosvall (2012) reported that the education they receive on VET programmes was too elementary. Such positive perspectives are supported by the most recent large-scale International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS; IEA, 2022) which found that Swedish 8-grade students have very good knowledge about citizenship, democracy, and societal issues, and express interest in political and societal issues and strong support for equal rights and opportunities. However, this does appear to vary by gender and socio-economic group (IEA, 2022). It is not clear whether or how such differences manifest when students choose their upper secondary study programmes. However, VET programmes are generally strongly gendered both in terms of the proportion of girls and boys choosing them and in preparing students for occupations that are male- or female-dominated (Panican, 2020b; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024). Further, both historically and today, parents of vocational students often have lower educational backgrounds than parents of HEP students (Nilsson, 1981; Statistics Sweden, 2023).

In summary, although there is a growing body of research on vocational education and citizenship education, the evidence is conflicting and few studies focus on VET students' perspectives in Sweden. Such perspectives are vital to developing education that motivates students to participate actively in society.

Method

Context of the study

This study was part of a joint research and development project in which researchers and teachers collaboratively developed knowledge about, and for, citizenship education in Swedish VET programmes. The project is part of a national initiative commissioned by the Swedish government to develop collaboration models to conducting research that is relevant to schools by enabling professional learning communities within schools to initiate research, rather than just academic researchers (ULF agreement, 2025).

Our project was initiated by teachers involved in teaching history, religious education, science studies, and social studies at two Swedish upper secondary schools in one municipality in Northern Sweden. As these courses are worth only 50 credits, the teachers recognised a particularly urgent need to jointly identify ways to improve citizenship education for vocational students in these subjects: increased collaboration between these subjects could leave more time for in-depth discussion, critical reflections, perspective-taking, and learning through active engagement. Active participation in society is an explicit motive for including these subjects in the upper secondary school curriculum (Ledman, 2014). Our selection does not imply that these are the only subjects relevant to citizenship education. On the contrary, we believe that citizenship education should permeate all education and all subjects.

The teachers who initiated the project were driven by the belief that teaching should be based on students' interests and engagements. Since both teachers and researchers shared an interest in discovering more about students' perspectives on citizenship education, we developed a student questionnaire together. Students' responses to selected statements in this questionnaire are discussed in this article.

The project received ethical approval from The Swedish Ethical Review Authority (dnr 2020-01188).

Exploration of the meaning of citizenship education

One aim of the joint research and development project was to explore the meaning of citizenship education (*medborgarbildning* in Swedish). Hence, our use of the term citizenship education is not underpinned by theory but rather intended as a working concept to unpack and reconstruct during the project. We began the project with a relatively open understanding of citizenship education, encompassing all education that gives students opportunities to reflect on different norms and values, practice critical thinking and argumentation, develop awareness of different perspectives, and foster the ability to take a stand. This understanding drew largely on the Swedish upper secondary school

curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011) and teachers' understanding of citizenship education expressed in the call for the project. Neither the Swedish upper secondary school curriculum nor the syllabuses for any of the four subjects (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011) explicitly mention citizenship education. The curriculum does however emphasise that education should convey and embed respect for the fundamental democratic values that Swedish society is based upon. It further states that teaching should be permeated by democratic working methods and provide opportunities to develop students' willingness and abilities to take personal responsibility and participate actively in society.

During the first part of the project, citizenship education was discussed in groups of teachers and researchers. Teachers presented examples of citizenship education within their specific subjects and the four syllabuses were then analysed by the whole group (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Examples of content and abilities relating to citizenship education that were identified in the syllabuses included: 'Ability to use knowledge of natural science to discuss, take positions, and formulate different options for action' (science studies syllabus), 'Groups' and individuals' identity, relationships, and social living conditions based on people being grouped based on categories that create both community and exclusion' (social science syllabus), 'Different perceptions of the relationship between religion and science in current social debate' (religious education syllabus), and 'Ability to search, review, interpret, and evaluate sources based on source-critical methods and present the results with varying forms of expression' (history syllabus).

The process of operationalising citizenship education for the questionnaire became an entry point for discussions about what citizenship education could mean. The discussion included elaboration of connections between citizenship education and the curriculum and syllabuses for the selected courses. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of these discussions and a questionnaire provided by the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS; IEA, 2016). The ICCS is an international study of 8th grade students' knowledge, attitudes, and engagement in civic issues. According to them:

Civic and citizenship education provides young people with the knowledge, understanding, and disposition that enables them to participate as citizens in society. It seeks to support emerging citizens by helping them understand and engage with society's principles and institutions, develop and exercise informed critical judgment, and learn about and appreciate citizens' rights and responsibilities (IEA, 2016, p. 1).

This definition of citizenship education aligned rather well with the overall discussion within the project group.

Questionnaire design

The aim of the questionnaire was to gather students' perspectives on citizenship education and engagement in society. Understanding which aspects students think are more and less important enables the teachers to adapt their teaching partly by addressing issues that students value, but also by explicitly problematising why issues students value less can be useful. To design the questionnaire, the researchers first presented a range of statements about citizenship, derived from the earlier discussions and ICCS questionnaire (IEA, 2016). Through discussion, this was narrowed down to 100 statements, this being the maximum number that teachers deemed likely to invite valid responses. Each statement was scored on a four-point Likert-type scale. The questionnaire was piloted with 40 students in the spring of 2020.

The statements in the final version of the questionnaire were divided into five main sections; (1) being a citizen, (2) the importance attributed by students to specific aspects of citizenship education, (3) current participation in society, (4) likelihood of future participation in society, and (5) attitudes towards citizenship. The questionnaire was divided into two parts (sections 1+2 and 3–5 respectively) which were distributed on different occasions. The results from sections 2 and 4 (involving 39 and 14 statements, respectively) were identified by the researchers and teachers to be the most interesting and relevant, and were thus selected for further analysis. The questionnaire was originally administered in Swedish. Tables 2 and 3 display the selected statements translated into English. Section 2 (the importance attributed by students to specific aspects of citizenship education) covered the abilities the respondents regarded as important to learn, the methods they believed teachers should use, and the content they regarded as important to learn. Most of the statements in our questionnaire relating to future participation, abilities, and methods were adapted from the ICCS questionnaire. These were selected based on alignment with the curriculum and syllabuses and the project group's earlier theoretical discussion about citizenship education. Most of the statements relating to content were based on the Swedish syllabuses for religious education, history, science studies, and social sciences.

Respondents

The questionnaire was distributed during the autumn of 2020 to all VET students in grade three in the municipality participating in the joint research and development project ($n = 162$). In total, 140 students (57 females, 82 males, 1 other) completed the first part of the questionnaire and 97 (41 females, 54 males, 2 other) completed the second part (Table 1).

Table 1. Titles of the VET programmes included in the study and associated groups based on gender and labour market sector. The final column shows the numbers of students responding to parts 1/2 of the questionnaire.

Programme^A	Group^B	Respondents
Child Recreation	1	21 / 1
Health Care	1	19 / 14
Restaurant and Food	2	2 / 7
Handicraft	2	9 / 8
Business and Administration	2	9 / 8
Construction	3	22 / 15
Heating, Ventilation and Sanitation Engineering	3	6 / 3
Vehicle Engineering	3	11 / 14
Electrical Engineering and Energy	3	31 / 23
Industrial	3	10 / 9

^A At the two schools included in this study 10 vocational programmes are available. Natural Resource Use and Hotel and Tourism are not available.

^B 1 = Caring programmes, 2 = Service programmes, 3 = Production programmes.

Analysis

As a first step we analysed the frequency distribution of students' responses to each statement in the questionnaire individually. The distribution of responses by students from each programme was also analysed, but there were too few students per programme to enable valid statistical between-programme comparisons. Thus, the programmes were grouped into three categories (Caring, Service, and Production), based on the gender distribution and targeted labour market sectors. The Kruskal-Wallis test was applied, with subsequent pairwise post-hoc tests, to analyse differences between responses from the three groups.

Next, the operationalisation of citizenship education and the results of the questionnaire were analysed using Westheimer's (2015) description of different types of citizens and the notions of direct vs indirect and individual vs collective action described by Sass et al. (2021). Addressing the question 'What kind of citizen do we need to support an effective democratic society?', Westheimer (2015, p. 38) identifies three types: personally responsible, participatory, and social justice-oriented. The personally responsible citizens act in the community by working, paying taxes, and helping others in need. The participatory citizens

are active members of community organisations and/or improvement efforts. They organise community efforts, know strategies for accomplishing collective tasks, and know how governmental agencies work. The social justice-oriented citizens critically assess social, political, and economic structures. They explore strategies for change that address root causes of the problem and seek out and address areas of injustice. According to Sass et al. (2021) direct action refers to individuals who directly contribute to attempts to solve issues, while indirect action involves persuading others to contribute. Individual action refers to behaviour directed towards a goal selected by the individual themselves, while collective action concerns voluntary action as a group directed towards a collectively chosen goal.

Results and discussion

Students' perspectives on the importance of citizenship education

Most of the vocational students surveyed had positive views of citizenship education in upper secondary school. Between 64% and 96% agreed or strongly agreed that it was important for upper secondary school education to foster the abilities, apply the methods, and include the contents highlighted in the questionnaire (Table 2). The general pattern was most students agreeing with the statements, and up to 40% strongly agreeing that the content, abilities, or methods mentioned are important (Figure 1, Table 2). Thus, the positive attitudes of Swedish 8th grade students towards citizenship, detected in the ICCS (IEA, 2016, 2022), are apparently retained by VET students in upper secondary school. The results also support the findings of previous studies that Swedish VET students are motivated. For example, an ethnographic study by Rosvall (2012) and a literature review by Asplund (2010) indicated that they are interested in studying Swedish, English, maths, critical thinking, and citizenship processes. In addition, interview-based studies by Ledman (2015) and Forsberg (2011) have shown that vocational students value the ability to express their views and listen to others and knowledge that enables them to engage in discussions about past, present, and future society. However, our results conflict with the more general discourse amongst politicians, school leaders, and teachers, that vocational students have little motivation to learn or interest in theoretical studies (Olofsson & Panican, 2020; Terning & Tsagalidis, 2020).

Although most students responded positively to most statements, they seemed to regard some abilities, methods, and contents as more important than others (Table 2). Many of the abilities and methods that most students agreed were important were described in general terms, for example, to learn to *use one's knowledge to act or suggest different ways of acting in a given situation or to not only*

learn ABOUT something, but also get to PRACTISE it (in each of these cases 95% agreed; Table 2). These statements could be interpreted as focusing on direct individual actions (Sass et al., 2021). Actions related to all three kinds of citizens fit into these general statements (Westheimer, 2015). More specific abilities associated with indirect and/or collective actions, such as the ability to *organise a group to achieve change* or *talk with other people about social issues*, were considered important by fewer students, but still a majority (74 and 64%, respectively). These actions are typical of participatory and social justice-oriented citizens (Westheimer, 2015). Generally, a large majority of the students recognised the importance of content relating to social studies (e.g., *how the economy works* and content *about human rights*, 95% agreed in each case). Fewer recognised the importance of content relating to history (e.g., *about how different groups lived in different times*, 82% agreed) and religious education (e.g., *about the relationship between religion and science*, 77% agreed). However, it should be noted that more than 89% of students regarded at least one topic within each subject as important.

Students' future participation in society

We observed much greater variation in students' responses to statements about the likelihood that they would participate in activities in society than in their responses to statements about what they considered important to learn in upper secondary school (Figure 1, Table 3). The activities mentioned can be categorised into three distinct groups.

The first is voting, which can be considered an indirect individual action. More than 91% of the students expressed beliefs (in responses to four statements) that they would vote in the future. These results are in line with findings by Persson (2012) that Swedish vocational students had relatively high intentions to vote. Compared with the 14-year-olds who participated in the ICCS study (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023) a higher proportion of vocational student participants in our study expressed positive attitudes towards future voting. Our data do not reveal the reasons for this difference, but age may certainly be an important factor, as upper secondary students will be eligible to vote sooner than lower secondary students.

The second group of activities can be classified as making personal sacrifices for social justice or the environment. Depending on the intention of these actions they might be regarded as direct individual action and typical of the personal responsible citizen, but they could also constitute indirect action to put collective pressure on governments or industries to achieve change. Just over half of the students could envision making such sacrifices (according to responses to three statements). This is similar to the results from 14-year-olds in settings in both Sweden (IEA, 2022) and Cyprus (Hadjichambis & Paraskeva-Hadjichambi, 2020).

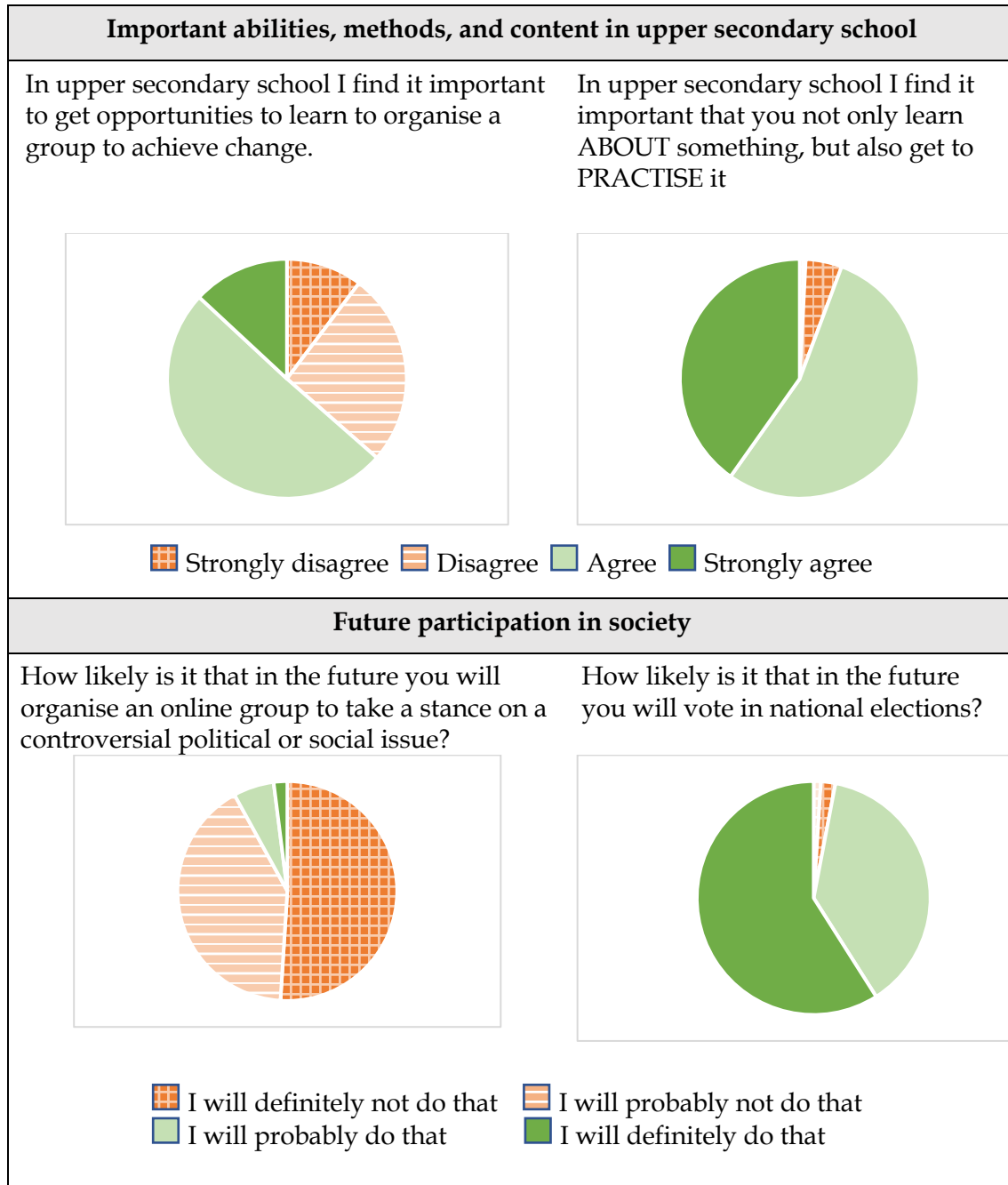


Figure 1. Distributions (%) of students' responses to the statements that elicited the highest frequencies of negative (left) and positive (right) responses relating to the abilities, methods, and content offered in upper secondary school and future participation in society.

Table 2. Distributions (%) of students' responses to all statements about what they consider it is important to learn in upper secondary school. Asterisks () indicate statements for which responses of students on production-oriented programmes differed significantly from those of students on caring and/or service programmes, according to the Kruskal-Wallis test ($p < .05$).*

		Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly agree (4)	% Agree
Abilities. In upper secondary school I find it important to get opportunities to learn to:						
understand and respect the needs and actions of others	*	0	3	61	35	96
use one's knowledge to act		1	3	69	26	95
suggest different ways of acting in a given situation		2	4	66	29	95
manage conflicts		1	6	61	33	94
critically review information		3	4	65	28	93
be able to understand and discuss the opinions of others		2	6	66	27	93
counteract prejudices	*	2	7	60	32	92
question prevailing norms (e.g., how a girl or boy is expected to be)	*	6	10	55	29	84
take a personal stand on various societal issues		6	14	64	16	80
talk with other people about societal issues		8	18	59	15	74
follow debates on various societal issues (political, economic, social, or environmental)	*	9	18	59	13	72
organise a group to achieve change		9	26	51	13	64
Methods. In upper secondary school I find it important that:						
you not only learn ABOUT something, but also get to PRACTISE it		1	4	55	40	95
teachers present several sides of issues when explaining them in class		0	5	72	23	95
you get to reflect on various value-based issues (e.g. equality, cultural diversity, the value of nature)	*	3	3	69	25	94
you have influence over how you are taught	*	1	8	61	31	92

you get to meet people who have different opinions or experiences from yours	*	2	7	57	34	91
teachers encourage students to express their opinions	*	2	7	57	34	91
you get some education outside of school (for example in a forest, a museum, town hall, or company)		6	14	60	19	79
you get some education involving combinations of several teachers and subjects		6	17	53	23	76
Content. In upper secondary school I find it important to get opportunities to learn:						
how the economy works		1	5	53	42	95
about human rights		1	4	57	38	95
how social life in society works		1	6	66	27	93
about fair distribution of resources		4	4	67	26	92
how the legal system works		2	7	64	28	92
about how scientific methods can be used to understand various problems in society		3	6	69	22	91
about how various historical events have affected today's society		2	7	66	25	91
the role of media in society		3	7	63	27	90
solutions to different environmental problems		3	7	60	30	90
about environmental and climate issues		5	6	62	28	90
about people's identities (based on religion, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality)		3	7	65	25	90
how your lifestyle affects the environment as well as your and others' health		4	9	56	32	88
about how history is used today to influence people		3	13	66	20	86
how the political system works		4	12	60	24	84
about different conceptions of life and religions		4	12	66	18	84
about various ethical and moral issues		4	14	65	19	84
about different historical time periods		4	14	64	18	82
about how different groups lived at different times		4	15	63	19	82
about the relationship between religion and science		6	17	56	21	77

The third group of activities are classified as actively expressing and discussing opinions on important societal issues, for example, organising a group to achieve change, following debates, questioning norms, and taking part in a peaceful rally. The items covering these aspects mostly relate to collective indirect action and are typical of participatory and social justice-oriented citizens. Fewer than 23% of the students indicated (in responses to seven statements) the belief that they would engage in these activities in the future (Table 3). A much lower proportion of vocational students expected to actively express and discuss their opinions on important societal issues than of the 14-year-olds who participated in the ICCS study (IEA, 2022). Previous studies have found that variation in attitudes towards citizenship education is linked to socioeconomic status and that students from vocational programmes and lower socioeconomic status are less socialised to actively participate in society than students in academic programmes (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Nylund & Rosvall, 2019; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017, 2023). This may explain why fewer vocational students believed it was likely that they would actively express and discuss their opinions on important issues in the future compared to the 14-year-olds who participated in the ICCS study (IEA, 2022).

Differences in perceived importance and participation between students on different VET programmes

An initial descriptive analysis of responses showed that all programmes included some students who felt strongly positive or negative about citizenship education, but no single programme stood out as having many such students. However, a few students on every programme did not expect to engage in the activities mentioned, and did not recognise the importance of developing the abilities or learning the content highlighted or the teacher using the specified methods. In line with arguments by Rosvall (2015), the classroom culture could potentially be affected by these students, even though they are in minority, along in with the prevailing beliefs that vocational students are unmotivated and vocational training differs from citizenship education, as described for example by Olofsson and Panican (2020) and Sanderse (2021).

Our respondents included too few students from individual programmes to analyse between-programme differences in their views. We therefore decided to cluster them into three groups (designated Caring, Service, and Production programmes) before in-depth analysis of differences in their views on the perceived importance of citizenship education and expected societal participation. Initial descriptive analysis found only small differences (< 10 percentage points) between groups for most statements.

Table 3. Distributions (%) of students' responses to statements relating to their thoughts about future participation in society. Asterisks () indicate statements for which the responses of students on production programmes differed significantly from those of students on caring and service programmes, according to the Kruskal-Wallis test ($p < .05$).*

How likely is it that in the future you will:	I will definitely not do that	I will probably not do that	I will probably do that	I will definitely do that	% who probably or definitely will
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
vote in national elections	1	2	38	59	97
vote in local elections	1	7	49	43	92
vote in EU elections	1	9	43	48	91
get information about candidates before voting in an election	2	7	49	42	91
choose to buy certain products in support of social justice (e.g., fair trade products) *	8	23	50	19	69
talk with others about your views regarding societal issues	6	28	46	20	66
consciously make personal sacrifices for the sake of the environment *	13	26	42	19	61
join an organisation addressing societal issues (e.g., a political party or environmental organisation that does something to improve things for other individuals or society)	33	44	16	7	23
participate in an online campaign	38	39	18	5	23
take part in a peaceful march or rally	40	40	11	9	20
contact a politician	39	42	11	8	19
collect signatures for a petition	51	32	14	4	18
contribute to an online discussion forum about controversial social or political issues	46	42	7	5	12
organise an online group to take a stance on a controversial political or social issue	51	41	6	2	8

Figure 2 illustrates typical response patterns for items with notably large and small between-group differences. The smallest differences between programme groups in shares of students agreeing (1–14 percentage points difference) were

found for statements regarding content that students felt it was important to learn. Larger between-group variations were found for statements relating to methods, abilities, and participation (ranges: 0–19, 0–33, and 1–52 percentage points, respectively). In general, smaller proportions of students in the male-dominated production programme group indicated positive views about citizenship education and participation than in the other two groups. This pattern echoes gendered differences that have been identified by previous studies (Högberg, 2011; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). For eight of the 39 statements relating to the importance of specific aspects of citizenship education we found significant differences in responses between students on production-oriented programmes and those on caring and/or service programmes (Kruskal-Wallis test, $p < .05$; Table 2). These statements largely concerned abilities that can be considered particularly important when working closely with other people, for example, questioning norms, encountering people with different opinions, and reflecting on values. While these abilities are essential in care and service professions, they are important for everyone in society. We also found significant differences in responses to two of the 14 statements about future participation between students on production-oriented programmes and those on caring or service programmes (Kruskal-Wallis test, $p < .05$; Table 3). These statements concerned making personal sacrifices for social justice or the environment. More students on the male-dominated production programmes responded negatively to these statements (Table 3).

Methodological considerations

This study was part of a joint research and development project and focuses on final year VET students in two upper secondary schools in one municipality. Although the respondents do represent students on diverse VET programmes, we cannot claim that the results are generalisable to all vocational students in other countries, or even Sweden. Nonetheless, our results contribute to the broader discussion on VET students' perspectives on citizenship education. For the teachers involved in the project, gaining knowledge about students' perspectives was particularly important, as they were convinced that any teaching they develop must be based on students' views.

The development of the questionnaire was a joint endeavour by the group of teachers and researchers. We wanted to include a broad set of statements aligning the four subjects' syllabuses while keeping the length of the questionnaire reasonable. Questions about how we operationalised citizenship education – encompassing what was included and excluded – surfaced repeatedly, both within the project group and when presenting our results to other researchers and teachers. One discussion highlighted that only a few statements clearly related to what Westheimer (2015) describes as the personally responsible citizen.

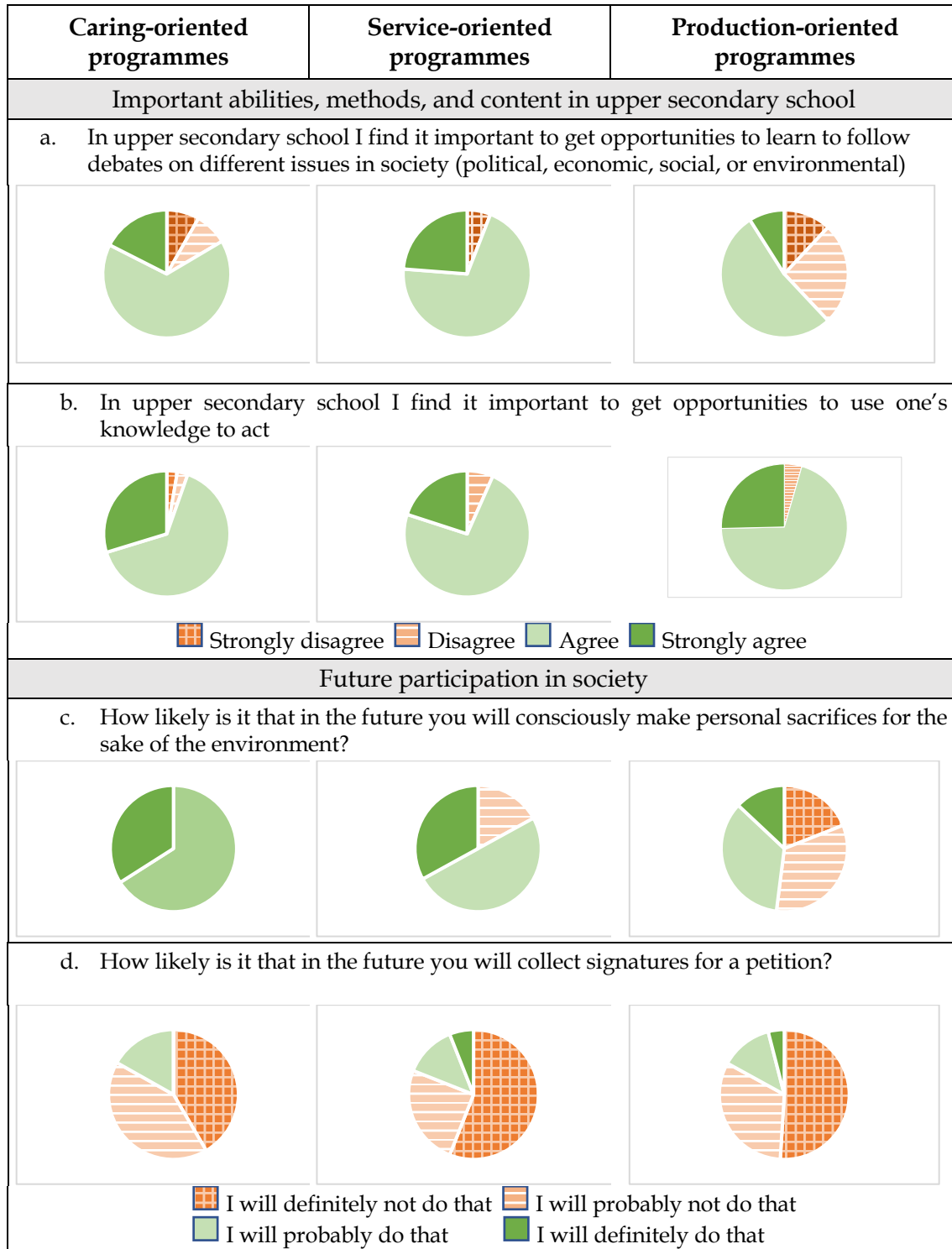


Figure 2. Illustration of response pattern (frequency distribution) to statement with large (a and c) and small (b and d) differences between the three programme groups.

Such a citizen acts responsibly in the community by working, paying taxes, helping others in need, and taking other direct individual actions. Teachers had several anecdotal stories about this kind of action, such as students helping neighbours with shovelling snow or buying groceries for elderly people during the pandemic. Most statements in the questionnaire instead related to indirect and collective actions that are typical of participatory and social justice-oriented citizens. No question related particularly to taking collective action in work life, for example joining a union and working together for change. This may have led us to underestimate VET students' anticipated level of participation in society. However, as Westheimer (2015) states, citizens who can and do take personal responsibility are important, but not sufficient, for a functioning democratic society. The latter also requires citizens who are active members of community organisations and know about strategies for accomplishing collective tasks (participatory citizens), and others who critically examine multiple perspectives and explore strategies for change that address causes of problems and areas of injustice (social justice-oriented citizens).

Conclusions and implications

We began this article by referring to Bernstein's (2000) description of citizenship education as a set of pedagogical rights that schools ought to provide for students. In this section we revisit our results by asking whether the schools have provided the VET students with sufficient education to develop willingness and abilities to participate in society. The answer is both yes and no: yes, in that most vocational students expressed positive views of citizenship education in upper secondary school, apparently finding citizenship education relevant and valuable, which is an important aspect of motivation to learn (Linnenbrink-Garica et al., 2016); and no, in that their expectations of future participation in societal activities varied strongly depending on the activity. Fewer students considered statements relating to indirect or collective action, or indicating participatory or social justice-oriented citizenship, to be important compared to statements relating to individual action and personal responsibility. Whether this is a result of students lacking opportunities to develop relevant competence or feeling less included in society, both of which are important to motivation (Linnenbrink-Garica et al., 2016), is beyond the scope of this study. For most aspects we found relatively small differences in responses between the three groups of vocational programmes. Where larger differences were detected, fewer students on the male-dominated production programmes indicated positive views about citizenship education and participation than the other two groups. However, it is important not to reproduce preconceptions of students as uninterested. The overarching result is that many VET students find citizenship

education important and, although not all VET students anticipate future participation in a broad spectrum of actions in society, their interest in the area creates opportunities for further development of teaching that includes strengthening students' ability to question and actively participate in societal and workplace development. Overall, the teachers in the project were both surprised and happy to see positive responses from a majority of the students and recognised that this did not correspond with how they sometimes talk about them in collegial situations. These results highlight the value of teachers scrutinising and actively questioning their own assumptions, and those of other colleagues and school leaders, about different groups of students.

As argued by others (Sanderse, 2021; Zuurmond et al., 2023), we believe that citizenship education within VET programmes requires further attention. The proportion of time allocated to general subjects in VET programmes has fallen (Ledman, 2014; Nylund et al., 2017) and their focus has shifted from cultivating autonomy, equality, and citizenship towards competition and employability (Jørgensen, 2018; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Zuurmond et al., 2023). Accordingly, there seem to be urgent needs for VET to foster students' development not only as personally responsible citizens but also participatory and social justice-oriented citizens. Citizenship education should focus not only on socialisation (for example, internalising rules, traditions, and social norms) but also development of the self, critical thinking, and autonomy, and promote the ability to question the status quo in workplaces and elsewhere (Zuurmond et al., 2023). Vocational and citizenship education should not be seen as in opposition. Many of the statements in our questionnaire that relate to participatory and social justice-oriented citizenship, for example, the ability to organise a group to achieve change, questioning norms, taking a personal stand, and reflecting on different value-based issues, are also important in preparing for a vocation. It should be noted that citizenship can also be developed in vocational courses and in professional settings and is not only a responsibility for the four subjects included in this project. A deeper understanding of the perspectives identified in this study could be developed through further interview-based research and a larger-scale comparison of differences between students on VET and HEP programmes.

Endnote

¹ Since 2025 the programmes are instead based around subjects at different levels.

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Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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