

# From boundary maintenance to boundary crossing: Geography in the Norwegian national curriculum

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## Abstract

The integrated status of Social Studies in the Norwegian *Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion in Primary and Secondary Education and Training 2020* reflects an international educational trend pertaining to a movement from knowledge and traditional disciplinary thinking to generic skills, competence and boundary crossing. This article addresses the changed organisation of geography as a subject within Social Studies in the national curriculum framework. Through a thematic analysis of how geographical knowledge is classified and represented in the curriculum, this article discusses opportunities and limitations in the curriculum when it comes to developing students' powerful geographical knowledge. The analysis shows that geographical knowledge is organised in an attempt to reduce content boundaries. Found across the curriculum, geographical knowledge includes geographical scale, geographic conditions and human–nature interconnections. However, geographical knowledge is represented through an understanding of space as absolute and fixed rather than relational and dynamic, as well as through a technical and mainly individual understanding of scale. We conclude that boundary crossing related to sustainability and citizenship as interdisciplinary topics opens opportunities for powerful geographical knowledge, although this potential is limited by the weak classification of geography in the curriculum for Social Studies.

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## KEYWORDS

boundaries, curriculum, geographical knowledge, powerful knowledge

## INTRODUCTION

The international education debate concerning knowledge, skills and competence also concerns the structure of a curriculum regarding the extent to which school subjects and knowledge are differentiated (Niemelä, 2021). The movement towards generic skills, competence and interdisciplinarity is part of an international turn to prepare young people to handle and engage with societal change. At the same time, this turn risks weakening disciplinary content knowledge in education (Helsvig, 2022; Wheelahan, 2007; Young, 2008). The subject of geography in the Norwegian national curriculum reform completed in 2020 is a case in point, as the organisation of the subject has changed in primary and lower secondary schools and three new interdisciplinary topics were introduced: democracy and citizenship, sustainability and health and life skills. Informed by the educational framework of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Norwegian policymakers have also included new core elements in the curriculum to strengthen the emphasis on knowledge. However, although named *The Knowledge Promotion 2020* (LK20), researchers have observed that the curriculum is structured around competence development and learning outcomes at the expense of disciplinary content (Karseth et al., 2020; Sundby & Karseth, 2022). Furthermore, Walmann Hidle and Skarpenes (2021) identified an unclear relation between the core elements of the subject and the interdisciplinary topics in the Social Studies curriculum. These complexities have led researchers to question whether the LK20 fails to strengthen the knowledge dimension of the school subject (Sundby & Karseth, 2022; Walmann Hidle & Skarpenes, 2021). The removal of geography as a specific domain within the curriculum for Social Studies and the low number of competence goals related to geography may weaken geographical knowledge in school. At the same time, the new emphasis on sustainability has the potential for revitalising the subject (Eidsvik, 2020; Sætre, 2021).

Drawing on the work of Young (2008), geography educators have argued that the above educational trends may exclude young people from access to powerful knowledge, defined as knowledge that enables them to understand and think beyond their own experience, change their perceptions and understandings, the questions they ask and the explanations they explore. Moreover, geography educators have emphasised the value of learning disciplinary geographical knowledge to develop students' capabilities to think and reason in specialised ways (Bustin, 2019; Lambert, 2011; Lambert & Morgan, 2010). The latter aspect is the key idea of the theoretical framework GeoCapabilities, in which the overall goal is to enhance young peoples' freedom to live a life they value that does not threaten the lives of others (Mitchell, 2022). However, Mitchell (2022) suggested that interdisciplinarity beyond geography is important for GeoCapabilities in the age of the Anthropocene. Along similar lines, Niemelä (2021) argued that maintaining and crossing the boundaries of disciplinary content are keys to developing students' powerful knowledge.

Simultaneously, Bagoly-Simó (2022) argued that although geography provides a unique contribution when it comes to areas such as sustainability issues, this contribution is not always visible in curricula across national educational contexts (see also Bagoly-Simó, 2017; Bouwmans & Béneker, 2018). However, none of these studies delved deeply into the geography in each of these curricula. Furthermore, Deng (2022) noted that contributions to the GeoCapabilities approach focus heavily on curriculum making in classrooms, implying that teachers can bypass and overcome limitations in curriculum. In this way, issues related to

the development of national curricula frameworks are overlooked. When it comes to the Norwegian context, a gap remains regarding how geographical knowledge appears when the Core Curriculum and the curriculum for Social Studies are scrutinised together, with a view to how sustainability, citizenship and geography are linked.

The aim of this article is to analyse geographical knowledge as an example of the broader conception of knowledge in the national curriculum. Drawing on the educational sociologist Basil Bernstein (2000), we are interested in how disciplinary content from geography is recontextualised for school purposes. Furthermore, we apply his concept of classification, along with a spatial analytical lens, to provide insight into the structure that allows and enables geographical knowledge to be recontextualised. In this way, the article contributes to Bernsteinian-inspired analyses barely touched by geography educationists internationally (see also Fargher et al., 2021; Lambert et al., 2021). Through a thematic analysis of curriculum documents, this article examines the following research question: *How is geographical knowledge classified and represented in the Norwegian national curriculum?*

The article is organised into four parts. The first part theorises the organisation of educational knowledge by drawing on the work of Bernstein (1971) and Young (2008) to discuss how powerful knowledge is interpreted within geography education. In the second part, we outline our methodological approach to curriculum analysis. Based on our findings presented in the third part, the fourth part discusses opportunities and limitations in the national curriculum framework when it comes to developing students' powerful geographical knowledge. Here, we demonstrate that the Norwegian national curriculum includes spatial concepts and geographical topics and that extracts linking geography and citizenship have powerful potential. However, the potential for developing students' powerful geographical knowledge is constrained by the weak classification of the subject and the lack of a disciplinary knowledge structure. In this way, geography provides an example of how the knowledge dimension may be seen as undermined in the national curriculum framework despite the ambition of a "knowledge promotion".

## ORGANISATION OF EDUCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

The recontextualising field is the field between the production field, where new knowledge is constructed, and the reproduction field where pedagogic practice in school occurs. In the process of de- and re-location of a discourse from the field of production, the original discourse undergoes an ideological transformation negotiated by actors with specialised interests and positionalities in the recontextualising field. The Official Recontextualizing Field (ORF) is created and dominated by the state and its selected agents and ministries. The recontextualising rules constitute the official knowledge—the 'what' and the 'how' of education (Bernstein, 2000). Nevertheless, the field will have a range of ideological pedagogic positions which struggle for the control of the field. When a discourse moves and is recontextualised, the outcome represents a negotiated ideological transformation (Bernstein, 2000).

In his sociology of knowledge, Bernstein (1971, pp. 48–51) presented two types of curricula regarding the relative status of content in the recontextualisation field. If classification is strong, a curriculum has clear boundaries between the given content, and this content is well insulated from other content, displaying a collection code. The subtype *specialised knowledge* refers to knowledge organised as closed content situated in science disciplines, and the subtype *non-specialised knowledge* has the subject or the course as the basic knowledge unit. In contrast, classification is weak when these boundaries are blurred. Subject knowledge that is recontextualised by an attempt to reduce content boundaries is known as an integrated code, and subjects in education are subordinated to a superior idea.

In addition to identifying different educational codes, Bernstein (1990) highlighted everyday and scientific knowledge in education. He asserted that both are equally important but noted that scientific forms of knowledge may appear more open to all students regardless of social background. Unlike everyday knowledge, scientific knowledge is more context independent and transferable. Young (2008) not only drew on Bernstein's differentiation of knowledge but also discussed the epistemological aspects. As a critique of employment and competence orientation in the British curriculum around the millennium, Young (2008) argued for "bringing knowledge back in" through the concept of powerful knowledge. This concept of knowledge is developed from a social justice point of view, where access to such knowledge should be a right for all and not just for the few. According to Young (2008), powerful knowledge is specialised knowledge based on academic disciplines. In contrast to context-based everyday knowledge, it enhances the intellectual power of those who have access to it. Consequently, the weakening of disciplinary content knowledge in the curriculum and the adoption of a competence-based approach close to the practical and common-sense knowledge that students need in their everyday activities and working life can exclude young people from access to powerful knowledge. In addition to ensure student access to such scientific knowledge, it is also about teaching students the distinctive qualities of powerful geographical concepts.

Then, what does a curriculum with powerful knowledge at its heart look like? Young and Muller (2010) presented three different educational scenarios for the future in relation to knowledge. A Future 1 curriculum is content-oriented with fixed subject boundaries and a view of subject knowledge as given, static and uncontested. In contrast, in a Future 2 curriculum, the role of knowledge is reduced to a vehicle for engaging in generic skills and competencies. Young et al. (2014) and Young and Muller (2010) have therefore suggested a Future 3 curriculum that values powerful disciplinary knowledge and human capabilities based on such knowledge. In such a curriculum, subject knowledge is not fixed or given but dynamic. They argued that in a Future 3 curriculum, boundary maintenance must occur prior to boundary crossing for knowledge to become powerful (Young et al., 2014).

## **POWERFUL GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE AND GEOCAPABILITIES**

Researchers have offered several partly overlapping approaches to how powerful knowledge and the Future 3 curriculum can be conceptualised in geography education. The GeoCapabilities framework provides one such effort by drawing on three perspectives. The first perspective understands the geography teacher as a curriculum maker, presenting arguments for the value of geography as a school subject to educate youth in a dynamic and complex world. The second perspective is based on Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's normative approach to human welfare (see Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1979), which emphasises freedom in terms of capabilities: what people are capable of being and doing to live a decent life. The third perspective is powerful disciplinary knowledge in terms of what students can think like, be and do in the world as a result of their geography education (Bladh, 2020; Bustin, 2019; Lambert, 2013; Lambert & Morgan, 2010).

The GeoCapabilities framework can be further operationalised along three dimensions. Firstly, the subject of geography can contribute to young people's acquisition of deep descriptive and explanatory world knowledge. This includes an overview of the world and an understanding of the complexity of places and how they come to be, based on in-depth studies (Bustin, 2019). Secondly, geography education can also lead to the development of the relational thinking that characterises geographical thought. Relation thinking includes key concepts such as space, place and scale (the local, the regional, the national and the

global), as well as the interconnections between human and physical processes and people and places in the world. However, as Lambert and Morgan (2010) noted, key concepts are contested within the field of academic geography debating how to understand and explain changes in the world. A technical and absolute understanding of space simply refers to cartographic scale or the spatial extent of a phenomenon, and scales are divided into different levels. In contrast, Massey (2005) among others developed the idea of relational space, which has been widely recognised within the discipline and beyond. Inherent in this idea is that space is never closed or fixed but is instead shaped by interrelations through different scales. Consequently, scales such as the global or the local do not exist in themselves, but are constructed in relationships with other scales through social practices. The outcomes of these processes can be studied in specific geographical contexts through the idea of place. Thirdly, the subject of geography can enhance young people's propensity and disposition to think about alternative social, economic and environmental futures in particular place contexts, drawing on a range of skills such as decision-making, analysis, evaluation, imagination and argumentation (Bustin, 2019; Lambert & Morgan, 2010). Jointly, this broader understanding contributes to young people's capabilities to make informed choices about how to live and think in ways that promote freedom in life without harming the lives of others (Bustin, 2019; Mitchell, 2022).

We also assert that the power of geographical knowledge lies in combining the vocabulary of geography, including geographical topics and phenomena, with the grammatical structures or key concepts of the subject on which students depend to engage with the vocabulary (Brooks, 2013; Fögele, 2017; Jackson, 2006; Lambert, 2004). Informed more directly by Young's concept, Maude (2016) presented a typology of what powerful geographical knowledge might look like. In addition to knowledge of the world, key concepts and analytical frameworks similar to those presented above, Maude (2016) described powerful geographical knowledge as knowledge that gives students some power over their own knowledge. This process requires knowledge that enables students to understand geographical reasoning and how to evaluate claims about knowledge itself.

## CRITIQUES AND LACUNAS IN THE DEBATE ON POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE

Researchers have offered multifaceted criticism of Young and powerful geographical knowledge relating to both the philosophy of science and pedagogy. Catling and Martin (2011) observed that Young privileges academic knowledge over everyday knowledge. Referring to the cultural turn within academic geography, Roberts (2014) argued that geographical knowledge is not necessarily testable or generalisable, as in the natural sciences, but rather situated as individuals interpret the world from a specific place and position. The situatedness of knowledge also has pedagogic value because all students bring their own knowledge and understanding of the world from direct and indirect personal experiences to school. Although Young (2008) and Young and Muller (2013) acknowledged that schools should recognise the practical and context-based everyday knowledge of students, they reasoned that it does not need to be explicitly referred to in the curriculum. However, according to both Catling and Martin (2011) and Roberts (2014, 2022), everyday knowledge should not only be valued as a pedagogical starting point but also recognised in the curriculum as a valid source of knowledge if it is to actually be brought into dialogue with scientific knowledge in the classroom. In here lies the potential for powerful knowledge.

Similarly, Wrigley (2018) emphasised that 'bringing the child back in' is as important as academic knowledge for a socially just curriculum. He claims that the students' capacity to question and understand their everyday situations requires attention to both vernacular and

canonical knowledge from disciplines. However, regarding the latter, Rudolph et al. (2018) have argued that the 'shine' of disciplinary knowledge must be scrutinised along with its 'shadows' referring to colonial relations of power. This means 'bringing history back in' to critical analysis of knowledge projects. In geography, this is particularly prevalent when it comes to the spatial representation of people and places (Morgan & Lambert, 2023).

Within the GeoCapabilities framework, human agency is seen as an outcome of powerful geography education (Lambert et al., 2021). The idea of spatial citizenship more specifically conceptualises students' abilities to produce and criticise absolute and relational notions of space, bridging the natural and social worlds, connecting everyday life and science and understanding social action at multiple geographical scales (Gryl & Jekel, 2018; Schmidt, 2011). Similarly, Leichenko and O'Brien (2019) drew attention to human agency when they identified climate change as a social problem that involves issues of poverty, inequality and biodiversity loss. Consequently, solutions require economic, political, cultural and institutional changes that may be visualised in three interconnected spheres. Changes in the practical sphere are observable and measurable, such as a reduction in mitigation. However, changes in behaviour must be supported by structural and systemic changes in the political sphere. The personal sphere refers to individual and collective beliefs, worldviews and values that constitute perceptions of agency to initiate change in the other spheres. If interconnections between the three spheres are acknowledged and activated, the pace of transformation may accelerate. The three spheres provide a spatial model for how everyday and school geography may be connected in citizenship education.

To summarise, we have outlined the theoretical assumptions that informed our reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023) of the organisation and representation of geographical knowledge in the curriculum. Furthermore, the theoretical framework contributes to discuss opportunities and limitations in the curriculum when it comes to developing students' powerful geographical knowledge.

## ANALYTICAL APPROACH AND DATA ANALYSIS

As we wanted to identify patterns in a qualitative data set, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of geographical knowledge in the curriculum. The *Core Curriculum—Values and Principles for Primary and Secondary Education* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) and the *Curriculum for Social Studies* (SAF01-04) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) as part of the Norwegian *Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion 2020* constitute the data material for this article.<sup>1</sup> We have analysed the entirety of both curriculum documents. The research question reflects an interest in the conceptual idea of classification derived from Bernstein (1971) as well as the content of geographical knowledge. The concept of classification provides insight into the structure that allows and enables geographical knowledge to be recontextualised.

Furthermore, we applied an inductive approach to the analytical process of coding geographical knowledge, taking the data set as the starting point for engaging with meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In line with our position within the qualitative paradigm, we have sought to bring out a nuanced analysis by paying attention to reflexivity and subjectivity. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise the inescapable subjectivity of data interpretation. Although the analysis is conducted inductively, themes have been developed through a reflexive process in the intersection of the data, the research question, our prior knowledge, the cultural context and the research field. Accordingly, theory always gives reflexive thematic analysis its analytical power, regardless of whether the analysis is more inductive or deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In our case, we were guided by a spatial lens based on our prior knowledge from the literature on powerful geographical knowledge and GeoCapabilities.

As reflexive thematic analysis is done through open and organic coding and inter-subjective reflections, themes are never pre-defined. In the initial coding process, we conducted the analysis as inclusively as possible by giving equal attention to each data item with some relevance to geographical knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Systematic engagement with the data material helps to avoid cherry-picking data that can fit any predetermined ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To make sure the constructed codes fit our purpose and that we seized all nuances, we altered the codes as our understanding developed (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). However, we often found instances where several codes were attached to one data extract, creating a challenge in placing data extracts that contained several aspects of geographical knowledge. Through the reflexive approach including a dialogue with the literature, we were nevertheless able to categorise consistently. We developed the following main themes, which will structure the analysis: geographical scale, geographic conditions and human–nature interconnections. In the subsequent process after the curriculum analysis, we developed the specific theoretical account for discussion of the results.

## CURRICULUM ANALYSIS

### Geographical scale

The analysis revealed how geographical scale, called “level” in the curriculum, is visible throughout several parts of the curriculum. The Core Curriculum for all school subjects highlights challenges on a global scale:

Children and young people will need to deal with the today's and tomorrow's challenges, and our common future depends on the coming generations and their willingness and ability to protect our world. Global climate changes, pollution and loss of biological diversity are some of the greatest environmental threats in the world. These challenges must be solved together. We need knowledge, ethical awareness and technological innovation to find solutions and make the necessary changes to our lifestyle to protect life on earth. (p. 9)

The above passage highlights threats to climate and environment globally and indicates that protection of the environment at the societal level is not limited to the students' local, regional or national surroundings. In the curriculum for Social Studies, the global scale manifests through the emphasis on sustainability as an interdisciplinary topic and in the core element Sustainable Societies. Here, the students shall “be able to assess the alternative actions that can be taken to ensure sustainable development on individual, national and global levels” (p. 3). Furthermore, in a competence aim for primary school, they shall “explore and present a global challenge that is related to sustainability and what consequences this might have, and develop a proposal relating to how one can contribute to counteracting such challenges and how collaboration between countries may help” (p. 10). According to the first statement, the students shall consider and reflect on potential options for actions concerning issues related to sustainability on various scales. The second data extract asks the students to gain insight into a global challenge related to sustainability and explore the collective agency among nations. Similarly, the core element Understanding and Participating in Democracy in the Social Studies curriculum states that “The content of this core element shall be seen through various perspectives, from the local to the global, and through the perspectives of indigenous and minority communities, with an emphasis on the past, present and future” (p. 3). This statement encourages students to take various perspectives, including the global perspective, as they work with specific topics of the core

element, such as cooperation between people, decision-making in different societies, systems of government, human rights, participation in society and democracy.

The national scale is clearly accentuated both in the Core Curriculum and in Social Studies. According to the Core Curriculum, “Insight into our history and culture is important for developing the identities of pupils and their belonging in society. The pupils learn about the values and traditions which contribute to uniting people in our country” (pp. 5–6). This extract points to Norway as a nation and highlights its national cultural heritage. The data extract also connects identities and belonging to the spatial dimension. Moreover, the national scale manifests particularly by virtue of the minority perspective, as is visible in the Core Curriculum:

Through the teaching and training, the pupils shall gain insight into the indigenous Sami people's history, culture, societal life and rights. The pupils shall learn about diversity and variation in Sami culture and societal life. Five groups with a longstanding attachment to Norway have the status as national minorities in accordance with our international obligations (...). (p. 6)

In the above data extract, the national scale appears in relation to the study of indigenous people and national minorities. The curriculum connects the cultural heritage of these minority groups to the national scale, although their geographical embeddedness stretches across national borders on the regional and global scales. In the curriculum for Social Studies, the national scale is also prominent, for instance in the paragraph describing relevance and central values of the subject: “In social studies, the pupils shall have the opportunity to explore their own identity, the local communities they live in and national and global challenges” (p. 2). This data extract illustrates a typical way of bringing forth national scale as a “level” on which societal challenges can be examined in Social Studies.

In contrast to the treatment of the national scale, attention to the local scale is expressed in a slightly different way. The Core Curriculum contains a section describing principles for the school's practice, pointing to, among other principles, an inclusive learning environment:

By varying its learning arenas, school can give pupils practical and realistic experiences which promote motivation and improve insight. The involvement of the local community and society may contribute positively to the development of the school and the pupils. Various forms of local, national and international cooperation will add up-to-date relevance to the pupils' learning. (p. 18)

The curriculum emphasises use of the local community as having a motivational impact. The local community itself is clearly valued, and the interest and engagement from society is portrayed as potentially developmental for the students. In competence aims for primary school in Social Studies, the students are expected to be able to “explore and give examples of how people have impact on the climate and the environment and document how this can be seen in the local community” (p. 7). While studying the local community, students are also expected to “talk about why conflicts arise in the school and local environment” (p. 8). The students' commitment to and understanding of their locality and potential place-related conflicts are prominent. Thus, the local is portrayed both as a learning arena and site of conflict.

Moving beyond the global, local and national scale, the curricula make a fourth scale markedly visible: the individual scale. In the Core Curriculum, the individual scale comes into view by drawing attention to environmental challenges:

In working with this topic the pupils shall develop competence which enables them to make responsible choices and to act ethically and with environmental



awareness. The pupils must learn to understand that all individual activities and choices are significant. (p. 17)

The extract particularly accentuates activities and choices towards the environment at the individual scale. The curriculum for Social Studies emphasises the individual scale in the paragraph describing relevance and central values of the subject: “The subject shall help the pupils to recognize the connections between individual choices, societal structures and tolerance limits in nature” (p. 2). We assert that this statement may indicate that understanding connections between scales in relation to nature and environment is one of the key purposes of Social Studies as a school subject. However, this purpose is not operationalised further in the competence aims.

## Geographic conditions

The second theme, geographic conditions, can be found in both the Core Curriculum and the Social Studies curriculum, but it is especially present in the latter, which extensively uses the word “geographic”. In the core element of Understanding and Participating in Democracy, the geographic is related to cooperation and decision-making:

The pupils shall learn about how geographic, historical and current conditions have laid and continue to lay the foundation for how people have cooperated and cooperate, organise and make decisions in different societies. The pupils shall gain an insight into the differences between countries when it comes to systems of government, protection of human rights and minorities. (p. 3)

The extract indicates that geographic conditions are significant when attempting to understand different societies, and it highlights the ways in which countries are different. As part of their competence in primary school in Social Studies, students are expected to connect geographic conditions to living conditions and human needs in general, for example, to “describe geographic features in different parts of the world and reflect on how these features have impact on the lives of the people who live there” (p. 10). Since human beings are those affected by geographic features, we might interpret geographic features as physical and locational features. Furthermore, one of the competence aims in upper secondary school requires students to be able to “compare how political, geographic and historical events affect living conditions, settlement patterns and demographics in different parts of the world today” (p. 11). In this example, the geographic is presented alongside the political and historical, and the geographic is once again presented as something that affects societies rather than as an integration of physical and human geography. The final data extract also shows how the curriculum for Social Studies explicitly points to world knowledge about factors such as demographics, living conditions and settlement patterns.

In the core element Sustainable Societies, the geographic appears in relation to resource use, distribution and human–nature interconnections. The curriculum states, “This means examining how geographic diversity and variety establish the framework for people’s livelihoods and living conditions” (p. 3). Geographic diversity may indicate how countries and places differ, both internally and compared to other places. Geographic variety may point towards how various parts of the world on various scales are different from each other.

Although physical geography is no longer among the competence aims, the terms *nature* and *environment* are emphasised both in the Core Curriculum and in Social Studies through a geographical lens. In the Core Curriculum, the position of human beings in relation to nature is expressed as follows:

Human beings are part of nature and are responsible for taking good care of it. Throughout their schooling, the pupils must acquire knowledge about and develop respect for nature. They must experience nature and see it as a resource and as a source of utility, joy, health and learning. (p. 8)

According to this data extract, human beings are part of nature, with a moral obligation to respect and protect it. The curriculum connects human beings to natural space and promotes that knowledge about as well as positive experiences with nature, are key to enhancing protection and respect for nature through education.

In Social Studies competence aims for primary school, the students shall be able to “explore and describe the cultural heritage and cultural and natural landscape of the local community” (p. 8). In other words, the students shall gain knowledge about the surrounding nature and landscape as part of their world knowledge. However, the concept of landscape is not mentioned in competence aims for lower secondary school. We also found that both the Core Curriculum and the Social Studies curriculum put greater emphasis on the environment than on climate.

## Human–nature interconnections

Interconnections between human beings and nature is a prominent theme we have identified in both the Core Curriculum and the Social Studies curriculum. The first expression of such an interconnection is related to human needs and the use of resources. According to the Core Curriculum, “The pupils shall develop awareness of how our lifestyles impact nature and the climate, and thus also our societies” (p. 8). The extract points to the role of education when it comes to knowledge about human impact on both nature and society. In the Social Studies curriculum, the core element Sustainable Societies also mentions the distribution of resources:

The pupils shall learn to understand how geography, history and current affairs have set and continue to set the conditions for how people have ensured and ensure that their needs are met and how resources have been and are distributed in different societies (...). The pupils shall see that the use of resources by societies has had and has consequences (...). (p. 3)

This extract highlights geography as conditioning human needs and the distribution of resources. In contrast to the Core Curriculum, which focuses on “our lifestyles,” the Social Studies content addresses the consequences of resource use more generally.

The Social Studies curriculum elaborates on the nexus between nature and society in the core element Deliberating on Society and Interconnections: “The pupils shall also gain insight into how nature and society have a reciprocal impact on each other” (p. 3). This core element links geographic conditions to social organisation, as mentioned in the previous section. In one of the competence aims in lower secondary school, the geographic is linked to social change by asserting that students shall “reflect on how people have fought and continue to fight for change in society while also having been and still being influenced by geographic conditions and historical contexts” (p. 11). This quote indicates that geographic conditions have an impact on human agency. However, it is unclear what these geographic conditions contain.

In the passages described in this section, sustainability issues are related to the main theme of geographical scale and may also be related to the main theme human–nature interconnections. According to the Core Curriculum, “Sustainable development as an

interdisciplinary topic in school shall help the pupils to understand basic dilemmas and developments in society and how they can be dealt with” (p. 15). Furthermore, “Sustainable development is based on the understanding that social, economic and environmental conditions are interconnected” (pp. 15–16). The three dimensions of sustainable development are also emphasised in Social Studies. The core element Sustainable Societies states that pupils “shall learn how changes in the past have had an impact on the three dimensions and thus how sustainable different societies are” (p. 3). This extract highlights a historical perspective rather than interconnections between the three spheres. A competence aim for lower secondary school again draws explicit attention to interconnections when the students are expected to “describe different dimensions of sustainability and how they have an impact on each other and present measures that can be taken to make societies more sustainable” (p. 12). This expectation invites pupils to describe dimensions and interconnections as well as present solutions, rather than discuss possible tensions and contradictions, as mentioned in the description of the interdisciplinary topic in the introductory parts of the curriculum. When it comes to human–nature interconnections, an anthropocentric perspective dominates through the emphasis on human needs and resource use and human’s impact on nature and society.

The final expression of human–nature interconnections is related to technology. The Core Curriculum recognises technological development as a threat as well as a solution:

Technological competence and knowledge about the links between technology and the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable development are thus key discussion points here. While technological development may help to solve problems, it may also create new ones. Knowledge about technology implies understanding which dilemmas may arise due to the use of technology and how these can be dealt with. (p. 16)

In contrast to the descriptive approach to sustainable development portrayed above, this extract points out the dilemmas that may arise related to technology. The following competence aim for Social Studies in lower secondary school highlights the role of technology when it comes to change, when students shall “explore how technology has been and continues to be a factor for change and discuss the influence technology has had and has on the individual, society and nature” (p. 10). In this extract, technology is understood as a cause of change rather than as a result of, or in a dialectic relationship with, environmental and societal change.

## DISCUSSION

Using the educational scenarios of Young and Muller (2010), the LK20 maintains the division of the curriculum into school subjects, which reflects a Future 1 scenario. However, the LK20 also corresponds with the international competence orientation, taking a step towards a Future 2 scenario. This turn is supported by the interdisciplinary topics that are aimed at curriculum integration or boundary crossing. Niemelä (2021) argued that boundary crossing is essential for developing a Future 3 scenario, as long as the curriculum is anchored in disciplinary knowledge. Our analysis shows that although key concepts and content associated with geography appear throughout the curriculum, it lacks a disciplinary structure of knowledge, particularly in the competence aims. This interpretation evolved in dialogue with literature on the three dimensions of GeoCapabilities (Bustin, 2019; Lambert, 2013) and other conceptualisations of powerful geographical knowledge (Catling & Martin, 2011; Maude, 2016; Roberts, 2014).

Drawing on Bernstein (1971), we suggest that Social Studies in the former Norwegian national curriculum of 2006 (LK06) displays a collection code; in other words, geography was more strongly classified through clear insulation between disciplinary contents. The LK06 Social Studies curriculum consisted of subordinated thematic areas representing the disciplines of history, geography and social sciences. In LK20, Social Studies is still organised as a subject, but with an attempt to reduce the disciplinary content boundaries. The classification is weaker compared to the previous curriculum and may be interpreted as displaying an integrated code.

When we look at the first dimension of GeoCapabilities, descriptive and explanatory world knowledge (Bladh, 2020; Bustin, 2019; Lambert, 2013; Lambert & Morgan, 2010) alongside the vocabulary and grammar of the subject (Brooks, 2013; Fögele, 2017; Jackson, 2006; Lambert, 2004), our analysis shows that several thematic content areas related to geography are present in the curriculum. Examples are livelihoods, living conditions, settlement patterns and demographics. However, when it comes to the grammar of geography, including geographical key concepts, the LK20 lacks the concept of place. Although the local community is mentioned a couple of times, it is implied that the geographical topics above can be studied in a general rather than a contextual way. Furthermore, it is unclear what terms such as *geographic conditions, features, variation and diversity* contain. The geographic is referred to as something else than the historical, contemporary or political. Consequently, the geographic is represented as outside the social that is affecting society. Thus, the geographic points towards physical geography and locational position. We may interpret this as an understanding of space as absolute and fixed rather than relational and dynamic (Lambert & Morgan, 2010).

Drawing further attention to the grammar of geography, including relational thinking as the second dimension of GeoCapabilities, geographical scale and human–nature interconnections appear as rich themes. Results from the analysis reveal the potential for students to develop geographical awareness through the concept of scale. The emphasis is especially on individual and national scales, while the global scale is toned down and appears together with the other scales. Overall, the curriculum directs attention towards individual rather than collective agency to handle climate and sustainability issues. This finding is in line with those of Tollefsen (2022), who determined that sustainable development in LK20 has culminated into a metaphor where individual action is what primarily matters in solving sustainability-related dilemmas. Similar to the notion of the geographic discussed above, the notion of scale appears as rather static. Different topics shall be studied on different *levels* instead of studying for example globalisation and climate change as relational processes on multiple scales. This static view also appears when it comes to technology as a factor causing change instead of being a result of the interplay between societal change, environmental change and technology. These findings reflect a technical and common sense rather than disciplinary understanding of scale (Lambert & Morgan, 2010) and a technology deterministic approach.

A more relational understanding comes to the fore when stating the relevance of Social Studies as a subject that aims to promote understanding of connections between individual choices, social structures and the tolerance limits of nature. Thus, the curriculum implicitly connects human–nature interconnections with human agency, which are key elements of spatial citizenship (Gryl & Jekel, 2018; Schmidt, 2011). Knowledge and awareness about individual and collective agency are important to initiate sustainability transformation in the practical, political and personal spheres (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2019) and across multiple geographical scales (Skarstein & Wolff, 2020). However, this relational approach is weakly operationalised in the competence aims.

Finally, we looked at how the curriculum allows for the analysis of alternative futures, which is the third dimension of GeoCapabilities. We found that sustainability as an interdisciplinary

topic facilitates opportunities for addressing and exploring various solutions related to sustainability issues. However, as mentioned above, the findings reveal an emphasis on technology as a cause of societal change rather than as an outcome of social relations. In a discourse analysis of sustainability in the Core Curriculum, Ott (2019) argued that this deterministic approach to technology may prevent imaginary thinking about alternative social-ecological organisation and futures.

Weak classification of subjects might potentially create better conditions for integrating students' everyday experiences with school knowledge. In contrast, a strongly classified curriculum with an 'overload' content, might imply that students' questions and experiences are dismissed in teaching practice, and not counted as knowledge (Adolfsson, 2018). In line with Wrigley (2018), a social just curriculum must combine an engagement with both key canonical knowledge and the vernacular culture of the learners' communities. Jegstad and Ryen (2020) found that certain parts of the Social Studies curriculum emphasise connections between the individual and the global and may open opportunities for teachers to engage with students' everyday knowledge to make curriculum content meaningful. Furthermore, as an integrated subject also encompassing history, the Social Studies curriculum may assist critical historical analyses of knowledge production and spatial representations of people and places with a view to coloniality, as called for in the dialogue on powerful knowledge and a Future 3 curriculum (Morgan & Lambert, 2023; Rudolph et al., 2018). However, when a subject is weakly classified, disciplinary content might be lost in the recontextualisation of knowledge. In other words, when geographical knowledge and ways of thinking are implicit and vague, the potential for integrating personal geography with school geography (Catling & Martin, 2011; Roberts, 2014) and understand the world in new ways may be constrained (Bustin, 2019; Jackson, 2006; Lambert, 2017; Maude, 2016). In LK20, this is exemplified by a static rather than a relational understanding of the spatial dimension. Consequently, those active in the Pedagogical Recontextualisation Field (PRF), such as teachers, may be driven towards a diminished sense of geography.

## CONCLUSION

The Norwegian national curriculum *The Knowledge Promotion 2020* (LK20) echoes the international educational trend emphasising competence development rather than disciplinary content. This article has drawn attention to the subject of geography in particular. The analysis shows that geographical knowledge is weakly classified in the curriculum, although it is visible especially in relation to sustainable development. The LK20 facilitates student attainment of powerful geographical knowledge through geographical scale, world knowledge and human–nature interconnections. However, geographical knowledge is represented through an absolute rather than relation notion of space and a technical and mainly individual understanding of scale.

In the educational scenario Future 3, disciplinary boundaries are maintained, but crossed for the development of new knowledge. When the curriculum is anchored in disciplinary knowledge (Niemelä, 2021; Young, 2008), the subjects can facilitate learning to understand, navigate and negotiate the world. As an interdisciplinary subject, geography clearly has relevant and instructive concepts for students to acquire and apply when it comes to for example sustainability issues (Bagoly-Simó, 2022; Onuoha et al., 2021; Skarstein & Wolff, 2020).

With a disciplinary knowledge structure and the engagement of students' everyday geographical knowledge through powerful pedagogy (Catling & Martin, 2011; Deng, 2022; Roberts, 2014), geography has the potential to educate for a more sustainable future. Thus, we argue that an important contribution to powerful knowledge for the geography subject in school lies in student engagement with the spatial dimension of human agency and

citizenship as interconnections between various scales and spheres in specific places. The LK20 accommodates this contribution to some extent through the interdisciplinary topics, but it is weakly operationalised in the competence aims for Social Studies. Consequently, the lack of a disciplinary structure of geography within the broader Social Studies in LK20, may exclude students from accessing powerful geographical knowledge that can strengthen their ability to live in the world (Lambert, 2019).

Despite the ambition of a “knowledge promotion” in the Norwegian national curriculum framework, the powerful potential of geographical knowledge to engage students in interdisciplinary issues is underutilised. In this way, the geography subject exemplifies what kind of knowledge that might be facilitated and lost in a competence oriented educational reform. We would like to encourage future curriculum reforms to take the knowledge dimension seriously as a basis for discussions, decisions and progress in interdisciplinary education in the 21st century.

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### **ENDNOTE**

<sup>1</sup>The Core Curriculum consists of five main parts: About the Core Curriculum, The Purpose of the Education, Core Values of the Education and Training, Principles for Education and All-Around Development, and Principles for the School's Practice. The curriculum for Social Studies includes the primary part About the Subject, which contains Relevance and Central Values, Core Elements, Interdisciplinary Topics and Basic Skills. Furthermore, the curriculum articulates competence aims and assessment for Years 2, 4, 7 and 10.

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