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Political-ideological normativity in Norwegian primary and lower secondary social studies education: An analysis of current learning objectives

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Abstract

With some degree of regularity, Norwegian authorities revise the curricula across all subjects within primary and lower secondary education, including social studies. In 2019, the most recent revision of this subject was adopted. It was labelled SAF01-04, and came into effect in August 2020. This article aims to identify areas where SAF01-04 implicitly encourages pupils to take specific normative positions in contested political-ideological questions. The article concludes that the implicit political-ideological content in SAF01-04 is moderately politically left-leaning and that pupils are expected to adopt moderately left-leaning positions. The article concludes that the ideological leanings of SAF01-04 are surprising given that the government behind SAF01-04 was centre-right.

Keywords: Social studies, learning objectives, primary education, lower secondary education, educational policy, normativity, political ideologies

1 Introduction

In 2019, Norwegian authorities presented the new social studies curriculum for primary and lower secondary school. The government at the time consisted of four political parties. Researchers usually consider two of these four parties as centre-right, one of the parties as conservative and the final party as populist right-wing (Aardal & Bergh, 2018; Bjerkem, 2016). The new curriculum, with the designation SAF01-04¹, was published by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, which is governed by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, and the new curriculum specifies learning objectives for pupils after year 2, 4, 7 and 10, respectively.

A social studies curriculum will never be ideologically neutral. In a qualitative subject such as social studies, there are considerable opportunities for politicians to exert power by promoting learning objectives reflecting explicit or implicit ideological content. For example, a curriculum can highlight *themes* that are essential for the ideologies of the governing political parties, as well as *perspectives* on these themes that promote the same ideologies.

At the present time, little research has been conducted on the political-ideological normative tendencies of SAF01-04. This is unfortunate because there is a need for research to help increase the awareness of current and future teachers and teacher educators of the explicit or implicit ideological premises that they are required to convey in their teaching. This article details the results from an

¹ The 'SAF' in SAF01-04 is an abbreviation for the Norwegian word *samfunnsfag* (*social studies* in English). The number '01' identifies SAF01-04 as the Norwegian variant of the curriculum. (There is also a Sámi variant of this curriculum, with the designation SAF02-04, which is slightly different in terms of content, with a stronger focus on issues of specific relevance to the indigenous Sámi population in Norway). The number '04' identifies SAF01-04 as the fourth edition of the social studies curriculum since the current main structure for subjects taught within Norwegian primary and lower secondary education was established in 2006. The learning objectives in SAF01-04 are referred to in the regulation as *kompetansemål*, which Norwegian authorities have translated into English *competence aims*. However, in this article, the more generic term *learning objectives* is used because this term is more widely used internationally.

examination of SAF01-04, and how this curriculum relates to ideologically contested issues. The research question asked in the article is: To which degree do the ideological sentiments of SAF01-04 reflect the ideologies of the political parties that participated in the coalition government in 2019 and that developed this curriculum?

2 SAF01-04 in a regulatory context

SAF01-04 is a 12-page document that outlines what pupils should learn within social studies. It identifies specific learning objectives that pupils should achieve by the end of year 2, 4, 7 and 10. The curriculum lists 13, 13, 17, and 19 learning objectives that pupils should have achieved after year 2, 4, 7 and 10, respectively. The learning objectives reflect explicit or implicit normative considerations that are subject to varying levels of political controversy.

SAF01-04 is situated at the operational level of regulations relevant for social studies education in Norway's primary and lower secondary schools. Hence, some of the political-ideological normative tendencies in SAF01-04 reflect normative considerations in higher-level legislation and regulation. To understand the political-ideological normative content of SAF01-04, it is thus advantageous to have some knowledge of the higher-order regulations that the curriculum stems from. Although some political-ideological premises are *exclusively* found in SAF01-04, other elements have been *derived* from regulations on a higher level in the legislative hierarchy. A pertinent question, then, is which political-ideological normative elements of SAF01-04 build on higher-order regulatory formulations, and which of them are exclusive to SAF01-04. Somewhat simplified, SAF01-04 stems from higher-order regulations according to the overview in Figure 1.

All Norwegian regulations must comply with the Norwegian Constitution of 1814 (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 1814; Ferrari, 2015; Gammelgaard & Holmøyvik, 2015), as shown in Figure 1. From the perspective of this article, it is thus relevant to inquire which of the political-ideological normative elements in SAF01-04 are reflections of the political-ideological normative underpinnings of the Norwegian Constitution. The Constitution is, in part, written in an archaic form and language, requiring the analyst to have considerable knowledge of its historical context. However, in general, the political-ideological normative content of the Constitution is so vague and general that many readers will consider the Constitution to be a digest of overarching principles that virtually all Norwegians would agree on. Article 100 states that "there shall be freedom of expression"² (see also Rolland, 2010), and Article 109 declares that primary and lower secondary education should "(...) promote respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights". These are broad, sweeping statements that are difficult to link to specific ideologies or Norwegian political parties. Thus, in the examination that forms the basis of this article, it was not assumed *a priori* that it would be possible to identify political-ideological normative elements in SAF01-04 stemming from articles in the Norwegian Constitution.

² This quote and all the other English quotes in the article have been retrieved online from English translations published by Norwegian authorities.

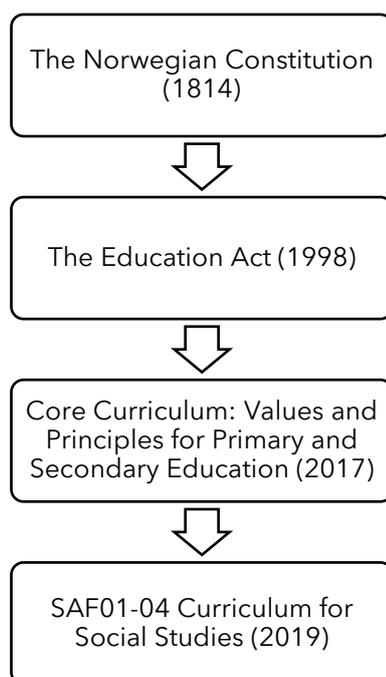


Figure 1 Levels of regulation of Norwegian primary and lower secondary social studies education.

The second level in Figure 2 is the Education Act of 1998 (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 1998). This regulation governs all forms of education at all levels and is somewhat more specific than the Constitution when it comes to political-ideological normative inclinations. Nevertheless, the Education Act still by and large reflect an uncontested political consensus. Moreover, most of the Education Act addresses issues of a technical nature that do not impinge on political ideologies. The only section to lay out any political or ideological inclinations is section 1-1, “The objectives of education and training”. This section contains phrases that political representatives from most Norwegian political parties will be able to agree without much hesitation, such as: “Education and training must be based on fundamental values in Christian and humanist heritage and traditions (...);” “Education and training must help increase the knowledge and understanding of the national cultural heritage and our common international cultural traditions;” and “Education and training must provide insights into cultural diversity and show respect for the individual’s convictions.” Thus, it would be unreasonable to claim that the political-ideological normative tendencies of SAF01-04, which we will return to later, derive from corresponding tendencies in the 1998 Education Act.

Norway also has a regulation that specifically governs *primary and secondary* education. In its most recent revision from 2017, this regulation is entitled “Core Curriculum: Values and Principles for Primary and Secondary Education” (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). From a political-ideological normative point of view, The Core curriculum contains statements that are far bolder than those contained in the 1814 Constitution and the 1998 Education Act. For example, it states that “a good society is founded on the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity” (p. 7). This is a *de facto* declaration that nationalist political ideologies are unethical. As will be shown later in the article, corresponding phraseology can be found in SAF01-04, and it is thus reasonable to assume that the wording found in SAF01-04 was significantly influenced by the Core curriculum. On sustainable development, the Core curriculum states that “social, economic and environmental conditions are interconnected” (p. 16). This statement is a truism, but it can nevertheless be regarded as a *de facto* argument for the political-ideological view that environmentalism is inextricably linked to a high level of economic redistribution. As the article will show, some of the same expressions can be found in SAF01-04, and this indicates that the Core curriculum was an important source for the development of political-ideological normative formulations in SAF01-04 that relate to contested political topics.

Given that some of the political-ideological formulations in SAF01-04 draw profoundly on the Core curriculum, it could be argued that political-ideological normative analyses of SAF01-04 are *de facto*

also political-ideological normative analyses of the Core curriculum. However, as we will see in Section 5 below, elements of SAF01-04 significantly exceed the Core curriculum in terms of political-ideological normative content. Also, SAF01-04 operationalises the Core curriculum through its numerous specific learning objectives for the various school levels, and some of these learning objectives display normative inclinations that are subject to political-ideological controversy.

The above overview of SAF01-04's regulatory context can be drawn in a graph, shown in Figure 2, which demonstrates that the degree of contested political-ideological normativity increases gradually from the top to the bottom of the legislative hierarchy. The graph increases from the uncontested Constitution, via the slightly more ideologically oriented Education Act and the Core curriculum, and on to SAF01-04, which is bolder in terms of political-ideological normative content.

What this means is that compared to the Constitution, the Education Act and the Core curriculum,

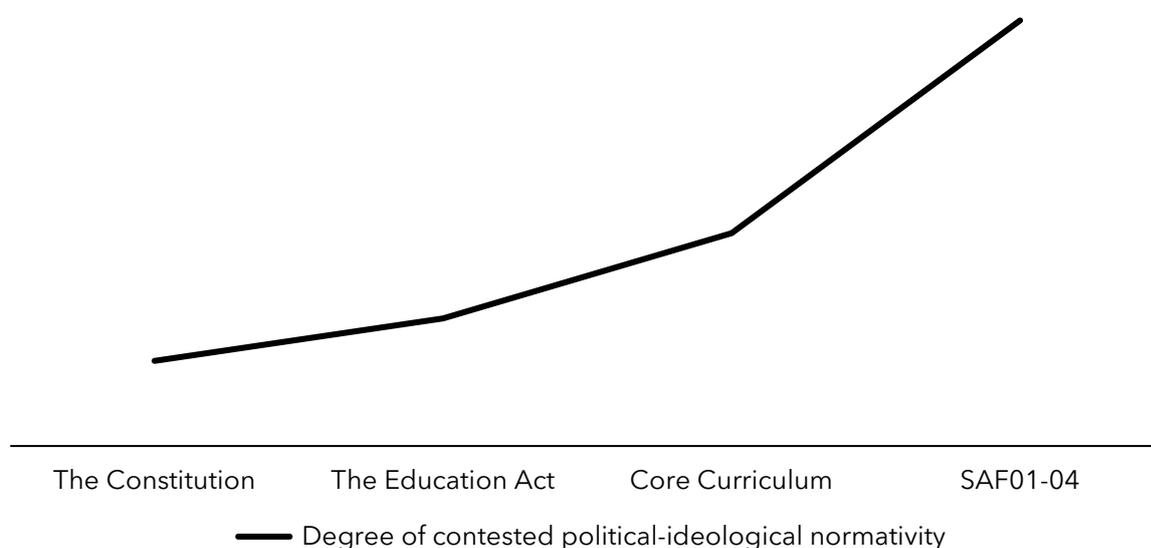


Figure 2 Degree of contested political-ideological normativity on the different legislative levels governing primary and lower secondary social studies education in Norway.

SAF01-04 is more specific in terms of normatively oriented issues. While this article does not examine in detail the relationship between the legislative levels, it is possible to conclude that the normative inclinations in SAF01-04 exceed the normative considerations in higher-order regulations. In other words, the development of a social studies curriculum gives the governing parties legislatively independent opportunities to plant their ideological seeds in the pupils' minds. The question is: To which extent did the political parties in power in 2019 use this opportunity?

3 Analytical method

The analytical method used in the study that underpins this article involved a three-step approach. First, SAF01-04 was coded to distinguish between descriptive and normative elements. The coding work required challenging interpretations of the formulations used to describe learning objectives within SAF01-04. An example can be used to illustrate the interpretive challenges involved. One of the learning objectives for year 10 is described as follows:

The pupil is expected to be able to (...) reflect on how human beings have fought and continue to fight for change in society while also having been and still being influenced by geographic conditions and historical context. (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, p. 11)

It is possible to draw a variety of conclusions about the political-ideological normative underpinnings of this quote. However, in doing this one should avoid ascribing meanings to it that

might not reflect the real intentions of the authorities that framed the learning objective. In this case, for example, sociologists and economists might without hesitation take for granted that the first section of the quote must be closely related to the authorship of Karl Marx. Looking through a Marxian lens, it could be argued that the *continuous fight* described in the quote denotes the proletariat's economic struggles. One might consequently argue that the "change" mentioned in the quote is associated with a societal shift from private capitalism to a society with state-owned means of production, and that SAF01-04 thus contains communist ambitions. However, one could also interpret the "fight for change in society" as the more general continuous ideological fights that can be observed between different groups in all societies. In that interpretation, the "fight for change in society" described in SAF01-04 is not an encouragement to pupils of developing a communist society, but a description of the analytical knowledge pupils are expected to acquire about human conflict in general terms. In other words, this learning objective can be interpreted in different ways in terms of its political-ideological normative content, depending on the interpretive lens. In the analysis of SAF01-04 reported on in this article, the first step in the analysis consisted of this type of interpretive work.

Second, the identified political-ideological normative contents were classified into *themes*. Borrowing a concept from Braun and Clarke (2006), this procedure can be referred to as a *thematic analysis*. Although thematic analysis is related to *knowledge organisation* (Foucault 1970; Gnoli, 2020) *classification* (Marradi, 1990; Hjørland, 2017) and *typology* (Bailey, 1994; Weber, 1978), Braun and Clarke (2006) gave *thematic analysis* prominence as a procedure in its own right. Braun and Clarke's article is helpful in that it explicitly lays out the different steps in the classification procedure. Presumably this explication of the steps has also been part of the reason why their article has provided the methodological impetus for a plethora of studies within education and the social sciences (for example, Anis et al., 2018; Attard & Coulson, 2012; Bagheri et al., 2017; Benavides-Lahnstein & Ryder, 2020; Clark, 2017; Haeyen et al., 2018; Lin, 2019; Nisbett, 2013; O'Kane & Boswell, 2018; Pickett et al., 2017; Riegel & Dellings, 2019; Silverman et al., 2019; Yeung & Yau, 2022). In the examination presented in this article, Braun and Clarke's six-step approach was applied as a procedure for classifying political-ideological normative content in SAF01-04. The steps of Braun and Clarke's approach are as follows: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87–93). The sixth step, "producing the report", here refers to the writing of the present article. Step 1 in Braun and Clarke's approach is self-explanatory. Steps 2–5 constituted a bottom-up hierarchical process that started with initial coding in Step 2 and ended up in Step 5 with three main political-ideological contested normative themes.

Third, the identified normative elements within each of the themes were used to determine the ideological leanings of SAF01-04 in terms of the political left–right distinction. Although the left-right distinction is only one of many possible analytical frameworks in the study of a text such as a social studies curriculum, this distinction is still considered to have significant relevance in political analysis (Bobbio, 1996; Knutsen, 1995; Laver & Garry, 2000).

4 Two clarifications regarding types of normative statements

In relation to the analysis conducted within this study, it is essential to be aware of two distinctions regarding types of normative statements. The first is that between *explicit* and *implicit* forms of political-ideological normativity in curricula, and the second is that between *political-ideological* and *prescriptive-didactical* normative statements.

With regards to explicit and implicit forms of political-ideological normativity, it is important to avoid overlooking any hidden ideological premises. Although a learning objective might not express any explicit political-ideological normative content, the present study included learning objectives which it seemed reasonable to interpret as *de facto* normative. Table 1 provides some examples from SAF01-04:

Table 1. Explicitly vs. implicitly normative learning objectives in SAF01-04.

Explicitly normative learning objectives (included in the analysis)	Implicitly normative learning objectives (also included in the analysis)
Example quote: “[pupils should develop] knowledge and skills necessary for creating and participating in democratic processes (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 4).	Example quote: [Pupils should be able to] discuss what (...) gender equality means for democracy (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 9).

In Table 1, the quote to the left can be regarded as normatively explicit (or semi-explicit) in that the quote makes it clear that it is a good thing for society if people create and participate in democratic processes. By contrast, the quote to the right is less explicit in its political-ideological normativity. The word “means” might entail that pupils should develop normatively neutral knowledge about the causal relationship between gender equality and democracy, i.e. which *consequences* gender equality has for democracy. However, although the quote is technically worded as an analytical learning objective on a causal relationship, a much more reasonable interpretation is that the word “means” conveys the political-ideological *normative* view that gender equality is ethically good. In other words, it is reasonable to conclude that the following premises (P) and conclusion (C) are implicit in the quote:

- P1. Democracy is ethically good.
- P2. Gender equality strengthens democracy.
- C. Gender equality is ethically good.

In the present study’s aim of examining the political-ideological leanings of SAF01-04, it was vital to include both explicit and implicit forms of political-ideological normativity, as illustrated in Table 1.

The second necessary form of distinction is that between political-ideological and prescriptive-didactical learning objectives. An example of the latter form of learning objective in SAF01-04 is the following:

Pupils shall be encouraged to be curious and actively search for and create knowledge, individually and with others, both inside and outside the classroom. (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 2)

Encouraging curiosity among pupils has, within SAF01-04, primarily the function of a *prescription* for how teachers can make it easier for pupils to gain insights into how societies work. In other words, although the quote is certainly a *normative* one, it is not a quote that should be regarded as a *political-ideological* normative quote. It is a prescriptive-didactical recommendation and as such a form of recommendation that is not within the scope of the analysis conducted in this study.

In contrast to the example above, which is primarily prescriptive-didactical, the following learning objective for year 7 is an example of a learning objective with significantly political-ideological normative content:

The pupil is expected to be able to (...) discuss what equality and equal opportunities mean for a democracy, and develop proposals for how to counteract prejudice, racism and discrimination. (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, pp. 9-10)

In this quote, the normative element is not merely prescriptive. Working for equality and developing proposals for how to counteract prejudice, racism and cannot reasonably be interpreted as prescriptions on how to achieve higher-order objectives in SAF01-04, but are, in and of themselves, political-ideological normative goals of the highest order.

The distinction between political-ideological and prescriptive-didactical normativity was essential to avoid confusions in this study, and the distinction is illustrated in Table 2.

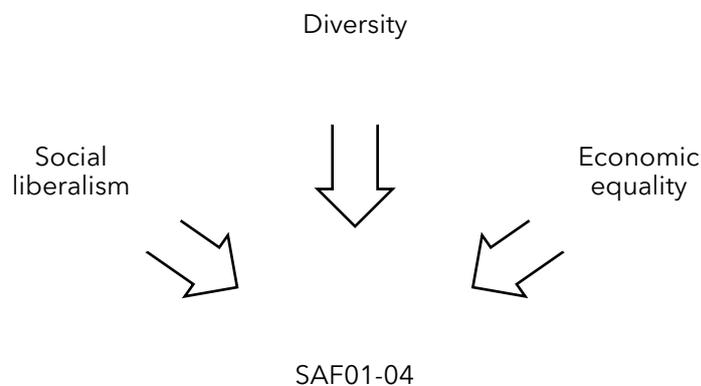
Table 2. Political-ideological vs. prescriptive-didactical normative statements in SAF01-04.

Political-ideological normative statements (included in the thematic analysis)	Prescriptive-didactical normative statements (excluded from the thematic analysis)
Example quote: “The pupil is expected to be able to (...) discuss what equality and equal opportunities mean for a democracy, and develop proposals for how to counteract prejudice, racism and discrimination” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 9-10).	Example quote: “The pupils shall be encouraged to be curious and actively search for and create knowledge, individually and with others, both inside and outside the classroom” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 2).

To sum up, in this study of SAF01-04, political-ideological normative learning objectives were included in the analysis regardless of whether the political-ideological normativity was expressed explicitly or implicitly. Also, among the normative learning objectives, whether explicitly or implicitly stated, only *political-ideological* ones were included in the thematic analysis, while *prescriptive-didactical* ones were excluded.

5 Findings

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the fifth and final analytical step in a thematic analysis (Step 5) is to give names to the identified themes. It was found that the most appropriate names for the contested political-ideological normative themes identified in SAF01-04 were *social liberalism*, *diversity*, and *economic equality*, as illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Contested political-ideological normative themes in SAF01-04.

Social liberalism. Social liberalism is a tag that can be used in different ways, but in the context of this article the term is used to denote tolerance in terms of family structure and sexual life. For example, SAF01-04 states that after year 2, pupils should be able to “talk about emotions, bodies, gender and sexuality (...)” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 7). The intention underlying this learning objective is to encourage pupils to take a critical view of traditional gender roles and not accept such roles without thinking critically about them. It also contains the implicit premise that different ways of sexual expression, beyond traditional ones, are ethically legitimate. In other words, this learning objective implies that SAF01-04 rejects the view that traditional family values are ethically superior. Correspondingly, a learning objective for year 7 states

that pupils should be able to “reflect on variations in identity, sexual orientation and gender expression (...)” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 10). This represents a *de facto* refutation of the patriarchal nuclear family as an ethically superior way of managing sexuality. It also goes further than the learning objective for year 2 mentioned above, in that it opens up for *critical* views on differences in terms of gender and sexual expression. The phrase “reflect on” underlines that the Ministry views many different variations of sexual lifestyles as ethically legitimate. The same call for critical views applies for the learning objective for year 2 that states that pupils should be able to “describe and give examples of diversity in Norway, with an emphasis on different forms of families (...)” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 7). This is a *de facto* rejection of the socially conservative view that the heterosexual and monogamous nuclear family is ethically superior to other family forms.

Diversity. In this article, the label *diversity* is used to denote the political-ideological normative view that ethnic and cultural diversity are desirable features in modern societies. For example, the final learning objective that was mentioned under “social liberalism” in the previous paragraph states that, after year 2, pupils should be able to “describe and give examples of diversity in Norway, focusing on different forms of families and communities, including the indigenous Sami people” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 7). As mentioned above, this learning objective is socially liberal. But it should also be noted that the learning objective is positive towards *multiculturalism* in that it implicitly encourages pupils to reject the view that Norwegian culture and ethnic Norwegians should have a privileged position in Norwegian society. Implicit in the learning objective is the view that ethnic diversity is desirable. Another learning objective expressing a corresponding normative view is the final one for year 2, which states that pupils should “explore and give examples of how people in different parts of the world can have an impact on each other’s lives” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 9). What the latter learning objective conveys is the descriptive view that the destinies of people across the globe are deeply intertwined and the normative view that these groups should find ways to communicate with each another despite national borders and other kinds of barriers. It seems reasonable to interpret this learning objective as an implicit normative promotion of multiculturalism and a rejection of nationalist political-ideological sentiments. The term “explore” is an encouragement to openness towards other cultures.

Implicitly multicultural underpinnings can also be found in learning objectives for the other years. After year 4, pupils should be able to “talk about identity, diversity and communities, and reflect on how it might feel to live on the outside of communities” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 9). The implicitly normative view expressed in this learning objective is that it is ethically unacceptable to exclude individuals on the basis of ethnicity or culture. Furthermore, after year 7, pupils should be able to “explore various aspects of diversity in Norway (...)” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and training, 2019, p. 10), which is a learning objective that implicitly promotes diversity and multiculturalism.

Economic equality. Economic inequalities lie at the core of political ideologies, and the degree of support for economic distribution is essential for identifying where actors fall on the traditional left–right political spectrum. The left has a lower tolerance for economic inequalities and is thus more positively inclined towards economic redistribution and public provision of welfare services. SAF01-04 has a few specific learning objectives that is consistent with this inclination. The most prominent one is the aforementioned “reflect on how humans have fought and continue to fight for change in society (...)” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 10). Although it is not explicitly stated in the quote, it seems reasonable to interpret the desired *change* as an economic-political form of change leading to a more equal society in terms of economic resources. Also, the learning objective seems to approve of movements that have worked and continue to work politically for a public sector that has economic redistribution as a high political priority.

Beyond the learning objectives specific to each year, SAF01-04 contains phrases that can reasonably be interpreted as consistent with the economic-political ideology of the political left. For example, with regard to sustainable development, which is both a “core element” in SAF01-04 and an

“interdisciplinary topic” that pupils should learn about across different subjects, including social studies, SAF01-04 contains the following quotes:

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. This means examining how geographic diversity and variety establish the framework for people’s livelihoods and living conditions. The pupils shall also gain an insight into the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development, and the connections between them. They shall learn how changes in the past have had an impact on the three dimensions and thus how sustainable different societies are. (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 3)

In the social studies subject the interdisciplinary topic of sustainability refers to the pupils learning to understand what the interaction between social, economic and environmental conditions means for sustainability. Knowledge of the connections between nature and society, how people affect the climate and environment, and how living conditions, lifestyles and demographics are interconnected, shall all contribute to this understanding. In the social studies subject the pupils shall reflect on and discuss the dilemmas and tensions relating to the different dimensions of sustainable development and shall see how actions on both the individual and societal levels have significance. (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 5)

These long quotes can be interpreted as moderate arguments for the view that sustainability is inextricably connected to a high degree of economic redistribution and economic equality. For example, the latter quote implicitly suggests that there is a causal chain between poverty and demography, thus mildly arguing for economic aid from rich countries with low birth rates to poor countries with higher birth rates. Thus, SAF01-04 argues for international economic solidarity and refutes the ideas of nationalist political parties on the political right that wish to reduce the provision of international aid by the Norwegian state to the poor Global South.

The three main political-ideological normative themes identified in SAF01-04 have been presented above, but it is beyond question that SAF01-04, in addition to the mentioned themes, also has *sustainable development* as an important focus area. It may be asked, then, why sustainable development was not identified in the present study as a key political-ideological normative theme in SAF01-04. The main reason for this is that although sustainable development is an essential topic in SAF01-04, it is not essential as a *contested* political-ideological topic. Almost all political parties in Norway agree that society should develop in a way that allows the planet to be habitable in the long term. Thus, it is only in the context of *operationalisations* of the concept of sustainability that ideological disagreements emerge. For example, political parties advocating environmental justice (Chancel, 2020; Pellow, 2018; Schlosberg, 2007; Sultana, 2022) hold the view that sustainable development is *ipso facto* egalitarian in terms of the distribution of resources within a society and between societies. It is not the views of such parties on *sustainability* that are politically contested, but their view that political redistribution of economic resources is inextricably connected to the environmental sustainability that all parties agree on. In other words, it is only when sustainable development is used in SAF01-04 as an argument for *economic redistribution*, either nationally or globally, that the learning objectives related to sustainable development become contested from a political-ideological point of view.

There are also numerous other learning objectives in SAF01-04 that have not been discussed in this article because they can be regarded as uncontested from a political-ideological normative perspective. For example, one learning objective for year 7 states that pupils should be able to “reflect on how one and other people participate digital interaction, and discuss what it means to use one’s judgment in the light of rules, norms and boundaries” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 10). While there might be political-ideological normativity concealed within such a formulation, it seems more reasonable to interpret this kind of learning objective as a politically uncontested and technical one. Many of the learning objectives in SAF01-04 are of a similar kind, and these were not included in the thematic analysis.

6 Discussion

Is there enough textual information in SAF01-04 to support the overall conclusion that this piece of educational regulation is moderately politically left-leaning? It should be admitted that this is a matter of contention, and this section discusses the strength of the empirical evidence for such a claim.

Many of the 72 learning objectives in SAF01-04 are *generic* learning objectives that say little in terms of political-ideological leanings. For example, one of the learning objectives for year 2 is that pupils should be able to “reflect on why people have different opinions make different choices” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 7). Moreover, they should be able to “talk about friendship and belonging and what can have an impact on relations” (Ibid.). These are generic learning objectives that could probably gain support from political parties across the entire political spectrum, both in Norway and beyond. It might be argued that the high number of this type of generic learning objectives entails that SAF01-04 is close to neutral from a political-ideological perspective.

However, as additional support for the interpretation that SAF01-04 leans moderately to the political left, it should be noted that a remarkably high number of the learning objectives in SAF01-04 start with three specific words and phrases: “explore” (16 instances), “reflect on” (13 instances), and “talk about” (10 instances). It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions on whether the massive use of these three words and phrases has political-ideological relevance. But the frequent use of such terms in SAF01-04 seems to reflect a desire to promote what broadly can be referred to as *critical thinking* (Best, 2021; Cáceres et al., 2020; Dewey, 1997; Ennis, 1964; Glaser, 1941), and which seems to be encouraged in SAF01-04 for political-ideological normative purposes, not only analytical ones. For example, it is stated that pupils should be able to “talk about emotions, bodies, gender and sexuality (...)” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 7). What “talk about” means in this context is that pupils should not only acquire *knowledge* about these topics, but they should take a specific politically normative position in relation to them. They should be able to think critically about emotions, bodies, gender and sexuality, which in this context means that they should take a socially liberal stance in questions relating to these topics. Correspondingly, after year 4, pupils should be able to “talk about identity, diversity and community, and reflect on what it might be like if one is not a part of the community” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 8). The term “talk about” conveys the view that pupils should not only become analytically knowledgeable about contested topics such as ethnic diversity, but also that pupils should adopt specific politically normative positions in relation to these subjects by thinking critically about them. Thus, the term “talk about” functions as a promotion of diversity and multiculturalism for this quote. Correspondingly, it is stated that pupils after year 7 should be able to “reflect on how commercialism can influence consumption (...)” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 10). In this case, the term “reflect on” has the function of stimulating critical thinking that debunks private market capitalism and promotes public production of goods and services. As these examples show, the call for critical thinking that is implied in words such as “explore,” “reflect on,” and “talk about” seems to underpin the overall moderately left-leaning political-ideological normativity of SAF01-04.

Moreover, there is another aspect of SAF01-04 that did not fit within the thematic findings presented in Section 4, but that might represent additional support for the conclusion that SAF01-04 is consistent with ideas of the political left: the absence of a focus on factual and easily measurable knowledge in the learning objectives. The political right has been more positively inclined towards the use of quantitative indicators of educational achievements (Marshall, 2017; Troman, 1989). One might assume, then, that the right-leaning Norwegian government of 2019 would give priority to easily testable learning objectives in SAF01-04. On the contrary, however, the dominating use of words and phrases such as “explore,” “reflect on,” and “talk about” entails that many of the learning objectives set out in the document are far from easy to measure in tests.

7 Conclusion

This article has reported on an examination of the political-ideological normative leanings of SAF01-04, which is the designation given to the regulation that currently governs social studies education in

primary and lower secondary schools in Norway. It was found that, in terms of contested political-ideological normative content, the themes *social liberalism*, *multiculturalism*, and *economic distribution* are the most prominent themes in this document. These themes do not significantly derive from higher-order regulations but are specific to SAF01-04.

It is difficult to detect ideological influences of the governing political parties of 2019 in SAF01-04. On the contrary, the curriculum is liberal in terms of social issues, and takes a stance for multiculturalism and against nationalism. The theme of economic redistribution can also be identified, although it is less prominent. In neither of these politically contested themes does SAF01-04 reflect the ideological inclinations of the coalition government that developed the curriculum. On the contrary, SAF01-04 leans moderately towards what is usually referred to as the political left.

Future studies should evaluate the interpretive conclusions reached in the present study. If other researchers come to the same conclusions regarding the political-ideological content of SAF01-04 as those suggested in this article, additional studies should examine the process behind SAF01-04. Future process analyses may help explain what this article has interpreted as a surprising absence of ideological congruence between the political parties of the 2019 Norwegian government and their social studies curriculum.

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