

# Uncovering the political in non-political young muslim immigrant identities

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The theme of this paper is political identity and participation among Muslim migrant young people in Denmark. Political identity is analysed by examining students' political interests and perception of themselves as participants in politics, as well as their rationalities for politics. In order to address the research question '*What characterizes political identities among Muslim immigrant young people in schools?*' we interviewed eight Muslim students from a Danish upper secondary school and from different national origins. The students' political orientations seemed quite contradictory, even among those who might readily have been identified as a-political. Despite moderate political interest, all students showed some inclinations to participate in elections or in particular issues. However, they emphasized that their social studies classes primarily provided them with factual knowledge experience, and some students found this knowledge useful. None of the students seemed to experience school as an arena for participation. Consequently, there is first a need to emphasize the significance of a dynamic perspective on the phenomenon of political identity, and second, we need to know how students in school should be regarded as citizens in 'the making' or as equal citizens in a participatory arena.

Keywords: politics, identity, citizenship, participation, democracy.

## Defining the problem

Immigrants are provided with certain rights of citizenship, but at the same time they encounter demands in the form of certain legitimate obligations such as participating in the political institutions of the receiving country. The claim that participation makes better citizens is a

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long established one in political science, dating back (albeit sometimes implicitly) to Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Rousseau. Many, including John Stuart Mill and Carole Pateman, have argued in favour of the educational effect of social and political participation at the individual level. However, it is hard to find proof that links participation to democratic prosperity (Mansbridge 1999). It seems, after all, much easier to make the opposite claim, namely that lack of participation provides fewer learning opportunities for citizens and has negative effects on democracy. In this regard, it appears that immigrants in Denmark are increasingly abandoning democracy. In 2009 the ratio of non-voters at local elections in the major cities was as high as 63% (Bhatti & Hansen 2010), thus indicating a serious democratic problem, and perhaps even starting a negative spiral of socialization in a situation where immigrants associate only with other immigrants who do not vote either. However, members of a political community are constituted of all people who are affected by and included in political decisions (Habermas 1994, Togeby 2003). Therefore, according to the 'principle of inclusion' (Dahl 1989), all members should participate in political processes. In the most general sense, citizenship is about group membership and political community, but citizenship sometimes involves a balance between having a number of rights and facing social and political inequality in exercising such rights. The rupture between equality and difference represents one of the greatest challenges to citizenship today (Delanty 2000). Much mainstream debate on citizenship has been premised on the assumption that citizens are fully formed individuals able to express their interests in the public domain. However, few studies have taken a closer look at the processes involved in *becoming a political citizen*. Becoming political involves the development of a political identity which is integral to a political culture (Inoguchi 2008). We share Inoguchi's understanding of political culture as comprising beliefs and norms, principles, and practices which are political, i.e. which pertain to authority, coercion, and freedom (Inoguchi 2008). We see political identity as *how citizens understand and represent themselves in relation to the field of politics*. In this article, we particularly focus on students' political interest, participation, and rationalities. Studying identity in the context of upper secondary schools is important, as schools might be a political arena and thus stimulate political participation. Our research question is:

*What characterizes the political citizen identities which can be found among immigrant young people in schools?*

For this pilot study, which precedes a larger study to be conducted in Norway and Denmark, we interviewed eight students at a Danish secondary school located near Aarhus. This school has been successful

in terms of integrating second-generation immigrants, thus pointing to the role of the specific institutional setting. Life in this school is also a crucial arena for talks and discussions and thus serves as both a formal and informal environment for socialization whereby second-generation immigrants are provided with basic tools with which to identify themselves in relation to the political system and participation in politics.

Research shows that the socio-economic resources of parents have a great impact on the citizenship competencies of pupils, and that children of highly educated parents generally perform better in this respect (Almgren 2006; Togeby 2003). In addition, the school context is apparently significant for individual pupils' results, which points to the fact that institutional determinants (both external and internal) should be taken into consideration.

## Citizenship, participation and rationalities

### Citizenship

In this article, we use theories of citizenship as a theoretical framework in an attempt to develop the dimensions of political identities. After examining the concept of citizenship we will clarify participation and rationalities as dimensions of political participatory identities.

More than anyone else in modern times, T.H. Marshall, in his classic essay *Citizenship and Social Class* (1991 [1950]), fundamentally set the agenda for citizenship discussions. In his essay citizenship is defined as a comprehensive set of rights, namely civil, political, and social rights. However, many scholars have argued that in the 21st century citizenship, as described by T.H. Marshall, does not provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding what it means to be political in an age characterized by globalization, culturalization, and postmodernity (Benhabib 1996; Delanty 2000; Kakabadse et al. 2009, Turner 1993). Modern citizenship is marked by significant transformations which highlight the issue of political identity. We face postmodern politics in which distributional struggles linked to wealth have been replaced by conflicts founded either in status and access or in matters concerning race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ecology (among others) as central constitutive elements of identity work (Isin & Wood 1999). These changes do not replace traditional distinctions in relation to social class, but supplement them with new ones. However, the basis of citizenship is ultimately the recognition of the autonomy of the *person*, and therefore presupposes the reconciliation of self and the other. We believe that the unfolding of an identity dimension is crucial to uncovering the basic elements of modern citizenship. Consequently,

we want to focus on identity as crucial to culture, and to demarcate this approach from communitarian positions which (although also highly relevant) primarily stress civic duties and moral values. Based on such arguments, it seems necessary to recognize two fundamental aspects of citizenship: citizenship as *status* (without status modern individuals cannot hold civil, political, and social rights) and citizenship as *practice*. How citizens see themselves in political participation is an important part of such practices.

## Participation

Historically, the classic studies of participation by Lipset (1959), Almond & Verba (1963), Milbrath (1965), and Verba & Nie (1972) narrowly conceptualized participation as participation in elections and the selection of government personnel. Later studies defined participation as activities directed toward the political sphere (Parry et al. 1992), towards political outcomes (Brady 1999), or towards societal power brokers (Teorell et al. 2007). Ekman & Amnå (2009) also include activities oriented towards a more general societal level with a focus on ‘participation’, rather than on activities which are ‘political’. Ekman & Amnå (2009) distinguish between political participation (formal as well as extra-parliamentary) and social commitment, defining the latter as activities aimed at influencing non-private matters, including writing letters to newspaper editors, pro-environmental sorting of waste, and donating to charity organizations, or simply following the news. In this article we aim to apply such a broad understanding of political participation including forms of participation in school, because how citizens understand themselves in terms of participation is an important part of their political identities.

## Rationalities

The neo-institutionalism of James March & Johan P. Olsen (2000) seeks to explain how rationalities for action tend to guide individual behaviour and understanding. March & Olsen do not place themselves explicitly within a certain model of democracy. They can all but be determined as having ‘one foot’ in liberal, communitarian, and deliberative camps – even if the latter two positions are dominating. They do, however, heavily emphasize the institutional and endogenous creation of identity and meaning in politics. This also focuses on the *transformative* aspect of action, which makes the question of political identity highly relevant.

March & Olsen distinguish between two different types of rationalities for action – a ‘logic of consequentiality’ (based on ‘rational exchange’) and a ‘logic of appropriateness’ (based on ‘reasoned obligation’) – and thereby clarify the difference between instrumental and identity-based or rule-based types of action in relation to political institutions. The distinction can be regarded as a difference between ‘anticipatory’ and ‘conventional’ action. Anticipatory action (which refers to the ‘logic of consequentiality’) is based on what in political theory is called an ‘exchange’ perspective on political behaviour. It builds on images of a rational agent. At the micro-level it borrows the basic understandings from economic theory (e.g. Downs 1957, Schumpeter 1946). Action, in this theory is instrumentalist and based on calculations of return. Many scholars (e.g. Chantal Mouffe, 1993) reject such models of politics and democracy because they build on rationalist and individualist perceptions and frameworks.<sup>1</sup> In opposition to this approach March & Olsen propose what they call the ‘conventional’ or ‘obligatory’ mode of action (which refers to the ‘logic of appropriateness’). Political action also aims at matching identity to specific situations (March & Olsen 2000). In an institutional perspective, political action is primarily seen as driven by socially constructed meanings and rules reflected in identities and institutions: ‘Which choice of action has the most favourable consequences’, as opposed to ‘What does a person such as me do in a situation such as this?’ To use March & Olsen’s wording, modern individuals must be understood as *identity seeking* individuals rather than as rational agents. The consequentialist logic is based on the idea that human action is determined by choices, and choices are determined by an assessment of the probable consequences of alternatives. March & Olsen (2000), however, claim that although such logic seems to capture part of politics, political life is more accurately characterized as an attempt to match conceptions of a situation in order to produce behaviour that fulfils an identity. According to March & Olsen, identities originate from institutions (in both the broad and narrow senses of the term). Identities are developed, shaped, and reformed through political and institutional processes.

At the macro-level March & Olsen differentiate between *aggregative* models of politics, in which political actors are motivated by the pursuit of interests (action is based on a ‘logic of consequentiality’), and *integrative* (or deliberative, one could add) models of politics (‘logic of appropriateness’), which stress the role of identity, moral considerations, and reason. Both models are, according to March & Olsen, central to democratic political order and are relevant when it comes to explaining how citizens form political and democratic identities.

## Design and method

The methodological design of the pilot study was based on a qualitative case study of immigrant young people from a Danish upper secondary school which is renowned for its work on integration. The school may be seen as ‘a paradigmatic case’. At the time of the study, it had 750 pupils, representing 39 different nationalities, and two-thirds of the pupils were multi-lingual and from the Århus area. The school’s success is reflected in its low dropout rate of only 7 %.

In this pilot study of what characterizes political citizen identities among immigrant young people in the above-mentioned school, we considered it important to develop our understanding of the complexity of political identities. Our unit of analysis was the dimensions of political identities of young immigrant adolescents, as presented in the interviews. Our first aim was to analytically describe the similarities and differences in political identities as they emerged in the school and particularly in civic education classes.

For the pilot study we interviewed eight students. The selection of students was deliberately designed to maximize variation though keeping the variable of religion constant. We chose to focus on Muslim students because there has been a considerable amount of focus on their situation in Denmark, both politically and socially. Also, for many Muslims, Islam has important consequences for their social and political life. Information relating to the sample of students selected for our study is listed in Table 1.

*Table 1 Selection of students.*

ID	nnk1	nnk2	nnk3	nnk4	ts1	ts2	ts3	ts4
Origin	Pakistan	Egypt/ Palestine	Palestine	Iraq Kurdistan	Afghanistan	India	Somalia	Syria/ Palestine
Gender	Boy	Girl	Girl	Boy	Boy	Boy	Girl	Girl
Citizenship	Danish	Danish	Danish	Iraqi	Danish	Danish	Danish	Danish
National ID – subjective	More Danish	90 % Palestinian	50 % Palestinian 50 % Danish	60 % Kurdish	Split	More Danish	Split between Somalia and Denmark	More Danish
Age (years)	18	17	16	18	17	18	16	18

The students were interviewed on the same day at the beginning of June 2010. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and then coded according to relevant information – the coding scheme is presented in the Appendix. The interview guide is tentative in the sense that the interviews were relatively open-ended. This means that while students were asked to answer most of the questions, we also tried to adapt the questions to individual student's particularities when exploring their political orientation. All interviews were coded using a parallel coding scheme in order to focus the analysis on the contradicting voices in the students' political orientations and interests. The scheme also focused on related orientations such as religiousness, membership of organizations, and attitude towards Danish society.

The analytical procedure started with all interviews being read through in an attempt to focus the current paper. The first analytical step revealed an overall contradiction between lack of explicit political interests on the one hand and political participation on the other. The second step focused on statements of participation and attitudes to politics in an attempt to find similarities and differences in the respondents' participatory orientation. The similarities and differences in political orientation were then grouped. The third and final step looked closer at the students' reasoning, and the purpose of the analysis was to identify what actually seemed to fuel the students' decision to participate in politics. Close examination of the students' statements enabled us to focus on rationalities in our theoretical approach.

## Empirical results

The results presented here relate to three groups of students according to their similarities and differences in relation to the dimensions of political identities.

Here, we first focus on two female students, respectively from Egypt and Somalia, who expressed strong religious identities which seemed to guide their lives. The Egyptian student expressed strong ties to her national roots and claimed to feel only 10% Danish. In contrast, the Somalian girl felt more split between Danish and Somali society. They had both attended a private Arabic school before starting in lower secondary grade at the Danish school. They explained how religion was important to them:

Egyptian: Actually, I use it [religion] everywhere, in school, on the street, at home, everywhere in every minute. There is a set of rules for every occasion which guide my behaviour, how to act, how to speak to people, to respect my parents, and when I can show my anger and in what situations, so I use it continually. (2nnk2)<sup>2</sup>

Somali: Yes, I'm a Muslim. Religion means a lot to me. It is in religion that I have my basis. These days I have become very interested in religion. I plan to read and study it in depth this summer. (3ts3)

What the two students had in common was a dedication to religion as a belief system, a set of values, and a worldview as a practical guide in their lives. The Egyptian girl was rather explicit on the link between religion and her social and political orientation: 'It is important, considering our religion, to have knowledge of our society. Most important is to be socially and politically aware of what's going on, and not just sleep.' The girls showed an apparent (religious) value rationality (logic of appropriateness) which may have regulated their opinions as well as their activism. The rationality seemed to be the nexus also in their identity formation and activism, and passion seemed to feed interest and activism (2nnk5; 2nnk9). The way in which rationality and activism were interwoven is revealed in the following quote from the Egyptian girl, when elaborating on her political interests:

Yes, I am interested in politics, but not in all kinds of politics. I like to read about Parliament and parties, but I have to do this because I like to know something about the country I live in and how it works. I like best to read about democracy and the constitution – what one is supposed to do and not supposed to do here in Denmark. (2nnk6)

Later, the student explained her political interests as rather selective and contradictory. However, her political interests and religious faith and orientation seemed to translate into political participation in several ways. First, she 'of course' intended to vote, in order 'to have someone who can represent me and gain some influence' (2nnk7). Second, she had taken the initiative to e-mail a cartoon-like drawing of Westergaard to Mohammed-cartoon artist Kurt Westergaard. She wanted to limit the freedom of expression that might be offensive to religious groups and made particular reference to the Mohammed cartoon case. In addition, she had participated in demonstrations, such as the local protest which had taken place the night before the interview, against an Israeli attack on a Gaza support ship.

In contrast, the Somalian girl was less interested in politics: 'they [politicians] all say the same [thing]'. She considered herself to be interested in society but rejected any interest in politics (3ts13). Nevertheless, she thought that one should vote. She also emphasized her responsibility to voice her opinion whenever she felt offended or was particularly interested in a given matter: 'Yes, when something really is of interest to me I can't just sit there and let other people make



choices on my behalf.’ In particular, she felt that people should unite to take action in important situations. This girl was positive toward political education in schools and stated ‘The information has been useful and interesting.’

Although neither of the two girls was committed to political activism, they showed a strong sense of responsibility for taking political action when necessary, partly due to their religious beliefs. In addition to passion, much of their political participation was guided by value-rationality. In this regard, Jon Elster makes an important point that ‘faith’ may be a mechanism that guides actions (Elster 1999),<sup>3</sup> which may explain participation beyond disinterestedness. We labelled the girls ‘religious participants’, thus pointing to the religious value rationality as an important mechanism in their political identity. Although the girls may not be termed politically active, they certainly might have become active if triggered by an optimal combination of values and preferences.

In our second group of respondents (the withdrawn participants), two of the students insisted that they were not interested in politics. One of them was a boy with an Indian background who described himself as a ‘modern Muslim’: ‘I don’t follow Muslim rules, except that I don’t eat pork’ (2ts). The other student was a girl from Palestine who believed in God, tried to live by religious rules, and sometimes attended a mosque, but did not wear a hijab. She described herself as ‘trusting’ (3nnk). She also claimed to have an interest in reading social studies, particularly reading those on the welfare state, and described her involvement as somewhat participatory (3nnk).

The Indian student informed that he actively tried to avoid politics. When he watched news broadcasts, he closed his eyes when it featured politics and might be said to have had a general lack of passion for the subject. He described himself as adapting to the rules of society (2ts8). The student was rather insistent about his negative attitude towards politics and seemed to be more or less a-political. He expressed a certain degree of general distrust in people, and found it hard to genuinely engage in social relations. When asked about trust in politicians, he responded: ‘I feel that I have to [but] actually, I don’t trust any of them.’ Despite distrust, there were numerous signs of participation in his responses. First, he clearly intended to vote: ‘I feel that I have to – it’s my duty!’ (2ts10). The student seemed caught between his political distrust and his feeling of social and political responsibilities. However, on a rare occasion a particular issue might have motivated him to participate: ‘If I really try my best, I believe in myself participating’. Unlike the above-mentioned religious girls, his rationality seemed to be mostly rooted externally in his perceived

expectations of himself. We see this as a clear sign of a ‘logic of appropriateness’ in action. For the Indian male student, reading politics in social studies in school was considered a duty.

The Palestinian girl also insisted that she did not discuss politics at all, although her parents sometimes did. When asked about her intentions regarding voting, she was positive:

Yes, I think so. I think I will devote some more time and prepare myself, but at the moment it doesn’t mean much to me because I don’t have a say, anyhow. If there is something on TV, I only ‘zap’ away [change channel], so I am not that interested at the moment. (3nnk6)

She continued to inform that politics did not seem to affect her situation and that was partly why they seemed uninteresting to her. She also pointed out that participating in society is important, but she found it difficult (3nnk12). Furthermore, she read some newspapers and sometimes watched news broadcasts on TV. She also participated in the above-mentioned local demonstration against Israeli actions against a Gaza support ship. Sympathy for the Palestinian issue coupled with a logic of appropriateness seems to have been the reason for her participation in politics and motivation for actively mobilizing in response to political events.

A Pakistani student similarly insisted that he was not interested in politics. He was a Danish citizen and considered himself more Danish than Pakistani and also a rather secular Muslim. He gave the following information about the way in which he discussed politics with his father:

Well, I discuss much with my father. In fact, particularly when something is going on in Pakistan, we sit and talk it over. For example, when Bhutto died there was a lot of talk in the family about what was going on. Every evening, we sit and watch TV channels, and often when there are suicide bombers, we sit and discuss who has done this. So, it is a part of my life. (1nnk4)

The student seemed to live in a rather political environment, despite his claim to lack interest in politics. He, too, attended in the above-mentioned Gaza support ship demonstration. When asked about voting, he was more uncertain. He once again claimed disinterest in politics and was rather negative about the prospect of voting: ‘Yes [confirming his negativity about voting], but if my mother were to find something to vote for, I might also vote for the same as her’. His political identity was dominated by non-interest. Further, his reliance

on his family regarding his decision as to whether or not to vote may be seen as an example of a logic of appropriateness. With regard to school education, he was negative: 'so far it has not been useful' to my life outside school.

Political disinterest seems to have been most prevalent in the political identity of the Indian boy, the Palestinian girl, and the Pakistani boy. However, their interest in certain issues as well as rationality characterized by a 'logic of appropriateness' still had the possibility to turn their seeming political inactivity into participation on rare but important occasions. We have labelled them 'the withdrawn participants', thus pointing to their disinterest and seemingly paradoxical orientations. Although disinterest and non-participatory attitudes are prevalent in the identities, the fact that the students had the potential to become political all of a sudden renders their political identities far from a-political.

The three remaining students (later named the latent participants), an Afghan boy, a Syrian/Palestine girl, and a boy from Iraq (Kurdistan), all reported having a modest interest in politics. In addition, they revealed differing political orientations. The Afghan student described his political interests as follows:

We discuss sometimes when there are new events which everybody talks about. Mostly, it is in school that we talk. ... for example, the case of the Mohammed cartoons, which really everyone talked about. We heard about this and talked about it. (1ts10)

He confirmed that his school was an arena for informal discussions and for learning about politics, both for himself and his friends. While he seemed to be open-minded, he was not particularly active in terms of politics. He had learned a lot in political education classes, but had not yet found the political information useful in daily life. When asked about the demonstration against Israeli aggression against the Gaza ship, he responded that he had not participated. However, when asked about whether he perceived himself as active or passive, he described himself as active (1ts12): he watched news broadcasts and read newspapers. When asked about what issues might be of particular interest, he replied:

For example, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict – there has been a lot of talk about this issue. You could say that [I'm interested]. People talk about it, not just in the news but here also. (1ts11)

Furthermore, he approved of the Danish involvement in the war in his home country (1ts11). It seems quite clear that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been quite a trigger for political involvement, discussion,

and other forms of activism, particularly in the Muslim immigrant population. The conflict has generated news and discussions, revealed attitudes and feelings, generated knowledge, and also led to all participants' involvement in political affairs, whether formally or informally. Coupled with support for the Danish political system, the Afghan student showed high levels of trust in both the political system and the governmental explanation for the Danish war-involvement. His levels of interest, political information, and logic of appropriateness formed the basis of his rationality. Two students voiced their reflections upon their social and political orientation more than other participants. One of them, a girl of Syrian/Palestinian origin described herself as a moderate Muslim and more Danish than Syrian/Palestinian. The other student was a boy from Iraq and of Kurdish origin. The student from Syria/Palestine described herself as an inactive citizen:

As an active citizen? At the moment, no, I am not a member of any organization. No, I have my opinions, but I rarely share them with others. I am not that active now. I may consider becoming more active in the future. ... [but] I do not like to participate in classroom discussions. (4ts9)

For immigrants, politics is a particularly contested field (Solhaug 2012). However, some issues may affect them deeply, such as the case of the Mohammed cartoons and also the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, voicing opinions may cause unexpected reactions from the immediate political environment. Consequently, many immigrants, including the girl of Syrian/Palestinian origin, are reluctant to reveal their political views. When asked about her political trust, she elaborated on her withdrawal of trust as follows:

Politics is just nonsense, I think. Politics – there is a lot you really can't trust. There is not much ideology left in it – it is more populism. Politicians don't stick to their opinions. You never know when they will change their opinions. Politics is much about getting people's trust, then manipulating them and people's brains, and I dislike that. (4ts21)

This student made a number of reflections on politics and how she perceived the field as stripped of ideology. The sudden changes of opinions among politicians were problematic for her, as well as for many others who voiced this rather common viewpoint. It is certainly also a problem for politicians, since their job is to find solutions to and compromises on contested issues. The girl's attitude is certainly representative of political youths in terms of their need for reliability,

predictability, and honesty. To separate good compromises from plain political populism hunting for voices takes political experience and is usually very difficult. However, rather than political cynicism, the girl's distrust should be regarded as political scepticism. This becomes clear from her elaboration on her political interests:

I do not dig very deep into political matters. I am interested in political parties and such issues – and democracy and freedom of expression is of interest to me, but I don't go deep into these issues. That is not me. However, I share opinions with friends on news and recent events. (4ts13)

Later, she elaborated on her activism and passivity regarding politics:

I am passive in politics. I am active in the sense that I have some knowledge, I have my opinions which I hold on to, but I am not active in the sense that I go out and voice my viewpoints, and do something about it. (4ts14)

She also emphasized that in certain situations she might have to resort to political activism, although she would have to have very good reasons to do so. This student was well-informed compared to the group of withdrawn students and she claimed that political education is very important. She did not participate in the above-mentioned demonstration. Despite the fact that she spoke Danish well, she found it difficult to participate in discussions in school and had difficulties in expressing herself. Furthermore, despite her interests and reflections, she adopted a spectator role towards politics and avoided revealing her political disposition. In common with most of the participants she was opinionated about what it takes to be a good citizen:

A good citizen should work, support oneself and contribute to society, if one is capable of doing so – that's a good citizen. The handicapped and the elderly are, of course, exceptions, but as a good citizen one should help as much as one can, because this is a society. (4ts20)

The student also stressed that she disliked people who deliberately try to live on public support when they do not have a genuine claim to such support. Later, she also pointed out that a good citizen should vote and that she herself intended to vote, despite her distrust in politics. Thus, she was a knowledgeable and reflected young woman with an obvious interest in issues and political norms, and someone who may be termed 'a latent participant'. Her knowledge and reflections may

be a basis for her logic of consequentiality. However, there are also signs of a logic of appropriateness in her perceptions of civic duties.

The Iraqi boy was on the verge of obtaining Danish citizenship after having lived in Denmark for eight years, and was shortly due to take a language and social studies test. He described himself as a moderate Muslim who, for religious and personal reasons, never attended a Mosque. He consciously sought friends among Danish people and other immigrant groups: ‘Getting to know people is the best way to avoid having prejudice against particular social groups’, he claimed. He did not discuss politics much at home but sometimes voiced his opinions:

Sometimes I do discuss. I may ask my mother not to talk the way she does about the Government or Danish People’s Party, because in Iraq there would also be parties talking unfavourably of immigrants. But she just gets annoyed about my comments. (4nnk8)

The Iraqi student’s strong opinions about prejudice and discrimination also seem to have been part of discussions within the family. Otherwise, he claimed that he was not particularly interested in politics, yet he planned to vote and he had also decided which party to vote for. This seeming contradiction between not being politically interested on the one hand and having made a decision on who to vote for on the other was commented upon as follows:

Well, you have to vote if you want to have a government, and all votes count, so one has to vote!

A mix of political obligation and responsibility is apparent in this student’s reflection, together with instrumental rationalism. He elaborated on his choice of political party as follows:

I believe that they (Socialist People’s Party) show great interest in young people and their wishes – for example, the state education grant and such things. ... Or, I may vote for the Social Democrats, because I believe my parents vote for them. (4nnk12)

When asked to elaborate on his reflections on his choice of party he repeated that politics were of no interest to him, and explained this in his perception of politicians:

[E]veryone [politicians] has their personal attitudes, and then they [politicians] claim they will do this and that. Most of their claims on what to do are not carried out in practice – it is only to get votes, to be popular. (4nnk12)

As pointed out earlier, lack of political effectiveness is a rather universal claim made in connection with politicians. However, when asked about his opinions of the Danish democracy and the political system, the Iraqi student claimed it is very good. It is, of course, perfectly possible to value a political system positively while at the same time being critical of the politicians involved. Furthermore, the student was not member of any organization, but had considered being an active supporter of poor children in a developing country. He also said that he considered becoming active if there were particularly important issues to fight for. He believed that in some ways his actions might make a political difference, but that in general there needs to be a large group to really change matters. In common with the Syrian/Palestinian girl, the Iraqi student was well-informed for his age, and showed a certain degree of political interest and sound reflections. His rationality for participation was evidently based on a logic of consequentiality.

## Summary and discussion

So far, the analysis has shown three different political orientations: 'the religious participant', 'the withdrawn participant', and 'the latent participant'. All of the students were found to have somewhat mixed identities in terms of politics.

The two 'religious participants' relied on their faith for a set of values, their worldview, and also as a practical guide to their lives. Their religious faith also seems to have guided their general orientation towards society and particularly some political issues and a logic of appropriateness as most prevalent. The group of 'withdrawn participants' showed less interest in politics, and their political rationality seemed to be more like a logic of appropriateness (family or perceived expectations). However, interest in particular issues, feelings of political responsibilities, and external influences may have motivated their occasional participation in politics. The third group of students, 'the latent participants', revealed more political knowledge, reflection, and interest than the 'withdrawn participants'. Their engagement in certain issues seemed to be a basis for a logic of consequentiality. Their open reflections and knowledge of society and politics distinguished them from the withdrawn participants. However, the orientation of all these three groups of students towards political participation may be termed latent in the sense that all students might have become politically active at some point. Cognitive awareness of political ideology and issues leads us to expect that students in the group labelled 'latent' would have participated more than those in the 'withdrawn group'.

We have offered a model of political identities composed of political interest, rationalities, and participation. Particularly values as well as beliefs and interests seem to have potential for turning disinterested and ‘non-political’ adolescents into quite active political activists of any kind. The beliefs and interest-based rationality displayed by both the religious participants and latent participants show some of the political potential in the sample of students used in our pilot study. Even the withdrawn participants claimed they would ‘certainly’ vote and might ‘take to the streets’ on particular occasions. The students’ participation might be spontaneous, occasional, and sometimes rather active between periods of passivity. A striking feature among the Muslim students is the extent to which their political participation and also their political rationality differed. In their ‘political life’ the students seemed to experience a mixture of value conflict, parental voices, influence from friends, and also information from their school and media sources. For most students this might be a confusing and sometimes conflicting situation which leads to a great variation in political orientation. Some of the students had had positive experiences of the political education as it provided factual information, particularly regarding the political system, but some found it uninteresting and irrelevant. Some students voiced their scepticism towards becoming involved in classroom discussions and none of the students claimed that they participated in discussions in school.

When discussing education we wish to introduce two concepts which Carsten Ljunggren uses to characterize education (2008). He has suggested the use of term *‘the principle of epistemology’* to characterize political education with a rather formal and general focus on factual knowledge. Contrary to this he advocates *‘the principle of public space’* where students bring their concrete political or moral issues forward as if they were voiced in the public, Ljunggren (2008: 317). The latter principle implies that school is considered to be a more politicized arena.

The students in this study certainly touched upon controversial issues such as immigrant and student questions, religious practice, and the Middle East conflict. Muslims may even have been the subject of considerable controversy themselves. When students are allowed to make their controversies known, discussions may become more meaningful and relevant to their lives, at least for the students involved. Such politicized education implies that students are regarded as citizens and political subjects, not just objectified as consumers of school information. We therefore believe, in line with Ljunggren, that schools may be (or may become) important arenas for political dialogues of any kind. Such an educational and political practice might lead to more meaningful political education for students.



However, some of our students found the education relating to democracy and the political system both important and interesting. We also see this as important and emphasize that there is no democracy without political parties, elections, and working a political system. Important political controversies are most often related to electoral campaigns and subject to disagreements between parties. The democratic political system may of course be subject to controversy too. We believe that 'no citizens' need for knowledge of political institutions and processes should be ignored'. In particular, we believe that immigrants who often have a much lower turnout during elections often come from authoritarian regimes or unstable democracies and have a particular need for such political information which may be used to exert political influence in institutionalized channels. Schools seem to be the main public institutions which can fulfil this educational need. We therefore believe that political education needs to balance the principle of epistemology and the principle of public space, hopefully in a complementary way.

## Conclusion

The political identities represented by the eight Muslim students in our pilot study are characterized by a relative lack of political interest on the one hand, but also a variety of participatory orientations on the other. We have identified different logics in participation issues. Among the students, political participation was contradictory and they showed considerable variation in their orientation. Political engagement was particularly invoked in relation to the Middle East conflict and in relation to religious divides. However, we found several indications of individual rationality based on a logic of appropriateness in the interviews, especially in the obvious attempts to show political responsibility and to conform to obligations to vote, despite manifest political disinterestedness. In fact, political disinterestedness might in itself be interpreted as a 'logic of appropriateness': when one belongs to an ethnic or cultural minority, and thus represents 'them' as opposed to 'us' in the discourse of the political majority. Political activity in such a discourse is easily perceived as embryonic political radicalism and is thus aborted.

We argue, in line with Ljunggren, that political controversies ought to be discussed in political education and that schools too are political arenas. Having said this, schools need to pay close attention to immigrants' reluctance to expose their political views. Furthermore, we believe that political education also should fulfil students' need for knowledge of democracy, political institutions, and the political system.

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### Notes

1. Mouffe herself regards identity as identification with groups rather than as an essential property of a given subject (Mouffe 1993).
2. The interview code refer to interview-number, interviewer initials and page in transcription.
3. "... mechanisms are frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences" (Elster 1999: 1).

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## Appendix

### *Thematic focus in interview*

Social participation	Codes
Social relations	Forms and levels of identity
Social trust	
Participation new media	Forms of participation
Integration	Political interest and involvement
National identity	Forms of rationalities
Organizational participation	
Social studies – school contribution	Passion – personally important
Good citizen?	
Political engagement – Interest	
Participation in school	
Political identity	
Political skills	
Political values	
Freedom equality	
Political trust	
Self-efficacy	
Political system	
Rights and obligations	
Democracy – Danish society	