Challenges and changes in arts education in Sweden – visual communication, visual culture and visual competence in the syllabus for visual arts

Tarja Karlsson Häikiö

Pedagogical Unit, Visual Arts and Sloyd Education, Academy of Art And Design, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The article problematizes conditions for visual arts education in Swedish compulsory school. This, by discussing the syllabus for visual arts (Sw. Bild) and through giving examples of teaching in the subject, based on interviews with visual arts teachers, carried out in connection with the production of two Assessment Guides on behalf of The National Agency for Education in 2012 and 2014. The subject visual arts are contextualized in relation to research in the subject field and the national evaluations in visual arts completed in 1992, 2003 and 2013. The research material is analyzed from a post-reflective perspective in relation to the 2011 syllabus (Lgr11) for visual arts, where visual communication and visual culture are central in defining the subject content. The research is further discussed in relation to the renewed syllabus for visual arts (Lgr22), operated in Swedish schools from school year 2022/2023, where a stronger emphasis emerges on visual competency. The syllabus and visual competency is discussed from a pre-reflective perspective and related to affiliated sub-competences defined by the European Network for Visual Literacy.

Abbreviations: Lgr11: The curriculum for compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare, 2011, The National Agency for Education, 2011; Lgr22: The curriculum for compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare, 2022, The National Agency for Education, 2022a; CEFR-VL: The Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy; ENVIL network: European Network for Visual Literacy; JADE: The International Journal of Art & Design Education; KRUT: Kritisk utbildningstidsskrift; KLÅM: Konferentexter om lärande, ämnesdidaktik och mediebruk; SOU: Statens officella utredningar; NU-92: The national evaluation, 1992; NU-03: The national evaluation, 2003; NAU-13: The national evaluation, 2013, The National Agency for Education [Skolverket].

KEYWORDS

Compulsory school; curriculum; syllabus; visual arts; visual competence

CONTACT

Tarja Karlsson Häikiö  tarja.haikio@hdk.gu.se  Pedagogical Unit, Visual Arts and Sloyd Education, Academy of Art And Design, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

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Introduction – the context for visual arts education in Sweden

The conditions for visual arts education in a Swedish school context is challenging due to several reasons. Since the 1990s the Swedish school system comprises both profit and non-profit school organizations (Hennerdal et al., 2020). Because of society’s emphasis on economic expansion and gain, as well as the demands from the labour market, cultural perspectives and civic competences tends to be outmanoeuvred in school (Alexandersson, 2011). This, even though social and civic competences as well as cultural awareness and expression has been stated by the European Parliament and Council (2006) to be desirable for lifelong learning.

One major challenge is the cutting down of the hours for teaching in visual arts over time in Sweden, which adds a questioning of the relevance of aesthetic subjects inside the school system. The national evaluation reports that the visual arts teachers consider the number of teaching hours to be too low in relation to the content formulations in the syllabus (NU-03; NÅU-13, report 426 p. 61).

Another challenge is that the continuous lack of qualified teachers in the aesthetic subjects (music, visual arts and sloyd, NÅU-13, report 426 p. 17–18), leads to a circular problem. Since the society and politics does not signal the importance of aesthetic school subjects (Alexandersson, 2011), young people avoid to educate themselves in this field in Sweden (SOU, 2020: 33, p. 33), which in turn leads to fewer teachers in the subjects and to lessened understanding and knowledge of the subjects. Even though efforts have been – and are currently – made in adding means and ways to educate more visual arts teachers nationally, a lack is still imminent (The National Agency for Education, 2022b).

There are other circumstances affecting the conditions for, and the legitimacy of, the subject. There are approximately 2500 visual arts teacher whole-time positions in compulsory school in Sweden (The National Agency for Education, 2019b). According to several recurrent national evaluations, the average visual arts teacher teaches in very large classes of a median of around 300 pupils in a week that often hinders a good teaching practice (NU-03 p. 62; NÅU-13, report 426 p. 61). Visual arts classes in Sweden can be held by class teachers or by teachers educated in the subject area. Today, both trained visual arts teachers (with 90–120 HEC in subject studies) and class teachers (with 30 HEC in subject studies) teach visual arts in Grades 1 through 6 in Sweden, but only trained visual arts teachers teach visual arts in Grades 7 through 9 and in upper secondary grades. The latest national evaluation show that the conditions for visual arts teachers are alike earlier findings, a lot of working alone in relation to other colleagues in classrooms with poor premises and equipment giving hard conditions to achieve the learning goals set by the curriculum (NÅU-13, report 423 p. 16–17, 20).

Visual arts – a short background

Visual arts as a school subject have undergone major changes historically and in the scientific legitimization of the field. In Sweden, at least three traditions – technical, expressive and communicative – have dominated visual arts education over the last hundred years. During the early history of the subject realistic depiction and technical drawing was predominant (Nordström, 2004, 2014). Åsén (2006) has described these
traditions as a change of focus from children’s drawing, through free creation to visual communication (Sw. bildspråk), a focus inspired by language semiotics (2006, p. 107). The use of portfolios within the artistic area has a long tradition based on knowledge passing on from a master and to a disciple (The National Agency for Education, 2012a, p. 17–18). Portfolios and documentation matrices are commonly used in Swedish visual arts education to follow and evaluate learning processes to ‘encourage student reflection and self-directed learning’ (Haanstra & Schönau, 2007, p. 2). Lindström et al. (1998) used portfolios in their research on subject teaching and of pupils’ creativity.

The study, that was a separate and complementary study to the earlier national evaluations in primary, compulsory and upper secondary school, changed the landscape of visual arts education in Sweden. The study consisted of observational data of 458 pupil and student portfolios in a total 45 classes in pre-school class, Grades 2, 5 and 9 in compulsory school and second and third year in upper secondary education. Their study show that the learning process can be made visible through in-depth working methods where tasks are supplemented with, for example, picture talks and thus methods can be created to assess the non-verbal dimensions of visual arts (Lindström, 1999, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Lindström et al., 1998).

In an earlier national evaluation, teachers describe different conceptions on visual arts as practical-aesthetical, communicative, as well as free, creative and expressive (NU-03, report of visual arts, 2005; Lindström, 2008b, p. 57). Visual communication has dominated visual arts education since the 1960s and is still a key concept in the syllabus for visual arts, but where the subject is currently described from a wider perspective as part of visual culture (Lindgren, 2008). Upcoming changes in the curriculum 2022 brings on new formulations in the syllabus for visual arts, where a long-term goal is added as well as the concept visual competence is introduced. The article thus focuses on the challenging conditions for visual arts education in Sweden, the changes in the syllabus tracking a paradigm shift, where visual knowledge is highlighted through complementing visual communication with visual competence in a visual cultural context of the subject.

The national evaluations in visual arts

The national evaluation (The National Agency for Education, 1992 [NU-03] ) show differences in the interpretation of the content of visual arts education among visual arts teachers around the country. This is an incongruity that may be the result of different generational and geographical contexts, as well as differences in educational backgrounds and conceptions of the subject (The National Agency for Education, 2012a; NÄU-13, report 426 p. 29, 59). The latest national evaluation shows visual arts to have a minor position compared to other school subjects in school years 7–9, a position that mirrors how parents and pupils perceives the subject as a lesser important school subject (NÄU-13, report 426 p. 8, 21, 23, 34; NÄU-13, report 423 p. 35–36). This bears witness of that cultural aspects are not valued in school. Still, pupils claim the subject visual arts to develop their identity and ability to express themselves as well as their self-knowledge (NÄU-13, report 423 p. 62, 185).

A conception that is common both for teachers and pupils, is the perception of visual arts as a school subject that emphasizes product- and object-oriented solutions and
results (Marner & Örtegren, 2013; NÄU-13, report 423 p. 23, 72). Individual performance dominates education in visual arts. The results from several national evaluations have showed an emphasis on individual image-production, focus on technical and chirographic skills, lack of use of image analysis and teacher-domination (NU-92; NU-03; NÄU-13). In the latest evaluation, the focus on theoretical aspects and teacher-led teaching has increased with even fewer occasions for cultural aspects to be included in the school activities (NÄU-13, report 423 p. 35). According to the evaluations the perceptions of the essential in the learning of subject content differ between teachers and pupils, where the teachers emphasize collective learning processes while the pupils perceive the learning context as individualized, focusing on individual achievements and problem-solving (NÄU-13, report 426 p. 36, 47–48; NÄU-13, report 423 p. 79–81).

The evaluation NÄU-13 also points at the fact that the teaching in many schools suffers from a lack of both adapted classrooms for art teaching, as well as a lack of digital tools. Digitization of the subject is problematic due to not only issues on lack of or poor digital resources, but also teacher’s lacking knowledge and in-service training in the use of digital media (Marner & Örtegren, 2015; Örtegren, 2014; NÄU-13, report 426 p. 58, 63; NÄU-13, report 423 p. 31–33), of which the visual arts teachers are aware (Karlsson Häikiö, 2021). The evaluation confirms that many teachers still prefer to teach handicrafts and analogical techniques in visual arts, although visual communication with digital media is predominant in contemporary society. Because of the dominance on individual image production and poor use of digital tools, the new national evaluation pays special attention to the use of digital media (NÄU-13, report 426 p. 44), which also has affected the formulations in the syllabus.

The curriculum and syllabus in visual arts, Lgr11

The Curriculum for compulsory school, pre-school class and school-age educare Lgr11 (The National Agency for Education, 2011) emphasizes democratic aspects of teaching and learning and the learners’ interest and active participation from a dialogic perspective. Various perspectives on learning are ‘natural starting points’ (The National Agency for Education [Lgr11, revised] 2019a, p. 8) in a broader discussion of knowledge, where the teaching should ‘...encompass a range of different approaches’ (Lgr11, revised 2019a, p. 6).

Knowledge is a complex concept, which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills, familiarity and accumulated experience – all of which presuppose and interact with each other. The work of the school must therefore focus on providing scope for expressing these different forms of knowledge, as well as creating a learning process where these forms are balanced to form a meaningful whole (Lgr11, revised 2019, p. 8–9).

To satisfy this mandate, teachers need to provide opportunities for the exploration of different types of knowledge. Therefore, curricula and syllabi should provide teachers with a clear framework for teaching, and at the same time allowing teachers the freedom to determine how subjects are taught, based on the content in the syllabus. In this way, the curriculum addresses different perspectives that tie together all the school subjects: a historical perspective, an environmental perspective, an international
perspective and an ethical perspective (Lgr11, revised 2019a, p. 8). An aesthetical perspective is not mentioned directly but is implicitly understood in the formulation that the studies should ‘should stimulate each pupil towards self-development and personal growth. It should focus not only on intellectual but also practical, sensual and aesthetic aspects’ (Lgr11, revised 2019a, p. 10–11). The curriculum also claims that various knowledge forms should complement each other, and that school practice should be a combination of different fields of knowledge. The revised 2019 curriculum says: ‘In collaboration with the home, the school should promote students’ versatile personal development to active, creative, competent and responsible individuals and citizens’ (Lgr11, revised 2019a, p. 7). Every subject not only provides a deepening and broadening of the knowledge in its own field, but also provides an opportunity for immersion in the other school subjects. Similarly, other subjects can be used as starting points in the visual arts or as a complement to visual arts as a school subject.

Also, a syllabus for visual arts was presented in Lgr11 (The National Agency for Education, 2012d). The curriculum and syllabus have been due to several revisions, made in 2019 and 2022. The syllabus consists of three parts: the goals for learning, the central content and the knowledge requirements. The goals for learning describe what the teaching should achieve. Each of these areas has its specific content. The knowledge requirements specifies the requirements that exist for different grading levels and forms the basis for the assessment practice. As pupils progress through their school years, they should also be able to develop their knowledge of different types of images. That is, the central content should include different kinds of image representations on ‘how visual messages are designed in different media’, and ‘give pupils the opportunities to discuss and critically examine different forms of visual communication and contribute to pupils developing knowledge of pictures and images in different cultures, both historically and in modern times’ (Lgr11, revised 2019a, p. 29). At the same time, the importance of individual development in image production and creativity is stressed. Two lines of progression are imminent, the individual and the creative as well as the collective and cultural.

Curricular changes between the syllabi Lgr11 and Lgr22

The central content in visual arts consists of what is to be treated in the teaching (Lgr11, revised 2019, p. 29–30). The National Agency for Education writes on their website about the latest revision of the curriculum (2022a), Lgr22 that the intention has been to make the syllabi clearer; therefore, there is a strengthened focus on the nature of the subjects in the central content to promote good subject knowledge that has a value in itself. Progression within the subjects is clarified and some subject-specific concepts has been added to highlight the subjects’ breadth in nature (The National Agency for Education, 2021a). The central content has been divided into three knowledge areas; image production, tools for image production and picture analysis (Lgr11) that now are changed in Lgr22 (The National Agency for Education, 2022a) to; image production, techniques, tools and material and picture analysis (The National Agency for Education, 2021b).

The National Agency for Education (2021c) more specifically comments the changes in visual arts. A new long-term goal has been added, pin-pointing the ability to choose approaches to enable work with and develop the ability to grow ideas and make considerations visible, compared to the previous goal that stressed investigative
work with images. Below the differences in the formulations in the long-term goals are set beside each other for comparison:

| Through the teaching of the subject visual arts, the students must be given the conditions to develop their ability to: | The teaching of the subject visual arts should give the students the conditions to develop: |
| --- | --- |
| • communicate with images to express messages, | • ability to communicate with images to express messages, |
| • create images with digital and artisanal techniques and tools and with different materials, | • ability to create images with different techniques, tools and materials, |
| • investigate and present different subject areas with pictures and | • ability to develop ideas and choose and motivate approaches based on the purpose with the image work and |
| • analyse the content, expression and functions of contemporary and historical images (Lgr11). | • ability to analyse the content, expressions and functions of contemporary and historical images (Lgr22). |

According to The National Agency for Education, practical and aesthetic knowledge is more in focus in Lgr22 compared to Lgr11 (2021c). Formulations about images that deal with norms and values has been expanded in the central content, as well as ethical issues besides perspectives on rights and obligations. These are emphasized to encompass these perspectives in the teaching and have more clearly been written into all the school levels (2021b). In Lgr22 the sentences are shorter in the central content and in this way a more open direction is taken, meant to clarify and make the work easier (2021c).

**Visual culture, visual literacy and product- and process-based learning**

A new domain of art education was defined *visual culture*, referring to the totality of human designed images and artefacts (Duncum, 2001; Mirzoeff, 1998). Due to changes in the research field, the curriculum context in visual arts education in Sweden is influenced by visual studies and cultural studies (Lindgren, 2008; NÄU-13, report 423 p. 21–22). The interpretation of the subject as communicative is considered to be in line with the syllabus for visual arts (Lgr11) where the concept visual culture is used to describe the subject field from a widened perspective in relation to society (NÄU-13, report 426 p. 59; NÄU-13, report 423 p. 23).

To be visually literate is to understand and use visual resources and information to communicate with others, but also to decode and interpret visual messages (Bamford, 2006). The ENViL network (Wagner & Schönau, 2016; Schönau et al., 2020) problematizes the concept *visual literacy* as being dependent on an interpretation that includes dimensions that can be connected to other understandings of the concept, as socio-economic, linguistic-philosophical aspects. The ability to reflect on learning, including the social aspects of learning, such as a dialogue, and on creating meaningfulness in learning, can be linked to qualitative and process-oriented aspects, which are noted on a more general level as a resource for school (Korp, 2011, p. 11, 16–18). Also, research in visual arts has brought on a wider range of methods of *process-based learning* (Lindström et al., 1998; Lindström, 1999; NÄU13, report 423 p. 107). In this process collaboration with pupils is a basis for developing the performance at different stages of the work from a progression perspective (Lindström, 1999; The National Agency for Education, 2012a). Lindström’s research has influenced visual arts teachers to focus more on the process,
and according to them, process-based learning can help understanding the content and flow of knowledge formation in the subject (Karlsson Häikiö, 2021).

Aims and research questions

This article’s overarching aim is to highlight conditions concerning visual arts education in Sweden through presenting challenges for teaching in compulsory school. Based on interviews with visual arts teachers, and changes in the formulations in the syllabus for visual arts between 2011 and 2022, the article more specifically aims at contributing to an understanding of the differences between product- and process-based learning. Another more specific aim is to discuss the concepts visual communication and visual competency as part of teaching in visual arts, as well as defining how these concepts can be interpreted and related to the widened definition of the subject as visual culture.

The research questions in focus in this study are:

- In what ways does the conditions in terms of challenges and changes in visual arts education in Sweden affect the legitimacy of the subject?
- What are the reflections of visual arts teachers on their teaching practice, analysed from a post-reflective perspective in light of the national evaluations of the subject, and in relation to the syllabus in visual arts?
- What consequences can be identified for visual arts education from a pre-reflective perspective through an analysis of the changed formulations in the syllabus in visual arts between Lgr11 and Lgr22, and with special focus on the concepts visual communication, visual culture and visual competency?

Method – framework and specification of research material

A framework of the study consists of the fact that the research material was gathered during the production of the National Assessment Guides in visual arts, for Grades 4–6 and 7–9 on behalf of The National Agency for Education in Sweden (2012a, 2014a). The two Assessment Guides are based on material from a collaboration with visual arts teachers participating in the production between 2011 and 2015. The author was the project leader of this assignment together with several colleagues at the Visual Arts Teacher Education at the University of Gothenburg. The Assessment Guides depict teaching situations and provide concrete examples of teaching and assessment in visual arts classrooms. The guides, a research survey, and films showing collegial conversations on assessment in visual arts (available on the agency’s website; The National Agency for Education [Skolverket], 2012b, 2012c, 2014b) were developed in collaboration with two groups of visual arts teachers from rural, suburban and urban schools all over Sweden. The production of the Assessment Guides and the films in their turn built on national evaluations and earlier research in the subject field.

The research material of this study encompasses two parts, one consisting of interviews with four visual arts teachers (Teachers 1–4) and another consisting of national evaluations and the syllabus in visual arts with affiliated steering documents. In the first part, in the interviews with the participating teachers, their practice is highlighted
through excerpts based on the author’s transcripts from six semi-structured individual and paired interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because of the suitability for examining informants’ experiences (Kvale, 1999). In the other part of the study, the national evaluations (NU-92, NU-03 and NÄU-13) are discussed in relation to the syllabus in visual arts operating between 2011 and 2021 (Lgr11) and the renewed syllabus in visual arts (Lgr22) applied from school year 2022/2023. This discussion is mirrored through a comparison of the changed formulations in the syllabus (The National Agency for Education, 2021b) and specifically the definition of the concepts visual communication, visual culture and visual competency as well as product- and process-based learning (Lindström, 1999, 2006, 2011).

Analysis and research ethics

The analysis is carried out through a qualitative content analysis, or thematic analysis (Bryman & Nilsson, 2011), where the interviews are related to the research questions based on an analysis of the research material. The analysis was made through reading transcriptions of the interviews with the four teachers and identifying themes related to the research questions. In the themes, the reflections of the teachers are presented as excerpts, with added commentaries by the author to clarify the context in the interviews to the reader. All excerpts are translated by the author from Swedish to English, which of course means that the sayings of the teachers are due to an interpretation. Also, the formulations in the syllabus for visual arts are translated by the author from Swedish to English.

The analysis is based on the idea of discussing post-reflective and pre-reflective perspectives in relation to the material (Alexandersson, 1999). The post-reflective analysis is directed backwards to the teachers’ visual arts teaching during Lgr11, while the pre-reflective analysis is directed towards future procedures that are enabled by the renewed Lgr22. The analysis of the research material encompasses two parts. The first part consists of the interviews with the visual arts teachers on their teaching based on the national evaluations and the syllabus in visual arts (Lgr11). The second part discusses the changes in the syllabus in visual arts (Lgr22) in relation to the use of the concepts visual communication, visual culture and visual competency.

In the production of the material research ethics according to The Research Ethics Committee (Swedish Research Council [Sw. Vetenskapsrådet], 2011) was followed. The National Agency of Education was informed that research material was collected from interviews in connection with the production of the National Assessment Guides and the film material and has given consent. Also, the teachers have been informed and have given consent to the use of the material. According to Bryman and Nilsson (2011), authenticity is used as a concept in qualitative methods to discuss ethical aspects of research results. In this study, the transcribed excerpts from the interview with the teachers gives authenticity to the presentation of the research results.

Result

The result of the study is gathered under sections addressing the themes below, followed up by the author’s commentaries:
**Analysis of post-reflective perspectives**

- Conventions and loneliness affecting quality and the legitimacy of visual arts.
- Digitization challenging a culture of art, individuality and use of analogue media.
- Portfolios and visual logs (vlogs) as tools to combine product- and process-based learning.
- Visual culture empowering visual arts as part of society in the syllabus Lgr11.

**Analysis of pre-reflective perspectives**

- Visual competency as a redefinition of visual literacy.
- Visual competency added in the syllabus Lgr22 for visual arts in Sweden.

**Part 1 – Analysis of post-reflective perspectives**

**Conventions and loneliness affecting quality and the legitimacy of visual arts**

Marner (2005) claims that the position for visual arts in compulsory school has been problematic for a long time and points out several challenges for the legitimization of visual arts to retain a justification for the subject. This is for instance the textual domination in school and need for competence development of teachers (2005, p. 66, 73). Many teachers are unqualified in spite of large investments in teacher education in Sweden (NÄU-13, report 423 p. 31; NÄU-13, report 426 p. 17–18). This affects the work circumstances for the qualified teachers in school and puts high demands on teacher education and professional development (NÄU-13, report 426 p. 16, 41). Jonsson Widén (2016) shows that visual arts teachers often legitimize their subject depending on their own perception of what is important due to that their personal interest in the subject field strongly affects their educational practice (2016, p. 197). Teacher 1 reflects on the different conceptions of teachers:

> You tend to lock the subjects in old constructions based on old teacher educations that cement old ideas and this means that the subjects do not get the same opportunity to develop. I would like to see that you open up more to collaboration across borders than before.

Jonsson Widén (2016) claims that lack of time, large student groups and focus on summative assessment in school hinders use of new ideas in teaching, which in turn leads to avoiding norm-critical and collegial forms of practice as well as socio-critical perspectives (2016, p. 145). The conditions for visual arts teachers are challenging due to that they often work alone and meet many pupils through the week. Teacher 1 points at the hard conditions for teaching in visual arts, since the classroom situation often is as a lone actor meeting hundreds of pupils a week in big classes (NU-92; NU-03; NÄU-13).

> …as a visual arts teacher you are alone, very lonely. You can have hundreds of pupils, and where you are obliged and responsible to follow each and every one’s process based on maybe 50 minutes a week. I think it goes without saying that this situation falls on its own impossibility, so that’s what the problem is.

The national evaluations in Sweden (NU-03; NÄU-13) also show how the differences in conceptions of the teachers on visual arts are affecting the teaching
and the quality in the teaching, creating unequal conditions for pupils. The latest national evaluation show that visual arts teachers doubt the value of visual arts as an equal school subject compared to other school subjects due to domination of theoretical subjects (NÅU-13, report 423 p. 7, 36; NÅU-13, report 423 p. 178). Teacher 1 comments the legitimacy of visual arts in school related to other school subjects:

Ehm, then of course the role of visual arts in school, and why we need to study it at all and why it is an important subject. It is also something you have to point out as a teacher, and once again, I believe in collaboration across subjects and boundaries to create space for visual arts. It’s A and O so that visual arts do not become the type of subject that lies somewhere between teaching and leisure activity that takes place in a strange room somewhere…

**Commentaries**

Differences in learning conditions and conceptions of the subject content among teachers risk leading to inequality in teaching. Teacher 1 reflects on the legitimacy of visual arts and how conventional thinking hinders development as well as the lonely working circumstances meeting many pupils every week. The subject is in need of an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the subject in school. Teacher 1 points at renewal of ideas being needed but being dependent on cross-fertilization and how this is hard to achieve due to lack of collaborative work with other school subjects. According to Teacher 1, the visual arts teachers carry a responsibility to be spokesmen for the subject, externally to parents and society, as well as internally in school in relation to other subjects and colleagues.

**Digitization challenging a culture of art, individuality and use of analogue media**

Marner (2005) points at a growing need for competences in visual communication in society why knowledge in multimodal communication should be a civil right, giving school a special role in the education in digital media. Since digital images has become very important sources of information world-wide, the national evaluation notes the accessibility to new media as a problem in school as well as poorly equipped classrooms lacking digital resources (NÅU-13, report 423 p. 22). This is further hindered by lack of digital competence among teachers (Marner & Örtgren, 2015; Örtgren, 2014; NÅU-13), which lead to a domination of individual, chirographic production of images with analogue media focusing on artistic perspectives of the subject content (NÅU-13, report 423 p. 8, 180; NÅU-13, report 426 p. 36, 47–48). There is a risk that pupils do not get the possibility to develop adequate visual competences connected to use, editing, dissemination and critical thinking about digitally distributed information.

Following, supporting and evaluating the knowledge process of pupils, instead of focusing on the product, requires adequate kinds of tools for documentation and analysis to create in-depth reflection (Lindström et al., 1998). Teacher 3 describes how use
of digital media in form of a blog, to document and giving peer response besides the teacher’s feedback, is central in her teaching:

Then they [the pupils, author’s notification] can report in other ways as well. For example, the pupils in year 9 have a blog where they blog their whole process. The best thing is that they can blog every lesson, every week that is. But it is not always what they do that, but that the whole process should then be there … They can go in and look at each other’s blogs and also comment if they want and be inspired by each other, and it will be like a conversation, but in writing form, you can say. I go in every week and comment on their posts and so, both their pictures that they publish and the texts that they write, I comment all the time, so it is like one …, all the time a dialogue between us, which is quite relaxed, I think …

Teacher 4 gives evidence of teaching procedure where use of digital media and a vlog is combined with analogue techniques, thus using both media-specific and media-neutral aspects (Lindström, 2008b; Marner & Örtegren, 2003) in the visual arts classroom:

In year 8, the pupils work according to the premises that they will create in 3D format where they are given a task on creating something in 3D. They start with a sketch or an idea in the visual log. They must always relate to this sketch or idea during the work. They can change, add, subtract etc. The 3D-object must be included in an installation by themselves, or together with other peers. The installation must be photographed, and the photograph must be processed in an image-processing program.

In this work, pupils can use process vlogs in relation to specified tasks or parts of the teacher’s educational plan, as presented by Teacher 3, but the methods can also be time-consuming and needs a participative educational context to be relevant and useful. Use of digital portfolios, blogs and vlogs can be a support for the teacher and enhance the pupils’ participation. Teacher 4 gives evidence of how use of analogue and digital media can be combined and how a more varied use of digital media can be implemented in the teaching.

**Commentaries**

Acceptance and inclusion of digital media offers tools for a more relational and communicative teaching practice and a more varied and collaborative teaching situation, but also tools for enhancing visual knowledge in an increasingly visual and digitalized society (Marner & Örtegren, 2013). Therefore, competence development for teachers in digitization is required besides production of visual images chirographically (The National Agency for Education, 2005, p. 51; NÅU-13, report 423 p. 7, 38). Teachers 3 and 4 exemplify how using digitalization as one of the teaching strategies is a way to create more participation and communication. Though creating a width in the teaching of the subject content the visual arts teacher can add to giving visual arts education status in itself as a subject in relation to changes in society’s use of digitization (use of social media, internet, etc.), and thus strengthening the relation to other school subjects.

**Portfolios and visual logs as tools to combine product- and process-based learning**

Visual arts have benefitted from the research made by Lindström et al. (1998) that used portfolios to identify both product- and process-based aspects of knowing
among pupils between the ages of 6 through 19 years. They developed criteria for assessing the work process in visual arts as well as the product, in order to make visible the complexity of the learning process, where the portfolios were used in a new way. The national evaluation report that that in many cases teachers find digital portfolios, blogs, vlogs and assessment matrices to create participation (NÅU-13, report 423 p. 54). This is similar to the interview with Teacher 4, where creating participation and enabling both individual and group learning is described through use of process-based work connected to key words in the central content of the subject as describe, interpret, compare, analyse and communicate:

We use a vlog. In the vlog, the pupils make reflections and analyzes of their own and peer’s work and receive a written response from me. At the beginning of each lesson, we have a ‘start-up task’ which takes 5–10 minutes and is based on what has now been named ‘the Big Five’ but which has followed me as a teacher since long before they got this snazzy name. Describe, interpret, compare, analyze and communicate. This is reported by the pupils in the vlog and responded to in rounds where they present some of what they have written in their vlog to their peers. This usually leads to a discussion in the group. In the vlog, the pupils also make their sketches etc. Most of my projects are open in nature, which gives the pupils a lot of space for dialogue and co-operation, as well as individualization.

On the contrary to Teacher 4, who describe how digital media and vlogs can be used to support the knowledge development of the pupils, Teacher 1 comment the risks of use of portfolios:

If you see the only the product as proof of that a process has taken place, then it becomes difficult to assess and it becomes a pedagogical or didactic question between teachers… em… ideologically maybe even. It is not an intention that a portfolio/folder should contain ten drawings, and then at the end of the semester you as a pupil can get a certain grade. Then you can end up in a situation where the pupil could skip the whole semester and then leave in ten drawings. Then you as a teacher and are forced to grade it …

Teaching all of the parts in central content in the syllabus is a priority for many teachers according to the national evaluation, and still the national evaluation shows a variation between teachers in terms of what support they feel they receive in the syllabus and the commentary material (NÅU-13, report 423 p. 53). Teacher 1 describe how she uses methods to create an in-deep discussion with the pupils about teaching to make them feel a stronger participation and involvement in the teaching through addressing both product and process as aspects of progressive learning and how communication is part of this:

Progression … Analyzing … Interpretation … That there should be a change in how the pupil views his/her work, not necessarily that it should be nicer [finer a product, author’s notification], but that there should be a change and a reflection and that the pupil should have developed an ability to talk about their work and discuss with others.

Through collaborating with the pupils, Teacher 1 wants the pupils to value their own learning process from a new point of view, in this way aiming at encompassing a more qualitative level in her teaching.
Commentaries

Process-based learning and use of process-based aspects and communication help pupils to understand the teaching in relation to key words in the central content in visual arts, as described by Teacher 1. In line with the reflection of Teacher 1 above, Lindström (2008b) claims the purpose of teaching is to support the pupil in moving from solving simple tasks to more complicated problems from a progression-perspective, encompassing both product and process in the learning. Teacher 4 tells of how she has developed didactic strategies to cope with the big classes and the lack of time in teaching through paralleling individual and group activities to create alignment between the subject content and the assessment process. In this way is exemplified how process-based strategies for learning in visual arts teaching practice are used to find ways to meet the demands of the syllabus and to encompass the width of the subject content.

Visual culture empowering visual arts as part of society in the syllabus Lgr11

In the syllabus 2011 (Lgr11), the concept visual culture is used to contextualize the subject in relation to the surrounding society. Teacher 3 comments the state of visual arts education in relation to this widened visual context in society:

I think that because the new curriculum [Lgr11. author’s notification] is divided into three areas within the subject; image-production, use of tools for image-production and picture analysis, it becomes very clear that the subject cannot only focus on materials and techniques or aesthetic education, but it is so much more. It is clear that it addresses issues of identity, sexuality, ethnicity, power relations, about contemporary art and documentary images, words and concepts, that makes it easier for us as a teacher to demand more of pupils than just to draw neat images or using materials in different ways.

The curriculum Lgr11, revised in 2019, identifies long-term goals for visual arts, where ‘pupils should gain experience of visual culture where film, photography, design, art, architecture and environments are included’ (Lgr11, revised 2019a, p. 26). The learner should develop knowledge about ‘image production and techniques’ as well as develop ‘communicative skills’ that will allow them to develop a critical approach based on image analysis. Additionally, pupils should develop ‘knowledge of images in different cultures, both historically and in the present’ (Lgr11, revised 2019, p. 26). Teacher 3 describes how she implements these different directives in her work:

I try to get the pupils themselves to talk about pictures that they have seen, for example art pictures or images from the media and advertising, or it can be all kinds of images. So, I want us to have conversations in the beginning of a work, in order for them [the pupils, author’s notification] to be able to lift up thoughts about how to think about images, how to look at other people's images, images that others have done and images that exist in society and in our culture. It can also be other cultures for that matter, we have for example worked with Chinese culture where we worked with the five elements on the theme energy. Then we looked a lot at pictures from China and we have worked with African art when we worked with the theme water.

Visual arts contribute not only by knowledge specifically in visual arts, but also in developing generic competences that contribute to over-all learning (Wagner &
Schönau, 2016). From a similar entry-point, Marner (2008) points at some of the generic values that visual arts contribute to in the over-all learning of pupils and development of their lifeworld, other than easily measurable outcomes. This is commented by Teacher 2 in the following excerpt, where he elaborates the theme:

In the actual learning process, in which they [the pupils, author’s notification] learn things in the image-making, becomes, reflecting to some extent the process of what knowledge has to undergo. You have to live, you have to experience, investigate the world. Things start to happen in that [the process, author’s notification], so that you learn things, reflecting on various things and see that there are different perspectives on life.

Teacher 4 continues to explain how this is done in relation to the subject content in the syllabus where the teaching is expected to address a lot of different perspectives of society:

In parallel, we work with inspiration from old works of art/artists from several eras and contemporary art/artists. The pupils should be inspired by, or be able to connect to a paraphrase, to create an image that is an opposite image, or compare with or something else or refer to someone else’s art in their own creation. This process takes place orally and in a vlog. The pupils have many materials available; papier-maché, recycled materials, cardboard, glue guns, clay, etc … They are allowed to completely decide the content and form of their creation. It can be an abstract or concrete message they want to express, and we currently refer to sayings, phrases linked to social media, like from transgender people or on family relationships, bullying, war, environmental issues, computer games, sports and identity these issues in the classroom. In images or art installations, the pupils can merge their messages, change them or develop them. They can use sound and build environments around the installations, or just place their artwork in chosen spot. Finally, they can change or develop their work through simple digital image processing.

Commentaries

Visual arts education is about developing skills in order to interpret the contents of images, to understand the social power of visual communication, and to discuss the purposes of imagery, as described by Teacher 3. Visual arts contribute not only by knowledge specifically in visual arts, but also in developing generic competences that contribute to the over-all learning of pupils and development of their life-world (Marner, 2008; Wagner & Schönau, 2016), other than easily measurable outcomes, as confirmed by Teachers 2 and 4. Teachers 2 and 4 put the significance of visual arts education into a widened visual and cultural context in society.

Part 2 – Analysis of pre-reflective perspectives

Visual competency as a redefinition of visual literacy

Wagner and Schönau (2016) state that since the development in global society is characterized by an increasingly prominent visual context, it is important for children to learn to read and interpret visual information so they can better understand their immediate surroundings. Children and youth need tools that will help them develop
**visual competences** that allow them to analyze and reflect on the changes in society as portrayed through visual representations.

Cultural awareness is one of the key competences stated by the European Parliament and Council (2006). Through understanding the content and knowledge formation in visual arts as part of visual culture, there is possibility to create related sub-competences for genre understanding or cultural awareness (Marner, 2008; Örtgren, 2017; Wagner & Schönau, 2016). According to Green (1988) literacy incorporates three dimensions, a cultural, an operational and a critical. Häggström (2020) applies Green’s (1988) three dimensions of literacy to visual literacy. A cultural dimension includes visual experiencing and visual culture, an operational dimension includes code-breaking, meaning-making as well as use of visual resources for communication, and a critical dimension shows an affective impact on visual messages as well as an ability to make judgements, evaluations and for instance understanding values (2020, p. 68). Häggström’s interpretation has similarities with sub-competences defined in an earlier prototype introduced by the ENVİL network in The Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL) (Wagner & Schönau, 2016, p. 64–108). The ENVIL network started its work with defining visual competences as a reaction to a common marginalization of visual literacy, claiming that the value of the concept ‘lies in the combined use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in (subject-)specific situations’ (Schönau et al., 2020, p. 60). The networks’ aim was to arrive at an overview of national curricula and competency models used in school subjects related to the domain of visual literacy (Wagner & Schönau, 2016, p. 6). In an unpublished article, Schönau et al. (2020) describe visual literacy as a ‘neutral umbrella term that covers all (school) subjects in the domain of visual learning’ (2020, p. 3). Here, the different aspects of production and reflection connected to all kinds of learning in the domain of visual literacy are discussed. Lindström et al’s. (1998) suggestion for defining and evaluating product- and process-based learning in visual arts, thus has similar dimensions as suggested by Schönau et al.

The ENVIL network has recently renamed the network as the Common European Network of Reference for Visual Competency (CEFR-VC) in the article ‘A New Structural Model of Visual Competences in Visual Literacy: The Revised Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competences’ (Schönau et al., 2020, p. 63). Here, Schönau et al. (2020) introduce a description of 16 sub-competences that covers different kinds of learning (Schönau et al., 2020, p. 58). To further describe the width and depth of the concept of visual competency the researchers in the network created a model with the sub-competences covering the subject-specific content of learning in visual literacy (Schönau et al., 2020, p. 61). Schönau et al. present five new generic sub-domains of producing and four generic sub-domains of responding, each related to the 16 sub-competences.

Sub-competences related to production:

The competency to generate visual ideas,

The competency to do visual research,

The competency to make visual images,

The competency to present one’s own images,

The competency to evaluate one’s own images and image-making processes.
Sub-competences related to responding:

The competency to look at images with an open mind,
The competency to research images,
The competency to evaluate images,
The competency to report about images. (2020, p. 63–69)

These sub-competences can be related to different processes in the production of images, interpretation of images, etc. Schönau et al. (2020, p. 62) state that some of the sub-competences can be noted to function on different levels, from elementary, through intermediary to competent. In a similar way, Lindström (1999) defined the learning process in visual arts to progress from novice to expert on four levels:

At the lowest level, the expressions encompass like that the pupil ‘only does what the teacher demands’. At the next level, the pupil can evaluate his/her work ‘with some help’ and ‘takes a problem that the teacher has found and changes it a bit’. At the highest level, the pupil develops the work on his/her own initiative, finds problems to solve him-/herself, actively seeks out role models, can motivate his/her value judgments, etc. (Lindström, 1999, p. 99; The National Agency for Education, 2012b, p. 15). [Author’s translation]

Also, ‘formulated seven performance criteria: three product criteria (visibility of intention, colour, form and composition and craftsmanship) and four process criteria (investigative work, inventiveness, ability to use models and the capacity for self-assessment)’ (Haanstra & Schönau, 2007, p. 3). There is also a kindship between the sub-competences and Lindström’s criteria for product and learning processes.

**Visual competency added in the syllabus Lgr22 for visual arts in Sweden**

Schönau et al. (2020) claim that words and concepts to describe educational goals and curricula often are not clearly defined (2020, p. 58). Therefor it is interesting to note how the sub-domains by Schönau et al. (2020, p. 63–69) relate to the upcoming syllabus in visual arts Lgr22 in Sweden. Here visual culture is described as the societal context to what the subject is related:

In the visual arts teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to explore, and process influences from the visual culture. The concept of visual culture is based on the traditional concept of image but expands it to include more and more different forms of visual expressions. The intention is to express a broad view of what is contained within the school subject visual arts. (The National Agency for Education, 2021d, p. 5, 6)

The concept visual competency is introduced for the first time in the revised syllabus Lgr22 to be a specific form of knowledge that also is linked to sight and seeing:

In the visual culture, sight is increasingly linked to specific knowledge, so-called visual competence. Developing visual competence is, among other things, about acquiring an approach to visual expressions by observing, registering, critically examining and documenting them, as well as being able to contribute to the visual culture. (The National Agency for Education, 2021d, p. 6)

In the syllabus Lgr22 for visual arts, visual communication is still a theme in the central content and is even more emphasized for school years 1–3 (The National Agency for Education, 2021c, p. 4):
In a comparison between the two syllabi the main changes consist of a stronger emphasis on the significance to create an ability to understand the message of images and being able to look at images critically. Developing an understanding of norms and ethical perspectives is more strongly highlighted in Lgr22 compared to Lgr11. This comes forth in the following formulation for school years 1–3 where the teaching should encompass:

Ethical issues that may arise in the production and use of images in different contexts (Lgr22)’ and ‘Images from pupils’ visual cultures that shape norms and stereotypes (Lgr22)’ (The National Agency for Education, 2021c, p. 4). This corresponds to sub-competences defined by ENViL like generating visual ideas and evaluating one’s own images and image-making processes.

Respectively, the teaching in grades 4–6 should deal with ‘Rights and obligations and ethical issues in the use and dissemination of images’ (Lgr22). This, since production and reflection upon media images, such as advertising and news images, are written in the central content where the importance of that pupils ‘get to explore the message of images: how images affect and convey messages’ (Lgr22) are emphasized (The National Agency for Education, 2021c, p. 5). Also, the ethical perspectives are defined to be part of the teaching where it should include ‘Images from students’ visual cultures that shape identity, group affiliation and norms’ (Lgr22) and discussions on ‘Rights and obligations as well as ethical issues when using images in different contexts’ (Lgr22) (The National Agency for Education, 2021c, p. 5). These formulations correspond to sub-competencies defined by ENViL like making visual images, doing visual research and looking at images with an open mind.

Concerning use of multimodal media, on primary level, pupils should use photography and learn to transfer images using digital tools. On intermediate level in school years 4–6, the pupils’ toolbox should be expanded through use of photography, film and other digital image creation as well as editing of photography and moving images. In the school years 7–9 the corresponding content encompasses ‘digital creation and digital processing of photographs, moving image and other types of images’ (The National Agency for Education, 2021c, p. 6). These formulations correspond to sub-competencies defined by ENViL as generating visual ideas, presenting one’s own images and evaluating images.

The ethical perspectives, supposed to be included in the teaching, are more explicitly defined in Lgr22 compared to Lgr11 for the higher levels. This comes forth in formulations where the teaching should deal with: ‘Rights and obligations as well as ethical issues in the use and dissemination of images’ and ‘Possible conflicts between freedom of expression and privacy in the use and dissemination of images’ (The National Agency for Education, 2021c, p. 6).

The concepts visual communication and visual culture in the central content of the syllabus in visual arts in Sweden, can in this way be related to the definition of visual literacy.
– and re-definition of visual literacy as visual competence – and sub-competences defined by the ENVIL network in 2016 and 2020 (Schönau et al., 2020; Wagner & Schönau, 2016).

**Discussion of result – concluding comments**

The conclusion of the result of the study relies on a post-reflective analysis reflecting on the conditions for visual arts education based on interviews with visual arts teachers related to the national evaluations and the 2011 syllabus in visual arts (Lgr11), and a pre-reflective analysis discussing the reformulated 2022 syllabus in visual arts (Lgr22) in relation to the use of the concepts visual communication, visual culture and visual competence as well as product- and process-based perspectives on learning.

The article starts in a problematization of the legitimacy of the subject visual arts, as well as implicitly the position of the aesthetic subjects in school in Sweden. Visual arts as an aesthetic subject is looked upon as a lesser important subject not only in Swedish school. The marginalization of the subject visual arts as a lesser important subject can be related to a wider marginalization of visual competences and visual literacy as a knowledge domain that has problems in coming forth in spite of recognition and regulations on an European level. A part of the conditions concerning the legitimacy of visual arts can also be linked to political decisions affecting educational circumstances. The interviews with the visual arts teachers in this study show a consciousness of challenges that meets visual arts education, as older conceptions of the subject among colleagues as well as parents and a low esteem of cultural aspects in school, that makes the work even more challenging.

The national evaluations show that a focus on art making with analogue media in school is problematic as well as individual learning. The result of the study although confirms how the teaching in the subject has developed, for instance in the use of digital media – in spite of often poor resources and need of competence development in digitization. The digital ‘turn’ is Swedish visual arts education is slowly progressing according to the interviews with the visual arts teachers, even though digital resources are lacking or insufficient in many schools. This change in attention shows that a paradigm shift is coming on from analogue to more digital production.

Portfolios, blogs and vlogs are used as strategies by the teachers to document and create a dialogue with the pupils to make the pupils understand the coherence between the subject content and syllabus. The interviews also show that visual arts teachers are working with combining both analogue and digital media, as well as work with product and process, based on the subject content in the syllabus Lgr11 and show an awareness of the possibilities and difficulties with the prevalent formulations. There are examples in their teaching of use of digital work with vlogs, internet searches, image processing, visual communication, use of photography, moving images, etc. This kind of combination of sub-competences and combining of production and reflection is described by ENVIL to enforce the visual knowledge formation.

Traditional and hierarchical conceptions hinder collaboration and cross-over work between school subjects. Differences in views between subject teachers on the importance and relevance of visual arts make it even more important for educators to have clear and specific goals with respect to what visual arts education should focus on and how to define its purpose. The visual arts teachers feel themselves to be
responsible for explaining the significance of the subject to pupils and colleagues. Visual literacy and visual competence are not limited to the area of visual arts education, but can be identified in several disciplines within school and thus often have a multidisciplinary role, a potential that according to the teachers in the study is not taken into account in compulsory school.

Earlier research and national evaluations in visual arts show a strong subject tradition today since teachers uses different definitions of concepts in their work due to different conventions. Paired with unclear formulations in curricula it makes it harder for new syllabuses to break through in practice. At the same time the subject formulations change and develop in line with contemporary society. Visual arts as a school subject have a wider content range today, as confirmed by the teachers in this study based on their teaching due to Lgr11. In this way, the focus on visual arts as part of visual culture, the emphasis on a more advanced use of digital media, the added definition of visual competence as well as a more process-based orientation in the description of teaching and learning in the upcoming Swedish syllabus for visual arts, Lgr22, seems to point in the same direction. This direction seems to be similar with the reformulated and specified description of sub-competences of visual competence in the domain of visual literacy as presented by the ENViL network (Schönau et al., 2020).

Visual arts as a subject brings perspectives on culture and aesthetics into the school’s daily life, and therefore there is need to acknowledging the subject and significance of visual competence as part of a larger educational context. Furthermore, the result points at the significance of visual arts as a school subject encompassing cultural perspectives as well as the significance for pupils to develop subject-specific and general competences through visual arts education to be able to cope with contemporary society. This, since the subject content of visual arts includes the development of related competences, such as genre understanding or cultural awareness.

Notes
1. In the English version of the syllabus, visual arts are called art, but I prefer to use the international concept of visual arts education, and visual arts to name the school subject.
2. Since 1980, visual arts in upper secondary school have been cut in half from 190 h to the current 95 h.
3. The curriculum Lgr11 was revised in 2019 in Swedish, but the English version was translated one year earlier, in 2018. I refer to the revision in 2018 throughout the text, since I use the English translations.
4. The visual art teacher educators Karlsson Häikiö and Lindgren produced the material in 2012 together with Johansson Bäcklund (earlier Wu) and Westerberg, and Johansson Bäcklund, Karlsson Häikiö and Valenta produced the material in 2014.
5. The material in the interviews was collected at sessions in the period between 2013 and 2015, with Teachers 1–4 working in school years 7–9 (2015-11-14 and 2013-06-14).
6. The sub-competences are defined by the following key words; analyze, communicate, create, describe, draft, empathize, experience aesthetically, experiment, interpret, judge, present, realize, reflect, use and value.

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