The status of aesthetic education in a revised centralized curriculum: a theory-based and content-oriented evaluation of the Swedish curriculum reform Gy11

Jonathan Lilliedahl and Stephan Rapp

School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, Jönköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This paper reports on a study of the recent curriculum reform of the Swedish upper-secondary school, Gy11. Although aesthetics were not made compulsory subjects by this reform, all students have a statutory entitlement to be offered a minimum of one course in an aesthetics subject. We wished to determine whether students are actually being given the opportunity of choosing such subjects.

The study is a theory-based and content-oriented evaluation. Data are based on curriculum studies and a comprehensive survey of upper-secondary school principals.

Our findings indicate that while principals have generally organized aesthetics courses, students seldom choose this kind of educational content. Instead, students’ selection is ruled by indirect methods of manipulation.

Introduction
Curriculum theory is fundamentally concerned with the legitimation of educational knowledge. It deals with issues such as ‘What knowledge is considered valuable?’, ‘Why is this knowledge of great worth?’, ‘How is it selected and organized as curricular content?’ and ‘Who determines this?’ (Deng & Luke, 2008). According to Deng (2015, p. 723), such issues are ‘epistemological (having to do with various ways of knowing), normative (having to do the purposes of schooling) and practical (having to do with curriculum-making)’ (italics in original).

Our concern is with the epistemological, normative and practical selection of content by processes at different levels of recontextualization, with particular regard to aesthetic subjects, i.e. music, visual arts, dance and drama (Bernstein, 2000; Lilliedahl, 2015). The study presented here considers the consequences of an educational reform that eliminated a compulsory aesthetics subject in the Swedish upper-secondary school, and the effect this reform has had on student selection or non-selection of courses of an aesthetics nature. We address this topic of aesthetic education with respect to the inner workings of state-based curriculum-making and content selection by following the specific education reform (Gy11) to policy enactment by curricular documents, the local implementation by principals, and the choices of individual students. Furthermore, we address a normative perspective on these practices, that is, the consequences of practical curriculum selection. Such an approach to curriculum theory involves questions of how knowledge is selected and organized as educational content, how this educational knowledge is promulgated by the curriculum and institutional practices of schooling, and how such content selections may be explained under the purview of a normative sociopolitical context (Deng, 2015; Lundgren, 2015). These issues are related to policy trends in Sweden and the relative status of aesthetic education.

Transnational policy trends in Sweden
Since the early 1990s, Swedish curriculum design has followed a transnational neoliberal discourse, with continuously increasing respect given to employment markets and international competitiveness (Grek et al., 2009; Harvey, 2005; Lundahl, 2011; Lundahl, Erreman Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013; Whitty & Power, 2002). Evaluations, inspections, national tests and international surveys have become important tools to assess the results of Swedish education. However, such neoliberal principles of valuation have also been integrated into a nationally oriented neoconservative agenda. The Swedish recontextualization of neoliberal and neoconservative perspectives have resulted in a pedagogic discourse characterized by a focus on the effects of learning in combination with a traditional understanding of curriculum and school knowledge (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015). In this context, the coordination of discourses has particularly...
influenced the recontextualization of the transnational concept of competency (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Wahlström, 2016). In 2006, the EU defined a number of key competencies for lifelong learning (European Union, 2006). These are traditional in the sense that the competencies are linked to subject-related forms, e.g. communicating in one’s mother tongue and mathematical, scientific, and technological competence. However, other wording are designed to appeal to a type of transversal competency concept in terms of generic abilities; ‘learning to learn’, ‘social and civic competence’, ‘sense of initiative and entrepreneurship’ and ‘cultural awareness and expression’. On a Swedish national curriculum level, however, the interpretation of competency has been narrowly curtailed in relation to what is in accordance with a neoconservative tradition and standardization discourse that is, viewed as knowledge. On closer inspection, we can distinguish a streamlined concept of competency in terms of subject-related skills, in particular when it comes to literacy and numeracy. More precisely, the concept has been sealed off restricted to a neoconservative emphasis on standards and basic skills (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015).

Standards, basic skills and aesthetic education

Research indicates that educational policy in the Nordic countries has been influenced by discourses on ‘back to basics’, resulting in increased attention to school subjects like mother tongue, mathematics, foreign languages, and natural sciences, while the development of social, aesthetic and moral aspects have been relatively diminished (Lilliedahl, 2013; Ofstedal Telhaug, Asbjørn Mediás, & Aasen, 2006). Such a demarcation of school subjects is transnational and can be understood as adaptation to principles of a standard-based curriculum and international surveys that rank countries according to performance. In the context of ‘back to basics’ and a standard-based curriculum, the arts tend to be reduced in proportion to greater concentration on what are considered as basic school subjects (Aróstegui, 2016). In Norway, for example, there has been a decline of curriculum time devoted to the arts, cultural and practical subjects, while Norwegian, English, mathematics and physical education classes have increased (Bamford, 2012). The effect can be seen at the level of local implementation and pedagogic practice, where hours allocated to the arts are bundled into 1 week projects to satisfy mandated requirements, rather than considering the arts basic subjects of the curriculum (Bamford, 2012).

In Europe, the arts (e.g. music, visual arts, dance, and drama) are usually compulsory in primary education, while in secondary or upper-secondary education, they become optional (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2009). Among the Nordic countries, by comparison, it is exclusively the Swedish curriculum that has previously included the arts as compulsory at the level of upper-secondary education. In the other countries, the arts have been elective subjects.

As far as student choices are concerned, it has been found that students may opt out of the arts (music) due to lack of self-esteem (Bamford, 2012; Lamont & Maton, 2008).

The view was also expressed that low numbers of pupils went to choose arts electives at the upper secondary because these were often designed for talented students in music, and there were not clear pathways for students who wanted to pursue learning music (or other art forms) at a novice or more modest level. (Bamford, 2012, p. 30)

However, there has not been much research investigating the effect of shifting the arts from mandatory to optional. Previous research has not analysed the result of students’ non-selection of the arts with regard to curriculum and policy intentions established in state regulations. There is, however, research about neoliberal governance models of controlling individuals and their choices. Bradbury, McGimpsey, and Santori (2013) have described the influence and applications of ‘Nudge’ approaches to current UK policy, which assume that people are irrational. This irrationality is problematic for social and economic performance and affects their outcomes. The policy innovation, then, is to regulate this irrationality through incentives and thereby better predict individual choice (Bradbury et al., 2013). Such a theory-based understanding of curriculum-making is of importance in evaluating education reforms. The relationship of students’ free electives and government control may be decisive in policy discussions of aesthetic education and state-based curriculum-making (Apple, 2003).

Purpose and objective

The arts have traditionally had a legitimate place in the Swedish upper-secondary school. However, in the Inquiry of 2007 (SOU, 2008:27), the investigator proposed that the core subject of artistic activities (an integrated subject in aesthetics) should be withdrawn from the common curriculum of both vocational and academic programmes. The reason given was that there were ‘other subjects deemed to be important as compulsory’ (p. 509) [author’s translation]. The intention was to provide students with enhanced occupational preparation (Prop, 2008/09:199; SOU, 2008:27). At the same time, it was stated that all students should have the opportunity to take at least one course in an aesthetics subject as per the student’s choice. In the new curriculum, Gy11, these regulations were realized.
The research problem is fourfold: 1) How has the education policy of aesthetics as optional content taken shape in the new curriculum? 2) How have the curricular regulations been implemented by principals in local schools? 3) To what extent have students chosen aesthetics courses? and 4) What has been the impact of these outcomes on the normative issue of ‘What counts as knowledge’?

In seeking to evaluate the Gy11 education reform, our particular interest is in the prerequisites for selecting aesthetics subject courses in Swedish upper-secondary schools. On the basis of this content-oriented evaluation, we hope to delineate outcomes in relation to policy intentions at different levels.

### A theory-based evaluation

Our evaluation has a theory-based approach in which research findings are considered from a specific framework (Figure 1). First, effects are understood as outcomes of rules and processes at different levels of curriculum formation and realization. Second, outcomes are explained by mechanisms of external and internal rules that govern processes at each level (Franke-Wikberg, 1992; Franke-Wikberg & Lundgren, 1979; Lilliedahl, Sundberg, & Wahlström, 2016; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015).

The research questions we pose correspond to the notion of educational reforms as occurring on three interrelated levels. On the macro-level, curricula and related provisions such as constitutions are considered the programmatic realization of policy intentions and prevailing ideologies. On the meso-level, the implementation of the new curriculum by school principals is its organizational realization. On the micro-level, individual student choices are interpreted as a result of the constraints and opportunities that policies and structures provide (Lilliedahl et al., 2016). In this way, ‘theory-based’ refers to a conceptual framework applied to explain how empirical outcomes have occurred and how they may be understood as reform effects.

Theory-based evaluations involve multifaceted views of the concept of effect. Reforms have clear intentions about how the particular reform should affect the social practice concerned. A theory-based evaluation can study the effects of policy intentions in relation to undesirable outcomes or other consequences (Vedung, 2003).

The issue of effects is a matter of the selective outcome of interrelated practices. To distinguish types of outcomes, we conceptualize distinct phases in terms of input, output, outcome and impact. Input refers to the system of rules that need to be implemented (Donaldson, 2007). Since education reform is an endeavour to transform the present situation, government regulations and

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**Figure 1.** Framework of the recontextualizing field.
curriculum revision are the state tools to bring this about, that is, the bridge to implementation (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000). Subsequently, what was implemented at the local level of providers and schools – the ‘production’ of schooling – is perceived as the output of the reform. However, the outcome, as we see it, is in fact the changing behaviour at the micro-level, that is, the selective processes that result from students’ individual choices. Based on these conceptual steps, the issue of impact becomes a matter of effects in a broader policy context. In this way, effects are given a multidimensional description and encompass direct outcomes as well as indirect impacts (Weiss, 1997).

In accordance with the theory-based evaluation approach, the results are systematically divided into the three procedural steps of reform realization mentioned above (i.e. input, output and outcome), and then discussed in a broader policy context (i.e. impact). Data are based on two sub-studies: curriculum analysis and a comprehensive survey of conditions in practice.

**Curriculum study**

The first step of the evaluation was to investigate the input of the reform, that is, how the policy documents constituting the reform have been actualized in the current curriculum. Curriculum construction is regulated by establishing a hierarchy of subjects and deciding on the amount of time that should be allocated to each. Also at issue is whether certain content should be compulsory or optional (Bernstein, 1975). The methodological approach, thus, includes both qualitative and quantitative analyses centred on transformations in the distribution of educational knowledge.

We compared the recently introduced Gy11 curriculum with the former one, Lpf94, to clarify changes in the distribution of school subjects and courses. This allowed us to examine the relative status of educational knowledge with regard to educational pathways: the selection of subjects in Gy11/Lpf94; the differentiated distribution of credits (time) to each subject in the two curricula; and how this distribution is related to educational pathways in each.

Since the curriculum study investigates the input of the reform, it aims to give a foundational and structural background towards understanding the output and outcome of the reform. Output and outcome are, however, explored through a principal survey.

**Principal survey**

To investigate effects in terms of output and outcome, we conducted a survey to collect data on prevailing conditions in Swedish upper-secondary schools. The survey instrument consisted of 14 questions. The first part (Q1 to Q4) inquired into background variables of the school unit and the principal’s responsibilities. The second part (Q5 to Q14) explored awareness and processing of the new constitutional requirements, comparing the number of students who exercised individual curriculum choices, and determining how many of those took a minimum of one course in an aesthetics subject.

Our empirical data are based on a comprehensive survey of 1334 school units (Swedish: skolenheter) engaged in upper-secondary education. The population and all contact details were retrieved from the Swedish National Agency for Education’s register of school units as of February 2016. The questionnaire was sent to the principal of the school at the school’s mailing address in June 2016, followed by an e-mail reminder in August 2016. A total of 408 responses (31%) were received by 1 September 2016.

Table 1 presents the total response divided between answers, drop-off/unknown status and overlay.

In the breakdown above, answers (n = 388) stand for those replies that adequately responded to the questionnaire, that is, in such a way that the responses contributed to the empirical basis for analysis. The category of drop off/unknown (n = 928) includes returned mail with information about incorrect recipient, and all other cases where the recipient did not respond to the questionnaire. Finally, the category of overlay (n = 20) comprises active replies where it is clear that the receiver does not belong to the target population. Overlay stands for responses with information about inactivity regarding national programmes. All results presented are based on the category of answers (n = 388).

**Non-response analysis**

We have examined whether there are differences in response rates based on school background variables and found no significant imbalance between public and private schools. However, there is an imbalance regarding the existence of arts programmes (Swedish: estetiska programmet). The response from schools having such a programme (n = 150) is overrepresented in comparison with the programme’s prevalence in the population (n = 251). This overrepresentation may have affected the outcome in a positive way.

Figure 2 shows the response rate by schools having different numbers of students. For example, principals in 197 school units indicated that they have about 200 to 499 students in their school. The size of the student population has been considered relatively representative of all schools in Sweden.

The register of school units includes all those in the Swedish upper-secondary school system. It does
not distinguish between schools that have national programmes and that do not. Since our target group consisted of school units with national programmes, this is also of importance regarding overlay and drop off/unknown.

All the principals were invited to voluntarily participate in the survey. They were assured that their responses would be kept confidential; a sequence number served as the only identifiable data. We believe that the considerable lack of response is mainly due to the voluntary nature of the survey. Also, one can assume that principals who have achieved the constitutionally mandated requirements would be more inclined to answer that those who have not complied. This would point to a possible overestimation of how well the implementation of the requirements worked out in practice.

The relatively low response rate also means that it is difficult to assess how well the responses represent the entire target group, suggesting caution with regard to statistical conclusions. This does not, however, contradict clear indications about the outcome of Gy11 in certain aspects of the reform.

The revised curriculum (input)

The Gy11 reform produced a new curriculum consisting of 18 national programmes: 12 vocational and six college preparatory. The vocational programmes train people for occupational careers and prepare them for further vocational education, while the goal of the higher education preparatory programmes is admission to institutions of higher learning. The diverse qualifications are probably one of the crucial differences between the two types of programmes (Forsberg, 2008; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Nylund, Rosvall, & Ledman, 2017). Higher education preparatory programmes grant diplomas providing eligibility for college or university entrance, while a vocational diploma does not serve in this way. If students in vocational programmes wish to achieve basic eligibility for higher education, supplementary courses in Swedish and English are required. In several cases, such courses must be chosen from a student’s elective options or by programme specializations. An expanded programme may be necessary (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012).

With Gy11, core subjects were renamed as foundation subjects, and the module of compulsory content was accordingly reduced from 750 to 600 credits. This reduction was achieved by a decrease in Swedish or Swedish as a second language (−100 credits) and social studies (−50 credits), and by eliminating aesthetic activities (−50 credits). At the same time, history was reintroduced as a foundation subject (50 credits).

However, in higher education preparatory programmes, the foundation subjects’ module was expanded from 750 to 1150–1250 credits, depending on the specific programme. Swedish (+ 100 credits) and English (+ 100 credits) increased in all higher education preparatory programmes, and other foundation subjects were strengthened in varying degrees through the allocation of increased credits: history (+ 50–200 credits), mathematics (+ 0–200 credits), science (+ 0–50 credits) and social studies (+ 0–100 credits). Aesthetic activities were also removed from all college preparatory programmes (−50 credits) and replaced by history (50 credits).

In total, the proportion of foundation subjects became twice as extensive in higher education preparatory programmes as compared with vocational
programmes. However, one crucial similarity stands out: there are no longer any compulsory aesthetics subjects in either curricula. Students who wish to study disciplines like visual art or music need to utilize their individual options (200 credits). This is a specific curriculum module designed to allow students an interest-based selection of educational content, although the range of choice in Gy11 has been diminished by 100 credits in comparison with the prior curriculum.

Which courses are offered among the individual options are decided on a local level, but the government does stipulate certain courses that must be provided. The Upper secondary School Ordinance (SFS, 2010:2039) prescribes that students shall always be able to take a minimum of one course in an aesthetics subject within the framework of their individual option. Exceptions may be made if there are extraordinary circumstances. In addition, students in vocational programmes also have the right to attend courses that lead to eligibility for higher education.

The changing input to principals and students – a transformed curriculum with special regulations pertaining to student options for electives – is problematic. First, principals are expected to organize courses in Swedish, English and aesthetics in such a way that students have the opportunity to study them as individual electives. This regulation may be difficult to attain in practice because of the provision of qualified teachers and appropriate premises. Second, there is only a limited amount of time available for optional courses in both the college preparatory and vocational curriculum. As a result, students in vocational programmes must prioritize courses required for graduation, making it difficult to include a course in an aesthetics subject. For pupils preparing for higher education, there are courses in modern languages, English and mathematics that will increase the point level of their academic record. This may raise their chances of being admitted to a particular college or university. Thus, even for students in college preparatory programmes, it may be wiser to avoid courses that carry fewer credits, which may mean opting out of aesthetic subjects.

To investigate the actual output and outcome of these matters, a survey was performed by means of a questionnaire following-up on each principal’s implementation of the new curriculum requirements (output), and students’ selection of educational knowledge (outcome).

**Principals’ implementation (output)**

The survey shows that in both public and private schools, principals have generally given students the opportunity to choose aesthetics courses within their individual options. Approximately 7% (n = 26) of the principals questioned had failed to provide students with the opportunity to take a minimum of one course in an aesthetics subject. There are, however, principals who believe that they have fulfilled the mandate, but the courses introduced could hardly be classified as aesthetic. Examples are classes in physical education and health, handicrafts, and/or media communication and production – none of which represent arts education.

A variety of reasons were given by principals to account for the absence of aesthetics courses, of which the most common were:

- Lack of student demand;
- school management’s commitment to prioritizing courses needed for graduation;
- human resources problems (such as a lack of qualified teachers in those subjects) that make introducing such courses unfeasible;

In the three cases, the principal was aware of the requirements but failed to implement them. Totally, only 14 principals (4%) were not aware of the legislation. Nevertheless, most of them have met the requirements.

The requirements and how to achieve them have been discussed on the level of the school and on the level of the principal organizer (Figure 3). The central task has been to decide which courses should be offered as student electives. However, policy discussions seldom preceded these deliberations. The size of the school unit does not appear have had an impact on this outcome.

While the new curriculum appears to have been put into effect in many places, one cannot say this with certainty. Given the shortfall in our survey, non-responses may represent deficiencies in many schools where principals were reluctant to report to us. There is, thus, the risk that our results are an overestimation.

**Students’ selection of educational knowledge (outcome)**

Our results show that few students selected aesthetics courses in relation to the number of students who could exercise choice in course selection. Figure 4 presents three interrelated series.

The rhombus line graph indicates the distribution of students by school units. For example, there are two school units with no more than nine students and 197 school units with 200 to 499 students. This line graph represents the data in Figure 2. The quadratic line graph demonstrates the number of students during school year 2015/2016 who had the opportunity to choose courses according to the individual option. The fact that this line is analogous to the
rhombus line was expected since it should reasonably follow the proportion of students at school units. Both lines generally follow the principle of normal distribution.

The triangular line graph (the number of students who have taken an aesthetics course) shows a reverse bend, with relatively few opting for aesthetics relative to the number of students who have chosen courses.

More than one-third of responding school units (35%, n = 135) reported that only a few students (≤ 9) had chosen an aesthetics course. This category includes instances where no one student had chosen an aesthetics course. The survey was not designed to expressly ask for ‘no students at all’, but in several responses (n = 35), principals volunteered this information in a space for comments. These spontaneous comments constitute about 26% of the ≤ 9 cases and approximately 9% of all cases. There may also be schools where no students took an aesthetics course, even if the responding principal did not state this. It is, therefore, likely that our results are an underestimation of the outcome.

If we aggregate both the number of schools that did not offer aesthetics courses and those schools where, although they were offered, no one had chosen such a course, they constitute 13% of all cases (n = 50). This outcome implies that only a fraction of all students take an aesthetics course. Thus, a considerable proportion of students receives their diplomas without ever having taken a course in any aesthetic subject.

The impact on aesthetic education

The recentralization of selective processes

We need to question whether students’ non-selection of aesthetic courses is intentional or a side effect. On the one hand, there is no evidence of governmental deprecation of aesthetics subjects per se. On the other hand, the interventions to change students’ selection behaviour and the increased control over students’ individual choices must be regarded as management by objectives. By providing incentives, the state has indirectly controlled the motivations of students and thereby manipulated their free choice (Bradbury et al., 2013).

The increased control over student choices of educational content suggests that students do not always make the choices desired by those who create the curriculum, that is, choosing the basics: Swedish, English, mathematics, modern languages or occupational training. There is a system encapsulating political arrangements that is designed to produce desirable outcomes without destroying individual freedom of choice. In this neoliberal curriculum-making, there are interrelations between discourses on the marketization of individualism in conjunction with discourses on social control (Apple, 2003). Such curriculum intervention leads to what we call a ‘choice device’, whereby student choices are regulated by certain mechanisms that have been put in place. In this way, individual freedom of choice is preserved while behaviour is affected indirectly by changing the

![Figure 3. Discussions of legislative requirements held during implementation of aesthetics courses.](image-url)
context in which choices are made (Dolan, Hallsworth, Halpern, King, & Vlaev, 2010). By such technocratic regulation, the neoliberal policy discourse has not been replaced, but rather refined by 'means of the efficient production of outcomes, a route to greater systemic efficiency' (Bradbury et al., 2013, p. 253). As a consequence, the formal ground for equality remains intact, but in fact students do not have a level playing field in the particular case of knowledge acquisition.

According to our findings, the selection of educational content mainly takes place on the level of the state (macro) in relation to the level of individuals (micro) (see Figure 1). The state’s framing of conditions for students’ individual electives is an expression of societal classification between valuable and less valuable knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). In comparison with the former strong decentralization in Swedish education policy, the new governance may be perceived as a recentralization of selective processes to

Figure 4. Relationship between number of students, individual electives and selection of courses in aesthetic subjects.
control and frame a standard-based curriculum (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). Furthermore, our results indicate that students’ non-selection of the arts need not be attributed to a lack of inner motivation or weak self-confidence regarding arts education (cf. Bamford, 2012; Lamont & Maton, 2008), but is more likely due to an external motivation controlled by the choice device.

The more prominent governance of students’ individual electives implies a limitation placed on the individual. In a historical perspective, individual option symbolizes a free space for a student’s own interests. The introduction of incentives to indirectly control this individual choice transforms the issue of interest from the individual to the societal level. The concept of interests has come to be associated with achieving utility and profitability while serving both individual aspirations and the national interest.

**Policy clashes**

According to current national policies, upper-secondary education should do more than preparing an individual for work or higher education. It ought to promote active student participation in the life of society, that is, ‘contribute to the all-round development of the students’ (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013, p. 5). The Education Act states that the upper secondary school should provide a good foundation for work and further studies and also for personal development and active participation in the life of society. The education should be organised so that it promotes a sense of social community and develops students’ ability to independently and jointly with others acquire, deepen and apply knowledge. (Skollagen (2010:800), chapter 15, section 2, paragraphs 1 and 2)

In the Gy11 reform, curriculum-makers explicitly argued that the objectives of preparation for work and further studies needed to be strengthened and prioritized, while general civic education was cut back (Prop, 2008/09:199). The politically driven act of removing common core aesthetics subjects was undertaken to create space for other subjects and courses, and thereby stimulate vocational and professional preparation (SOU, 2008:27). For the same reason, distinctions between vocational and professional programmes were clarified, and students’ free choice in the selection of courses was restricted (Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Nylund et al., 2017). As cited earlier, the outcome of this reform has been that a majority of students graduate from Swedish upper-secondary schools without ever having taken a course in the subject area of aesthetics. This fact may be considered a policy problem.

First, one may question whether all students are given an equal opportunity to achieve the overall goals of knowledge acquisition in accordance with the curriculum, since ‘It is the responsibility of the school that all individual students . . . can obtain stimulation from cultural experiences and develop a feeling for aesthetic values’ (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013, p. 8). Possibilities of developing ‘feeling for aesthetic values’ are curtailed when subjects dealing with those values are excluded from the curriculum.

Second, policy clashes are relative to a transnational policy arena. The European Union, according to recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, has declared cultural awareness and expression as one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning (European Union, 2006). In the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (‘ET 2020’), the Council of the European Union states that enhancing creativity and innovation is crucial ‘at all levels of education and training’.

A first challenge is to promote the acquisition by all citizens of transversal key competences such as digital competence, learning to learn, a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness. (European Union, 2009, p. 4)

There is a discursive gap between European transnational policies and Swedish national curricula. Transversal key competences, such as cultural awareness and expression, are not particularly compatible with the subject content-based and performance-oriented type of curricula prevailing in Sweden. The strong classification between subjects is like an underlying principle that largely regulates the framing of competencies, that is, the classification of subject knowledge is superior to the implementation of key competencies (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Wahlström, 2016). In this way, ‘Sweden converges with the European transnational discourse of what counts as knowledge in conceptualization of basic skills and standards, but diverges in relation to transversal skills’ (Wahlström, 2016, p. 310).

Finally, there are problems with the distribution of knowledge. We found that students are not being provided with real opportunities to study the arts during their years of upper-secondary schooling. What impact this restriction has on their personal growth, cultural development and societal integration has yet to be explored. Although curriculum-makers have made a selection of content with undeniable educational value, aesthetics has not been considered essential to the academic or vocational curriculum. This judgement on the part of curriculum-makers is indirectly confirmed by the non-selection of aesthetics subjects by students. Thus, while weak interest in these subjects is considered market-based outcomes by some, it may in fact be the result of the state’s systemic control of student selection of academic courses. Practically speaking, aesthetics
subjects are ‘unselectable’ for the majority of students who consider their upper-secondary school education as a portal to the future.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, when aesthetics was removed from the common curriculum by the Gyllenberg educational reform, it was with the proviso that all students would have a statutory entitlement to take at least one course in an aesthetics subject. Both public and private school providers have largely implemented this constitutional requirement. However, one unexpected outcome of the Gyllenberg reform has been that students show little interest in aesthetics studies. Such subjects appear to be insufficiently attractive for students in Swedish upper-secondary schools to choose them as electives.

The latitude for students to exercise their options in course selection has clearly been reduced. The state has once again centralized curricular content through regulations specifying what education providers have to offer their students (meso-level), as well as through incentives that effectively narrow the choice of electives by students (micro level). In this way, the state has increasingly made itself the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and, as a result what was once touted as student choice has been turned into not much more than a display for the public.

**Notes**

1. A comparison with other models of curriculum evaluation may be found in Hopmann (2003) and Westbury (1970).
2. N = 251 according to valjaskola.se.
3. Or Swedish as a second language.
4. Each programme has its own structure, based on foundation subjects, programme-specific subjects and orientations. In addition, there is a module of individual options.
5. Foundation subjects are English, History, Mathematics, Physical Education and Health, Religion, Science, Social Studies and Swedish/Swedish as a Second Language.
6. The results and analysis are based on empirical information for the 2015/2016 school year. Conclusions are based on a sample deemed representative.

**Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by the Helge Ax:son Johnsons Stiftelse.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Helge Ax:son Johnsons Stiftelse.

**ORCID**

Jonathan Lilliedahl  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7030-9925

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