Why the arts are not considered core knowledge in secondary education: a Bernsteinian analysis

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ABSTRACT

As a result of international neoliberal and neoconservative trends, the status of the arts has been devalued in secondary school curricula. This paper examines why the arts are not considered core educational knowledge in pedagogic discourse arising from the New Right policy agenda. In a case study analysis of Swedish educational policy debates, curriculum codes and their underlying principles of recontextualization are weighed as they bear on the arts. Discursive positionings and socio-political networking between political standpoints and stakeholders have been analysed based on official Swedish documents associated with the legislative process of curriculum revision.

Our findings show how justifications of arts education clash with coding orientations arising from a strong classification between what is presumed to be valuable and non-valuable knowledge, which in turn is due to an underlying principle of visibility. While advocates argue that artistic practices promote transversal competences and have intangible benefits, this same argument unwittingly strengthens the non-autonomous status of the arts. The illegitimacy of the arts also stems from the belief that they are only marginally related to visible market values. Taken together, the arts are not considered core knowledge because of their perceived relative unimportance for higher academic learning or vocational competence.

Introduction

In a perceptive formulation, Basil Bernstein (1975, p. 85) states that ‘Curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge’. He thereby implies that the normative debate over how curriculum should meet the challenges of the future is linked to the epistemological question of the validity of knowledge. Since schools have limited instructional time, curriculum-making also becomes a practical problem in time-budget negotiations (Deng, 2015). Thus, the selection of educational knowledge is a political consideration. Rather than asking whether particular content is valid in itself, there are only concerns with the ‘relative status of a given content’ (Bernstein, 1975, p. 87), determination based on a particular set of values (Deng & Luke, 2008; Maton, 2014). Such discussions take place in a specific social, cultural, and historical context. As a result, what is considered valid knowledge is a selective process closely bound up with the question of ‘whose knowledge?’ (Apple, 1993). Thus, political movements entail changing attitudes towards the value of educational knowledge.

Understanding such relationships has long been a part of curriculum theory. However, while curriculum studies have primarily focused on how policy making has brought about various changes,
and the promulgation of different types of educational knowledge, analyses of the relative status of a particular school subject are less common. Our focus is on the legitimacy of what is commonly recognized in the secondary school curriculum as ‘the fine arts’ (i.e. visual arts, music, dance, and drama/theatre, hereafter referred to as the arts) in relation to current movements in educational policy. We argue that the transnational declining trend in the relative status of the arts in pre-tertiary education may be understood as part of the New Right’s agenda: they seek to weaken the systemic boundaries between education and the field of production, while at the same time strengthening the classification and framing of pathways within the education system (Bernstein, 2000, 2001). The recontextualized composition of neoliberal and neocconservative discourses has brought about a policy that stresses a strong classification between what is declared to be valuable and non-valuable knowledge, based on an underlying principle of visibility. While advocates argue that artistic practices promote transversal competences and have intangible benefits, this same argument unwittingly strengthens the non-autonomous status of the arts. The illegitimacy of the arts also stems from their being considered only marginally related to visible market values. Taken together, the arts are not considered core knowledge because of their perceived relative unimportance for higher academic learning or vocational competence. This conclusion arises from a close examination of curriculum policy negotiations at the national level in Sweden.

The weakened status of the arts

The arts have long been part of the secondary school curriculum. However, a transnational trend of weakening the status of such subjects has emerged (Lilliedahl, 2021). This significant decrease has been marked by cuts in curriculum time, diminished funding, and a decline in the number of students taking arts courses. Such reductions have primarily been reported in countries commonly recognized as influenced by a revived New Right movement in the early 2000s and 2010s. The recontextualization of neoliberal discourses have strengthened a performance-oriented approach to education, including greater accountability of schools and their teachers, and increased emphasis on educational competitiveness through assessment programmes. The focus on evaluation and measurement has been intertwined with a call for standards-based curricula founded on a neo-conservative view of what is considered the core of traditional subject knowledge (Apple, 2006; Beck, 2006; Neumann et al., 2020; Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Sadovnik, 2006; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Wahlström, 2020).

For example, in the US, both the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the 2009 Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation have had a negative impact on the relative status of the arts. As these reforms represented an increased emphasis on ‘the basics’ through high stakes testing and by holding schools and their teachers accountable for student achievement, subjects not considered basic, such as the arts, decreased in status (Berliner, 2011; Beveridge, 2010; Pederson, 2007). The UK has experienced a similar shift after the introduction in 2011 (revised in 2015 and 2017) of the English baccalaureate certificate (EBacc) and the 2016 Progress 8 Benchmark (Bath et al., 2020; Fautley, 2019; Johnes, 2017; Neumann et al., 2016). Since both students and schools are assessed by examination in given subjects, this standards-based model contributes to an imbalance in the status of different curriculum subjects. Students are guided towards choosing subjects that policy makers consider valuable educational knowledge, and they opt-out of courses such as the arts that lack ‘merit’ values (Neumann et al., 2020).

The weakened status of arts courses in secondary school education is probably also linked to the lack of entrance requirements in that area from institutions of higher learning. If colleges and universities do not ask for arts course credit for admission, there are no strategic reasons for students to acquire it during secondary school. Instead, students are likely to prioritize subjects of value to them for college entrance or employment (McCarthy et al., 2019; Tutt, 2014).

Similar conclusions have been reached in studies of Swedish education policy. Students are pressured by structural features of the educational system to choose courses that are either
prerequisites for admission to schools of higher education, or that might enhance their application. They appear to be nudged away from choosing the arts and encouraged to opt for educational content of more practical value in line with their future academic or vocational goals (Lilliedahl, 2021; Lilliedahl & Rapp, 2019).

While previous research has reported on how arts education has been disadvantaged by changes in education policy, our study examines why the arts are not likely to be considered core knowledge in formulating secondary school curricula. At issue are public deliberations relative to different ideological positions on educational policy, namely, the principles of justification versus delegitimization of the arts. Swedish educational policy represents an instructive case because policy struggles were waged between 2007 and 2018 by different socio-political groups over the legitimacy of the arts in upper secondary school. We focus on the arguments raised and how networks of politicians, stakeholders, and controlling agencies have supported or defeated making the arts part of the upper secondary school curriculum. Our aim is to elucidate the relationships between discourses on arts education, curriculum codes, and the underlying principles of recontextualization.

The political recontextualization of educational knowledge

Issues such as ‘What counts as valid knowledge?’ and ‘What should the curriculum contain?’ are central to pedagogic discourse. However, Bernstein (2000) holds that ‘pedagogic discourse is constructed by a recontextualising principle which selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses, and relates other discourses to constitute its own order’ (p. 33). Thus, pedagogic discourse not only identifies what it considers legitimate knowledge, but also specifies to whom, at what time, and how this knowledge should be taught. In a wider perspective, it conveys the socially differentiated distribution of knowledge (Bernstein, 1990, 2000).

While such a recontextualization of knowledge takes place in a variety of arenas (Bernstein, 2000; Maton, 2014; Maton & Muller, 2007), we focus on the processes of curriculum-remaking at the level of national reforms, that is, the politically-driven selection and organization of educational knowledge. Since the curriculum is bounded by time, the political recontextualization opens it up for ideological power struggles among different socio-political groups and their various interests (Bernstein, 1990, 2000). Such negotiations include issues of time allotted to different subjects and whether certain subjects should be mandatory or optional. Thus, there are political questions of ‘the relative status of a given content and its significance in a given educational career’ (Bernstein, 1975, p. 87).

When a curriculum is up for revision, politicians and stakeholders may engage in a struggle over the selective recontextualization of educational knowledge on the basis of a particular set of values (Maton, 2014; Sing et al., 2013). Those structuring principles may be conceptualized by making use of the notion of ‘curriculum codes’ (Bernstein, 1975; Bernstein & Lundgren, 1983). This presupposes that the processes of legitimation and the possibility of achieving legitimacy are determined by the underlying principles of different types of curriculum. Thus, while debates about secondary school reforms are ideological, such positionings are interrelated with their differing approaches to curriculum codes, and those curriculum codes are in turn based on diverse principles of recontextualization.

Curriculum codes and principles of recontextualization

Bernstein distinguishes between two types of curriculum codes: a collection type and an integrative type, depending on the degree of classification and framing. The collection code is typically based on strong boundaries between educational content, together with a strong teacher control over pedagogic practice. By contrast, the integrative code is characterized by a curriculum in which the classification of content is blurred, and where teachers and students stand in an open relation to each other in the pedagogic communication (Bernstein, 1975). The first type has been associated with what is recognized as traditional education and visible pedagogies, because the clear-cut
boundaries of both the school subjects and the teacher–student relationship constitute a pedagogic practice whose rules are explicit. The second is typically linked to principles of progressive education, where a more cross-disciplinary approach to educational content is favoured, and where there is less controlled interaction, as though invisible rules of communication and evaluation were in vogue. However, in both cases the classification and framing can vary and take place along a continuum of strength. Thus, in analysing curriculum changes, it may be better to use the terms ‘stronger/weak’ and ‘strengthening/weakening’ to denote the relative strength of a particular relationship, rather than putting findings into a rigid typology of strong or weak relations (Maton, 2014).

While the concepts of classification and framing have primarily demonstrated the systemic ‘relations within’ curricula and pedagogic practice, they also help to clarify the ideological ‘relations to’ the curriculum (Bernstein, 2000; Lilliedahl, 2015; Moore, 2013). In this regard, classification and framing refer to the relative autonomy of education: whether there are strong or weak boundaries between secondary school curricula and the field of production, which implies different approaches to the control of curriculum framing. In a broader perspective, such issues of recontextualization reflect the long-standing division between the intrinsic and extrinsic justification of educational knowledge (Moore, 2013). Bernstein (1990, 2000) conceptualized such intrinsic–extrinsic relationships as two ways of typically justifying and organizing knowledge: autonomous knowledge and market-dependent knowledge.

Autonomous educational knowledge is justified by its intrinsic value in terms of ‘for its own sake’ and ‘in itself’. Such self-evident knowledge is commonly associated with a liberal–humanist approach to education in which social and economic needs are downplayed for the sake of intellectual development (Mulcahy, 2009). Structurally, knowledge is then organized into systematically distinct and independently self-referential disciplines. These are often based on their intrinsic verticality, whereby knowledge is strongly classified and hierarchically condensed, or horizontally systematized into ‘a series of specialised languages’ (Bernstein, 1999, p. 161, cf. Young & Muller, 2013). In educational policy discussions, however, autonomous knowledge is associated with both academic pathways and what is considered the core curriculum every student should acquire regardless of their career orientation. Core knowledge has also been referred to in the neoconservative discourse of ‘moving forward by going back to basics’ (Bernstein, 2000). From such a point of view, the basics in school reflect the academic disciplines in a continuous relationship. Therefore, the curriculum is supposed to be traditionally organized on the basis of a linear recontextualization of those disciplines, and transmitted to the student through processes of ‘pedagogization’ (Lilliedahl, 2015).

While the traditional liberal–humanist orientation towards curriculum formation stresses the boundary maintenance between education and the field of production, the neoliberal discourse has weakened this division, underscoring that the utility of educational knowledge depends on its market value. Thus, curricular content is justified as a means to an extrinsic end (Moore, 2013). Such market-dependent knowledge is typically associated with embodied, context-oriented procedural skills that are vocationally relevant to the field of production (Young & Muller, 2013, 2019). The instrumental value is a matter of functionality and applicability (Wheelahan, 2010). Although commonly related to vocational education and training (VET) programmes, the recontextualizing principle includes any conceptual or procedural knowledge that has a visible exchange value with regard to everyday practices outside school (Bernstein, 1999, 2000, 2001).

Bernstein’s division of autonomous and market-dependent forms of educational knowledge is analogous to the discursive dichotomy between autonomous and heteronomous purposes of arts education (Eisner, 2002; Gadsden, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008, 2013a; Kalin, 2018; Moore, 2010; Varkøy, 2001). While there have long been firm normative demarcations between the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’ and the extrinsic values of something ‘for the sake of something else’, such boundaries are generally lessened when philosophical deliberations are recontextualized in the sphere of educational policy. Thus, there may be interdiscursivity between both intrinsic and extrinsic justifications in the policy debate regarding the inclusion of arts education in the secondary
school curriculum. For example, the liberal–humanist discourse of the intrinsic value of arts education is often intertwined with an extrinsic discourse into what has been denoted by Gaztambide-Fernández as the common ‘rhetoric of effects’ (2013a, 2013b). Both refer to the impact of the arts, whether the arguments are instrumentalist in terms of effects and causation, or relate to the believed positive function of the arts on a student’s inherent creativity, expressiveness, and critical thinking (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013a; Kalin, 2018; Lilliedahl, 2013). Such discursive interconnections are the result of politically questioning the legitimacy of any curriculum subject, where advocates are expected to adhere to the official pedagogic discourse (Elgström & Hellstenius, 2010, 2011).

In the case study that follows, we use the concepts of classification and framing, and the intrinsic–extrinsic relationship, as recontextualizing principles with which to examine the political issue and the negotiations over the place of the arts in secondary school curricula. The composition of such principles is understood as a curriculum code. It regulates what is considered to be the most valuable educational knowledge for incorporation into the secondary school curriculum (Bernstein, 1975).

The case of Sweden

The binary divide between autonomous knowledge (i.e. autonomous meaning and intrinsic justification) and market-dependent knowledge (i.e. heteronomous meaning and extrinsic justification) is usually blurred in curriculum negotiations. The Swedish policy context provides a clear illustration.

From approximately 1940s to 1970s, the Social Democratic establishment of a comprehensive education system was characterized by a ‘utility-oriented progressivist approach’ (Elgström & Hellstenius, 2011, p. 731). Moreover, Swedish educational policy was greatly influenced by a Bildung-centred approach to education, something Deng denotes as the ‘cultivation-via-knowledge platform’ on which educational knowledge is construed as an ‘important resource for the cultivation of human powers, rather than as something taught for its own end’ (2020, p. 39, 44). Thus, the curriculum was expected to consist of various types of knowledge, based on their potential for cultivating an individual. In Sweden, such a discourse of Bildung was reconceptualized in conjunction with a rationalistic view of mass education to reflect an increasing need for professionals (Dahllöf, 2011; Lundgren, 1979). As a result, the curriculum regulating the Swedish upper secondary school of 1970 (Lgyps 70) was considered an instrument to both cultivate the youth for citizenship and prepare them for a career. However, the academic/vocational divide was strong, and systematically framed by distinct educational pathways.

At the beginning of the 1990s, these tracks were considerably weakened. While the revised curriculum of 1994 still distinguished between academic and vocational programmes, an array of foundation subjects was introduced (Swedish, or Swedish as a second language, English, mathematics, social studies, religion, sciences, physical education and health, and artistic activities). Such core courses aimed to provide basic prerequisites for college or university entrance, regardless of one’s programme of study, and at the same time, give students an all-around education for such purposes as citizenship and critical thinking (Prop. 1992/93:250; SOU 1992:94). The cross-disciplinary foundation subject called ‘artistic activities’ was introduced because of a revived interest in Bildung. The acquisition of knowledge was understood as something that goes beyond pure intellectual learning; students must also learn by engaging in perceptual and experiential activities (SOU 1992:94). Towards this end, students were to be provided with a variety of ways to concretely interpret, construct, articulate, and negotiate their understanding of the world. These include experiencing something aesthetically, as well as drawing on their creative potential to express themselves aesthetically. In a Bernsteinian (2000) conceptualization, the arts were supposed to be ‘therapeutic’ and progressive by invigorating a student’s personal development, creative potential, critical perspective, and self-regulation.

When the centre-right alliance came to power in 2006, they declared that there was a overload of foundation subjects in the upper secondary school curriculum. The core course ‘artistic activities’ was questioned and ultimately withdrawn from the common curriculum in 2011 (Lilliedahl, 2013). In 2014, a newly-appointed coalition of the Social Democrats and the Swedish Green Party sought to
reintroduce an arts subject as compulsory for all students, but in June 2018 their proposal failed to win approval in the Parliament. We examine the policy negotiations that took place during these reform periods with regard to what arguments were put forward, who raised these arguments, and why a general arts subject was not considered for inclusion as core knowledge in the upper secondary school curriculum. Our objective is to analyse the debate and link the arguments raised to curriculum codes and their underlying principles of recontextualization.

**Materials and methods**

The process of education policy making in Sweden begins when the government appoints a commission of inquiry for a specific purpose (details in Government Offices of Sweden, 2020; Sveriges riksdag, 2020). The committee is politically guided by the commissioning document to provide constructive proposals for the solution of various problems (referred to as Dir., Swedish Direktiv). The committee’s proposals are then presented as a Swedish Government Official Report (referred to as SOU, Swedish Statens offentliga utredningar), and this may become the basis for a government bill (referred to as Prop., Swedish Proposition). However, before the government submits such a bill to Parliament (Swedish Sveriges riksdag), the recommendations are usually sent out to various stakeholders and public authorities for comments. Through this referral process the government solicits or considers the consequences of the proposed legislation. (Since the letters of recommendations and objections from the referral bodies are unpublished, they are not cited in the references.)

In addition to the government bill, individual members of Parliament, or a coalition, may submit a private member’s motion to Parliament (referred to as Motion). Prior to the chamber’s decision, the Committee on Education drafts a resolution in which all proposals submitted to the Parliament are taken into consideration (referred to as Bet., Swedish Utskottets betänkande). Since the committee report often includes alternative opinions from minority committee members (referred to as Reservation), it serves as the basis for both debate and a final decision in Parliament (referred to as Records of Proceedings in the Chamber, Swedish Debatt i kammaren). If adopted, the government bill becomes the basis of an ordinance and, in this case, the basis of the new curriculum that will be formulated by the Swedish National Agency of Education.

The official process of policy making for the foundation subject of the arts as described above took place from 2007 to 2011 and 2015 to 2018. It produced 110 policy documents, including 80 responses from referral bodies. We have categorized these records and have qualitatively analysed them using NVivo software. The discursive positions of various stakeholders were classified into discursive nodes of arguments both for and against a mandatory arts subject in the curriculum. In the process of condensing such nodes into broader curriculum codes, the Bernsteinian typologies of collective/integrative and intrinsic/extrinsic proved especially useful. We found strong links to classificatory principles and differing approaches to the intrinsic–extrinsic relationships. Moreover, case classifications served to analyse how representatives of the labour market and government authorities discursively established networks in their gatekeeping and policy negotiations. While the discursive interconnection between different recontextualizing fields (i.e. the relationship between the state government and various stakeholders) appeared to be indirect, intertextual relationships (in NVivo termed as ‘ties’) were found between agents within fields of interest (i.e. between the state government and its agencies, or among member organizations of the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise). Such patterns of case classifications, and node classification patterns formed the basis for examining the underlying principles of political recontextualization and determining how such principles were linked to differing orientations with regard to curriculum codes and the arts.
Findings

First round (2007–2011)

The most recent reform of the Swedish upper secondary school, known as Gy11, increased the degree of separation between academic programmes and vocational education and training (VET). The commission’s report, Path to the future—a reformed upper secondary school (SOU 2008:27), and the government bill, Higher requirements and quality in the new upper secondary school (Prop. 2008/09:199), maintained that the educational pathways at the time were too homogenous, resulting in insufficient preparation for the demands of higher education and the labour market. Upper secondary programmes were subsequently more closely linked to the needs of their stakeholders (Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Nylund et al., 2017).

In contrast to the previous curriculum, Lpf94, the new bill sharply distinguished between educational pathways as either preparatory for higher education or VET programmes. Since the intention of the VET curriculum was to qualify students for employment, it concentrated on training in specific job skills and subjects useful in occupational settings. The academic preparatory programmes, on the other hand, were devoted to qualifying students for college entrance. Thus, admission requirements became the crucial point for questioning the legitimacy of the arts (alternately called aesthetics).

The newly-appointed government claimed there was a curricular overload of foundation subjects. Guided by the government’s proposed solution to this matter (Dir. 2007:8), the Inquiry of 2007 (SOU 2008:27) argued that the common core subject of ‘artistic activities’ (an integration of disciplines such as music, visual arts, and drama) needed to be withdrawn from both the academic study curriculum and VET programmes. The revision was intended to free-up classroom time for ‘other subjects deemed to be so important as to be made compulsory’ in academic preparation (SOU 2008:27, p. 509, author’s transl.), and to prioritize more practical content in occupational training (SOU 2008:27; Prop. 2008/09:199).

The government’s proposal to withdraw ‘aesthetics’ was criticized by advocates of arts education and by public authorities. During the referral process, arguments for including aesthetics courses were related to the functional merits and usefulness of arts education. It was urged that arts-based courses foster the development of communicative and creative human beings who will contribute to the knowledge economy in the future.

High aesthetic and communicative skills are among the most important qualifications for those who will someday be working with development and innovation, and who will have to reach out to people with information, ideas, and products. (Swedish Teacher Union, 2008, unnumbered; author’s transl.)

Stakeholders also emphasized the centrality of the arts for the development of cultural awareness. It was asserted that students were entitled to be given opportunities to communicate through different artistic modes of expression. Referring to the recommendations of the European Parliament and the Council (European Union, 2006), some urged that the eighth key competence for lifelong learning, ‘Cultural awareness and expression’, should be reflected in the curriculum.

The views of special interest groups and public authorities, however, failed to convince the Swedish government (Prop. 2008/09:199). One reason may have been the lack of explicit causal explanations. For example, it was not indicated how creativity that has been nurtured in artistic activities could be recontextualized into economic and material production (Lilliedahl, 2013). There was also relatively weak support from institutions of higher education for the inclusion of arts as a foundation subject. There were some colleges with a special interest in arts education (e.g. the University of Arts, Crafts, and Design and the Royal College of Music in Stockholm), and some general institutions (e.g. Lund University), that did argue for the preservation of the specialized arts programmes that were being attacked by the government. While the gatekeeping stakeholders of colleges and universities were driven by their interest in guarding the boundaries and retaining
control of such programmes, general institutions of higher education took no position on the matter of a mandatory arts subject for upper secondary schools.

The fundamental problem in the first round of negotiations was the code clash between the government’s recontextualizing principle for assessing the relevance of any subject, on the one hand, and the rhetoric of the opponents and their affiliated stakeholders, on the other. While the centre-right alliance insisted that an explicit meaning be discernable for higher academic learning or a professional preparation, opponents held that a foundation subject of the arts should be legitimized because of its implicit value and enhancement of dispositional competences. The arts were not linked to future employment prospects, but were associated with a student’s all-around development and the civil right to express oneself in various forms of communication. However, despite their unsuccessful attempt to validate the arts as a core subject, representatives of higher education institutions did succeed in showing the importance of keeping specialized arts programmes separate and within their own study track. Thus, they could retain autonomous control over cultural and social reproduction within their own educational context (Lilliedahl, 2013).

Second round (2015–2018)

When a coalition of left-winged parties comprised of the Social Democrats and the Swedish Green Party came into power in 2014, the discourse over arts education changed. In 2015, the government initiated a new Commission of Inquiry tasked with investigating a) the conditions for reintroducing aesthetics as a common core subject, and b) the means whereby all students might be given the opportunity to qualify for admission to a school of higher education (Dir. 2015:31).

It is essential that all students be allowed to develop and use their imagination and creativity. Aesthetics, creativity, and the ability to express oneself artistically is an asset in many professions. It is also essential that all young people familiarise themselves with different cultural expressions and have the opportunity to develop their creative talents. (Dir. 2015:31, p. 11, author’s transl.)

In the Inquiry (SOU 2016:77), the state investigator declared that an aesthetics subject may develop creativity that could be a skill transferable to other domains of learning (academic disciplines), as well as to various vocational practices. Thus, aesthetics may not only enhance academic achievement, but may also improve skills demanded by development-oriented industries.

Such an extrinsic-oriented justification was supplemented by a revived discourse on Bildung education. The commissioner stated that the legitimacy of the arts does not reside in solely being a means for something else. The arts have value in themselves and contribute to the broader aims of education. Similar to the official pedagogic discourse in the early 1990s (SOU 1992:94), the Inquiry proposed that students be given arts-based opportunities to express themselves and provided with skills to communicate in a variety of ways, including aesthetic means. In a broad perspective, cultivating such capacity has social significance with regard to democratic values and human rights (SOU 2016:77). In addition, the arts were credited with the therapeutic potential to positively influence a student’s personal well-being, school engagement, and motivation to learn. By this line of reasoning, a general arts subject was justified with regard to its quasi-intrinsic value, rather than being scrutinized for its extrinsic utility alone.

The investigator proposed the introduction of a general arts subject carrying 50 credits and a corresponding reduction from 100 to 50 credits of the upper-secondary school essay/project requirement (hereafter: the secondary school project). The project had sought to demonstrate a VET student’s readiness to do work in their chosen professional area, while students in the academic track were expected to show that they were well-prepared for college, primarily in the subject areas included in the curriculum.

The proposal was met with criticism during the referral process. Industry organizations (e.g. the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise) considered the idea of a common arts requirement an impediment to the teaching of other more vocationally desirable subjects. They questioned
aesthetics adoption as a distinct subject, and wanted it relegated to the specialized knowledge area of the programme.

The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise rejects the proposal that an aesthetics subject be introduced. We also oppose its inclusion among upper secondary subjects in all national programmes. While aesthetic activities are important for students in both higher education preparatory programmes and vocational programmes, we think it better to incorporate aspects of aesthetics into the specialization of each of the programmes. In that way the reform will have better outcomes. (Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, 2017, p. 12)

The issue of an arts subject was also problematical for a scheduling reasons: if an arts-based course was to be included, something else had to be reduced or omitted from the curriculum. Such a revision would risk weakening educational content deemed more essential to the educational programme.

Since the proposal was to reintroduce the arts by reducing credits associated with the secondary school project, the educational contents of the proposal and the project were weighed against each other. In the discussion that ensued, introducing an arts-based aesthetics course at the expense of the secondary school project was deemed unacceptable. Since the secondary school project was to remain as extensive as before, that would not be possible if part of its curricular time were given to the arts. Therefore, some voices suggested sending the referral back for another look at what was proposed.

In addition, the reintroduction of the arts was questioned with regard to the allotment of financial resources. The Swedish Association of School Principals and Directors of Education and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions were concerned that the proposed curriculum revision would cause problems in staffing, allotment of premises, and purchase of equipment.

In their memorandum, the Ministry of Education and Research (Prop. 2017/18:184) declared that the arts serve to complement the mission of Bildung as students become conversant with artistic and aesthetic forms of expression. All students, therefore, should study an aesthetics subject of a practical nature (called ‘aesthetic expressions’), based on several artistic practices, in order to gain experience in aesthetic communication. The arguments presented implied a discursive division between the school’s assigned knowledge mission and the broader objective of Bildung. Thus, the distinction between the provision of knowledge and the meaning of the arts was extended. While such a distancing from ‘knowledge-oriented’ subjects was discursively consistent with the left-wing government, the arguments raised clashed with the centre-right’s insistence on a specialized curriculum based on traditional subject content and contextually relevant skills, as well as boundaries against those subjects with vague academic or vocational meaning. This kind of disagreement led to an oppositional reaction: Prior to the decision of the Chamber, the Committee of Education (Bet. 2017/18:UbU30) stated that, while the arts have an important role to play in education, by reducing the scope of the secondary school project, the government was causing problems:

Sweden is one of the most creative countries in the world. We have a rich flora of internationally successful companies, services, products, fashion designers, artists, actors, and filmmakers. We should, of course, be proud and manage these resources well. Therefore, there is great importance placed on the arts in the Swedish compulsory education system . . . . The purpose of the secondary school project is to provide students with the opportunity to link the parts of the education programme and show that they are well-prepared for professional life or university studies . . . . Reducing the scope by half, in favour of a mandatory aesthetics subject, impairs the conditions for students to conduct their secondary school projects. (Bet. 2017/18:UbU30, p. 16)

The above quotation implies that while the arts may have a self-evident place in primary education, they are not crucial for a secondary school curriculum that prepares students for higher education or vocational employment.

The Committee of Education proposed that the Chamber reject the government’s proposal and, instead, approve the Motions written by the centre-right and far-right parties (2017/18:4030; 2017/18:4092). However, committee representatives from the left-wing parties (Social Democrats, the
Swedish Green Party, and the Left Party) expressed their reservations against the committee’s official proposal.

The debate in Parliament (Record, 2018) followed along established social and discursive party lines. The centre-right parties formed an alliance with the far-right party to gain a majority against the government’s proposals. This parliamentary backing was supported by the Committee on Education and those who submitted oppositional motions. In consequence, the government bill of reintroducing the arts as a mandatory subject was defeated.

In the end, the policy negotiation process between 2015 and 2018 followed much the same discursive positions as from 2007 to 2011. However, the political starting point of the struggle was different. In the first case, the centre-right parties were in office and utilized their political power to propose the removal of the arts. Then advocates of arts education came forward to defend their special interests. In the second round, a left-wing coalition government tried to reintroduce the arts. The resulting oppositional views argued the illegitimacy of a mandatory arts-based course. The latter opinion achieved a parliamentary majority composed of a network of politicians in league with stakeholders from commerce and industry.

Discussion

Our findings show that the arts have been justified through the prospective discourse of knowledge recontextualization: it is claimed that what students learn in arts-based courses during secondary school is likely to be transferable to other domains of knowledge and to a variety of workplaces. This discursive reasoning takes two modes of extrinsic justification: transfer within the field of education, and transversal competencies related to the field of economic production.

In the first case, the arts are considered legitimate because of their potential to enhance academic achievement in ‘the basics’, such as by boosting student performance in other subjects that may be considered more valuable. While such reasoning aims to strengthen the legitimacy of the arts, it relegates the arts to a ‘non-autonomous’ level by reducing the meaning of the arts to a more or less handmaiden status, that is, a means towards achieving some other goal (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013a). In consequence, it becomes difficult to consider the arts as having educational content that warrants organization as a separate core subject in secondary education.

When related to the field of production, legitimization takes the form of a discourse on transversal competencies. It is claimed that the arts are endowed with the power to enhance such transferable abilities as creativity, imagination, and aesthetic communication. These symbolic resources are declared to have the characteristics of becoming recontextualized as instrumental vocational skills of value in various workplaces. In such extrinsic justification, the argumentation commonly heard utilizes several keywords (e.g. creativity and communicative competence) alluding to competitive economic performance in the knowledge society (Bernstein, 2001; Kalin, 2018). However, the failure to demonstrate a causal relationship between skills provided by arts-based education and the field of economic production results in a confused discussion in which the arts are claimed to function positively in all conceivable contexts, but not in a directly visible manner (Lilliedahl, 2013; Varkøy, 2001). In consequence, the arts remain inexplicit, unclear, and incommensurate in seeking to place value on the subject’s relative status.

The most intrinsic-oriented justification of the context-independent meaning of the arts has probably been expressed by the concept of Bildung. Its main argument is that arts-based learning stimulates one’s own artistry; it promotes reflective imagination that is of crucial importance for a student’s creative potential, cultural literacy, and citizenship. The applied dimension of arts knowledge is downplayed by Bildung, while greater focus is placed on the independence of artistic activities and aesthetic experiences as they relate to liberal cultivation (Deng, 2020; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). However, here the notion of Bildung and the meaning of the arts are conducive to magnifying the ‘otherness’ of the arts relative to the school’s institutional assignment of reproducing knowledge. To highlight such a quasi-intrinsic meaning of the arts, stakeholders emphasize the
discursive distinction between art and knowledge by linking the arts to the ‘non-knowledge-oriented’ purposes of education. By so doing, this discursive position is at odds with a policy agenda that supports visible meaning alone, and advocates educational pathways to clear-cut knowledge.

The crucial problem of achieving legitimacy for the arts may be explained as a code clash over differences in one’s orientation to visible versus invisible meaning. In contrast to the view of specialized arts programmes, a general arts foundation subject has been discursively linked to generic knowledge and the non-specialized aims of providing the active learner with opportunities to affectively develop their creative self-expression, and thereby emotional well-being, social consciousness, and cognitive outcomes. From the neoliberal and neoconservative point of view, however, such arguments are discursively more associated with concepts of primary schooling than the objectives of secondary education: while both the prospective and retrospective standpoint of the New Right agenda focuses on how to ‘put in the basics’ for the benefit of visible outcomes, the arts are justified based on a presumed student need of ‘drawing out’ to make meaning (Bernstein, 1990, 2000; Eisner, 2002).

The code clash may also be conceptualized by the differences between collection and integrative curriculum codes. The idea of a common arts subject is a notion discursively more interconnected with cross-curricular themes like environmental education and education for citizenship than it is recognized as a clearly-defined academic subject. Therefore, stakeholders in arts education tend to argue for an integrative curriculum code, placing weight on the scope of foundation subjects and broad competences (Whitty et al., 1994). However, proposals of integrating quasi-subjects like a generic arts course are not considered legitimate when the order of discourse prescribes a performance-oriented collective curriculum with stronger boundaries between education programmes, clearer distinctions between essential and marginal educational knowledge, and greater control of pedagogic practices (cf. Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Wahlström, 2020). When foundation subjects are included in the curriculum, they are expected to be based on visible scientific characteristics of autonomous knowledge, such as structural coherence, vertical progression, and capacity for assessment through explicit measurement criteria. Therefore, the discursive order of the New Right ‘puts the arts in the untenable position of being labelled soft, inexact, emotional, and inaccurate—in short, unscientific’ (Gadsden, 2008, p. 33). As a consequence, the arts may not be counted as valid knowledge. The ‘fine arts’ may be considered ‘just fine’, but they are not seen as the core of what the Information Age esteems.

**Conclusion**

We have examined a code theory that postulates two modes of legitimizing educational content when a discursive order demands visibility: autonomous visibility through intrinsic relations within disciplines, and heteronomous visibility through extrinsic relations to various practices. Visibility, thus, works as the underlying principle of recontextualization (Lilliedahl, 2013; Moore, 2013). To be considered legitimate, school subjects must be discursively acknowledged as having the autonomous status of ‘the basics’ or, alternatively, must have a visible instrumental value. In this way, the relative status of a given subject matter is dependent on its degree of visibility in one form or another (Bernstein, 1975, 1990, 2000).

The choice of different subjects according to their relative visibility implies a selective view of knowledge. The principle of visible autonomous knowledge tends to reduce knowledge to what is objective, observable, and measurable. On the other hand, the mode of market-dependent knowledge nourishes epistemological externalism since the only thing considered worthwhile educational knowledge is what markets demand. In the long run, such an instrumental approach encourages an empiricist ontology and epistemology, namely, what the world is and what we need to know about it can be reduced to what is useful and valuable in a specific context (Wheelahan, 2010).
When the discursive order is regulated by the principle of visibility, it results in a conundrum for those who consider the arts significant knowledge. The arts are not explanatory in the causal sense, nor is artistic knowledge generally applicable directly to vocational contexts. However, they ‘may be universal in the sense of connecting people to a larger humanity’ (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 245). Thus, the potential power of the arts lies in the emancipatory properties of the symbolic work that have been attributed to arts education (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013b). While the arts are not typically predictive or transferable, arts education may give an individual the power to transcend boundaries, challenge conventions, and ‘think the un-thinkable’ or the ‘not yet thought’ (Bernstein, 2000; Young & Muller, 2013). This view implies a ‘rhetorical shift’ in which arts education may be considered productive in a cultural sense, rather than in terms of its economic value (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013b, p. 639). There is, however, the danger of slipping into the intrinsic justification of arts education by favour highbrow culture and specialized practitioners, rather than giving all students access to cultural awareness and expressions.

From the Swedish case study, arts education may appear as something ‘leftist’, that is, only considered legitimate when the official pedagogic discourse is regulated by left-wing parties. It appears to us, however, that a generic, cross-disciplinary foundation subject of the arts is discursively linked with an integrative curriculum for progressive education. Right-wing coalitions are more likely oriented towards a collection code where the secondary curriculum is expected to consist of traditional school subjects and distinct instrumental knowledge.

On the other hand, advocates of arts education have a firm understanding of what can and cannot count as arts and aesthetics. For example, the boundaries between the fine arts and language arts are strong. The disciplines included appear to be self-evident: music, visual arts, dance, and drama. Moreover, the concept of aesthetics is considered deeply embedded in these specific knowledge practices. Thus, stakeholders in the arts tend to advocate a cross-disciplinary arts subject, while at the same time prescribing a traditional classification system that elucidates what can be considered the arts.

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