Supportive assessment strategies as curriculum events in a performance-oriented classroom context

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Abstract
This article examines the role and pedagogical implications of supportive assessment strategies at the interface where curriculum, general Didaktik and pedagogy meet; theoretically, the article draws upon concepts from research in each of those domains. This interplay is examined in relation to the performance-orientation on two curricular levels: on the programmatic curriculum level, Sweden is used as an example for a result-oriented curricular assessment context. On the enacted curriculum level, a high-performing class in year 8 in a Swedish compulsory school is chosen as a concrete case. Methodologically, the study represents a classroom case study. The empirical data corpus has been collected during one school year and consists of video-recorded lesson observations in the subjects of Swedish and science, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and field notes and teaching artefacts in the form of teaching documents. The results show that the supportive assessment strategies used in this classroom context can be understood as a kind of catalyst for the curricular performance orientation, where the effective achievement of externally set up outcome expectations is the purpose. Finally, this is critically discussed, among others, in relation to a bildungs-oriented understanding of education.

Keywords
assessment for learning, standards-based curriculum, general didactics, performance, classroom studies

Introduction
This classroom case study revolves around the role and pedagogical implications of assessment strategies that are intended to support learning in a performance-oriented curricular assessment context. The article is based on the work undertaken in a larger research project on knowledge
segregation in Swedish compulsory schools. In this project, the pedagogical conditions and implications of a standards-based curriculum for teaching and learning are investigated in relation to high- and low-performing classrooms and from a critical curriculum perspective. The focus of this article is on the analytical observations in a high-performing class in a Swedish year 8 classroom, where the relevance of performance and the results are emphasised in this classroom’s discourse and where assessment strategies intending to support students’ learning play a particular role. This observation represents the starting point for this article, whose purpose is to provide insights into how the standards-based curriculum is transformed into teaching in a performance-oriented classroom context and how the concept of performance can be understood in relation to supportive assessment strategies from a general Didaktik and pedagogic perspective. More concretely, this implies analysis of the character of the performance orientation that becomes visible in a performance-oriented classroom, how the role of assessment strategies that intend to support teaching and learning in relation to this performance orientation can be understood, and what are the pedagogical implications that emerge.

These questions are raised against a background of internationally observable and profound changes in educational systems during the last few decades, characterised by educational standards, the growing relevance of educational outcomes and performance indicators as well as the increasing relevance of making the results of education measurable and comparable (Biesta, 2009; Grek, 2009; Hopmann, 2008; Smith, 2016). As in most countries, these changes have also taken place in Sweden and have led to standards-based curricula that have also deeply, and in many different ways, affected classrooms (Wahlström and Sundberg, 2018). From a curriculum perspective, standards-based education in Sweden is characterised by predefined and uniform standards and learning requirements in the syllabi. This includes the alignment of the curricular elements of the purpose, content and criteria for assessment, whereof the latter prescribe quality indicators that are intended to enable standardised and thereby fair and comparable assessments. Moreover, there is a developed system of guidelines and materials aiming to strengthen teachers’ assessment competencies, and there is increased focus on accountability, for example with regard to the powers of the national school inspections in Sweden (Sundberg and Wahlström, 2012).

In parallel to these global curricular shifts emphasising the relevance of measuring and tracking educational outcomes and standardising education, more pedagogically informed approaches to assessment have also gained in popularity. Usually, these are referred to as ‘assessment for learning’ (afl) (e.g. Black and Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2011). This idea has become popular not only in the shared terminology of assessment researchers but also in the professional language repertoire of teachers, policymakers and transnational actors, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. There is a growing body of literature, policies and recommendations now available on this topic. Taken together, the core idea is to use assessments to support students’ further learning and to adjust teaching to meet the learners’ needs and through this, to make educational processes more effective (e.g. Wiliam, 2010). On a level of ideas, afl conceptually connotes to some prominent discourses in education and their related logics that have deeply changed the educational landscape, how we think about education and how education is organised and enacted. This includes for example learner-centred pedagogies, theories of metacognition and lifelong learning, individualised and self-regulation approaches to learning, ideas of learning efficiency as well as the improvement of learning in relation to evidence-based practices. The implied shifts here from teaching and the teacher towards learning and the learner, have among others been criticised as the ‘learnification’ of education (Biesta, 2009; 2015). That means that education, in its broad definition (in terms of content – learning something specific; purpose – learning something for a specific reason; and relationship – learning this from someone), may risk being reduced to learning as an aim in itself.
However, from a normative point of view, it could be said that the main focus regarding AFL is supposed to be on supporting the process of learning rather than the outcome of students’ learning efforts as such. For this to happen, particular kinds of key strategies are recommended to support that process. These key strategies are about (a) the clarification and sharing of learning intentions and criteria for success; (b) the engineering of effective classroom discussions, questions and learning tasks; (c) the provision of feedback that moves learners forward; (d) the activation of students as instructional resources for one another; (e) the activation of students as the owners of their own learning (Wiliam and Thompson, 2008).

This pedagogical approach to assessment is often viewed as a kind of counter-idea to the increasing relevance of measuring educational outcomes for control and monitoring purposes. This also often includes a somewhat dichotomous reception of ‘assessment for learning’ as pedagogically desirable and the ‘assessment of learning’ as a sort of ‘necessary evil’ in the classroom that is externally imposed on teachers (see e.g. Lau, 2015). On the other hand, Torrance (2012), for example, underlines how ‘assessment is always formative, it will always impact on students and have a central place in what and how students learn, but not necessarily in a positive sense’ (p. 334). He problematises an often too one-sided view of formative assessment as a ‘nebulous good thing’ (p. 327) and shows how formative assessment—due to the increasing focus on learning outcomes and assessment criteria—instead may become ‘conformative’, promoting criteria compliance. Thus, especially when it comes to the classroom level, where different kinds of assessment purposes often exist in parallel, a clear-cut differentiation seems difficult—if not impossible—to draw, and assessment practices and purposes seem to exist on a continuum rather than being part of a strictly dualistic system (Harlen, 2012; Tolgfors and Öhman, 2016). Moreover, it has been repeatedly highlighted that the idea of AFL still lacks a sufficiently solid theoretical foundation; recently, suggestions have been made to develop its theoretical underpinnings in relation to pedagogy (Black and Wiliam, 2018).

Taken together, the supportive assessment strategies named above necessarily have to relate to something, since the supportive actions and intentions have to be directed towards a specific aim or some kind of expected outcome. In standards-based curricula, these aims and outcomes of teaching and learning processes are prescribed in the form of standards. Thus, from the perspective of critical curriculum research, where curriculum is understood in a broader sense, denoting curriculum as a system of thought and ideas about what education is about, the question that arises is what these kinds of supportive assessment strategies mean for the pedagogical transformation of a standards-based curriculum in a curricular classroom context that is characterised by performance-orientation. Against this background, the article will examine the didactical role of these strategies and the pedagogical implications that follow. By this, the intention is to contribute with empirically grounded and theoretically useful insights in order to nuance the idea of supportive assessment strategies in relation to curricular standardisation.

The pedagogical transformation of the curriculum

The meaning of supportive assessment strategies for the pedagogical transformation of the standards-based curriculum is, in this article, understood from an integrated perspective and in relation to the intersection where the curriculum, general *bildungstheoretische Didaktik*¹ and pedagogy meet. The assessment strategies that intend to support learning are seen as a bundle of methods, tools and purposive actions used in the classroom, which *per definitionem* are intertwined with the social, communicative and curricular context in which they occur. As such, it can be assumed that these strategies cannot exist in a meaning-making vacuum but are always infused with certain kinds of purposes that are at the core of all didactical relationships and framed by the conditional
matrix of the classroom. Expressed differently, and with reference to Biesta (2009), this means that the ‘what for?’ of education is a relevant question in this article, alongside how this ‘what for?’ becomes visible in the classroom.

In line with Alexander (2001), assessment as well as the curriculum is considered to be central to the wider dimensions of pedagogy in classrooms. Accordingly, an in-depth understanding of assessment strategies in classrooms is hardly possible without taking the ‘socio-educational context’ into account in which teaching and learning occurs (Vogt, 2017). This requires context sensitivity with regard to the wider social, curricular and normative embedment as well as the discursive negotiations of what is meant by education, knowledge, learning and teaching, what the related purposes are and which rationales they follow. By approaching the classroom from a perspective of pedagogy and in relation to the framework of Alexander (2001) both teaching as an act and the ideas and values that inform teaching matter. In one way or another, teaching always includes the different elements of learning tasks and what is to be learnt, certain kinds of activities that are undertaken in relation to these tasks, particular interactions that teachers promote in relation to the tasks and activities, as well as the evaluative judgement of students’ learning. Hence, when teaching, the curriculum with its content as well as its inherent purposes and values is transformed into concrete tasks, activities, interactions and judgements in the classroom (Alexander, 2001). However, the pedagogical process of transforming the formal curriculum, with its aims and standards, into concrete teaching in a classroom must not be understood as an isolated and mechanical top-down process, in which the curriculum on the programmatic level would be simply applied on a classroom level. Rather, this process is characterised by a dynamic transformation through which the curriculum is shaped, negotiated and actively ‘made’ by teachers and students together, creating specific kinds of classroom discourse. Thus in this article the pedagogical transformation of the curriculum denotes both the act of teaching as well as its discursive embedment, when the curriculum is re-contextualised through certain actions in a process of joint meaning-making.

Based on Doyle (1992) and his integrated framework of pedagogy and the curriculum, the classroom is seen as ‘a context in which students encounter curriculum events, that is, occasions in which they must act with respect to some content. These events can be thought of as consisting of written, oral and behavioural texts that must be interpreted and acted upon towards some purpose’ (pp. 507–508, author’s emphasis).

As teaching takes place in this manner, the actions and strategies used as well as the ensuing classroom discourse can be understood as texts that are authored by teachers and students in interaction. Against this background, the assessment strategies that teachers use in order to support teaching and learning can be understood as such curriculum events, denoting the dynamic process of curriculum transformation, where the curriculum is jointly ‘made’ by students and teachers – with regard to particular content and in relation to specific values and purposes.

The didactical meaning of performance orientation and forms of curricular knowledge conceptions

Seen from a perspective of bildungs-oriented Didaktik, teaching can be understood as ‘a process of the educational encounter [bildende Begegnung] between selected suitable educational goods [Bildungsgüter] (Terhart, 2009: 153, author’s translation). In the bildungs-oriented Didaktik tradition, teaching means more than instruction. Teaching means that conditions and carefully selected content are provided that serve the students’ broader Bildung (which is more than mere knowledge acquisition or the development of competences as such). For example, Rucker (2019) suggests that Bildung can be understood ‘as a process in which an individual deals self-actively with the world and thereby
develops a multi-dimensioned ability to self-determination under the claim of morality’ (p. 67). When education is seen from this point of view, this also implies that educational performance is given a certain kind of meaning.

The question of the educational performance principle (*Pädagogisches Leistungsprinzip*) seems inevitable, given the nature of education as embedded in a performance-oriented society and the task of education being to prepare students to participate in and form society in the future. However, from the critical–constructive *Didaktik* perspective (Klafki, 1985/2007), a differentiation has to be made between the external kind of performance orientation and the related educational needs that society imposes on education, and a pedagogically informed performance orientation (*pädagogischer Leistungsbegriff*). With a pedagogically informed performance orientation, the focus is primarily neither on the product of teaching as such, nor on the more or less mechanical assessment of the – externally – imposed needs, but on enabling each individual student’s self-determination and on students developing the ability to become autonomous, moral and critical-constructive participants in society (see also Rucker, 2019, with regard to *bildungs*-oriented teaching in general didactics). Hence, the assessment of this performance has to contribute to this development, supporting a general and broad *Bildung* of the individual’s self. At its core then, this denotes a didactical question, since assessment is ‘inevitably related to the general task of defining the purpose, the content and the methods of learning, which are the core problems of curriculum-making’ (Klafki, 1985/2007: 233, author’s translation).

Moreover, Wahlström (2009) distinguishes between three different kinds of curricular knowledge conceptions. These include: (a) knowledge as meaning-making (a horizontal and multifaceted knowledge approach with references to students’ own experiences and society); (b) knowledge as essentialist (a vertical knowledge approach emphasising the disciplinary subject); (c) a result-oriented knowledge conception (a knowledge approach where the focus is on assessment criteria and outcomes). Learning, then, can emphasise either a dimension of *delivery* (which is about making teachers and students deliver the results that are externally set up in the form of standards and which emphasises the notions of effectivity and social efficiency) or *education* (which implies a broader view on the purposes of education, including social and societal dimensions as well).

### The curricular assessment context of the study

As illustrated above, it is assumed that neither the curriculum nor assessment strategies exist in a meaning-making vacuum and that both are infused with certain, more or less explicit, values, assumptions and normative conceptions, which may be especially true when both of them reach classrooms and are transformed into concrete curriculum events. With regard to the curricular performance orientation and its meaning for teaching and learning, the choice of empirical units for this study was made along two curricular levels: On the programmatic curriculum level, Sweden is used as an example for a performance-based curricular assessment context, focusing on the curriculum for compulsory schooling, LGR11. On the enacted curriculum level, the curricular assessment context in a specific classroom is represented by a class in year 8 in a high-performing school.

Concerning the curricular assessment context in Sweden, this can be said to be characterised by an emphasis on performance and results in the curriculum (Sundberg and Wahlström, 2012) as well as by an ‘intensified assessment paradigm’ that can be traced in instructional actions (Hirsh, 2020). During the last two decades, curriculum reform in Sweden has been influenced by standards-based reforms, and with the last reform that took place in 2011, wide-reaching changes with regard to both the curriculum and assessment have further aggravated tendencies towards result-orientation, efficiency and performativity (e.g. Wahlström et al., 2020). This is, for example, reflected in the formulation of criteria for different grading levels (A–F, where A denotes the highest grade and F
stands for a non-pass grade), the so-called knowledge requirements, which prescribe in detail which performance-oriented competences students are required to show in order to receive a certain grade at the end of the term. The standards in the curriculum thus describe performance standards less so than they do content standards, which would more strongly imply the general aims that the students should achieve. In addition, new rules and guidelines for the assessment of students have been introduced, stressing the importance of clarity and equivalence in grading and assessment, and strengthening students’ and their guardians’ rights to information regarding the underlying rationales for grade allocation. When assessing and allocating grades, teachers must necessarily interpret the knowledge requirements. This applies to assessments carried out during the term, the assessment of national tests (which teachers assess themselves, but on the basis of standardised assessment guidelines), as well as for grade allocations at the end of the term. However, differences resulting from these interpretations, including differences in grade allocations between teachers or schools, or differences between allocated grades and results in national tests, are seen as indicating a problematic lack of reliability (e.g. School Inspection, 2013), which is subject to intensive nationwide discussions on grading equivalence and the related problems in terms of justice in admission procedures. Due to this normative equivalence problem, the criteria have been revised for even more clarity, and comprehensive commentary material for teachers has been provided by the National Agency for Education (NAE) in order to support the ‘correct’ interpretation of the criteria. Moreover, the intensification of assessment also includes earlier grade allocations (formerly in year 8 and now obligatory in year 6 and optional in year 4), national tests that are conducted in earlier years and in more subjects, as well as the implementation of screening tests in the preschool class and in year 1.

In one way or another, all of these assessment activities focus on students’ performance in relation to the stipulated standards. This has consequences for students’ learning and well-being, for example with regard to the experience of increased stress and performance pressures (e.g. Hirsh, 2020; Löfgren et al., 2019), as well as for teachers’ professional work, for example in terms of a perceived decrease in their professional autonomy and increased control of their assessments (e.g. Wermke et al., 2019). Moreover, the contributions in Wahlström and Sundberg (2018) show that teaching under the result-oriented curriculum in Sweden also has consequences for the teaching repertoires that teachers use in the classroom, with teaching tending to become more teacher-centred and with less opportunity to ground teaching in students’ experiences or questions. In addition, a stronger alignment between the teaching content, the task and assessment criteria has become visible in the classroom, with teachers tending to plan their lessons ‘backwards’, meaning that the planning of lessons departs from the knowledge requirements and thereby with what knowledge students need to show (Sundberg, 2018). Moreover, students perceive that teachers constantly refer to the knowledge requirements in the classroom, making clear what they are expected to achieve (Vogt, 2017). While teachers say that they use these kinds of references to support students’ learning and to enhance clarity, students perceive the strategies as a constant examination in the classroom (Falkenberg et al. 2017). If subsuming thus, it can be said that these aspects represent a pivotal part of the curricular assessment context, in which the pedagogical transformation of the performance-oriented curriculum takes shape and in which teaching and learning are realised.

However, the concrete classroom context that this case study is based on is not only situated in a performance-oriented curricular context, as performance orientation here also refers to the high-performing school context, of which the class in year 8 is a part. Regarding this school, here called Larch Tree School, high performance means that the comprehensive school in question has, during a five-year period, performed in the 75th percentile with regard to so-called merit points (meritpoäng) that are calculated on the basis of students’ grades in year 9 (according to data downloaded in January 2018 from the official database SALSA, provided by the NAE in Sweden). The school
is located on the outskirts of a medium-sized Swedish town and has an international profile. The majority of the students has a migration background and has guardians with a higher-education qualification. The number of year 9 students in this school who finished their lower secondary schooling and who achieved the knowledge requirements in all subjects is clearly above the national average.

**Methodological approach and methods applied**

As already mentioned at the beginning of the paper, this article is part of a larger research project on knowledge segregation in schools ‘Exploring the elusive teaching gap – Equity and knowledge segregation in teaching processes’. In this project, the conditions and implications of the pedagogical transformation of a standards-based curriculum are investigated in relation to high- and low-performing classrooms and from a critical curriculum perspective. In order to capture this pedagogical transformation, the project draws upon well-established methodological frameworks for classroom research as, for example, developed by Alexander (2001) and Klette (2018). The research project follows the ethical rules of the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2017) and has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Board in Sweden (2018/108-31).

As a part of this project, the article builds upon data from the above named high-performing classroom. This classroom represents a single case (Merriam, 1998), for investigating how the role and the pedagogical implications of supportive assessment strategies in a results-oriented and high-performing curricular classroom context can be understood. The data was collected during one school year in *Larch Tree School* and included filmed video observations of eight lessons in each of the two subjects of science and Swedish, four interviews with teachers, and four interviews with students in each subject, as well as field notes and additional material handed out during lessons. The lessons were filmed with tablets and wide-angle lenses, and external microphones recorded ongoing talk in the classroom. In total, nearly 16.5 hours of filmed video material were produced. After every second lesson, semi-structured group interviews with students were conducted, inspired by the stimulated-recall method (Calderhead, 1981). The interviews, for example contained questions on what students perceived to be the most important content of the lesson, if and in which ways this content was relevant to them, and how their knowledge was assessed. Asynchronously, every second lesson, the teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guideline including questions regarding their aims and intentions when planning the lesson, their choice of methods and how they perceived students’ involvement and activity. In addition, observation protocols and field notes were also produced, the latter also containing important documentation before, during and after the lessons and during break times. Moreover, additional material was collected, such as lesson plans, worksheets, etc., in order to further contextualise the data. All interviews were recorded and partly transcribed *verbatim* with some adaptions to smooth out the written language in order to increase readability. When taken together, the students’ and the teachers’ conceptions that can be traced in the interviews, the classroom discourse that was captured by the filmed lesson observations and the additional material representing pedagogical artefacts used in teaching and learning, enable the kind of investigation of the pedagogical transformation of the curriculum in the classroom that this article is focused on. The careful composition of multiple data sources, also providing a broad range of different forms of data that have been gathered during a longer period of time, provides the basis for a context-sensitive and in-depth understanding regarding the phenomenon in question. This is especially important for interpretive case-studies, which seek to gain knowledge that is more holistic in character (Merriam, 1998).
The data was analysed via integrated and iterative interpretation procedures. On the one hand, a detailed coding scheme was employed to analyse classroom discourse and the dominating conceptions of knowledge that were represented in the lesson (Wahlström et al., 2019), and a qualitative thematic analysis was undertaken for the interviews. Even though the process of analysis was iterative, the following description provides a schematic overview of the process in question: In the first step, the coding scheme allowed for a fine-grained systematic coding of the whole lessons. Interview transcripts were read line by line, which was followed by thematic coding and categorisation. Here, analytical cross-connections to the contextualising material were also made. In the final step, the preliminary findings were verified against the data corpus. Moreover, the whole analytical process was supported by joint-analysis meetings with the project group, where excerpts from the empirical material and the preliminary findings were presented and discussed.

Findings

Overall, the systematic analysis of the 16 lessons in Larch Tree School shows a clear tendency for teaching promoting a result-oriented conception of knowledge with elements of an essentialist knowledge conception (Wahlström, 2009; Wahlström et al., 2019). This implies that classroom discourses were often motivated by, related to and framed by references to the knowledge requirements in the syllabi, and here, assessment strategies that intend to support learning turned out to play a vital role. These strategies can be summarised as including different forms of written and oral feedback and feedforward provided by teachers, students’ self- and peer-assessment, task-specific concretisation of quality criteria, authentic examples for identifying quality indicators in a task, as well as quick replies regarding students’ understanding during and at the end of lessons to calibrate further teaching and learning.

From a didactical perspective, these strategies serve as a kind of mediating element between teachers, students and the content. They denote curriculum events (Doyle, 1992) through which the curriculum is transformed into actual teaching and learning (Alexander, 2001), which is given a particular kind of meaning in this transformation process. This meaning is represented in teachers’ and students’ conceptions and becomes manifest in classroom discourse and the artefacts used during lessons. In this context, the knowledge requirements and the specific curricular rules and frames for assessment turn out to be of vital relevance for what the supportive assessment strategies mean in this high-performing classroom. In the following, findings from the case study will be concretised and exemplified by excerpts from the empirical data corpus in relation to artefacts, teachers’ and students’ conceptions, and classroom discourse.

Performance orientation in lesson artefacts

At the beginning of a new task or working unit, teachers handed out a so-called working-unit plan to pupils containing information about how the working unit was related to the syllabi in the curriculum. In these documents, the text from the syllabi was referred to, listing the related aims, content and knowledge requirements. In the subject of Swedish, this could look like the example below (see Figure 1), when the new working unit on writing chronicles was introduced, including the knowledge requirements and performance progression for the different grading levels, and showing a clear alignment of aims, content and assessment.

Such working-unit plans, as with the one shown, are often broken down and concretised into minor units, which becomes visible in different kinds of artefacts. In biology, for example, the teacher starts the first lesson of the new working unit, which is about the human body, by going through a lesson-planning sheet. On this lesson-planning sheet, all lessons in the working unit are presented as shown in Figure 2.
In the interviews, the science teacher emphasised the time pressure for addressing all of the content that is named in the syllabus. Over many years, the teacher has thus developed a system for teaching and assessment that allows for teaching everything required in the syllabus and for assessing everything named in the knowledge requirements in order to be able to allocate a grade at the end of the term that is in line with the national rules for grading. This lesson-planning sheet is an example of the teacher’s meaning-making and of how the teacher tries to integrate and align teaching, learning and assessment. The teacher transforms the syllabus into content-related themes for each lesson, for example, the cells and organ system, and formulates concretised learning objectives for different performance levels that are explicitly linked to different grading levels: E, C or A. These are characterised by increasing difficulty with regard to the forms of knowledge they represent – from the lowest level of labelling (i.e. facts and concepts) to the highest level (explaining). The sheet intends to enable students to evaluate, track and direct their own learning process over time by checking off their knowledge outcomes for each lesson in the cells on the right-hand side of the table.

Another document in biology that is handed out to students is the so-called reflection sheet (see Figure 3). After each lesson, students need to fill in which grade their learning during this lesson
equates to, what patterns of evidence they can find in their learning for this and what they need to do in order to improve:

In the example above, students are supposed to quantitatively assess their learning during the lesson in terms of a grade and to concretise this judgement qualitatively. Based on this self-evaluation of their learning progress in relation to what has to be learnt, they draw conclusions for the direction of their further learning.

The exemplifying artefacts above can be seen as tools for a certain kind of pedagogical reduction of curricular complexity when communicating the curriculum to students. They intend to support students’ self-efficacy due to clarity and concretisation, and represent a communicative system for enabling students to understand and to evaluate their learning process in relation to content and standards.

Performance orientation in teachers’ and students’ conceptions

In the teacher interviews that were conducted after every second observed lesson, the rationales and meaning-making logics underlying teachers’ didactical and pedagogical decisions can be traced. When taken together, these can be said to be framed by the perceived necessities to provide teaching that allows for addressing all of the content named in the syllabi and to plan beforehand how to assess the related parts of the knowledge requirements along the way. When talking in the interviews about the aims, the purposes, the chosen actions and techniques used in their lessons, the teachers’ performance orientation is a central dimension that teachers refer to, which also has consequences for how the curriculum is communicated and realised in the classroom.

When the Swedish teacher, for example, was asked after the second observed lesson what the teacher’s main aims were for the working unit on writing chronicles, the teacher answered: ‘The central aim with this working unit is to train the abilities and the knowledge that is required for the national test’. In another interview that related to a lesson where the teacher provided the students with a high-quality example of a student chronicle from the previous school year in order to concretise the quality indicators of the task, the teacher explained the pedagogical implications of this choice in the following way:

And, the reason why I worked through a text that was very good was because I wanted this to become the norm in some way. [. . .] Because, I believe, if I were to go through a text that got an E, then this would,
in some way, become the norm in the classroom. And I know that many students are ambitious and aim high. [. . .] I believe that one can achieve much more if one aims high instead of only going for a ‘pass’.

The high-quality student chronicle, used to exemplify and concretise quality indicators in the students’ task, is a performance-oriented strategy that aims to motivate all students to achieve higher outcomes by using a point of reference that matches the standards for the highest grade.

The emphasis of these performance-oriented logics in the didactical and pedagogical considerations for lesson planning is also present in the interviews with the science teacher. In these interviews, the interrelations between the performance-oriented curriculum and supportive assessment strategies also clearly emerge and take shape in the teacher’s carefully designed system for teaching and assessing the curriculum:

Now, I structure the lessons/. They are structured in levels of difficulty. From E, to C, to A. [. . .] So when I plan a lesson, I follow the objectives. I teach the E by doing like a little task. I teach the C by doing a little task. Doing the A, and doing a task. And hopefully, doing a summary at the end, where they get their reflection sheets out.

The pedagogical idea behind the structure of the biology classes is didactical differentiation in the whole-class setting. The general structure for lesson planning that is described can be seen as a blueprint for lesson planning, a sort of didactical standardisation, where the taught ‘levels of difficulty’ are synonymous with grading levels and where the grade level is taught. The didactical transformation of the curriculum together with the rules and official frames for assessment and grading coalesce here in a kind of performance-oriented conception regarding the purpose of biology classes. It is about the structured and integrated alignment of the curricular ‘what and how’ in biology, also enabling students to evaluate their personal outcomes at the end of the lesson via reflection sheets (see Figure 3).

Below, another interview excerpt exemplifies how the performance-oriented curricular assessment context is interwoven with conceptions about the role and character of supportive assessment strategies. In one of the interviews, the science teacher, who also leads the professional development of all science teachers in the school, explained:

| Lesson 3: Circulatory systems |
|------------------------------|
| I think my grade this lesson is ... | In order to improve, I need to ... |
| Because I learnt that ... |

Figure 3. Reflection sheet for biology.
We meet three hours a day [Author’s note: when having staff development days] [. . .] when working with this and where we create these lessons together [. . .] in a way that allows me to give them a structure of how to plan lessons more effectively. [. . .] This is a culmination of marking the national tests for four years giving me a chance to really figure out what the most effective way is to teach this curriculum. Embedded assessment for learning techniques.

First, what becomes obvious here is the relevance of the national tests for planning classes and for calibrating teaching in relation to curricular standards and content. When giving advice to other teachers regarding lesson planning and how this planning could be more aligned in all science classes in the school, the teacher refers to the national tests and the understanding of the curriculum which have been extracted from assessing these tests. Hence, the teacher’s conception of what the curriculum is about and what the most important knowledge is for students to learn is seen to become visible in the national tests. Teaching the curriculum is perceived as being about the effective attainment of external standards, where the embedded assessment techniques, intended to support learning, represent a tool for effectively making students reach predefined goals.

After each second observed lesson, the students were interviewed in groups in order to capture how those who were mainly affected by what was happening in the classroom perceived the classes that they were part of. Overall, the students appreciated the assessment strategies that were used since they supported their learning and improved their contextual understanding of what was required. However, it seems that this was less about the personal value that an increased corpus of knowledge could be expected to imply for students. Rather, the value of the assessment strategies lies in the advantages they provide for improving the tasks on which the grade is based. For exemplifying this analytical thread, an excerpt from one of the student interviews is provided, when students, after one of the Swedish lessons were asked what was helping them to learn. They answered the question in the following way:

**Student A:** I, I like if the teacher shows like different kinds of student examples. Former students who did the task last year. And then you need to say which grade they got. So, more or less, you know the criteria for how to write.[. . .]

**Interviewer:** So, there are different examples for the different grades then?

**Student B:** Yes. Usually we read what it is about, and then we assign different grades. So, we may also know this before we may know the real grade.[. . .]

**Student A:** And then you may also learn what to write and how to write in order to achieve a certain grade. This is quite good, because then you can think of how to write.

The first important observation that can be made here is that students answer the question about what is helping them to learn by pointing out the authentic examples of similar tasks in relation to grade allocations. Hence, superordinated to the supportive purpose of improving one’s own knowledge is the purpose of improving grades via the improved understanding of how the quality in a task relates to the criteria for different grading levels.

In another interview, which was conducted after one of the biology lessons, the conversation circled around the science teacher’s elaborated system for embedded assessment techniques and the artefacts that the lessons were organised around. The didactical coherence of this system seems to provide students with transparency and clarity and constitutes a sort of reference point for understanding what they are supposed to learn, how they are supposed to show their learning and how this learning is assessed. When students were asked how much they perceived the artefacts used in the classroom as supportive for their learning, they answered:

**Student C:** This helps a lot, because instead of thinking about what we have learnt, you can simply look and check what you know. Well, like, you only have to look
for yourself, checking, and if you know something, then you can skip it. [. . .]
If I am going for a D, I know that this is what I need to know.

**Student D:** It is more effective to study like this.

**Interviewer:** You say more effective?

**All:** Mhm.

**Interviewer:** In which way is it more effective?

**Student D:** You save time. Well, instead of reading a text and trying to understand it, you can directly move on to the facts and understand.

The quote illustrates students’ reasoning regarding the benefits of the strategies and tools used to enable students to direct and to regulate their learning by themselves. This self-direction allows students to ‘simply look and check’ what they know and enables them to track their individual learning process in relation to requirements and outcome expectations. Moreover, this also implies the purposeful planning of steering their learning actions towards the achievement of the desired grade: ‘If I am going for a D, I know that this is what I need to know.’ The benefit of this lies at hand for the students – it is about the effective organisation of their learning process. What becomes clear at the end of the quote is that it is not only about effectivity but also about efficiency, or more concretely, students’ understanding of effective classes is efficiency. It is about reaching the set standards via an efficient use of resources (e.g. time), and through this, the tools and strategies allow students to reach their goal, their desired grade, without the sometimes necessary pedagogical indirections that otherwise might come along with deeper learning and knowledge acquisition.

**Performance orientation in classroom discourse**

The specific kinds of curricular performance orientations which come to the fore in artefacts – as well as in teacher and student interviews – also become manifest in classroom discourse. Here, it becomes clear how the assessment strategies that intend to support learning are interwoven with the conditions and frames of the curricular performance orientation and how students and teachers together create a distinct discursive space related to these issues.

In one of the Swedish lessons where the class was still working on the unit regarding chronicles, the students were supposed to evaluate each other’s chronicles. On the one hand, the purpose of this strategy was to let students provide helpful comments on each other’s chronicles before the teacher conducted the grade-relevant assessments. On the other hand, the ability to provide such peer evaluations that aim to improve the outcomes was also a part of the knowledge requirements in Swedish that the task intended to assess. The teacher handed out a worksheet containing the related knowledge requirements as well as the instructions for the peer assessment.

**Teacher:** Well, it says read your classmate’s chronicle, answer the following questions and give clear and constructive feedback. See the knowledge requirements for feedback on the other page. So, I will collect your sheets at the end of the lesson and assess them here on the back. How good you were in giving feedback to your classmate.[. . .]

**Student E:** Shall one also write why one finds that a certain kind of formulation is good?

**Teacher:** Yes. You write: ‘I find the formulation is bla-bla-bla-bla good, because bla-bla-bla-bla.’ I want you to motivate all the time.[. . .]

**Teacher:** So, if you turn the paper over, it reads that the ability that is tested is to ‘provide feedback’. And there, it reads for E level that you can give *simple* opinions on content, language and structure. For the C level, you can give *developed*
opinions. For the A level, you can give well-developed and nuanced opinions on content, language and structure. What is the difference between E, C and A? Between simple, developed and well-developed and nuanced opinions? [. . .] [Student F]?

**Student F:** Eh, well, if you want to get an A, then maybe you have to give some suggestions for, eh, how to improve?

**Teacher:** Good! Exactly! In order to reach the higher levels, I want you to come up with suggestions. Concrete suggestions. Like: ‘I think that this is good. But this could be improved by thinking like this and that. Or, for example, by mentioning this thought in your text as well’.

The excerpt of the classroom discourse regarding the peer assessment sequence shows how teachers and students jointly transform the performance-oriented curriculum into concrete classroom interaction, with standardised expectations regarding the outcome and different levels of quality. Furthermore, it also depicts how students’ assessment literacy (i.e. what the knowledge requirements mean in relation to this specific task and how different levels of quality differ) is, per se, subject to the teacher’s assessment; and by this, assessment-related competences as such turn into a part of what has to be learnt and performed. The act of helping a classmate to improve his or her chronicle as an act of kindness and an expression of collective knowledge development is supplanted here and instead denotes an opportunity to demonstrate and to perform the necessary grading-relevant assessment competences prescribed in the syllabus.

In another example taken from one of the biology lessons on the human body, the science teacher introduces a new task, a lab report, which is about the effect of music on the human body. After introducing the task, the teacher presents the assessment details and what quality students must show in their assignments in order to perform in relation to a particular grade level. The teacher presents the concretised assessment criteria and systematically goes through former students’ lab reports, exemplifying and concretising different levels of performance quality. When going through an example representing very good student performance, the teacher refers to and reads from the assessment instructions for a national test, corresponding to the kinds of knowledge and abilities that the lab report will develop and measure:

The student has planned to measure the pulse before the work and to measure the pulse after the work and to measure the pulse returning to a resting heart rate at regular intervals. Like we did, right? That’s why that [pointing to the student example on the whiteboard] would’ve got an A.

This sequence illustrates how learning content and performance orientation coalesce in classroom discourse. Via the assessment strategy of making the quality criteria transparent to students, the understanding of what a high-quality task contains becomes a part of the learning content. In the sequence above, this equals a kind of a standardised list of quality indicators that can easily be checked off, communicating to the students how to produce a lab report that matches those prescribed criteria.

**The standards-based performance orientation and its pedagogical transformation in the classroom through supportive assessment strategies**

Due to the character of qualitative case studies, the results above cannot be understood in a nomothetic way, generalisable in a statistical sense or as representative of an overall truth (Merriam, 1998), neither of which are the intention of the article. However, against the background of a
concrete classroom setting, the findings provide empirically grounded and theoretically relevant insights for nuancing the complex interrelations of the possible translations of assessment strategies intended to support teaching and learning, and the curricular assessment context in which they are realised.

Taken together, the findings illuminate the pedagogical transformation of the curriculum in the classroom (Alexander, 2001), which in this article is about the ways in which the standards-based curriculum is transformed into teaching and learning in a highly performance-oriented classroom context. Here, the analysis revealed a clear tendency towards a ‘result-oriented knowledge conception’ (Wahlström, 2019) for the observed lessons, in which the relevance of prescribed standards and knowledge requirements for teaching and learning clearly emerge. Moreover, by applying a multilevel curriculum perspective, how ideas of curricular standardisation can affect classrooms and promote a kind of didactical standardisation in teaching processes as a way to control and steer these processes in an effective manner towards prescribed outcomes becomes visible. From a theoretical point of view, it could thus be said that the curriculum necessarily undergoes a pedagogical transformation in the classroom, but that a basic curricular orientation towards standards plays a role for how teaching and learning is conceptualised, organised, realised and evaluated by teachers and students.

The related performance orientation emphasises the importance of products through which the students demonstrate their knowledge and their level of ability in relation to the standardised outcome expectations. As such, this kind of performance orientation seems more to represent teachers’ and students’ responses to external outcome pressures rather than a pedagogically informed performance orientation (see Klafki, 1985/2007). Consequently, high performance in this context also refers to the system-immanent logics that are characterised by a didactical dominance of ‘performative’ outcomes, denoting teaching permeated by the idea of perfecting students’ learning in relation to prescribed results. This also implies that the didactical space for enabling students’ self-determination and critical autonomy in thought (Rucker, 2019) becomes seriously limited and subordinated to other purposes. Hence, teaching and learning under those conditions may risk being less about the self-active and critical educational encounter between students and what is to be learnt in terms of emancipation and deep-knowledge acquisition. Instead, it seems that teaching and learning mainly purposes to be about the optimisation of processes, which in a rather fragmentised way are aiming at measurable units of knowledge. For students, this can imply that education becomes reduced to learning – maybe as an end in itself, or as in this performance-oriented environment, at least as a way to achieve a certain grade.

By looking at the supportive assessment strategies as curriculum events (Doyle, 1992), it became possible to detect the didactical dimensions of these strategies and the interrelationships between these pedagogical methods and the curricular purpose and content. The specific ways in which these assessment strategies become manifest in classroom discourse, in the artefacts used in teaching and learning, as well as in the conceptions of teachers and students implies that learning support is encouraging of learning that enables students to reach the prescribed standards and, if put in relation to Wahlström (2009), to deliver the expected outcomes. Hence, in the classroom context, on which this study focused, these strategies primarily had the character of a catalyst for a performance orientation understood as a response to outcome pressures. Overall, this suggests that such pedagogical strategies can neither be understood in isolation from the context in which they are used, nor as being neutral in their pedagogical meaning. How these strategies and the underlying ideas are re-contextualised and given meaning in specific contexts, and above all, what they mean for and do to teaching and learning in a broader sense of education that reaches beyond results and a resultant related understanding of effectivity, seems thus to be the vital pedagogical questions that have to be taken into account.
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Notes
1. General Didaktik refers here to the German tradition of the bildungs-oriented critical-reflexive study of education, teaching and learning (e.g. Klafki, 1985/2007; see also Westbury et al., 1999).
2. The excerpts which were recorded and transcribed in Swedish are translated into English.
3. The grading scale in Sweden consists of six levels, F–A. Knowledge requirements are formulated for the grade levels E, C and A, while B and D denote half grades. E stands for the lowest pass grade and A for the highest possible grade.

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