



Aesthetic reading as a problem in mid-20th century Swedish educational policy

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Abstract

This study aims to identify and analyse how aesthetic reading was problematised in Swedish educational policy 1940-1962, in order to create a better understanding of the politics of reading in an era that has been of great importance for how reading is understood in contemporary Sweden. The empirical material consists of reports from three school commissions, laying the foundation for the new compulsory and comprehensive school that was introduced in 1962. The reports have been analysed using a discursive methodological framework, focussing on problematisations of aesthetic reading. The main problem that aesthetic reading was meant to solve, according to the analysis, was a lack of aesthetic taste. There is a shift in emphasis during the period from problematisations of *what* to read towards problematisations of *how* to read. Thus, the solution to the problem of aesthetic reading during the period transformed from a governing of *taste* to a governing of *skills*. Educational and cultural policy shares the problematisation of aesthetic upbringing, made possible by its roots in modernist ideas of general character formation and the ideals of free public education. We argue that research on the politics of reading in Sweden can be reinvigorated by exploring the governance of cultural practices emanating from policy fields other than explicit cultural policy.

Keywords

Aesthetic reading, Discourse analysis, Educational policy, Reading, Sweden, The politics of reading

Introduction

Throughout its history, the skill and the art of reading has been the subject of political control. There have been attempts to both promote and curb certain reading practices. In this study, we focus on a particular era in the politics of reading, namely the Swedish mid-19th

century. Furthermore, we focus on a particular aspect of the politics of reading, namely educational policy. Finally, we focus on a particular type of reading, namely *aesthetic reading* (Rosenblatt 2002; see also Dolatkah & Lundh, 2014; Lundh et al., 2018). By aesthetic reading we refer to a tradition of reading for pleasure, enjoyment and meaningful cultural experiences. This reading practice is often seen as related to written literature and fiction, and thereby, to cultural policy. However, a basic assumption in this study is that culturally relevant policies can be articulated not only in cultural policy fields, but *across* policy fields. This is certainly the case with reading. In order to understand how reading is and has been governed and controlled, we need to study a number of policy fields of which educational policy is one. National education systems have played an essential role in the governance of reading, not least since the introduction of basic schooling in many parts of the world since the 1800s. By providing literacy instruction for *all* children, national education systems have not only empowered citizens, but also created a mechanism for the control and influence of how and what individuals read. The policies of the teaching of reading are therefore an important issue for cultural policy research.

The current Swedish education system is founded in an intensive reform period that started in 1940 and eventually led to the instigation of the comprehensive and compulsory nine-year school system in 1962. This period also included a lively cultural policy debate, culminating in the establishment of the Swedish Arts Council and the implementation of a wide range of cultural policy actions in the early 1970s. This latter development has been thoroughly researched (e.g. Bennich-Björkman 1991; Frenander 2014; Harding 2007; Sundgren 2007; Lindsköld 2013), but only regarding explicit cultural policy targeting the art fields. If we are to understand the politics of reading in Sweden, the reform work leading up to the introduction of the comprehensive and compulsory school system is important, not least as it articulated how the cultural practice of aesthetic reading was meant to be performed by all Swedish citizens.

This study aims to identify and analyse how aesthetic reading was problematised in Swedish educational policy during 1940–1962, in order to create a better understanding of the politics of reading in an era that has been of great importance for how reading is understood in contemporary Sweden. In addition, it will contribute to the research on how cultural practices are governed in policy contexts other than the cultural (see Ahearne 2009). Influenced by the “What’s the Problem Represented to be”-approach (WPR) (Bacchi, 2009; 2012), the following three research questions have guided the analysis of educational policy documents published between 1940-1962:

1. What’s the problem represented to be regarding aesthetic reading and what is left unproblematised?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie these problem representations?
3. How are the possibilities of aesthetic experience represented in these problematisations?

Through a close reading of policy documents from the period focussing on how aesthetic reading and its teaching are presented and discussed, we have been able to identify a number of problematisations of aesthetic reading and the presuppositions, assumptions, categories of people and dichotomies that make these problematisations possible. In the following, we will present previous research illustrating the links between educational and cultural policy in terms of the role of aesthetic reading; present our analytical approach and the material analysed; and – which is the main section of the paper – present our analysis. The paper is concluded by a discussion of our results.

Setting the scene: Reading in cultural and educational policy

In the beginning of the 20th century, before educational and cultural policy were institutionalised and professionalised as two different areas, aesthetic reading was considered a common central tool for creating educated and cultivated citizens. If we are to understand how aesthetic reading was problematised in Swedish educational policy in the middle of the century, we need to consider the ideal of *bildung* and the free public education movement of the early 20th century.

In Sweden, just as in the other Nordic countries, culture and education have a common denominator in the concept of *bildung* [bildning] and free public education [folkbildning]. The German word *bildung* is here understood as the practice of a lifelong process of learning and cultivation, with the goal of personal development without a given instrumental goal or result. The free public education movement was traditionally organised in study circles, practicing *bildung* by the people, for the people, often with a connection to cultural heritage (Harding 2015). During the late 19th and early 20th century, the movement accorded a central place to aesthetic reading for both adults and children (Rydbeck 2001). Democracy activists identified aesthetic reading and free, public education as important tools for creating independent citizens, capable of taking responsibility for their own lives and it has been argued that free public education played an important role in the development leading to women's right to vote in 1919 (Ambjörnsson 2017; Key 1906; Sundgren 2007).

Bildung and free public education was not only relevant for adults; children were identified as heralds of the new. Progressive and radical educators, such as the internationally renowned intellectual Ellen Key, wrote about the need for seeing children as individuals, and adjusting their education accordingly. The goal for education should be, according to Key, *bildung* and not just the learning of facts. Furthermore, students were meant to develop their own personalities through, among other things, aesthetic reading (Key 1900, 1906). Just to give a short example illustrating this vivid time in the Swedish pedagogical debate: Key and her colleague Anna Whitlock published a reading book called *Poetic reading book for children* [*Poetisk läsebok för barn*] in 1887, and made the point that the selection was based on poetic rather than didactic values (Ambjörnsson 2012, 150). Thus, the connection between qualitative reading, of aesthetic value, and good education was made explicit and considerably strengthened. These arguments are in line with the ideals of modernity, where “general character formation” is a corner stone (Drotner 1999, 612). An understanding of aesthetic experiences as cultivating has however deeper historical roots than the free public education-movement. For example, Friedrich Schiller (1795/1982) envisioned art as a tool for equality and took the view that aesthetic ‘atmosphere’ would afford individuals the freedom of deciding over their own lives.

The ideal of cultivating the individual personality was also part of the foundation of cultural policies in the Nordic countries. Influential cultural politicians such as Arthur Engberg, Swedish minister of culture and education during the 1930s, argued that free, public education was the most important tool for popular rule. Engberg maintained that “democratic cultural policy”, achieved through education and *bildung* was needed for creating citizens that were capable of taking part in a democratic society (Engberg 1938; Harding 2015; Klockar Linder 2014). But Engberg argued not only for an education of the citizen's taste, but also a transformation of society itself to create a fruitful environment for artistic production (Erlanson & Henning, 2020). After World War II, the Swedish Social Democrats claimed that material welfare was but one cornerstone in the new welfare state of Sweden; citizens should also be guaranteed *cultural* welfare. It was argued that if people had a higher standard of living, they would also choose better culture. The cultural policy advocated by the Social

Democrats during the 20th century was based on a bourgeois understanding of art, including a clear hierarchy between the high arts and the low arts (Frenander 2014, 240). However, these assumptions were contested by people who still preferred to consume popular culture rather than high art (Sundgren 2007, 286-288). Li Bennich-Björkman argues that the definition of qualitative literature put forward by the Swedish Writers' Guild greatly influenced Swedish literature policy, and Linnéa Lindsköld shows how welfare is still used in the discourse for legitimising literature policy in the 2000s (Bennich-Björkman 1991, 322-323; Lindsköld 2013). Cultivation, or civilisation, as a result of the transformative power of the arts is still a core understanding of cultural policy in the Nordic countries. As Egil Bjørnsen argues, it may even have intensified in Norway during the 2000s (Bjørnsen 2012, 400).

Previous research on literature and reading in Swedish formal education has mostly focused on Swedish as a school subject, in which reading was an important object of teaching and learning. Relevant research has taken a specific interest in how literature has been treated within the subject of Swedish. Jan Thavenius (1991a; 1991b) conducted studies in the history of literary reading before the reform work got underway, from 1860 until the middle of the 1900s, while Magnus Persson (2007; 2012) studied the current discourse on literature in a didactic context. Thavenius shows how literature became something not only relevant for education or pleasure in certain societal groups, but also something seen as having a lasting cultural value for the nation. Furthermore, he found that education in literature was delivered differently depending on the pupils' class and gender. However, Thavenius shows how this differentiation, especially regarding class, was implicit rather than explicit when education in literature was established in the 1800s (Thavenius 1991a). Persson (2012) is critical of the development in present-day Sweden where the teaching of aesthetic reading is mostly connected to social and cultural values, such as promoting integration and democracy, and fails to take into account the aesthetic value of literature. At the same time, he is also critical of the idealisation of literature, where literature is seen as something unquestionably good. Both Thavenius and Persson use curricula as their material. There are, for obvious reasons, fewer studies of actual classroom practices. A few examples (Dolatkhah and Lundh 2016; Lundh et al. 2018) show that actual reading activities in Swedish primary school classrooms in the late 1960s were mostly focussed on informational fact-finding reading rather than experiential, imaginative reading.

In summary, literature and aesthetic reading played an important part in both educational and cultural policy in the early 1900s in Sweden. Administratively, educational and cultural policy were placed under the same department until 1991. Contemporary cultural policy activities such as reading groups in public libraries have also a strong historical connection to the free public education movement (Rydbeck 2016). However, literature policy has mostly concerned the production and distribution of literature, although later years have seen an increased political interest in policy actions on reading and reading promotion, especially those aimed at children and youth (Lindsköld et al. 2020). Thus, the two policy areas are intimately connected. Consequently, we agree with Jonathan Rose (2007, 595) that the historiography of education is essential to the historiography of culture. In a cultural policy context this sentiment could and should however be turned on its head. To study the governing of culture as a whole, one must also take the governing of education into account.

Analytical approach

The analysis in this article is based on the “What’s the Problem Represented to be”-approach (WPR), developed by political scientist Carol Bacchi (2009; 2012). This method-

ology draws on the works of Michel Foucault, especially the methodological concept of problematisations described in *The history of sexuality* (1990). Studying problematisations is a suitable method for making clear how, where, and why certain issues come to be contested or approved of, and how these different ways of understanding an issue change over time (Bacchi 2012, 4). Problematisations make certain ways of talking about an issue, as well as certain practices possible. For example, there is a difference between promoting the reading of fiction as a way of creating democratic citizens and seeing it as a way of creating ‘good workers’. Policies aid the problematisation of the social world, as the ‘problem’ of a specific policy is often taken for granted and not explicitly articulated. The ‘problem’ is implied through the measures suggested by a policy that becomes adequate only in relation to certain understandings of the social world. Thus, the documents analysed in this study are seen as serving as a governing of knowledge as they present the perceived truth of how and why aesthetic reading should be taught to pupils in the Swedish compulsory school.

Material analysed

The material analysed consists of government commission reports and government bills on public compulsory education published 1940–1962. The reports and bills were the result of three school commissions and make up a large body of work. In Table 1, the different documents analysed are listed together with their respective commission. Full references can be found in a separate list of references.

Table 1 Documents analysed

Name of Commission	Documents
The School Commission of 1940 [1940 års skolutredning], <i>SU40</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SOU 1943:19 • SOU 1944:20 • SOU 1944:23 • SOU 1945:6 • SOU 1946:11 • SOU 1946:15 • SOU 1946:31 • SOU 1947:49 • SOU 1949:35 (summarises reports from both SU40 and SK46)
The School Commission of 1946 [1946 års skolkommision], <i>SK46</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SOU 1948:27 • Hulteberg, M. & Tarschys, K. (1951) • SK46, 1946 års skolkommision (1952) • Axberger, Gunnar, Lindstrand, Lars & Isling, Åke (1953)
The National Board of Education [Skolöverstyrelsen], 1957 års skolberedning, <i>SB57</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SOU 1961:17 • SOU 1961:30 • SOU 1961:31 • LGR 62 (1962). Sverige. Skolöverstyrelsen. <i>Läroplan för grundskolan</i>. Stockholm. Government bill from 1962, resulting in 1962 års läroplan (curriculum), <i>LGR 62</i>

The School Commission of 1940 (SU40), is extensive and consists of twenty volumes published up until 1947 with a final report by the National Board of Education in 1949 (SOU 1949:35). It was instigated by the wartime coalition government and was meant to deal with several practical and ideological problems in the differentiated school system. The School Commission of 1946 (SK46) resulted in the 1948 School Commission Report (SOU 1948:27). The Commission was instigated by the Social Democratic government and underlined the democratic mission of the school system. The next commission report was

the 1957 School Commission (SB57), followed by the 1962 Government Bill, which resulted in the 1962 Curriculum (LGR 62).

A complex educational system was reformed and during the 1970s the higher levels of education were also reorganised. In the earlier reports, girls' schools are mentioned but as the comprehensive and compulsory system developed, they disappeared. Thus, our analysis concerns the kinds of aesthetic reading seen as necessary for citizens in general and not more specific forms of reading. The explicit problem addressed in the policy-making process was the whole educational system, which was hierarchical, differentiated, complex, and, in many respects, out-dated (see Qvarsebo, 2013). Aesthetic reading should be understood as one part of this larger cluster of issues.

Analysis

The analysis shows that the major problem that aesthetic reading was meant to solve in the reform work was a lack of aesthetic *taste*. In the following, we start by presenting this problem and the presuppositions and assumptions that underlie it; thereafter we focus on the different categorisations and binaries that become possible due to this problematisation.

Problem: (Lack of) aesthetic taste

In the 1940s documents, it is claimed that the reading of literature is a way of deepening and refining the emotional life of children and youth (SOU 1943:19, 55). Thus, it can be said that the problem that aesthetic reading was meant to solve was emotional poverty and underdevelopment, and this problem could be solved through processes initiated within the educational system. The foundational ideological text of SU40 is "School in society's service" [*Skolan i samhällets tjänst*] and links aesthetic upbringing to ethical issues. It pits the "empty, common, and sometimes even raw entertainment of today's youth" against "better pursuits, nobler entertainments, participation in a refined cultural life" and "voluntary interests" (SOU 1944:20, 60).¹ Furthermore, the text also argues that public libraries and other meeting spaces are not enough in themselves to provide this counterweight, as an interest in books and a taste for the arts need to be fostered. Interest in books, art and music has to be cultivated and created. (Ibid.) This idea was reinforced two years later, when the development of aesthetic sensibilities was described as having an "ennobling" effect on personality development and holds this effect to be "generally acknowledged" (SOU 1946:31, 90). Even SB57 expresses this view, claiming that "[t]he abilities of insight, intuition and imagination must be *cultivated*" (SOU 1961:31, 161, emphasis in original). As stated earlier, the notion of cultivation through art was also acknowledged in the development of an explicit cultural policy during the 1930s, which in turn was closely connected to the ideal and practice of *bildung*.

Because pleasure reading, fiction, and imagination were deemed as central to personal development and maturity, a study plan developed by SK46 considers it to be "disastrous" that the majority of young people turn to "literature of short story magazine standard" after a phase of reading boys' and girls' books, and not "genuine" Swedish and foreign literature (Axberger et al 1953, 9). This view, where certain cultural consumption is seen as unwanted or even dangerous, motivates a paternalistic approach to culture, which was also evident in the cultural policy of the period. As mentioned above, the Swedish Social Democratic movement had, during the early 1900s, internalised a bourgeois view of culture and made it

1. All translations from Swedish were made by the authors.

their own (Frenander 2014; Sundgren 2007). The governing of taste therefore became a shared problematisation not only between cultural policy and the worker's movement, but also between these fields and educational policy. Suspicion of mass culture and popular culture can thus be traced to the ideals of modernity and *bildung* (Drotner 1999).

Good fiction could be of personal help to young people as they might recognise themselves in the stories and thereby get to know themselves better. However, pupils were taught that different ways of speaking and acting were not "authorised" just because they encounter them in a book, or, for that matter "the stream of suggestions that he encounters in movies and magazines" (Axberger et al 1953, 10). Furthermore, the governing of aesthetic and literary taste was aimed at the future lives of pupils. The aesthetic reading taught in school was supposed to lay the foundation for continued reading after graduation, through developing good reading and library habits. The policy texts thus envision a form of socialisation into an active and interested readership and a long-term process of shaping aesthetic sensibilities, based on discussion and guidance:

The teacher can through discussion try to make the students observant of the common criteria of the arts usually applied to literature, music, and educative art. Most important is however that the students are given plenty of opportunities to encounter art of all kinds. Then it becomes mainly a question of maturity and experience, how the students' own sense of artistic values develop. (SOU 1948:27, 182)

School libraries were seen as a suitable context for such socialisation, and a way of introducing the value of the public library thus leading to library use when the students reached adulthood (SOU 1946:15, 19. See also SOU 1961:30, 253). Eventually, the pupils would habitually "choose good literature over poor" (SOU 1948:27, 31). School was expected to cultivate long-lasting reading habits, where the development of taste would progress in line with the ideals of the period's emerging cultural policy. Another arena linked to public education is that of the national movements, such as the temperance movement, the workers movement, the evangelical movement and the tradition of free, popular adult education. Through schooling, citizens were supposed to be able to join the popular adult education movement (SOU 1944:20, 76). Thus, the line between formal education and free adult education became blurred. Importantly, it is also stated that a prerequisite for developing and maintaining aesthetic taste is not just education, but also a future occupation that does not "wear the individual out", so that s/he will also have spare time that can be filled with meaningful cultural activity (SK46 1952, 29–30). Just as Sundgren (2007, 321–322) notes in his study of social democratic cultural policy formation, work and culture are positioned as each other's opposites.

The potential of aesthetic experience for the bettering of humankind envisioned by, among others, Schiller (1795/1982), constitutes an important assumption underlying this problematisation, namely that art can affect and change people in different ways. This discourse on the social impact of the arts has had a great influence on both formal and free education (Belfiore & Bennett 2008). Many philosophers and intellectuals have been devoted to this issue of the educative function of art. Schiller (1795/1982) maintains that the goal is to implement an aesthetic state where all individuals are free and equal. However, the government cannot do this, he argues, but the fine arts themselves are the tools for creating this new ideal state. While the goal of shaping aesthetic understanding, according to our material, was to develop a certain taste, which we will discuss more in subsequent sections, the strategies suggested were not authoritarian. Simply forbidding certain reading material was seen as potentially counterproductive, as was the "categorical decreeing of what is

beautiful and what is foul” (SOU 1948:27, 182). Instead, it is repeatedly stated throughout the reform process, that the current interests and prerequisites of the children must be the departure point, and that teaching has to meet their expectations (see Hulteberg & Tarschys 1951, 37). This has to do with who was being governed, namely the children. The assumption that the child’s individuality must be taken in account is in line with the progressive educational ideal promoted by Ellen Key in *The century of the child* (1900) among others at the turn of the century. However, this aspiration also gives rise to a conflict in the discourse that is still evident today, namely that aesthetic reading with its connection to joy and pleasure is to be taught in schools, where control and discipline are key. In this problematisation of aesthetic reading, the voluntary aspect of the public education movement is not included in the transfer to formal education.

Appropriate art for children’s different phases

One central assumption throughout the texts produced in the reform process is that children and young people develop through certain phases and that these phases can be tied to specific categories of literature. For example, in SU40, it is stated that “For many [people] around the age of 15, a spontaneous interest in poetry is awakened” (SOU 1943:19, 72–73). When choosing texts for reading, the School Commission of 1946 expects that studies of the “spontaneous reading interests of different ages” will be considered by the teacher (SOU 1948:27, 151).

‘Boys’ and ‘girls’ are also important categories in the material, and they are expected to have different tastes in reading. The gender categories are especially salient in the early texts. For example, boys are described as being naturally interested in technology and nature, while girls are described as being more receptive and prone to literature, language, and history (SOU 1943:19, 61). The knowledge formation that results in this categorisation of children and boys and girls is based on early developmental psychology. For example, SOU 1943:19 refers to a German survey from 1933 on pupil’s interests in history (72–73). Thus, the categorisations of people in the material build on different measurement techniques used in behavioural and developmental psychology (see Bacchi 2009, 9). Cultural development and the ability to enjoy more advanced art has often been connected to general human development, which is evident both in educational and cultural policy (Drotner 1999, 611–612). This assumption of progression becomes measurable when connected to children’s presumed different developmental phases.

These categories are also tied to reservations about pupils’ abilities referred to in several pertinent passages concerning the challenge of governing aesthetic reading. It is pointed out repeatedly that pupils should be led to appreciate and enjoy literature and other arts “to the degree of which they are capable”, or “to some capability” (SOU 1961:31, 167) or “if possible” (SOU 1948:27, 28). It is acknowledged that pupils’ abilities are varied, and therefore assumed that expectations on teaching outcomes should be moderate. An example can be found in the following excerpt from SK46:

Give them a sense of the beauty in art, music, and literature, not by ignoring an undeveloped taste, for example for comics, adventure novels or swing music, or preach about what they should think, but work instead with existing conditions to develop and cultivate taste, without for a moment belittling that which the child likes for the moment, or by demanding something they are not mature enough for. (SK46 1952, 123)

To return to the categorisations, ideas of developmental phases lie behind many of these phrasings, as guides as to what would be suitable for the individual pupil: “Of weight is thus that the reading material at every stage of schooling should correspond to the pupil’s stage

of development and literary interests” (SOU 1946:11, 83; see also SOU 1961:31, 22; Lgr 62, 145). The phase corresponding to ages 13-15, was seen as critical: this was the phase where the pupils would turn from children’s literature and approach literature for adults and come to understand that literature could offer more than just entertainment, for example learning about the world, other people, and possibly about oneself (Hulteberg & Tarschys 1951, 37).

At the same time as the interests of pupils are largely seen as “spontaneous” or “natural” (SOU 1961:31, 28–29) and tied to certain developmental phases in an essentialist sense, several phrasings also imply that interests in themselves were not just there to be taken as a given, but could be *created* through thoughtful teaching (SOU 1948:27, 151). Also SB57 considered the creation of “a genuine interest in good reading in school and in spare time” as an important goal (SOU 1961:31, 167). Thus, an ambiguous relation is created towards the essentialist natural development of children although some aesthetic training might still be required to awaken ‘natural’ development.

Searching high and low

On the one hand, the governing of taste was built on the binary of good, high, qualitative, or genuine culture and literature and, on the other hand, poor, empty, bad, or even brutalising literature and culture. For example, SU40 states that “It is to the highest degree a meaningful task for schools to teach the young to separate good from bad literature, to understand and value a literary work of art as opposed to a literary and aesthetically inferior product” (SOU 1946:31, 91). SK46 is also part of this discourse, describing “shallow reading”, “inferior art”, “worthless musical entertainment” and “poor films” that “destroyed” the taste of broad layers of the people (SOU 1948:27, 7). Aesthetic training was the remedy, which would enable the people to live “richer lives” (Ibid.).

Examples of low-quality works were colourful weeklies and short story magazines (SOU 1948:27, 30). Such products were subjects of moral outrage and debates both before and during the reform process (see Drotner 1999; Arnberg 2013). However, “quasi-fiction” was not to be completely banned, as it was useful for comparison and debate (SOU 1948:27, 9). Thus a middle position between high and low was established. During the 1950s, comic books from the United States became popular among children and youth in Sweden and this led to an intense debate among experts and politicians about whether certain comics should be forbidden. Economic historian Klara Arnberg (2013) illustrates how this debate was based on assumptions of children’s and youth’s relation to society and the democratic welfare state, where comic books were seen as a threat to positive development in society. In this understanding of taste lies again the modernist assumption that consuming culture should result in the progression of personal development (Drotner 1999). In our case, good education would carefully improve children’s abilities to make informed choices regarding their reading and contribute to their personal development.

The dichotomy between high culture and low culture was also typical for Swedish cultural policies at this time. Frenander (2014) describes the general idea that high-quality culture was to be projected onto the population and thereby develop a cultivated citizenry. In the analysed material, it is explicitly stated what constituted high-quality literature. Authors and titles were suggested for syllabi and in comments for courses in the subject of Swedish. Considering that the teaching of aesthetic reading was to take place within the institutional confines of the mother tongue – the subject of Swedish – it might not be too surprising that the syllabi focused rather narrowly on Swedish literature, making good taste explicit by mentioning Swedish authors. In addition, antique classics (such as the *Odyssey*), Danish and Norwegian literature, and Finnish works in Finland-Swedish original, i.e. the Finland-

Swedish Runeberg, or translated from Finnish are also included. A common Nordic cultural, linguistic and literary heritage – a Nordic canon – is thus envisioned and manifested, sometimes traced as far back as to the Icelandic sagas and *Eddas*.

“Genuine literature” is the keyword used for the material that the pupils should read (Axberger et al 1953, 9). In the study plan for literature education for the years 7–9, the reading of literature is described as a meaningful activity in itself. Mature students will be able to remember “the joy of seeing and listening during reading, to experience an atmosphere, a milieu, a face, to ponder over humans and the problems they face.” (Ibid.). It is also pointed out that the student must learn to appreciate aspects of literature, without copying a dialogue or a character in his own life (Ibid., 10). Here the autonomous aspects of aesthetic reading become visible, as an experience in itself, in contrast to instrumental aims more often described.

A key phrase in the material is that: “Such reading material that is devoted to obstruct the desire for peaceful coexistence among people and nations should be avoided” (See SOU 1946:15, 62–65). This can be understood as connecting the concept of aesthetic reading to the overall ambition of the reformative work to shape a “new democratic personality” after the horrors of World War II (Qvarsebo 2013, 223).

The later texts, and in particular the curriculum of the comprehensive school established in 1962, put much more emphasis on the individual experience of reading than the earlier texts did. It is still described as essential to cultivate good reading habits, but the idea of objective literary quality and value is complemented by a much stronger conceptualisation of the importance of the subjective reading experience. SB57 problematised general cultural consumption habits, the vulgarisation and degeneration in taste that was visible in the love of inferior cultural artefacts and expressions such as movies, print, art, and music (SOU 1961:31, 161). But SB57 also acknowledges that it is impossible to make “absolute and objective judgements” in matters of taste (Ibid.). It is therefore only possible for the teacher to point out certain values and guide towards certain aesthetic experiences, and not to proceed too hastily from the pupils’ initial position. The text nevertheless proceeds to propose that pupils’ “as early as possible” should learn to distinguish between, on the one hand, “the good and genuine” and, on the other hand, “the indifferent or inferior”, suggesting that such categories were obvious and apparent (SOU 1961:31, 161). This presupposition makes visible a special problem related to literature in the Western world, namely that it is claimed as being universally accessible and of use to everyone, while at the same time literature is built upon distinctions. (Kaufmann 1996, 266). These distinctions apply to high and low literature, as well as distinctions between different readers (e.g. age, gender) who in our material are described as having different capacities for approaching literature.

One of the main assumptions of the problematisations of (lack of) aesthetic taste is that taste progresses, meaning that the development of aesthetic sensibilities will lead to pupils automatically choosing good literature over poor. This belief was also inherent in the cultural policy of the time (Drotner 1999). However, this assumption was challenged during the 1960s. In the same year as the 1962 curriculum was established, a wide-ranging cultural debate broke out in Sweden, initiated by *Demokratins kultursyn* (“The democracy’s view of culture”) by Bengt Nerman (1962). Nerman argued that the value of reading was not primarily given by the quality of the object that was read, but through the process of reading and how and for what purposes reading was enacted. This view contested previous cultural policy discourse where high-quality culture was to be projected on the masses for their cultivation, and was met with several objections and, at least from Nerman’s own point of view, misunderstandings (Frenander 2014). This cultural debate may be seen as part of a wider

international shift in perspectives on popular culture, mapped by Horowitz in a study of intellectuals and their views on mass-market culture (Horowitz 2012).

In the material, a study plan for literature studies devoted considerable attention to arranging teaching so that the reading experience would become as strong and uninterrupted as possible (SOU 1961:31, 11–15), but still within a dichotomisation of high- and low-quality reading material. However, in the first curriculum of the comprehensive school (LGR 62), the reading experience of the individual pupil is an important category and desirable goal. This means that the rigid dichotomisation between high and low is nuanced, at least to some extent. Through the development of a concept of “experiential reading”, meaning “reading characterised by imagination, aesthetic values, meaningful experiences and the joy of reading /.../”, the shift towards reading experience is taking place (Dolatkhah & Lundh 2016, 19). However, this experiential reading is still based within the framework of aesthetic governing.

The practice of ‘free’ reading

How should reading be enacted in order to benefit students as much as possible? Through cooperation between the teacher and the school librarian, the pupils’ “free reading” was to be supervised and led (SOU 1946:15, 82). It was acknowledged that it was not feasible to explicitly forbid low-quality reading – which could even be counterproductive – and that other strategies must be employed. Examples of such long-term strategies are discussions, suggestions and meeting the interests of the pupils (partly depending on the assumed developmental phase they were in), in order to lead them further towards qualitative literature. In the material, “silent reading” is contrasted to the older practice of recital in groups, which is described as not in tune with the interest or reading speed for all students (SOU 1961:31, 29).

As a consequence of the colliding problematisations above, the oppositional categories of ‘schooling’ and ‘spare time’ become important in the discourse of aesthetic governing. ‘Spare time’ becomes a contested field and an ambiguity arises in the texts, concerning how much the school should extend into and influence pupils’ leisure time. In a passage that leads to no clear conclusion on this matter, it is argued that it could be potentially dangerous for pupils to constantly be the subjects of governing, education and care-taking, without room for their own initiatives (SOU 1961:31, 156). However, while the pupils were seen to be engaged in a number of spare time activities such as library use and book studies, there was also concern that some of the available entertainment might instil a passive and receptive attitude. A general working time reduction was carried through in 1958, and SB57 implied that the increased spare time should be filled with “active contributions to society” and in other respects be “developing and valuable” (SOU 1961:31, 158). The school was to foster taste and equip the young with the will and capability of engaging in valuable leisure time activities with “critical judgement and a sense of quality” (SOU 1961:31, 158, 183). A version of the soft discipline mentioned above is suggestions that reading habits should be discussed with pupils’ parents (SOU 1946:31).

Children’s and young people’s leisure time is problematised in the material. It is at the same time problematised for adults during the 1940s and 1950s in cultural policy debate. The conflict between spare time and work is made possible through the industrial society, where industrial work and spare time were regulated with time as a tool. But leisure time was seen with scepticism by politicians, institutions and even from within the free, public education-movement. There was a concern that workers would not use their spare time in constructive ways, and would prefer to participate in commercial mass culture events

(Eskilsson 2000; Sundgren 2007, 325). Above all, it was the free time of the working class and their children that the authorities wanted to make sure was used in a constructive manner. But the socialistic free public education movement in Sweden was also very much the hub for the organisation of the assiduous worker (Eskilsson 2000, 84–85). This conflict between governing people's spare time and allowing them to choose how to spend their time is visible in the material. SK46 similarly stated that "Leisure time is the student's own, and pressure from school is not permitted. On the other hand, leisure time is so important for the student's building of character that the school cannot be indifferent about how it is used" (SOU 1948:27, 25). Therefore, besides arranging clubs for leisure time reading and other activities, the school should seek support and opportunities for cooperation with children's families as well as with the national movement's youth organisations, in order to influence the pupil's leisure time (Ibid.). The school library was described as useful in pupils' spare time (SOU 1961:31, 233). Thus, through cooperation with other organisations, institutions, and families, children's free reading was nevertheless somewhat controlled.

Discussion and conclusions

In our analysis of mid-century Swedish policy documents that laid the foundation for the new Swedish public compulsory education, we have investigated why aesthetic reading was deemed important, the categorisations of children that enabled different kinds of genres to be mediated to certain ages and genders, the seemingly ever-present dichotomisation of high and low culture and art in cultural policy, and, finally, ideas on how reading should be performed.

The main problem that aesthetic reading was meant to solve, according to Swedish educational policy during the period, was a lack of aesthetic taste. However, the methods for acquiring better taste were not obvious. A core tension in the report texts relates to how much freedom pupils can exercise in their choices of what to read. Two different problematisations seem to collide in this issue. First, reform work in general, especially after the end of the war, was motivated by a desire to carefully govern individual pupils' personalities and to promote an anti-authoritarian spirit. The problem of authoritarian schooling was well understood in the shadows of Nazism and communism and was to be countered by a democratic school system. Second, pertaining specifically to aesthetic reading, was the problem of the mass consumption of low-quality mass-market entertainment products, which had been debated on a wider scale for decades. Thus, it was possible in the reports to assume that pupils – the citizens to be – were to be drawn to this mass-market culture. Therefore, the teaching and practice of high-quality aesthetic reading in school was a necessary antidote to undesirable cultural practices.

Consequently, there was a conflict between, on the one hand, the encouragement of individualism and individual choice, and on the other hand, steering clear of unwanted cultural consumption. The ideals of democratic, individualised and anti-authoritarian schooling clashed with the ideological structure of high and low culture. This structure had been a central dichotomy in the cultural debate and cultural policy for several decades, but it was also challenged by intellectual debate on popular culture on a grander scale, both nationally and internationally. Concerning the policy of aesthetic reading, the democratic project of schooling and the older hierarchy of taste, amalgamated into an ambiguous concept of free reading and an idea of the governing of taste through subtle processes of long-term socialisation. As we have discussed, educational and cultural policy share the problematisation of aesthetic governing, made possible by its roots in modernist ideas of general character formation and the ideals of free public education.

What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? The value of the good book is not questioned during the time period, but taken for granted. It will later be contested, which makes the need for legitimising reading and literature more important (Persson 2012). Our analysis suggests that it is the solution to the problem – the concept of free reading – that is “left problematic”, as it assumes that school will still control what is said to be ‘free’ and ‘without pressure’. Explicitly banning poor literature was regarded as counterproductive, but through the establishment of a network of discipline through school, family and national movements, it was still possible to maintain a degree of control. The free public education movement influenced the educational ideals. However, the transition from the voluntary movement to the compulsory school with instrumental goals established a conflict that is still a dilemma for teachers and school librarians today. How can the benefits and pleasures of reading be taught if a pupil does not want to read?

What is at stake in this understanding of the problem? Aesthetic governing is connected to democratic ideals as well as personal development, and it is described as a tool for solving emotional poverty and underdevelopment. Aesthetic reading is described as having a great impact on the bettering of people, as well as of society.

The analysis also shows how science, and in particular behavioural and developmental psychology, is used for creating different subjects – pupils in different age phases and of different genders – that correspond with different aesthetic tastes. This “ages and stages” approach (see Säljö, 2000, 60–61) and its implications for aesthetic training contradicts both an individualistic ideal and a universal ideal, in that certain ways of reading are seen as more suitable and possible for certain categories of pupils and not others. It also creates a tension in terms of the possibilities of aesthetic governing, in that children’s development is seen as a natural process that should not be intervened, at the same time as some intervention is needed in order to create appropriate literary taste in the future. What we can see here is also a movement from – or perhaps a marriage between – a *bildung* rationale where aesthetic reading is deemed important in its own right, while also resulting in a development of character, to a science-based rationale where reading development is a part of human development which can be quantified and measured. That art and literature has the power to develop humans unite the rationales, but there is a difference in their effects, faith in the transforming impact or evidence-based policy, as made visible by Bjørnsen (2012). At the time of writing, the two rationales are presented as two different, but equally important, values of reading in Swedish literature policy (Lindsköld et al. 2020).

Aesthetic reading is however not only connected to instrumental values, but also described as having value in itself as a pleasurable aesthetic experience, when reading genuine literature. During the reform process, the clear distinction between high and low literature and culture became blurred, both in the reform work documents and in the public debate. The reform process shifted in emphasis from problematisations of *what* to read towards problematisations of *how* to read. This shift was not categorical – the discussion on what children should read continued – but the question of *how* became more prominent. Thus, the solution to the problem of aesthetic reading during the period transformed, from a governing of *taste* to a governing of *skill*. The latter was seen as instrumental in the student’s development to a democratic citizen. Perhaps this transformation has led to a more instrumental view of the aesthetic experience. While still based in the framework of aesthetic upbringing, this transformation is carried out through the development of the concept of experiential reading. In this concept the experience is arguably more central than any objectively identifiable quality in the literary text. However, as mentioned above, previous research suggests that informational reading, focusing on non-fiction, study skills, and

finding facts was favoured in actual classroom practices (Dolatkhah & Lundh 2016; Lundh et al., 2018), meaning that the practice of experiential reading may have been limited.

A question that arises from the result is *where* children and youth actually learnt experiential reading. In what parts of Swedish society was this kind of reading appreciated and supported? It is not possible to answer these questions through this study or previous studies, but the relation between class and aesthetic reading needs to be further investigated over a longer time period. For example, hard work is understood as a hindrance for aesthetic reading in the reform work. Today, class is not a common categorisation in cultural policy. Instead the discourse focuses on non-users and participation. Through the use of problematisations as an analytical concept it is possible to make visible the continuous tension in the reform work between, on the one hand, the aim of equipping students with the tools needed for developing into critically thinking members of a democratic society and, on the other hand, the fact that students could resist this aim. This is also a pressing problematisation in contemporary literature policy. Non-readers are stigmatised in large reading campaigns and reading is identified as more connected to *bildung* and participation than other media (Kann-Rasmussen & Balling 2015). The cultural policy research narrative, where the worker's movement made so called high-culture their own (Frenander 2014; Sundgren 2007), can benefit from and be challenged by further research in other policy areas where the politics of reading takes place, especially concerning changes over time.

Turning back to Rose's (2007) remark that readers will not always read in the ways that the people in charge want them to, we can see in the policy documents that the autonomy of the reader that is both encouraged through a democratic ideal and regulated through a desire to foster aesthetic taste. This tension was a problem for the governing of the reading citizen throughout the 20th century. But how has such governing been enacted? This question must be explored over several policy fields. We argue that research on the politics of reading in Sweden can be reinvigorated by exploring the governance of cultural practices emanating from policy fields other than explicit cultural policy.

Acknowledgments

This study was conducted within the project *Reading, traditions and negotiations: Reading activities in Swedish classrooms 1967–1969*, funded by the Swedish Research Council 2013–2017, ref 2012-4140. The project is part of the Linnaeus Centre for Research on Learning, Interaction and Mediated Communication in Contemporary Society (LinCS) at the University of Gothenburg and the University of Borås, Sweden, funded by the Swedish Research Council, ref 349-2006-146. Parts of this study was written during research retreats at Sigtunastiftelsen and Ellen Key's Strand, due to grants from Harald och Louise Ekmans forskningsstiftelse and Ellen Key's stiftelse Strand. For this opportunity the first author is very grateful. The authors would also like to thank the reviewers for constructive comments, Frances Hultgren for proof reading and Erik Erlanson for insightful remarks.

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