

# Making social studies in standards-based curricula

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**Keywords:** Curriculum, civics subject, standards-based curriculum, competences, assessment

- Disciplinary knowledge constitutes the structure of the syllabi in civics
- The syllabi of civics include a clear orientation towards social efficiency
- The use of abilities, instead of competences, are strongly linked to a subject matter
- Civics is understood as a mélange of abilities and in-built subject-specific content
- The Swedish syllabi of civics represent performance-based generic competences

**Purpose:** The aim of this article is to critically explore the complex relations among the triad comprising standards-based curriculum, the curriculum concept of 'competences' and the subject of civics in Swedish curricula.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The theoretical framework is based on Bernstein's (2000) two models of pedagogy, the competence model and the performance model. Following Deng and Luke (2008), we analyse the conceptions of 'knowledge' in the subject of civics and explore how a civics syllabus in a standards-based curriculum can be understood and expanded in relation to a classical typology of social studies by Barth and Shermis (1970).

**Finding:** The syllabi of civics includes a clear orientation towards social efficiency. Moreover, the abilities, the concept used instead of competences, are strongly linked to the subject matter. Civics is thus understood as a mélange of abilities and in-built subject-specific content. We identify a new category in the typology of social studies, which is social studies as performance-based generic competences.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Many school curricula have statements and broad goals concerning critical thinking, global citizenship and awareness of the climate and environment. However, the overarching goals of curricula and those of school practice do not always harmonise. The combination of curriculum standards and standardised tests tends to constitute a prescriptive formula, with an increased risk of subordinating more complex learning

outcomes for the sake of meeting measurable standards. This applies not least to the complex and sensitive subjects covered in social studies.

From a US perspective, Westheimer (2019) argues that the uniformity required by standards prevents teachers from making local adaptations in, for example, their choice of teaching content. Moreover, such standards are inextricably linked to the larger project of shaping public education in a policy direction that advocates external guidelines and evaluations as well as privatisation, risking the devaluation of teachers' practical wisdom and spontaneity. This scenario is not only an American reality. Standards-based curricula are influencing the teaching of social studies in many countries, although this influence varies from one country to the next. Westheimer states that

“[e]ducation that fosters the kind of engagement a well-functioning democracy requires will also ensure that students gain the knowledge, capacities, and dispositions associated with a robust democratic life.” (Westheimer, 2019, p. 14)

One problem with standards, including standardised curricula and assessment practices, is that all standardisation aims to simplify multifaceted issues, while democratic civic education in social studies has the opposite goal: to teach students about social conditions as complex issues with often-conflicting interests. Standards can be categorised as horizontal or vertical. An example of horizontal standards is a set of guidelines that aims to improve teaching in a more nuanced and in-depth direction. A vertical notion of standards, in contrast, has the focus on increasing the knowledge results, under the assumption that students need to raise their knowledge standard relative to other nations (Mathison et al., 2006).

Standards-based curriculum reform can be defined as the effort of a governmental agency or national educational authority to establish a holistic system of pedagogical purpose, content selection, teaching methodology and assessment (Mathison et al., 2006). These different components reinforce each other and coalesce in the classroom. Moreover, the assessment component serves as an external, normative indicator of student outcomes, determining the relative success or failure of student performance. According to Mathison et al. (2006), several assumptions underlie standards-based reform: students do not know enough; curriculum standards and assessment will lead to higher achievement; subject experts are best positioned to determine what ought to be taught in schools.

In the case of Sweden, yet another reason for standards in curriculum and assessment is emphasised, namely equivalence in the assessment of student results, which is regarded as an important indicator of an equal and therefore just education system. However, the danger of standards-based social studies, as Ross et al. argue (2013), is that standards and other prescriptions hinder teacher engagement with the perennial curriculum question of what knowledge is most worth teaching. According to these researchers, the core of the subject is to create a meaningful understanding about the world and how one might transform it. In a comparative study of social studies in two standards-based curricula, in California and Sweden, the lack of themes about society's need for discussions on 'the common good' has been demonstrated (Wahlström, 2019). The potential of discussing different modes and assumptions of school knowledge in policy texts and curricula in terms of Bernstein's (1975/2003) theorization on knowledge structures have been convincingly elaborated by for example Moore and Maton (2010) and Morais and Neves (2018).

### 1.1 PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overarching aim of this article is to critically explore the complex relations among the triad comprising standards-based curriculum, the curriculum concept of 'competences' and the subject of social studies, with the Swedish context as an example. While the former two elements in this triad represent key concepts in transnational education policy, the third has its history in the selective traditions of the subject of social studies. The selective traditions of a subject strongly contribute to shaping its meaning and what counts as 'knowledge' in that particular subject (Apple, 1993).

More specifically, the purpose of this study is to conceptualise analyses of types of knowledge approaches in the subject of civics within current international education policy trends in terms of standards-based curriculum and competences. The national Swedish curriculum in civics is used as an example of the 'new' formation of the subject in a context of curriculum standards and an international policy trend of competences. The Swedish curriculum is composed of, on one hand, a content- and subject-based structure and, on the other, the logic of a result-focused, ability-centred curriculum. In the study, the following research questions, focused on curriculum creation, are explored:

- a) How can the logic of knowledge be conceptualised in the syllabi of civics for compulsory and upper-secondary school in the 2000s education policy on curriculum standards and concepts of competences?
- b) How can a typology of civics be developed to capture knowledge formations evolving during the 2000s?

Drawing on Vinson (1999) we define national curriculum standards 'as authoritative policies seeking to prescribe curriculum or content, that is to determine and limit what teachers can and should teach and what students can and should learn, for the entire country' (p. 298). Further, in general, national curriculum standards 'imply some means of assessment by which teacher and student achievement or performance can be gauged' (p. 298).

The structure of this article is as follows. First, we will give a brief contextualising overview of the Swedish case, followed by a detailed presentation of the theoretical and methodological frameworks of our study. In the result sections, we present how the knowledge discourse in the syllabi of civics can be understood and how this is mirrored in and intertwined with the logic of assessment. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion on the need for a revised typology of social studies and a presentation of our new type.

### 1.2 The Swedish case

In Sweden, a knowledge debate was initiated in the early 1990s through the official state report *School for Bildung* (Official report, 1992, p. 94). The purpose of the report was twofold: to broaden the concept of knowledge from its one-sided, cognitive meaning and to offer 'new' concepts of knowledge adapted to a performance model of school curriculum. Since this official investigation, a new grading system and a standards-based and subject-based model of curriculum with prescribed 'knowledge requirements' have been implemented. However, the knowledge base for teaching and learning, stated in the first part of the curriculum, has remained the same since the beginning of the 1990s. Currently, there is a major debate in Sweden on the status of 'facts' in the school system's concept of knowledge. One line of argument claims that students are not given enough opportunities to learn factual knowledge. Instead, student abilities have been the dominant concept of knowledge, obscuring the importance of factual knowledge. The other line of argument is that factual knowledge is necessary to perform the abilities, as, without factual knowledge, the abilities become empty. The emphasis on 'abilities' in the

knowledge requirement is related to the transnational policy discourse on competences. In this article, our interest is in exploring the question of what education is *for* (Biesta, 2011) in social studies, as expressed within the Swedish framework of curriculum and the subject of civics. This means that we are interested in exploring the basic knowledge assumptions in the school subject of civics in current education policy.

Swedish children begin compulsory school at the age of seven years old. Primary school includes six years, from Year 1 to Year 6. After primary school, all Swedish children continue to lower secondary school for Years 7 to 9. They finish compulsory school at the age of 16. Virtually all 16-year-old students move on to one of the three-year programmes in upper secondary school. The *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre 2011* (Lgr 11) is structured in relation to the school system, with content and knowledge requirements stated for Years 3, 6 and 9. While students do not receive grades until Year 6 (at 12 years old), their individual knowledge development is continually monitored and reported from Year 1 onwards. Thus, assessment is a key concept in the Swedish school system, even before it is reported in terms of grades.

Lgr 11 is a standards-based curriculum in which the subject's purpose, content and assessment criteria ('knowledge requirements') are closely aligned, with knowledge requirements as the dominant part (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012).

### 1.3 Theoretical framework

The British knowledge sociologist Basil Bernstein (2000) explored the concept of *competence* and its spread in the policy arena, tracing the origin of the term across the field of social science in the 1960s and early 1970s. The inherent assumption in the concept of competences – what Bernstein (2000, p. 42) calls 'the social logic' of the term – includes an implicit model of the social, of communication, of interaction and of the subject. The promise of the concept of competence contains (i) a democratic approach to the opportunity to acquire competences; (ii) an active subject creating a meaning of the world; (iii) an emphasis on the inherent creative, tacit and self-regulating process of the acquisition; (iv) a rejection of hierarchical relations; and (v) a concept of time that emphasises the present. Bernstein (2000) argues that these five features are in-built in all competence theories, albeit not in exactly the same ways in all disciplinary contexts. The competence process is characterised by an anti-positivist position and a 'democratic' approach based on diverse theoretical perspectives. The approach of competence stresses general skills rather than selective specialisations, as well as the micro-context rather than the macro-arenas. Although the arguments for competences were created in the intellectual domain, the concept has exerted tremendous influence on the theory and practice of education.

The discourse of competence constructs a specific pedagogic model. The pedagogic idea of the competence model is characterised by work on projects, a high degree of influence over content selection, pace and order for the learners and an emphasis on competences that learners already possess. In the competence model, classification is weak. The criteria for assessment are implicit and diffuse, with an emphasis on what is present in the learner's product. The pedagogic competence model can be contrasted with the performance model. The performance model is characterised by a focus on subject skills, the individual student, a low degree of influence over the content selection, pace and order for the learners and a grading of student texts. In the performance model, classification is strong. The criteria for assessment are clearly communicated and known to the learners in advance. The emphasis in the assessment is focused on what is missing in student performance (Bernstein, 2000).

Bernstein (2000) distinguishes three modes of the pedagogic performance model: singulars, regions and generic. Singulars correspond to academic disciplines, with their own intellectual fields of texts and rules, characterised by strong classification. The focus is directed inwards, towards the development of the disciplines themselves. The second mode, regions, represents an

extension of singulars into the intersection between singulars and professional programmes such as medicine, architecture and education. In contrast to singulars, regions are controlled by external pressure and administrative control, in order to be responsive to the market they serve. The third mode, finally, is the generic mode.

Generic performance competence is of specific importance for the analysis of the Swedish curriculum, as it offers a tool for unravelling the complexity of current curricula, placed at the intersection of the three foci of subject knowledge, competences and achieved outcomes. Generic modes are recontextualised outside the pedagogic recontextualising field. The generic mode is directed at what comes after school and education, towards work and 'life'. Jones and Moore (1993) show that the rise of generic 'competences' should be understood in terms of a change in the social control of expertise in society, from the professional community to more direct state control. They argue that the educational competence movement can be viewed as a behaviouristic approach. The behaviouristic competence approach 'is empirical and atomistic and decomposes activities into supposed constituent elements ('skills') in terms of which the performance of individuals can be measured' (Jones & Moore, 1993, p. 386-387).

Moreover, the promotion of 'skills' rests on the assumption that skills are transparent and easy to describe. The success of 'competences' can be related to the way in which behaviour can be regulated and codified through constructs of 'skills' and the way this methodology can be used for directing pedagogy and assessment. It is through the production of matrices, checklists, performance indicators and the like that the promotion of competence has gained success as an effective strategy for a generic performance model (Jones & Moore, 1993). Generic modes conceptualise economics and working life as continuously changing and are thus deeply linked to the concept of 'trainability'. Bernstein (2000) argues that the cognitive and social processes needed for responding to such a pedagogised future depends upon a *capacity* to project oneself towards the future, rather than upon an *ability*. In this article, we distinguish between 'ability' as an actual skill, native or acquired, and 'capacity' as a potential to develop a skill. This difference is of certain relevance to the analysis of the Swedish curriculum text, since the Swedish curriculum Lgr 11 uses the term 'ability' rather than 'competence' or 'capacity'.

We believe it has become increasingly important to be able to distinguish between different modes of competences in curriculum analysis. With reference to Bernstein (2000), the assumptions underpinning the pedagogic competence model is a democratic approach and an active subject creating meaning of the world in all the three modes of liberal/progressive, populist and radical interpretations. Thus, the use of the term 'competence' includes a specific emancipatory logic of competence, which differs from the logic underpinning the term within a pedagogic performance model.

In the performance model, the concept of 'competence' primarily emerges in the generic mode. The social logic in the performance mode is built on behaviouristic/economic assumptions about individual and collective skills needed for coping with globalisation, a theoretical approach of 'common sense' and the idea that there exist clear and simple technologies for judgments and evaluations. An analysis of the syllabus of the subject of Swedish, comprising both language and literature, in the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school (Lgr 11), indicated that the syllabus of Swedish was constructed within a performance model of curriculum (Wahlström, 2016). Thus, the meaning of competence in the analysis of the subject of social studies needs to be interpreted within the wider framework of pedagogic models for curricula, instead of being viewed as a general term.

#### **1.4 Understanding school subjects from a theoretical perspective**

The fundamental task in curriculum creation is to answer the question of what should count as 'knowledge' in this specific school subject. International and national negotiations, contests and agreements form the discourses regarding on which versions of knowledge, skills and

competences the curriculum should be based. As Deng and Luke (2008, p. 67) put it, 'curriculum entails the normative selection, classification, and framing of knowledge from the archive of human knowledge', defining subject matter as a distinctively educational phenomenon. On the programmatic level of curriculum creation, there are four historical curriculum orientations (Deng & Luke, 2008). First, the longstanding notion of *academic rationalism* stresses the importance of the transmission of disciplinary knowledge. Academic knowledge is viewed as the authoritative source for subject matter content and way of knowing. Second, the curriculum orientation of *social efficiency* instead stresses the importance of equipping students with necessary skills for their future as citizens and employees. Within this tradition, it is theories of human capital rather than of the academic disciplines that are dominant. If academic rationalism is related to the knowledge concept of academic knowledge, the rationality of social efficiency is instead developed outside the realm of the epistemological classification schemes. It is closer to the generic mode in Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic performance model than it is to any epistemological knowledge concept. Third, the curriculum tradition of *humanism* looks at the school as a place for student self-actualisation, personal development and creativity. Finally, *social reconstructionism* constitutes a fourth curriculum tradition, in which the focus is on social conditions and the reconstruction of social issues and society. As in humanism, the emphasis is on the experiential conception of knowledge, assuming meaningful encounters with the subject matter content, leading to reflexivity and action. Within the tradition of social reconstructionism, the purpose of studying subject matter is to create meaningful learning experiences for the students, opening the way for possible social actions.

Thus far, general curriculum traditions concerning several of the traditional school subjects have been categorised, as well as the links between the different curriculum traditions and the underlying concepts of knowledge. In the final section of the theoretical framework, we turn directly to the subject of social studies and, more specifically, to the subject of civics.

### 1.5 A Typology of social studies

The subject's selective traditions and the struggle between a disciplinary subject matter teaching and a community-oriented one is tangible in most school subjects. In science literacy, Roberts (2007) understands these two positions as representing two extremes on a continuum. In Vision I, the direction is inwards, towards the processes and products of science itself. In contrast, Vision II, the direction is outwards, towards society and students' everyday life. In Vision II, the subject of science derives its meaning from conditions with a scientific component, in situations students are likely to encounter as citizens. This kind of science literacy can be understood as literacy about science-related situations. Vision I and Vision II should be understood as two different ideals, with different starting points and different goals. Nevertheless, these two extremes co-vary in both curriculum creation and classroom practices, although with different dominance in different contexts (Roberts, 2007).

In the tradition of social studies, a similar field of tension between reaching inwards towards the discipline and outwards towards society can be distinguished. This tension is captured within the classical typology of Barth and Shermis (1970), including social studies as (i) citizenship transmission, (ii) social science and (iii) reflective inquiry. In the tradition of social studies as citizenship transmission (i), the emphasis is on the nation's cultural and social unity and the transmission of certain norms and attitudes. The priority is on certain factual knowledge, based on the assumption that the selected knowledge is of importance for the practice of good citizenship. Social studies as social science (ii) is based on the assumption that social studies is best taught in accordance with the academic discipline of social science. Citizenship education in this tradition emphasises the mastering of social scientific procedures, concepts and processes for good citizenship. Instructional methods are highly informed by methods and concepts developed by social scientists. From the perspective of social studies as reflective inquiry (iii), its

purpose is to prepare students for democratic problem solving. Since the assumption is that there is no single or correct solution to social problems, the emphasis is on inquiry and reflective thinking regarding current societal issues. Within this tradition, it is believed that democracy requires citizens capable of defining problems, discussing and analysing different solutions and making reasoned arguments for them. According to Shermis (1982), from the position of social studies as social science, a text author or curriculum should do the process of defining social problems *a priori*, so that problems will be defined in social science disciplinary terms for students. In contrast, from the standpoint of reflective inquiry, a social problem is not a problem until it is experienced and felt by the learner. From such a view, problems cannot be formulated on beforehand; instead, they must be felt and defined by individuals.

If social studies as social science (Barth & Shermis, 1970) matches the inward approach of Vision I in science literacy (Roberts, 2007), the typology of social studies as reflective inquiry has strong similarities with Vision II in its aim of reaching outwards from the discipline toward society and the students' experiences in everyday life. In Bernstein's (1975/2003) terms, the approach of social studies as social science represents a strong classification, with a content distinguished from other subject contents by clear boundaries. In contrast, the approach of social studies as reflective inquiry represents a weak classification. This approach presupposes the inclusion of experiences of individual learners in addition to the content of subject traditions. As Bernstein (1975/2003) notes, even if the concept of classification is related to relationships between subject contents, the degree of classification has implications for power and control on all arenas for recontextualisation of the subject, including the pedagogic arena. The term 'frame' denotes the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and what is taught. Strong framing refers to sharp boundaries between what is taught and not taught. The opposite is weak framing with blurred boundaries for the content of the teaching. The approach of reflective inquiry indicates a weak framing. Reflective inquiry regarding social problems cannot be recontextualised only as an interaction between the curriculum and the teacher. This approach needs also to include the experiences of the students. By including the relationships of classification and framing in the analysis, it becomes possible to move between curriculum text and pedagogy. Even if the analysis conducted in this study regards the intended curriculum, it simultaneously suggests implications for the implemented curriculum at the classroom level.

## 1.6 Method and data

The Swedish syllabi for civics can be seen as an exemplifying case in exploring the relations among the triad of standards-based curriculum, the concept of competences and the subject of social studies. As data material, we used the syllabi in civics (Lgr 11; Lgy 11) as well as relevant governmental reports as additional and contextualising sources of data (Official Report, 2007:28; Official Report, 2008/09:87; Official Report, 2008/09:66). Our approach to these documents moves beyond seeing them as artefacts or texts and towards understanding them as products of action which carry distinct ideas and conceptions (Prior, 2003). As a point of departure, our theoretical framework (Bernstein, 2000; Deng & Luke, 2008; Barth & Shermis, 1970) constituted the reflexive background foil for our qualitative text analysis. The process of analysis was characterised by the dialectical pendulum movement, typical for an abductive approach (Reichertz, 2003), in which the researcher moves back and forth between theory and empirical data to gain an increasingly deep understanding that enables empirically based theorisations. In this process, the analytical focus has been on the conceptual character of knowledge in the syllabi and how this is mirrored in the distinct frameworks and logics for assessment. Even if an analysis process based on an abductive approach does not allow for a definition of clear-cut analytical steps, our successive proceeding can be summarised as follows: (i) a line-by-line reading of the syllabi's sections and collaborative identification of analytical patterns in the text against the backdrop of our theoretical framework; (ii) the preliminary interpretations from the

first step mirrored against the additional data for contextualisation and in-depth understanding; (iii) theoretical integration of the previous two steps leading to a formulation of results; and (iv) synthesis and theorisation leading to our suggested additional type of social studies.

## 2 KNOWLEDGE DISCOURSES IN THE SUBJECT OF CIVICS

As previous studies have indicated, the Swedish curriculum for compulsory and upper secondary school is formed from a hybridisation of different curriculum ideas (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018; Adolfsson, 2018). On the one hand, the subjects have a prominent place; on the other hand, there are elements of a clear result-oriented conception of curriculum in which the so-called 'abilities' are crucial in forming the basis for the knowledge requirements. As in all national curricula, various transnational policy movements can be, on a programmatic level, more or less salient. However, the incorporation of such transnational policy trends in national curricula always occurs through a re-contextualisation process, framed by the current national socio-political context. How this is done, and with what consequences, are in many respects empirical questions. With regards to the Swedish case, the syllabi are built on three different 'pillars' outlined for each subject: aim, core content and knowledge requirements. The aim provides a guideline regarding the direction of the teaching as well as what abilities the students should generally attain within the current subject. The pillar of core content declares what is to be taught, providing a specification of what subject matter content that should be emphasised in teaching. The knowledge requirements describe what levels of knowledge students must attain to achieve certain grades. In the syllabus for compulsory schooling, there are requirements for Years 3, 6 and 9, while in upper secondary schooling, there are formulated knowledge requirements for each syllabus.

In the light of the transnational discourse on standards and competences as discussed in the first part of the paper, the aim of this section is i) to present how knowledge is expressed in the syllabi and in relation to official documents with regard to assessment and ii) to identify what types of competence conceptions influence it. For this purpose, the section is organised in different analytical units as follows. First, we will focus on how the subject of civics in the syllabus can be understood. Then, we will present the character and the role of the subject-oriented abilities as expressed in the syllabi. After that, a brief overview is given regarding the curricular assessment context in which the knowledge and the abilities are embedded. Finally, we explain in which ways the standards-based and competence-oriented assessment of knowledge contributes to set specific conditions for the subject. For each analytical unit of the section, exemplifications from the empirical data is provided.

### 2.1 A Subject-oriented syllabus

Even if the Swedish syllabi are composed of various elements, each of which may point to different curriculum ideas, it is clear that the subject per se constitutes a main unit. In other words, the syllabi are strongly framed by their school subjects in terms of subject-oriented facts and concepts. The following excerpt is an example of the so-called 'core content' in civics for Years 7 through 9:

Individuals and communities

- Youth identity, lifestyles and well-being and how this is affected by such factors as socio-economic background, gender and sexual orientation.
- Sweden's population, its size, composition and geographical distribution. The consequences of this, for example, socially, culturally and economically.



- Swedish welfare structures and how they function, such as the health care system, the pension system and unemployment insurance. Financial responsibilities of individuals and families and what is financed through public funding.
- Immigration to Sweden, before and now. Integration and segregation in society. (Lgr 11, p. 231).

A similar focus on subject-oriented content can be found in a civics syllabus for upper secondary school:

- Democracy and political systems at the local and national levels and within the EU. International and Nordic collaborations. Citizens' opportunities to exercise influence at the different levels /.../
- Human rights – what they are, how they are related to the state and to the individual and how you can claim your individual and collective human rights. (Civics Syllabus, 1a1, Upper Secondary School)

Explicit and defined subject content implies that the boundaries between the subjects are fixed. The knowledge content itself, exemplified in both excerpts above, is presented as informative and objective. A desirable aim in teaching, then, is to provide students with an as true and objective picture of society as possible. The characterisation of the knowledge as something *external* and *impersonal* means that students' experiences and interests should not constitute the foundation of the curriculum and thus is subordinated to the subject content. In other words, the predefined subject content is not open for negotiation. In the light of Deng and Luke (2008), the curriculum orientation of the civics syllabus content can be seen as permeated by academic rationalism, which implies that the student's 'life world' plays a lesser role.

At the same time, this focus on subject-oriented content is in line with the intentions behind the current curricula. In one of the official reports of the Swedish government investigating the new education reform, the former curricula and syllabi were overall strongly criticised:

“...many times, the syllabuses fail to be concrete and they are perceived as unclear and even ‘fuzzy’. Imprecise and generally formulated expressions, to varying degrees, dominate several syllabuses. This is considered an improper development. In the forthcoming syllabuses, the objectives must be concrete and subject-oriented.” (Official report 2007: 28, p. 13f).

However, even if a disciplinary knowledge discourse constitutes a central part of the Swedish syllabus content in the way it stresses the transmission of disciplinary knowledge, the syllabus is not solely based on academic rationalism. There is also an orientation towards social efficiency, which stresses the importance of equipping students with necessary skills for their future as citizens and employees:

“Students should also be given the opportunity to develop an understanding of issues concerning working life, resources and sustainable development. Students should be given the opportunity to develop a scientific approach to social issues and an understanding of scientific work on social issues. In addition, teaching should contribute to creating conditions for active participation in society (Civics syllabus, the purpose, upper secondary school).”

Linked to Barth and Shermis (1970), this points to a hybridisation of the two typologies ‘social studies as citizenship transmission’ and ‘social studies as social science’. This leads to the

question of how the transnational discourse of competences is reflected in the Swedish syllabus of social studies.

## 2.2 Subject-oriented abilities

In the sections on 'aims' and 'knowledge requirements', the so-called 'abilities' have a crucial function. The abilities, based on their meaning in the Swedish syllabi, describe what skills the students should attain within each subject. In the 'aims' section, these abilities prescribe the general direction of the civics teaching. For example:

"Teaching in civics should aim at helping the pupils to develop knowledge about how the individual and society influence each other. Through teaching, the pupils are given the opportunity to develop an overall view of societal questions and social structures. In such an overall view, the social, economic, environmental, legal, media and political aspects are fundamental." (Lgr 11, p. 227)

The knowledge requirements state more specifically which abilities students must acquire in Years 3, 6 and 9 in compulsory schooling and after finishing a specific course in the upper secondary schooling. The same abilities constitute the basis for the grading scale. The following excerpt is an example of the knowledge requirements for grade E from an upper secondary school syllabus in civics:

"The pupil can analyse societal issues and identify some causes and consequences. In the analysis, the pupil briefly discusses the causes and consequences and possible solutions of societal problems. The pupil can, on a basic level, give some arguments for their positions and value other people's standpoints." (Civics syllabus, course 1a1, upper secondary school)

The quote above give us some examples of the kinds of abilities students are expected to acquire in the civics course: *analysing* social issues, *discussing* causes and consequences related to these social issues, *discussing* possible solutions, etc. It is important to note that these abilities are strongly linked to a clear subject matter. The abilities themselves do not constitute the basis of the curriculum and syllabus; rather, these are presented and integrated under the subject. Thus, comparing the Swedish approach to the EU's and OECD's so-called key competences, we find some crucial differences. According to Sinnema and Aitken (2013), the key competences have more of a dispositional character, which means that developing these generic competences also includes developing the motivations, emotions and attitudes that will promote a readiness and willingness to use them appropriately in a range of contexts and situations.

The concept of competence, as it is often defined within a transnational discourse, thus emphasises the application of knowledge to practical problems but also the judgement and capacity to make 'good' decisions in various situations. Such a broad definition is not found in the meaning of 'ability' in the context of the Swedish syllabi. This implies that, in the transnational competence discourse, the subjects are subordinate to the generic competences, while the opposite is more often found in the Swedish syllabi. Related to Bernstein's (2000) performance model and what he defines as the 'generic mode', this means that the concept of 'competence' has a very specific meaning in the Swedish curriculum. The prominent role of the abilities in the knowledge requirement frames their meaning in a specific direction, narrowing it to an actual skill that students must acquire and that the teacher must be able to examine and grade. This in turn requires intelligibility, clarity and transparency. The question of assessment will be further discussed in the next units of the section.

### 2.3 The Curricular assessment context in Sweden

As discussed, the Swedish curriculum can be understood as a standards-based, with a clear focus on results and a strong alignment of subject purpose, teaching content and assessment criteria in the syllabi. Over the course of the curriculum reform, the assessment system has changed in various ways. From a political point of view, one of the central intentions of the government regarding the new curriculum has been to provide better conditions for a more efficient school and to contribute to improved knowledge outcomes (Official report 2008/09:87, p. 29). Likewise, the implementation of a new assessment system should contribute to equality, clarity, transparency as well as improved educational monitoring in order to manage goal attainment and to stimulate students' learning efforts (Official report 2008/09, p. 87; 2008/09, p. 66).

'Knowledge requirements' is a term for assessment criteria that is used exclusively in the Swedish context. The knowledge requirements serve as a set of quality descriptors for evaluating student knowledge and thereby intimate what knowledge is seen as valuable. The term also indicates that students are held accountable for providing the teacher with evidence of having the required knowledge. Hence, the knowledge requirements follow a certain logic of standards, in which a shift has taken place away from standards as aims for learning and towards standards as required and expected outcome. The knowledge requirements prescribe in detail what students at the end of Years 1, 3, 6 and 9 are expected to have acquired. In order to monitor the requirement-related achievement on a school level and to support equivalence in teachers' assessments, national tests have been expanded and are conducted for more subjects and from earlier stages in students' careers (now from Year 3, compared to Year 9 in the previous assessment system). Mandatory screening tests in pre-school class as well as in Year 1, intend to early detect students who are at risk for not reaching the requirements formulated for their age cohort and therefore have the right to receive individualised learning support.

Furthermore, a new grading scale of A through F has been implemented, doubling the number of possible grades as well as adding a non-passing grade F, allocated if students do not reach the minimum required performance level, which is E. In order to receive a certain grade, the knowledge requirement for the grade must be achieved holistically; a weak performance in one part cannot be compensated for in another part. In addition to these wide-reaching changes in the assessment system, more rules and regulations to direct teachers' assessment and to ensure improved equivalence have been stipulated. As another measure to ensure and enable more equivalence and clarity, the sheer number of assessment guidelines, subject-specific commentary material and video courses on how to perform a 'good' assessment, conforming to rules and regulations, has increased considerably (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). Thus, on a system level, it can be said that the Swedish assessment context has clearly moved towards a logic similar to Bernstein's (2000) ideal type of the performance model, where the focus on the assessment of students' learning has increased considerably in manifold ways and where required performance and outcomes are emphasised.

### 2.4 The Assessment of performance and qualities in the subject of civics

As already highlighted before, the knowledge requirements prescribe in detail the expected quality of students' performance. Since learning is an inferential process, students must explicate their knowledge and abilities and transform them into observable actions or products in order to demonstrate their learning. For example, the requirements to earn the middle grade C in the subject of civics in Year 9 are described in the following way:

“Pupils have *good* knowledge of different societal structures. Pupils show this by exploring how social, media, legal, economic and political structures in society are organised and function and describe *relatively complex* relationships in and between different societal structures.” (Lgr 11, p. 236, orig. emph.)

What becomes visible here is that the ‘good’ knowledge must explicitly be ‘shown’ and that this visualisation of knowledge is realised by ‘exploring’ and ‘describing’ the related learning content, i.e. actions expressed with active verbs. Against a theoretical backdrop of Jones and Moore (1993), this implies an emphasis of knowledge that needs to be translated into visible behaviour and a certain sort of ‘skills’ in order to be assessable. Also worth noting is the use of adjectives describing the quality of the active performance. The ‘good’ knowledge is characterised by a student’s description of relationships that is ‘relatively complex’ in character. It is through these adjectives, the so called ‘value words’, that the qualitative progression of the grading levels is expressed, since the active verbs and related content remain the same throughout the levels. For the lowest passing grade E, for example, ‘basic’ knowledge is demonstrated through a ‘simple’ description of relationships. For the highest grade A, representing ‘very good’ knowledge, the student must show an ability to provide descriptions of relationships that are ‘complex’ in character (Lgr 11, p. 235-237). Hence, it is neither the content knowledge per se – e.g. the knowledge of the ‘different social structures’ – nor the form of action – e.g. to ‘describe’ relationships – that is intended to mirror qualitative progression in students’ performance. Instead, the quality-related differentiation is made along a spectrum of adjectives and therefore with what level of *quality* students are able to *do* something with this subject knowledge at the time of the assessment. This implies that the strong classification (Bernstein, 1975/2003) in the syllabus is not only limited to prescribed aims and criteria for performance evaluation, but in addition even more strengthened in relation to the extension implied in the prescribed quality-related differentiation of students’ demonstrated knowledge.

One intention of the knowledge requirements has been to enhance clarity. The government bill *A new grading scale* (Official report 2008/09, p. 66) reads that the ‘criteria shall be easy to understand and to use for teachers, pupils and parents’ (p. 17). The knowledge requirements for civics in Year 9, from which an excerpt is presented in the quote above, prescribes with 801 words what students are required to perform (Lgr 11, p. 235-237). When adding the knowledge requirements for Years 3 and 6 to this calculation, student knowledge progression in civics over time and its different quality levels is described in 2,003 words in total on six pages in the syllabus. In comparison, the subject purpose and aims (for the whole compulsory level), including what teaching in civics should be ‘for’ (Biesta, 2011), are described in 418 words (Lgr 11, p. 227-228). Even if measurement in word counts or pages is not an entirely appropriate method of analysis, the quantitative visualisation of proportions may nevertheless give an impression of the emphasis on assessment. Indeed, compared to the grading criteria in equivalent documents in other countries (Lundahl, Hultén & Tveit, 2017), the Swedish knowledge requirements are quite comprehensive; a detailedness which teachers need to handle when assessing student performance.

In addition to this comprehensiveness, the knowledge requirements also appear as quite complex in the sense of the language used. An excerpt from the knowledge requirements for civics in year 9, again for the grade C, illustrates this complexity:

“Pupils can study societal issues from different perspectives and describe *relatively complex* relationships by applying *developed and relatively well* informed reasoning. Pupils assess and express different viewpoints in some societal issues by applying *developed* reasoning and *relatively well* informed arguments and can to a *relatively great extent* switch between different perspectives.” (Lgr 11, p. 236)

Overall, the linguistic style used in the knowledge requirements reveals that teachers are the main intended readers of the syllabus. This is obvious from the formulations clearly written from the perspective of one observing the students from the outside – i.e. the teacher, who must assess them. The knowledge requirements do not address the students themselves, in which case the required outcome might read ‘I can assess and express (...)’ and use language in such a way that 15-years-olds can truly understand what is expected of them. It is clear that the text requires a certain level of subject-specific knowledge and expertise in order to be fully understood, particularly since neither the purpose nor the content to which the prescribed skills and qualities should relate is sufficiently specified. To fully understand what these requirements *mean*, one must interpret them in relation to the description of the subject’s purpose and to the core content prescribed in the first parts of the syllabus. Thus, a proper understanding requires a thorough and integrated overview of the whole syllabus, since the knowledge requirements per se otherwise remain vague and relatively ‘empty’. When assessing student knowledge in civics and when allocating grades, teachers therefore first must synthesise the purpose, the core content and the knowledge requirements and then analyse students’ performance in relation to the concrete teaching done.

Against this background, it is clear that, when analysing students’ performance, teachers must *concretise* for themselves, as well as for their students, what the knowledge requirements mean. This applies especially in relation to the value words, the adjectives that express the qualitative progression for different grade levels. How ‘simple’ (grade E) reasoning is differentiated from ‘developed’ (grade C) or ‘well developed’ reasoning (grade A) is dependent on the teacher’s interpretative synthesis and analysis. Teachers require strategies to manage this complexity and to specify the rationales and principles underlying their assessment. They also have to balance curricular and legal regulations of assessment on the one hand and its pedagogical dimensions on the other (Falkenberg, 2020). Here, matrices and checklists appear to play a vital role as instruments for reducing this complexity and making the requirements more comprehensible (Falkenberg, 2020; Vogt, 2017). This ‘atomistic’ approach (Jones & Moore, 1963), as a pedagogical consequence of an orientation towards abilities, risks to oversimplify the manifold qualities of students’ learning since knowledge and skills are presented in a fragmented way, which risks learning to be perceived as instrumental (Vogt, 2017). In addition to the strong classification described above and together with the clear focus on students’ performance and results, even the framing of pedagogical situations in classrooms appears thus to be strong (Bernstein, 1975/2003). The problems of fragmentation and instrumentalism may be exacerbated by the fact that the value words are generally the same for all subjects. For example, in the commentary material for the subject of civics, intended to support teachers’ professional assessment literacy, one can read that only a few of the value words used in the civics syllabus are covered in the material:

“... there are so many similarities with regard to how the levels are constructed. Due to these similarities, considerations regarding the value words can be applied in relation to different subjects, even if there also are quality characteristics, which to a large extent are based on the subject.” (NAE, 2012, p. 4)

Hence, what distinguishes ‘well developed’ reasoning in civics from that in physical education or technology and where the subject-specific characteristics begin and end, becomes – at least to some extent and in relation to assessment – blurred.

Taken together, what the central aspects of assessment are, what constitutes prescribed qualities of learning and performance in the subject of civics and therefore what knowledge and what forms of knowledge are seen to be of most *value* can be said to point towards civics understood as a *mélange* of abilities and in-built subject-specific content knowledge. Through the lens of Bernstein’s (2000) pedagogical models, it can be seen that students must perform this

mélange in the form of externally observable actions or products, providing the teacher with measurable evidence for judgement in accordance with prescribed and highly detailed quality criteria.

### 3 A RENEWED TYPOLOGY INCLUDING SOCIAL STUDIES AS PERFORMANCE-BASED GENERIC COMPETENCES

In relation to the typology formed by Barth and Shermis (1970), we argue that, even if we consider the knowledge content in the syllabi of civics in Lgr 11 (and Lgy 11) as a disciplinary conception of knowledge, the knowledge conception is not based on an academic rationality of in-depth knowledge in a discipline. Instead, on the programmatic level, it becomes a mixture of a subject-based structure and a logic based on social efficiency, indicating the abilities that students are expected to acquire by the time they finish school. In the present study, the focus is directed towards the subject of civics; however, all syllabi in the Swedish curricula for compulsory and upper secondary school are designed in accordance with the same logic, structure and vocabulary. Thus, a knowledge formation based on generic competences within a performance model of curriculum may also be valid for other subjects in the Swedish curriculum.

The category of 'social studies as social science' is applicable to the Swedish case of social studies on the conceptual level. The syllabus in the subject of civics is largely characterised by the application of social science methods and concepts. However, our analysis, comprising the implied concept of competence as an important expression of knowledge formation, reveals that the category of 'social studies as social science' is still an insufficient designation. The Swedish civics curriculum is not primarily based on academic rationalism (Deng & Luke, 2008). At an analytical level, which also takes into consideration different conceptions of competences within two different pedagogic strands and the logic of assessment, another rationalism emerges as the dominant one: the rationalism of social efficiency. The Swedish curriculum may be subject-based, but the underlying rationality is competences expressed as abilities ('skills') that students should be able to demonstrate. The same type of general competences appears in all subjects in terms of abilities, with the aim to be useful for students' future work and societal life.

To express this kind of generic competences related to the school subjects, framed by a pedagogic performance model built on a rationality of social efficiency rather than academic rationalism, we argue that there is a need to revise the classical typology of social studies developed by Barth and Shermis (1970). Alongside the categories of social studies as (i) citizenship transmission, (ii) social science and (iii) reflective inquiry, a new category should be added: *social studies as performance-based generic competences*.

In this categorisation, generic skills are not understood as inner traits. What characterises the category of social studies as generic competences is that generic competences are (i) built into a performance-based logic of pedagogy and curriculum, (ii) based on a rationality of social efficiency at a programmatic level of knowledge formation and (iii) focused on a behaviouristic perspective on 'skills' or 'abilities' as general, atomistic and easy to measure. In the Swedish syllabus, the broader understanding of the concept of *competences* denotes a capacity for prospective life skills, while *ability* denotes actual skills within a subject, understood as independent elements easy to measure.

Social studies as performance-based generic competences represents a more recent phenomenon compared to the typology suggested in the 1970s (Barth & Shermis, 1970). The generic performance mode was generated in the 1990s, outside, and independently of, the pedagogic recontextualising field (Bernstein, 2000). The generic mode can be related to what Young (2008) terms 'technical-instrumentalism'. The technical – instrumentalist approach is focused on the needs of the economy and labour market, rather than on educational needs. On a programmatic level, this approach is in line with a curriculum orientation of social efficiency (Deng & Luke, 2008). Social studies as performance-based generic competences has a weak

classification in terms of subject traditions. This means that it is generic competences, rather than a discipline-based content that is emphasised. However, the approach of performance-based generic competences represents strong framing, because of the focus of knowledge requirements and the demand on the students to make their knowledge visible for the teacher. Thus, the recontextualisation arena constituted by the curriculum and the teacher's selection of teaching content is constrained.

The renewed and extended version of the classical typology in social studies by Barth and Shermis (1970) presented in this article, opens up for comparative studies on the recontextualisation of social studies in different countries. We suggest that meanings of curriculum standards and competences in curricula during the 2000s may constitute a common base for such comparisons.

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