

The worth of art education: Students' justifications of a contestable educational choice

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Abstract

How is art education valued in society? In Swedish public discourse the value of educational trajectories is often equated with their usefulness for employability. With competitive winner-takes-all labour markets for artists, art education is largely perceived as a worthless credential and form of education. But what kinds of worth does art education have among students themselves? This article draws on the approach of pragmatic sociology and individual and group interviews with 62 Swedish folk high school participants within the arts, to understand the meanings participants assign to post-compulsory education within the aesthetic realm. The students' accounts belong to three broad themes, where art education is described as: (a) being a 'stepping stone' to becoming an artist, (b) allowing them to have 'unique' experiences while being in a particular state of creativity or (c) offering them a chance to regain health and general well-being after a difficult period. These results are discussed in relation to the relative institutional autonomy the folk high school possesses in the Swedish education system, as well as the possibilities of challenging the hegemonic ideas of 'learning for earning' that largely reject non-instrumental regimes of self-discovery and artistic creativity.

Keywords

art education, critique, employability, folk high school, valuation

Talking to politicians: An introduction

The place of art education in society and how it should be valued is a contested and debated issue. One answer to the question of the societal value of art education was offered to the authors of this article when

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they presented a commissioned research report on art courses at the folk high school to an audience of members of the Swedish parliament. The folk high school is an educational institution in Sweden and known for offering aesthetically oriented courses at the post-compulsory level. While the full report focused on an array of questions pertaining to artistic practices among participants, their social backgrounds and education-to-work transitions, the organisers of the event decided to headline the presentation as ‘No, the [art courses at] folk high school do not lead to unemployment!’ The title of this talk, given by the folk high school organisers, is both a claim and an answer to the question about the ‘usefulness’ of art education in society. To be useful and legitimate in the eyes of policy-makers, participation in art education should lead to employment. As the title is based on a double negation (*not* leading to *unemployment*), it builds on the assumption that the audience shares a view of art education as being useless for labour market integration.

This kind of policy statement is part of a much larger and powerful political story in which education is increasingly valued for its usefulness in creating employable citizens. EU policies on lifelong learning, for example, frame learning and adult education as a means to create citizens that are more competitive in the labour market (EC, 2000; 2011). Although recent EU policy has been reintroducing social cohesion and equality as legitimate values of adult education, this revival is still subsumed under the overarching ambition of deriving economic gains from adult education (Rubenson, 2006). In a series of concerted efforts to ‘upskill’ the labour force, the very concepts of lifelong learning and employability have taken centre stage in the policy debate on adult education; these efforts have been perceived as paramount in the ‘positional competition’ of a globalised knowledge economy (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). Participants in post-compulsory education are supposed to increase their own human capital by participating in both formal and non-formal educational programmes and to convert their human capital into financial gains and career mobility within the labour market.¹

Nordic popular education has often been associated with other kinds of principles of worth, such as fostering civic virtues, self-development and the enrichment of individuals in a much wider sense (see Korsgaard, 2010; Manninen, 2017). The Swedish tradition of the folk high school has even been claimed to have been important in counter-hegemonic struggles during the 20th century, as the folk high schools channelled claims formulated by organisations within civil society to create democratic reforms, social change and justice (Rubenson, 2006: 337).

While it should be clear by now that there are inherent ideological tensions in how non-formalised adult education is framed within public policy in Europe and Sweden, it is not at all evident what value these educational opportunities have in practice and for the participants themselves. The kind of worth that is assigned to these non-formalised art courses might not be derived from the policy arena that was alluded to in the introduction. To derive a deeper understanding of the societal meaning of post-compulsory art education, we approach the problem of valuing art education based on how participants justify and make use of these educational opportunities. Hence, this article asks: *how do folk high school participants in art education justify their educational choice, bearing in mind that it is a contestable educational decision?*

To answer this question, we draw upon pragmatic sociology in order to understand the ‘grammars’ the participants mobilize to justify their educational choices (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). In doing so we take seriously ‘the critical capacities developed by actors in situations of everyday life’ and the uncertainties facing students engaging in post-compulsory education within the aesthetic realm (Boltanski, 2011: 43)

Our results emphasise, in particular, the actors’ accounts, or motivational statements, for embarking on folk high school training which are found to belong to three broad grammatological and temporal orientations: (a) being a ‘stepping stone’ to becoming an artist, (b) allowing them to have ‘unique’ experiences while being in a particular state of creativity and (c) offering them a chance to regain health and general well-being. In the concluding sections of this article we discuss these results in relation to a broader conceptualisation of the ‘interests’ pertaining to individuals involved in post-compulsory art

education (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Hirschman, 1977). We also consider the possibility of the folk high school challenging hegemonic ideas of education that increasingly tend to reject non-instrumental desires for self-discovery and artistic creativity.

Earlier research on the valuation of art and education

This article addresses the valuation of an educational choice within the arts and contributes to both research in the sociology of valuation in arts and research about justifications in the realm of education. The sociology of valuation has emerged as a research field with an interest in studying value as a central feature of social life (Helgesson and Muniesa, 2013; Lamont, 2012). The intersection of art and valuation has been a key topic in this research field. Research on the intersection of art and value has addressed the uncertain symbolic and economic status of art objects for buyers and sellers and how art objects gain meaning through evaluative devices (Karpik, 2010; Velthuis, 2005). From the perspective of artists, the intersection entails the valuation of an artistic career or practice, and the accounts used by artists to convey the worth of what they do as they juggle the demands of making money and pursuing artistic practice as a passion (Gerber, 2017). The issue of arts education as 'worthless' for artists pursuing an artistic career has also been addressed and contested (Childress and Gerber, 2015). In this article, we address this particular intersection by considering a broad scope of meanings attached to post-compulsory art education, that is, how the participants themselves handle a situation where their educational choice may be perceived as problematic, and the motivational statements they give to justify their choices.

In the field of education, school choice is a conventional topic that has been widely addressed by sociologists, particularly those inspired by the works of Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Palme, 2008). More recently, scholars have also been inspired by contemporary branches of French sociology in order to address how educational actors coordinate their actions in situations underpinned by uncertainty. Van Zanten (2019), for example, studied the interplay between institutional arrangements, family strategies and market devices in order to outline how the conservative regime of higher education policy in France is currently transformed by neoliberal influences. Educational scholars have also started to derive valuable insights from pragmatic sociology, for instance by focusing on the problems of governance (Graß and Alke, 2019; Hedtke et al., 2017) and the negotiation of different justificatory regimes related to policy (Leeman, 2014; 2018). One of the merits of this line of research is that it illustrates the consequences of justifications in policy and administration for students 'on the ground'. Our own approach differs to some extent from previous studies inspired by pragmatic sociology by basing the analysis firmly on the valuation of educational choices as expressed by students themselves.

The folk high school and its art courses: Setting the stage

The first folk high school in Sweden was established in the middle of the 19th century. The folk high school was already, from its conception, vocationally oriented, and as such a means for the emerging class of farmers to improve skills and craftsmanship deemed necessary for farming and the household (Korsgaard, 2010; Lundh Nilsson, 2010). Perhaps due to its early history of educating farmers, the schools are still often oriented towards cultivating practical know-how. Many are found in rural areas of Sweden where they offer possibilities for participants to live on the premises, akin to boarding schools.

While these schools tend to be run by popular movements of political or religious origin, they have in a Swedish context come to rely heavily on state funds and tend to adhere to state policies to some extent. In agreement with their founding principles, the schools are still relatively independent and are free to design their own local curriculum and recruit whomever they want, thereby separating themselves from the state power normally exercised on schools. Since they operate without a nationally enforced curriculum, they have been seen as an educational 'avant-garde'. Historically they have also been considered

forerunners in reaching social groups that were otherwise excluded from entering higher education (Larsson, 2013).

In 2019, the number of Swedish folk high schools reached 156, a figure that has been rising at a steady pace over the course of 150 years. The folk high school offers both generic ‘second-chance education’ for participants who have incomplete degrees from upper secondary school, as well as more specialised courses within a given subject or vocation, such as the art courses we study here. In the last 20 years the number of participants in the art courses nearly doubled from 4000 participants in 1997 to more than 7000 participants in 2016 (Fürst et al., 2018). Within the arts, the folk high schools offer, for example, courses in music, creative writing, performing arts, visual arts, handcraft and photography.

Hence, the setting of this study is an educational institution in Sweden which, through working with a great variety of organisational providers, offers training at a post-upper secondary level. The art courses have considerable heterogeneity in terms of their curriculum and social recruitment (Fürst et al., 2018; Nylander and Melldahl, 2015; Nylander, 2014). Since the admission level and degree of subject specialisation differ greatly between the various schools and courses, they represent different types of training within the Swedish educational system on a continuum ranging from hobby and amateurism to professionalised elite artistic training. These aspects form the bedrock for participants’ valuation of art education as exemplified through the Swedish folk high school.

Theory and method: A pragmatic sociology approach

A number of prominent scholars have previously scrutinised the emergence of neoliberalism as a contemporary economic, political and cultural reality, as an ideology or as a successful ‘governmental technique’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998; Foucault, 2008). In their book, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) explore the moral justifications for capitalism and conventional forms of critique. Aside from a standard denunciation of capitalism, where it is seen to perpetuate inequality, selfishness and poverty, they also discuss the possibility of a revival of the artistic critique (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 419–420, 466–472). The artistic critique under capitalism has often, despite a series of metamorphoses, returned to a series of tropes such as standardised modern life forms, the deterioration of artistic authenticity and the overrationalisation of education and work. Boltanski and Chiapello’s work also highlights how management discourse has come to transform Western societies in the last few decades such that future-oriented actions, constant productivity and project-based work tasks have become more pronounced within current labour markets (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

We draw upon Boltanski’s (2011) work on the critical capacity of social actors in order to unravel how participants in post-compulsory forms of art education account for their educational choices. According to Boltanski (2011), critique is an inherent feature of the social order, as people test ‘reality’ and tend to perceive discrepancies of ‘what is’ and what they believe ‘ought to be’ (Boltanski, 2011: 113). In analysing these accounts in detail, we have derived an underlying grammar of why these students engage in post-compulsory art training. Institutions, such as art schools and colleges, are particularly appealing settings to explore the overarching problem of valuing art education as they are equipped with the semantic power to stabilise and fixate reality by confirming ‘what is the case’ and ‘what matters’ (Boltanski, 2011: 75).

Research strategy and material

In order to analyse the valuation of art education among students, we interviewed participants enrolled in folk high schools in 2017.² A sampling frame was built by creating a database of art courses offered at the folk high schools during 2017, the same year the study was conducted. In total, 83 art courses were offered during the semester when the research was carried out. In order to have a manageable project, courses in music, visual art and creative writing were sampled from this population of courses. To

account for geographical variation, interviews were carried out at folk high schools in different parts of Sweden. Variation was also sought in terms of the profile and status of the folk high schools. For example, some of the selected art courses were well established and prestigious, while others were not. This sampling was based on previous research that showed how the proximity that visual art, creative writing and music courses have towards the professional cultural field and other leading institutions varied by geography (Fürst, 2019; Melldahl, 2012; Nylander, 2014).

In total, 12 folk high schools were selected for this study. At these schools, 15 group interviews were carried out: four with music students, seven with visual art students and four with writing students, resulting in a sum of 54 participants interviewed. In addition, eight individual interviews with former participants were carried out. Four participants had taken a creative writing course, three a visual art course and one a music course. Hence, a total of 23 group and individual interviews were conducted, with 62 participants interviewed.

The interviewers jointly constructed a schedule, which was used for all the interviews. The schedule included a series of themes to be discussed by the participants. All interviewees were asked about their background, their path to the folk high school, why they had chosen to study at the folk high school, how they had chosen the particular folk high school they went to, what the admission process had been like and their experience of the folk high school and interaction with other participants. The former participants were also asked about their career trajectory following their participation in the art course at the folk high school.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis focused on how individuals justified their educational choices in the interview situation, that is, the various reasons expressed for participating in the art courses. These instances in the material were identified in a first-cycle coding. In this first-cycle coding, different types of reason were identified, mainly relating to the temporality of the reasons given, for example referring to the past, present or future. In the second round of coding, the transcripts were returned to. We identified the types of accounts for folk high school participation presented in this article by comparing the statements for similarities and differences. In this stage of the coding procedure, we also related the material to the conceptual base in pragmatic sociology. Quotes from the interviews have been selected on the basis of being representative of the categories identified in the material and to show the variation within the category. The quotes have been translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

The value of post-compulsory art education

Three accounts have been identified in the material: art education as (a) a stepping stone, as (b) a unique experience and as (c) a medicalisation and recovery. The accounts are positions used to justify the educational choice. Among the 62 participants more than half used several positions to justify their choice. In terms of overall salience for each category, 58% of the participants identified with the first (stepping stone), 74% with the second (unique experience) and 26% with the third (medicalisation and recovery). These three categories will now be introduced one after another, and will be developed and substantiated in the forthcoming discussion.

Art education as a stepping stone

In the first set of accounts, participants see their education as a means to create a future self as an artist, or as offering possibilities of working within the creative sector. These accounts suggest that the participant invests in educational trajectories with prospects of achieving success, regardless of the slim possibilities of its realisation.

While it seems well documented by now that art institutions help provide an excess supply of the sheer number of people aiming to make a living from their artwork, these ambitions are nevertheless real for many of the participants in art education. In fact, the uncertainty inherent in these career aspirations

constitutes a permanent crisis for participants envisioning their future. The competitive logic within artistic fields often leads to long educational trajectories and a step-by-step procedure when artists are trying to realise their artistic career (Fürst, 2019; Menger, 2014). The respondent below exemplifies how the folk high school is a stepping stone in an educational and artistic career.

- RESPONDENT: I think I will use samples from my work and apply to art school.
 INTERVIEWER: You mean for higher education and art college?
 RESPONDENT: Yes, higher education. I have already taken art courses at folk high schools for six years; it is time to take the next step. [...] From these kinds of courses you get the necessary experience and craft skills in how creative processes work. Actually, not that many know how creative processes work. Many people think about the pleasure of making art, but how the creative process works, that is something you really need to learn. That is important if you want to attend higher education or if you want to start your own business directly after the course. (I6, art)

This participant stresses how artistic knowledge is not a sacrosanct ‘gift’, but rather the product of hard work and learning. Having acquired the necessary foundation of craft and creativity, she now claims to be ready to apply for the next ‘level’ after the folk high school. These types of accounts are similar to the credentialing accounts of artistic practice used by established visual artists: that works are produced to create a stable position for the artist to be able to apply for positions at established art colleges (Gerber, 2017). The perceived worth of their education is dependent on how they are evaluated by gatekeepers at the next stage of their educational or artistic career.

When accounts about the future are used by these participants, they are often expressed in an instrumental manner. Yet, these accounts are expressed with an awareness of the uncertainty of achieving success in getting into the few educational institutions that pave the way into the professional field of arts, and eventually becoming an established artist. The vision of the future also becomes rather blurred due to the life situation of the participants, which may change over time. Here is an example of how a participant, based on the prevailing uncertainty in the labour market, is prepared to make compromises with their vocational artistic calling:

- INTERVIEWER: We have talked about the future; you said you did not know what to do?
 RESPONDENT: No, I do not really know, but I hope to work artistically somehow and perhaps not full time. I really don’t know if you will ever be able make it within this vocation. At the moment, I think it would be really nice to get deeper into making costumes and such things for, say, the theatre, musicals and film. So, I do not know; I hope I will be able to paint and create things myself. Or that is something I will do as a sideline thing, but it is really about what you do. (I18, art)

When accounts about the future artistic self are given, they are usually portrayed in vague terms with the acknowledgement that the ideas and aspirations of the persons have changed or may change in the future. This shows the role of the folk high school as a place to explore one’s self and desires while being in a state of transition, a possible stepping stone in an artistic career.

For those who are accepted into the more prestigious courses at the folk high school, the situation is slightly different as they have already mitigated some of the inherent risks associated with their career path and have received some initial signs of recognition. These students tend to be aware that they are on a path that is fragile but that can potentially lead them to achieve success in *entering* the artistic field. The situation tends to be stressful, precisely because they are well informed about what it takes to achieve success (Fürst, 2018; Nylander, 2013; Nylander and Melldahl, 2015). The expectations they have of themselves and their artistic careers are talked about in a self-reflexive mode:

- INTERVIEWER: You said you had an ideal and a realistic idea of what will happen. Tell me more about that.
- RESPONDENT 1: I hope that I will be able to work 80% and write, perhaps 75%, but it depends on the employer. My goal is absolutely to have something published. I also hope to collaborate with others, to be in a context with people who love text, writing and reading. To have a social space and context for texts, I have been missing that for a very long time. There is some kind of belonging, context and connections that come from being at this folk high school course too. [...] I do not know about the situation at other folk high schools, but it is a really great environment to be in. You sit down by a large window and write; it is almost . . . you almost get this uncanny self-awareness, because this is not what my regular life looks like.
- RESPONDENT 2: No, it is a special place, it looks like you are sitting and writing the next great novel.
- RESPONDENT 1: You can feel the pressure too. Perhaps it will not be the next great novel. (I26, creative writing)

These respondents are well aware that many who have attended this particular course have used it as a stepping stone to becoming published and entering the literary field. In fact, the high status of this particular folk high school derived from successful alumni trajectories was one of the main reasons for choosing to apply for the course in the first place. The first respondent in this group interview acknowledges that by being accepted into a particular course of special status, the participant has been able to imagine herself as becoming a fiction writer. She also acknowledges that the educational environment exemplifies the precarious working conditions of her artistic calling where there is a demand to produce valuable text. Not knowing the future, respondents vacillate between belief and disbelief in regard to achieving their aspirations. Regardless of whether or not the respondents accomplish their aspirations, the folk high school is believed to develop valuable abilities, while providing resources (credentials, knowledge and relations), similar to the stocking of a portfolio (Menger, 2014). The accounts in this category refer to the value of the educational choice for making an artistic self and thereby achieving an aspiration in the future. The folk high school represents a stepping stone towards the next phase of the respondents' artistic and educational trajectory.

Art education as a 'unique' experience

The grammars of justification found in the second set of accounts are related to the first one, even though the temporal emphasis differs. In contrast to the participants who talk about participation as a means of achieving a rather utopic future end, the accounts in this category tend to describe the intrinsic value of art education and emphasise the present experience. While the justifications for participation in the first category relate to stepping stone strategies and the accumulation of assets in a portfolio, the accounts in the second category come closer to the image of experiencing the folk high school as a long-lasting holiday. The accounts have a seemingly non-instrumental orientation to participation, and are associated with taking a gap year to enjoy the creative environment of the folk high school – or to have what the participants refer to as 'the folk high school experience'.

The educational activities at the folk high school can be both leisure oriented and more professional. What unifies accounts in this category is that they are focused on the present as a means for artistic self-exploration and self-reflection. The respondent below has been reflecting on what she wants to do with her life. She shares how the role of the folk high school plays a part in such ongoing self-reflection:

INTERVIEWER: What was the reason for applying for this course?

RESPONDENT: Yeah, I graduated from upper secondary school and then it was like, what should I do now? I did not know if I wanted to study at university or what I wanted to become. But I did know that I liked to write and that was like the only thing I have heard that I am good at, so I thought that I should give it a chance. But then I postponed it, I went abroad instead, and now I am back after one year abroad, what should I do now? Then I remembered. I applied to folk high schools for a while to attend creative writing courses. So, it fits me well because I still do not know what to do. I applied in order to be able to really try creative writing and see if it is something I would like to do professionally in the future. (I31, creative writing)

The respondent repeatedly emphasises that she does not know what she wants to do with her life and that she must find an answer to this question. The answer to the question is supposed to be what kind of work she wants to do. The struggle to find an answer brought her to the folk high school to explore a craft and an interest she has: creative writing. She does not know if she wants to do this in the future. The folk high school thereby becomes a space for reflecting on life and who she is and wants to become, as well as a way to explore an artistic interest.

In the accounts in this category, it is also possible to discern how the folk high school is viewed as a place where you are surrounded by a strong institutional ethos and belong to a community of like-minded people. Some respondents talk about a specific 'folk high school experience'. The respondent below exemplifies this notion of a 'unique' folk high school experience as contributing to her educational choice:

Many of my friends have talked about folk high schools. I also know about them, but my friends have talked very positively about them, that they have a great sense of belonging and they're just like very, very cosy and worthwhile. I thought, yes, then I want to try it because many people have had such positive experiences [laugh]. (I18, art)

The need to get away is a common reason for attending post-compulsory art courses: to move away from a way of being, to escape or to leave home. Emphasised in this category is not what has been going on in the past but enabling a special type of experience in the present. The grammar that is used for legitimising the educational choice clearly draws upon values normally associated with a strong community spirit, friendships and a sense of cosiness (*mysighet*). The respondent talks about the reputation of the folk high school as a place where one feels a sense of belonging with others who share similar interests. It is common for participants to apply for courses because of the reputation of the folk high school being a welcoming place and a space for having 'unique' experiences involving a feeling of belonging. This kind of reputation is fundamental in cultural fields and can differ substantially depending on which school or particular art programme is applied for.

For some other participants, just thinking about the future is stressful in itself. On the question of what they think about their future, one respondent said:

RESPONDENT: I do not think about the future. It is too much stress.

INTERVIEWER: What do you experience as stressful?

RESPONDENT: To have to think about what to do. You have to do something. I do not know. I have never had any plans for the future. (I35, music)

For this participant, the folk high school has become a form of safe containment and a way of being when *not* making any decisions about what to do in the future. He justifies the school choice partly by saying it enables him to postpone the inevitable pressure to make decisive plans for the future, something he claims to have never been too preoccupied with anyway. As for many aspiring artists, *time* emerges as a crucial factor. In this case, the Swedish welfare state plays an important role in enabling aspirational

artists to test their dreams by providing a generous study loan scheme and no educational tuition fees. Although such an attitude is highly dependent on both private and public infrastructures, it can nevertheless be seen as a form of resistance against the expectations of imminent future-oriented planning, typical of the current labour market logic (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

In retrospect, the postponed decision on embarking on a clear vocational or professional career track could also be conceived as a sound way of taking responsibility for the course of one's own life. This may not be evident in the accounts of some of the participants who are attending the courses, as they are in the midst of these transitions. However, when interviewing former participants, the nexus of personal growth, social bonding and artistic enculturation are elevated:

INTERVIEWER: What do you experience as most rewarding during your time at the folk high school?

RESPONDENT: Good question. I think it is the opportunity to try to write in so many different ways, to write and produce music. To grow as a human being.

INTERVIEWER: Is it something you feel has made a lasting impact?

RESPONDENT: I think I have found a way to express myself, the whole thing of, on the one hand, living there, and on the other hand, the personal growth, to be able to take responsibility. The whole concept [of the folk high school] helped me to grow as a person. [...] A major part of folk high school is the social aspect of living at the folk high school. It gives one so much more than just attending the education during the day. (I51, music, former participant)

This former participant describes the folk high school experience as closely associated with the boarding school format and the institutional ethos where personal growth and community spirit play a big part. Participation becomes a rite of passage, a way to mature and take responsibility for one's actions, both aesthetically and ethically.

An important aspect of the folk high school experience is perceiving the folk high school as a unique space for transition, a place to move away from home, to get experience necessary for life and to transition from youth to adulthood. Hence, the folk high school becomes a space in between two states, youth and adulthood, where these art courses provide a breathing space, where prevailing values are derived from the community of like-minded people they study with as well as these courses' relationship to specific cultural markets. Nevertheless, the experiences also appear transient and confined. Most participants in this category expressed the necessity of conforming to the idea of educating oneself for employability, sooner or later.

Art education as medicalisation and recovery

The last category is a set of accounts that refer primarily to the past, where participants embarked on art education as a means to regain a sense of self. Many of the participants that oriented their justification backward in time had been ill or had fallen out of the normative course of events pertaining to adult life. The art courses were then perceived and justified as a form of self-treatment with therapeutic effects. For the participants to have time to contemplate and heal, they made use of an educational space seemingly outside of regular society, seeking a break from their own situation and status quo. For example, the following response was offered to a question about the participant's reason for applying for art education:

RESPONDENT: This is something I have been thinking about from time to time for quite a long period. I have a degree as an art teacher and have worked for many years at upper secondary school as an art teacher. I am on long-term sick leave because of burnout and fatigue. I tried to get back to my job but felt that something was missing, and I simply wanted to take a chance to find a new route in life and make a break with my occupational identity, and work with my own creativity and see where it led me.

INTERVIEWER: What was missing? [...]

RESPONDENT: [...] I was lacking inspiration and engagement, on my part, I think. That was something that was lost. (I1, art)

This respondent felt she had become lost in her work and could no longer fully identify with the occupational identity of an art teacher. Instead of looking for gainful employment, she claimed to be participating in this art course in an attempt to regain a sense of engagement and inspiration, something that was lost in the process of burning out at work. The course seemed to have created an opportunity for her to explore new ways of being, by shifting the focus from her occupational task of caring for others (as a teacher) to her own self and suppressed desire for artistic exploration.

Her participation constituted a strategy to regain health. At the same time, her involvement in artistic practice seemed therapeutic for her. Furthermore, she did not appear to entertain any serious ambitions to become an established artist. Rather, she was allowing herself to dabble with artistic expressions while hoping that she would regain health and figure out what she wanted to do with her life. The former art teacher was not the only participant previously on sick leave who justified her educational choice by means of shifting focus from what others wanted of her to taking seriously her own wishes and sense of self. Consider also this extract below:

I got to this course through the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, because I have been on long-term sick leave. I got an opportunity to take [a course] at this folk high school. I tried ceramics, which I had never done before. I then took this course and got stuck and could not leave [laugh]. [...] I have a goal now, that is not the usual nine to five job. [...] I want to do something I have dreamed about for a long time but that I have not been able to achieve. [...] To do something for my own sake, and not based on what others expect from me. (I6, art)

The participant above placed emphasis on the importance of resisting the pressures of society to have regular work. She felt that she could not conform to the norms of working life and the current imperative of employability. Attending the art programme offered a situation for reflection and reorientation, allowing her to focus on her own desires rather than the demands pertaining to working life and what others expected from her. She was also convinced of the therapeutic effects of doing art, and later on in the interview revealed that she eventually wanted to work with art as a tool for therapy for others who have fallen ill.

Some participants talked about how work became too demanding and routine-like, where the art course offered an opportunity to take care of themselves and their own interests. One participant even compared the folk high school to a hospital:

There is actually a very fine line between folk high schools and a hospital [laughs]. Everyone seems to have a trauma that they need to work to resolve. A trauma and an emotional wound. Or they want to engage in self-realisation to get on track, without a lot of pressing demands. To be able to take a breath. (I26, creative writing)

The official purpose of the folk high school is not to be like a hospital, but it can nevertheless attend to such therapeutic needs according to its participants. The kind of creative 'work' that is described in the quote above seems to simultaneously address the kind of social and emotional 'baggage' the participants carry with them and the artistic genre they have chosen. The participants in this third category provided justifications of their educational choices that were more individualistically oriented than those from the second category where accounts centred on the present.

There is also tension in these narratives. On the one hand, participation becomes motivated by the participants' own desires and situations that are not in line with the demands of the labour market. On the other hand, the consequence of regaining health may, in fact, lead the participants to become

employable. The fact that the Swedish Social Insurance Agency supports folk high school studies within the arts for individuals on long-term sick leave illustrates how the Swedish state acknowledges another instrumentally oriented value principle towards art education, namely its medical-therapeutic benefits. While the interviewees' motives for participation allow for a critique of a working life that is not suitable for them, their participation in a folk high school will not alter the characteristics and working conditions in the labour market as they become employable and (re)enter the labour force. Any deviation from the norms of being a full participant in working life is highly conditioned and confined in time and place. The criticism voiced by the participants does not seem to challenge the conditions that lead them to embark on art education; rather it restores their individual states of being.

Discussion: On the value of post-compulsory art education

As we see from the accounts of the Swedish folk high school participants within the arts, there are common themes that can be identified across the three tenses (past, present, future) used in justifying their educational choices. The participants are engaged in a quest for authenticity, wanting to slow down time and to (re)assess what is valuable to them. The institutional context of the Swedish folk high school, through its relative institutional autonomy, seems to attract a multitude of adult participants who covet time for a kind of contemplation through the arts. In advanced capitalistic societies time for musing is, arguably, a scarcity.

The emphasis on artistic self-exploration expressed by the folk high school participants could be seen to challenge the dominant ideologies of the current educational system that, to a large extent, does not build on artistic interests of self-discovery and creativity. Educational institutions, such as the Swedish folk high school, could thus be seen as vital for harbouring and cherishing other dreams and sets of value principles than those we typically find in universities or other post-compulsory institutions. The participants' justifications for their educational choices are as much oriented towards recreation, intrinsic self-discovery and exploration as they are about promoting their position in the educational system or gaining merits that are deemed valuable in the cultural labour market.

However, according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 466–470), the new spirit of capitalism has successfully neutralised many of the challenges raised by this kind of artistic critique historically, by incorporating it into a post-Fordist mode of production built around buzzwords from the creative industries: flexibility, entrepreneurship, creativity, project-based innovation. The participants' accounts of using these forms of post-compulsory artistic training facilities for self-therapy and reflection can also be considered a symptom of these dominant discourses of governing oneself – through buying time and recuperating. A romantic reading of these folk high school participants' accounts as a counter-hegemonic critique must come to terms with the fact that they are contained in time and space and are predominantly oriented towards privileged social groups. As such, these critiques do not seem to pose any serious threat to the dominant ideologies of the present era.

These justifications do suggest conflicting interests between the demands posed by the idea of educating for employment and the actual desires and capacities of the individuals we interviewed. The experiences in the last two sets of accounts are of being unable to 'keep up with society'. The critical potential is visible among participants in the folk high school and expressed as reflections of the necessary value of being able to explore an artistic craft, to find 'one's own sense of self' and one's own interests outside the confinements of the current educational system or working life. At the folk high school, there are not the same demands for performing and producing for the sake of others that, in the accounts of many of these participants, seem to form a basis for alienation.

Through the current employability regime, labour market demands tend to merge and integrate with the interests of the state. The implicit requirement of these folk high schools, the type of courses they offer and their content should, on this line of thought, be based solely on the demands of the labour market and its usefulness for establishing 'full employment and employability'. Against this backdrop,

post-compulsory art education risks becoming evaluated either as vocational schools or as therapeutic self-recovery institutions. In such a paradigm, post-compulsory schooling is legitimate only to the extent to which the skills taught meet the requirements defined by employers, or as a therapeutic place for people to regain health and consequently be ready to re-enter the labour market.

However, any broader conceptualisation of individual and collective 'interests' is then effectually eradicated (Hirschman, 1977). The role that the folk high school has traditionally possessed in facilitating social cohesion, channelling collective demands formulated in civil society and setting up radical forms of popular education is at odds with the discourse of 'employability'. In addition, intrinsic values pertaining to the world of art are also at odds with the employability regime in a narrow sense, such as the school's role in fostering more sophisticated aesthetic judgements, developing a capacity to produce artistic work or assigning value to those who actually go on to pursue a career within the arts.

Concluding remarks: The paradox of artistic accountability in the employability regime

The question of the value of art education in society posed in the introduction can now be returned to. The answer provided in the introduction points to the increased pressure to define art education as a means to bring participants to a position of paid labour and long-term employment. The irony of this idea is that standardised forms of employment (with long-term contracts, stable income and job security) are now increasingly being replaced by more project-based, flexible and short-term job arrangements. The artistic realm has been the 'forerunner' in this regard and the development has to some extent relied on the co-option of the artistic critique from earlier generations (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Standing, 2011). While 'flexicurity' is being perpetuated as a new condition for the employability regime, those who engage in educational trajectories that connect to the labour market segment, where this has always been the norm, can nevertheless be seen to 'fail' if they do not meet the criteria of successful labour market integration.


This article broadens the view of what kinds of meaning are assigned to post-compulsory art education. As we have seen, there is a mixture of motives for participating in artistic training at folk high schools. However, it is generally conceived to be a space for transition and an alternative educational route with a rather undefined and uncertain endpoint. While the participants may reflect upon the possibility of another reality as a basis for critique, they do not escape the prevailing imperative of educating themselves for employment. At the folk high school they are, rather, offered a chance to regain a sense of self-determination or to postpone the inevitable encounter with the labour market.

In an international context with societies increasingly shaped by instrumental and economic views of education, the folk high school in Sweden may be considered a deviant case in and of itself as it is voluntary, participants do not pay a tuition fee and the school has no requirement to provide formalised degrees. Nevertheless, these alternative forms of education might help to highlight the broad array of intrinsic values upon which participants involved in post-compulsory education make their choices, and the important role played by institutions in safeguarding a participant's quest for self-discovery and artistic creativity.

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Notes

1. A state commissioned report (SOU 2018:23 Konstnärspolitiska utredningen, 2018) shows that Swedish artists' income development during the last ten years has been well below the average income development in the Swedish population as a whole, and that this disparity has increased in recent years.
2. The data were originally collected for a commissioned report (see Fürst et al., 2018). The folk high school teacher Sanna Levelius conducted some of the interviews.

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