



# Constructing the Desirable Reader in Swedish Contemporary Literature Policy

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## Abstract

This study contributes to a growing number of critical studies of reading that are seeking to understand how reading is constructed socially and politically. It addresses issues concerning why certain types of reading are deemed more appropriate than others in various contexts and historical eras. The aim of the study is to explore constructions of reading, reading promotion, and readers that can be identified in Swedish literature policy 2012-2013 in order to make explicit the implicit assumptions embedded in the politics of reading. This is achieved through a discourse analysis of the Swedish Government Commission report on Literature from 2012 and the subsequent Government Bill from 2013. The analysis focuses on the construction of the 'problem' that reading is supposed to solve, the subject-position of the reader, and the knowledge practices that underpin the construction of the 'problem'. The analysis reveals that the main 'problem' is the changing reading habits of the Swedish population and the decline in the reading ability of Swedish children and youth. This is seen as a threat to several important societal values, such as children's learning and development, democracy, "the culture of reading", Sweden's economic competitiveness, and the market for literature. Responsibility for the problem is placed on the school system, parents, and the use of computers and the Internet. The remedy is seen as the promotion of the right kind of literature. Furthermore, the analysis illustrates how the subject position of the appropriate reader is formed around the notion of the harmful non-reader. Similar dividing practices are constructed around youth/adult, pupil/teacher, child/parent, and son/father where the latter is expected to make the former a reader and thereby a desirable subject. The analysis also shows how two contradictory knowledge practices are joined together in the policy texts, where seemingly rational, objective, and empirical research is paired with humanistic *Bildung* values.

**Keywords:** critical studies of reading, literature policy, politics of reading, discourse, knowledge practices, Sweden

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents a study of how reading is problematised in Swedish literature policy, in particular the Swedish Government Commission report on Literature from 2012 (SOU 2012: 65) and the subsequent Government Bill from 2013 (Prop. 2013/14:3). The art of reading has been a subject for governing since the introduction of the written word. In the last few decades, political interest in reading has been intensified in many countries, not least as reading and literacy are linked to both economic and individual development (see Davenport & Jones 2005, Hamilton 2012, Kelly 2015). This is also the case in Sweden, where an increasing number of policy actions are aimed at stimulating reading in the entire population. The political documents analysed are key texts in producing the contemporary discourse on reading, reading promotion, and readers in Sweden.

The study is a contribution to a growing number of critical studies of reading. Such studies focus on how reading is constructed socially and politically and on the dialogical interplay between local reading activities and societal discourses about reading. Thus, rather than evaluating people's reading activities or the effectiveness of particular teaching methods or reading campaigns, critical studies of reading ask questions about *why* certain types of reading are deemed more appropriate than others in, for example, policy making, teaching, and reading promotion (see Lundh & Dolatkah 2016). Focus in these types of studies is on problematising understandings of reading, literature, and literacy as something inherently good that automatically makes people and society better. While some of these studies analyse actual reading activities (e.g. Persson 2012, Dolatkah & Lundh 2016), others take an interest in policy level and larger historical processes (e.g. Chartier 1994, Persson 2007, Darnton 2014, Lauristin & Vihalemm 2014, Kann-Rasmussen & Balling 2015, Hedemark 2020, Lindsköld, Dolatkah & Lundh 2020). This study analyses literature policy in the early 2010s in Sweden. The main aim of public literature policy is to control and support the production, distribution, and consumption of literature, traditionally books, in general. While public literature policy is not the only influence on reading, it is central in the network or infrastructure that forms the politics of reading. Furthermore, policy plays a significant role in the making of the reading subject (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016: 92). Reading is, for example, often considered to be under threat, with the effect that some readers and reading practices are construed as problems, and others are not. In other words, in public debates and in policy texts some reading practices are constructed as risks, while others are represented as beneficial for society (Hamilton 2012, Mäkinen 2014, Kelly 2015).

By using the Foucauldian concept of problematisation, this study seeks to contribute to the task of critically examining the politics that both produce and enable different notions of reading, reading promotion, and readers. In particu-

lar, it seeks to understand how constructions of reading, reading promotion, and readers have come about and the kinds of knowledges that come into play in the policies analysed.

The aim of the study is to explore constructions of reading, reading promotion, and readers in Swedish literature policy 2012-2013 in order to make explicit the implicit assumptions of the politics of reading. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

Q1. What are the ‘problems’ that reading is expected to solve?

Q2. How are the subject-positions of the reader and their reading practices discursively constructed?

Q3. What knowledge practices underpin the ‘problems’ that reading is expected to solve?

The research questions are addressed through a discourse analysis of the Swedish Government Commission report on Literature from 2012 (SOU 2012:65) and the subsequent Government Bill from 2013 (Prop. 2013/14:3). In the following, we present our theoretical framework, the context of the material, the analysis, and, finally, return to our research questions and present the conclusions drawn from the study.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In order to analyse reading as a social and historical practice that is subject to governing, this study uses a discourse analytical methodology. The analytical focus of the study is the subject position of the reader and how it is discursively constructed, as well as the knowledge practices that have made this construction possible. This methodology is based in the work of Michel Foucault (1990) and the Foucault-inspired policy analyst Carol Bacchi (2009, 2012).

A basic premise in the analysis is that dominating discourses about reading – which determine whether a statement is seen as acceptable or not – involves “special knowledges” (Foucault 1990), and in particular, knowledge that is described as scientific and based on research.

Problematizations and knowledge are intertwined. According to educational policy researcher Roger Deacon, problematizations “[...] refer[s] to the practical conditions that make something into an object of knowledge [...]” (2000: 131). This is especially relevant for policy texts, where public actions are motivated. We use the concept *knowledge practice* to discuss and illustrate how different types of knowledges underpin literature policy. Knowledge practices include knowledge produced by government institutions, academic research and, for example, by dif-

ferent professions and nongovernmental organisations (Bacchi 2012).

On the basis of Bacchi's work, we identify how reading is governed through the formulation of a certain problematisation and the rejection of others. According to Bacchi, every policy proposal relies on problematisations, and a policy is a solution to these "problems". Different forms of governing practices become possible only when an issue is constructed as a problem or not. Through these practices, particular kinds of subjects are constructed. These constructions are in the analysis referred to as *subjectification processes* and the making of *subject positions* and they describe "the characteristics, behaviors and dispositions that political subjects are encouraged to adopt" (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016: 49). Carol Bacchi & Susan Goodwin's use of the concept is derived from Foucault's writing on the subject, especially in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1990, 1992). When operationalizing Foucault's terminology for policy analysis, they put forward different interacting modes for subjectification processes. Especially relevant for our analysis is how authoritative knowledge regulates how 'subjects' ought to be and how dividing practices produce subjects (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016: 51–52).

In summary, we analyse how a certain problematisation in literature policy has emerged. The aim is not to find solutions or identify "correct" policies, but rather to investigate how policy proposals and actions are deemed rational and true through the knowledge practices they draw on.

### 3. Culture in the Welfare State, the Swedish Parliamentary System and the Material Analysed

This study is limited to Sweden, but there are several similarities, both contemporary and historical, to the neighbouring countries. Cultural policy in the Nordic countries, despite changes in the last decades, retains a social welfare aim of guaranteeing access to cultural expressions regardless of education or geographical location (Mangset et al 2008; Hylland & Bjurström 2018). This aim has its roots in the German ideal of *Bildung* (Swedish *bildning*), which can be described briefly as individual self-cultivation (Wesner 2010: 438). This concept has been of great importance to the democratic movements of the Nordic countries around the turn of the last century, especially in the form of non-formal education or voluntary popular education (Swedish *fokbildning*). It has been characterised as learning processes by the people, for the people, and usually conducted in the form of the study circle as its foremost practice. Danish cultural policy researcher Henrik Kaare Nielsen argues that *Bildung*, defined as "an overall socio-political objective of furthering the empowerment of the individual, universal enlightenment" together with the ideal of democratisation is the *raison d'être* for cultural policy in the Nordic countries (Nielsen 2003: 241). That the arts are perceived as

a transforming power, made visible in the concept of *Bildung*, is still an important aspect of Nordic cultural policy. According to Norwegian cultural policy researcher Egil Bjørnsen, faith in the *Bildung* potential of the arts has increased in Norway during the 2000s, in contrast to, for example, amateur culture (2012).

Since 1974, Swedish cultural policy has been governed by national and general goal formulations (see further Frenander 2007). Even though literature policy is a subsection of cultural policy, policy questions regarding reading and literature are also part of other areas such as education, integration, and language policy. Most costly in the literature policy area is state support to literature and magazines, which aims to stimulate the production of a qualitative and diverse range of reading materials (Lindsköld 2013).

The documents used for our analysis consist of commission reports and a government bill. In Sweden, a government commission investigates a policy issue or area, collects and evaluates research, and suggests policy actions. Thereafter, the report is circulated for consideration by different stakeholders, including government authorities. Finally, the government presents a bill that is either passed or rejected by parliament. In the bill, the government suggests policy actions based on the commission report and their own suggestions. Four Commission reports on literature have been published since the formation of cultural policy as a separate political field in the early 1970s. The first report was published 1972-1974, and focused on reading habits, reading in schools, the book market and libraries. Two more Commission reports were published in 1984 and 1997. The most recent report, from 2012, is in focus for this study.

In 2011, the centre-right Alliance Government, consisting of liberal and conservative parties, appointed a Commission with the directive to analyse the status of literature and its future. This resulted in the research anthology *Läsarnas marknad, marknadens läsare* [The readers' market, the market's readers] (SOU 2012:10) and the Commission report *Läsandets kultur* [The culture of reading] (SOU 2012:65). In 2013, the Government Bill *Läsa för livet* [Reading for life] (Prop. 2013/14:3) was presented and passed in parliament. The Bill resulted in a grant of 15 million SEK per year to the Swedish Arts Council for managing and funding reading promotion activities. A Commission report solely dedicated to children's and young people's reading was published in 2018, as of yet this report has not led to a government bill (SOU 2018:57). Non-governmental organisations have been active both before and during the policy processes described above, for instance *Läs rörelsen*, [The Reading Movement], which successfully lobbied the government in 2016 to rename the autumn break for school children as "a reading holiday". They have also been cooperating with McDonalds for several years, distributing picture books through the hamburger food chain's children's menu.

## 4. Analysis

In our analysis, we focus on the Bill, seeing the Commission Report as part of the knowledge practices that informed the problematisation of reading, reading promotion, and readers. The texts address several problematisations, such as access to literature and the role of the production and distribution of books. However, one major problematisation was identified, namely poor reading ability. The following presentation of the analysis is structured according to this problematisation, the subject-positions created through it, and the overarching knowledge practices making this problematisation possible, that is, the idea of the transformative power of literature.

### 4.1 Problematisation: Poor Reading Ability

Essential to an understanding of the knowledge produced in the analysed texts is the formulation of a national goal which is the main outcome of the Bill. This goal reads: “Every person in Sweden should, regardless of background, and with a basis in each individual’s specific circumstances, be given the opportunity to develop good reading ability and have access to high-quality literature.” (Prop. 2013/14:3: 22).<sup>1</sup>

To operationalise this goal, it is suggested that the Government take action to:

- improve reading ability compared to today;
- ensure that the number of people that regularly use non-fiction and fiction increases compared to today; and ensure that an understanding of the importance of reading, for education, *Bildung*, and participation in society increases compared to today. (Prop. 2013/14:3: 22.)<sup>2</sup>

Reading ability is an important theme in the analysed documents. However, it is interesting how the connection between literature – as an artefact, product, and art form – and the activity of reading is assumed in all of the texts. The connection is visible in the national goal articulated in the Bill, mentioned above, where “the ability to read well” is connected to “access to high-quality literature” (Prop. 2013/14:3: 22). A main problematisation is the documented changing reading habits of the Swedish population together with a decline in the reading ability of Swedish children and youth, which is seen as a threat to several important societal values. A central passage is the following:

The importance of reading ability cannot be overestimated. Reading ability is an important component of linguistic ability in general. Linguistic ability is fundamental both to the ability to express oneself and to understand other people’s thoughts; to reflect; to understand relationships; to draw conclusions; and to build an argument. Linguistic ability is also

of great importance for the ability to see different perspectives, identify oneself with other people's situations, and enables the expression of empathy. For society, access to information in a language that everyone understands is a question of democracy. From this perspective, the question of everybody's chances to develop the ability to read and gain access to a rich range of qualitative literature is a matter of great importance. (Prop. 2013/14:3: 7)

This passage starts by emphasising reading ability and how it is an important part of the general linguistic ability that is central to learning as well as to the development of empathy. Thereafter, the question of democracy is introduced and it is highlighted that this question makes issues of reading ability *and* the production of qualitative literature pressing.

What kinds of knowledge practices have made this problematisation of declining reading ability possible? With some exceptions, the main sources used are large-scale, quantitative surveys and tests, measuring reading habits, reading ability and reading motivation. The Commission Report, as well as the Bill, refers to international literacy tests such as PISA and PIRLS to paint the picture of the declining reading ability of children and youth. In accounts of the situation in the wider population, large surveys conducted by the research institute Nordicom on Swedish reading habits are used. Beyond the political documents, lobbying groups such as The Reading Movement and a group led by the Swedish Writers' Union also build their campaigns on these kind of surveys. Their campaigns have an explicit focus on language development, which is connected to qualitative reading material (Föreningen Läsrörelsen 2017, Arbetsgruppen för ett läslyft i Sverige 2018).

In motivating the aim of improving reading ability, "studies" are more generally referred to and it is stated that:

Improved reading ability and children's and young people's motivation to read are prioritised. This is especially important in groups shown in studies to have fallen behind in reading development. Such groups include, among others, boys in general, but also children from socioeconomically marginalised families and children with parents who speak languages other than Swedish in their homes. (Prop. 2013/14:3: 27)

Here, it is stated that certain groups of children and youth can be identified as especially problematic. The highlighting of these groups will be discussed further in the following section. What can be noted here, however, is the confidence placed in large-scale research measuring various aspects of reading and literacy, and which makes comparisons between groups and nation states possible.

When seeking explanations for changing reading habits and the decline in children and young people's reading ability, statements are more tentative, especially in the commission report. According to the commission, the quality of teaching in the Swedish school system, including preschool, varies and is, in many cases, too low (SOU 2012:65: 67). For example, in a discussion on how literature is used in Swedish preschools, a report from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate is referenced where the culture of childcare, rather than children's learning, is seen as a problem:

The authors claim the original role of preschool has contributed to the development of a strong caring culture that remains to a too great extent, i.e. a culture where the well-being of the children is unilaterally in focus. (SOU 2012:65: 82)

Another suggestion is "that the increased use of computers and the internet has had a negative impact on [people's] reading." (SOU 2012:65: 58). Despite tentative statements like these, both the Report and the Bill articulate skepticism towards digital reading, for example in the following excerpt:

However, there are many indications that the texts internet users come into contact with are usually short and do not require much of the reader. The reading of fiction or other longer, coherent, and reflective texts via the internet is relatively unusual, according to Nordicom surveys. (Prop. 2013/14:3: 9)

Through the connection between literature and reading ability, and the knowledge practices making this connection possible, a subject position for children and youth is formed. Using a dichotomy developed within Childhood studies, this subject position entails seeing children and youth as *becoming*, rather than as *being* (see James, Jenks & Prout 1998: 207). Thus, in the texts analysed, children and youth are seen as adults-to-be and in a process of learning to read – a process that needs to be surveyed and monitored. In the Bill, it is claimed that:

Strengthening the reading ability and reading motivation of children and youth is of particular importance. By reading literature and developing creativity early in life, the level of knowledge and *Bildung* is strengthened. It is also a prerequisite for people's growth and development as adults. (Prop. 2013/14:3: 7)



Here, children's future lives as adults are put to the fore. The subject position emerges particularly clearly when contrasted to a perspective on reading as a right for speakers of minority languages which was included in the Bill (Prop. 2013/14:3: 39-40) after critique from several stakeholders that such a perspective was missing in the Commission Report. This perspective differs significantly from the perspective where children's and young people's reading is described as an obligation, rather than a right.

#### 4.2 Subject-positions: *The (non-) Readers*

A recurring problem in the Bill is what is perceived as a lack of understanding of the benefits of reading, both in the population in general and in specific groups. This section will more closely discuss subject positions identified in the material. These subject positions reflect certain groups in the Bill that are designated as being in the greatest need of better understanding.

The analysis takes its starting point in the third goal formulation which is to: "ensure that an understanding of the importance of reading, for education, *Bildung*, and participation in society increases compared to today" (Prop. 2013/14:3: 22). The formulation is general, but statements in the Bill and in the Commission point out groups in society that are in greater need of knowledge than others. In an earlier version of the goal "groups that today read to a lesser extent" (SOU 2012:65: 399) are identified. Underpinning this statement is the notion that once non-readers understand that it is important to read in order to fully participate in society, they will become readers. But who are these non-readers? As previously mentioned, certain groups of children and youth are identified as lacking sufficient reading abilities, namely boys, children from groups with lower socioeconomic status, as well as immigrant children. The non-formal education system is identified as a key player for increasing an understanding of the benefits of reading (Prop. 2013/14:3: 35). The Bill concludes that:

At a place in time where the gap between those who read and those who do not is increasing and the reading ability of the young is declining, the government encourages the non-formal education system to be more actively involved in strengthening interest and motivation for reading in groups that rarely or never read. (Prop. 2013/14:3: 36)

Reading promotion activities generally promoted by non-formal or voluntary education organisations and unions can be described as aimed at the working class and the general population. In the Bill, workplace libraries and libraries for lorry drivers are particularly mentioned as activities to be supported (Ibid., 35). One prioritised and targeted group in the Bill, and a main recipient of an incre-

ased understanding of the importance of reading, is the group reluctant readers. Paradoxically, one could say that the subject position of readers is constructed around the notion of non-readers. According to Danish library and information science scholars Nanna Kann-Rasmussen and Gitte Balling the problematisation of certain groups as non-readers could, since they are defined as either unwilling or incapable of reading literature, results in a stigmatisation of these groups. Furthermore, and as argued in the policy texts, if it is mainly through reading literature that certain democratic competences can be gained, the non-readers are implicitly constructed as undemocratic, thus harmful to society (Kann-Rasmussen & Balling 2015).

Adults, and in particular parents, are also explicitly pointed out as in need of increasing their understanding of the benefits of reading in the Bill (Prop 2013/14:3: 25). They are identified as role models when it comes to reading, for example in the following formulation stating that the reading habits of adults have an impact on the reading habits of children:

It is well documented that the reading habits of young people are closely connected to the habits of the adult generation. To turn this development around we need to decrease differences in the reading habits of the population at large. One way of doing this is to increase an understanding of the importance of reading. It is difficult to stem the negative trend in the reading abilities of young people, if adults close to children do not understand the value of literature. Even more so if they do not read themselves or read for their children. Even though the education system has a great responsibility to provide equal opportunities for every child, awareness of reading at home is also an important aspect. (Prop. 2013/14:3: 27-28)

The quote illustrates how the subject positions of adults – and most importantly parents – are constructed as the children's *first teachers*. Although school is identified as the main reading educator for children, parents clearly constitute an important group for stimulating children's reading interest.<sup>3</sup>

The implication of this argument is that adults must be educated about this obligation since not all parents and/or adults understand their educational role for children. This role is mainly made up of two practices, namely reading themselves (i.e. function as role-models) and reading for (their) children. Earlier research has noted that parents' role as their children's first teachers is often emphasised by librarians in different reading promotion activities where parents participate with their children. Library and information scholars Roz Stooke and Pamela McKenzie claim librarians talk less about the love of books and more about the need to

educate parents in supporting early literacy (2009: 658). On a similar note, Åse Hedemark and Jenny Lindberg (2018) conclude that librarians working with library programs for babies, focus explicitly on encouraging and empowering caregivers to become reading companions and role-models for young children. The work being done by librarians in educating parents could thus be understood as a reflection, and possibly an implementation, of notions expressed in the analysed policy texts. Public libraries are in the Commission report articulated as important for reading promotion and raising awareness about the values of reading. Making children into readers is, according to the analysed texts, not only a matter of public responsibility, but also a responsibility for individual parents.

Several researchers have illustrated that the family, particularly parents, is often mobilised as responsible for a whole range of social issues, for example for their children's physical activity level (Alexander & Coveney 2013) and "good" mental health (Widding 2011, see also Bacchi & Goodwin 2016). This making of "responsibilized subjects" in policy texts has also been identified by Nicholas Rose (1999) as the governmental rationalities of neoliberal politics and is noticeable in the analysis of the policy text at hand. In addition to the educational system, parents are in the Bill held responsible for the 'problem' of the declining reading ability of children and youth. As an adult reader – which you will become if you understand the virtues of reading – and especially as a parent, you have the obligation to teach (your) children about literature and reading. Following Bacchi (2009), the desired behaviour of parents underlying the argumentation in the policy texts is to practice reading and to educate children. The subject position of readers therefore entails the making of the (young) reader.

If we go further and problematise the concept of parents – who are they? As we understand the statements in the Bill, both mothers and fathers are viewed as essential for encouraging children to read. The fathers are, however, put forward as especially important, since male role models are seen as missing for the non-reading boy. The Commission report mentions *Läs för mig pappa* [Read to me dad], as a successful example of a reading project aimed at working class fathers and grandfathers. The project was instigated by LO, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, and ABF, the Workers' Educational Association (SOU 2012:65: 130). Historically, reading has always been gendered in different ways, for instance, the feminisation of reading has been explained by a lack of "boy-friendly" books, by the gender imbalance between teachers and by the lack of male role-models (Ross, McKechnie & Rothbauer 2006). The "Mother as educator" was an important discursive construct around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Media theorist Friedrich Kittler shows how a plethora of books, published in Germany during this time period as handbooks for mothers, instructed them how to teach their children how to behave, and how to read (Kittler 2012: 47-50). However, in the

Commission Report, fathers are seen as particularly valuable as role models for their children. By encouraging fathers to play a part in their children's reading, it is implied that men do not invest time and effort in reading books themselves or for their children, thus representing the 'problem' to be illiterate fathers. Social class is not explicitly mentioned, however the mentioning of immigrant families and the importance given to non-formal education and libraries for lorry-drivers in the policy texts, seems to suggest that both gender and class are significant, suggesting that some parents are more 'problematic' than others.

### *4.3 Knowledge Practices: The Transformative Power of Literature*

As stated in section 4.1, the main sources relied on in the Bill are large-scale quantitative surveys and tests aimed at capturing the reading ability of the population. In this section, we will delve deeper into the question of reading as a solution, namely what reading *does* to people, the *effects* of reading, and why it should be promoted. An overarching knowledge practice in the material is that the reading of literature has a (positive) transformative power on both the individual and society as a whole (see also Bjørnsen 2012). The rationales behind the values of reading are both instrumental and humanistic *Bildung* values.

Instrumental values concern the ability to participate in the democratic discourse, understand common affairs, and to speak one's own mind. It is also stated that a well-developed reading ability is central to the individual's learning, schooling, and therefore, "Sweden's competitiveness" as a nation (SOU 2012:65: 30-31). This system requires "a culture of reading" which includes "educated citizens, a well-developed ability to read, and literary *Bildung*" (Ibid.: 33). These accounts implicitly illustrate what is jeopardised when the reading ability of the population seems to decline. The stakes are high, when the democratic conversation, the individual's possibilities to learn, and the entire culture of reading – a culture that has given the Report its title – is threatened. In addition, the required section on economic consequences claims that poor reading ability leads to failure in school, which is financially costly (Ibid.: 443). The instrumental values taken up in the Bill include the idea that more reading and the improved reading ability of the population will result in socio-economic profit and an improvement in gender equality, when boys read more. Reading is thus understood as a practice with the potential to benefit society instrumentally on different levels; individually, groups and for the nation.

When the Report put forward the possibilities for *Bildung*, reading is defined as having a value in its own right (despite of the choice of literature): "Literature and reading has a value in itself, through its mediation of experiences and emotion. Literatures aids us in understanding the world and ourselves" (Prop. 2013/14:3: 7). According to this statement, literature makes people individuals.

This understanding where the reading of fiction is seen as a cultivating tool can be found in both contemporary educational and literature policy and has its roots in the free public education movement around the turn of the century (Lindsköld, Dolatkah & Lundh 2020). More specifically, reading and literature of a certain kind is seen as being able to connect to and protect the culture of reading:

The value is in, among other things, the aesthetic experience of the work of art and the specific experiences that are mediated through it. Its value is of course more difficult to measure but should not be underestimated. The purpose of *Bildung* offers the individual the prerequisites for artistic expression, regardless if it is new or old. From a *Bildung* perspective there is also a certain value in being familiar with *the literary cultural heritage* [emphasis in original] – or rather with the various literary cultural heritages that form the backbone of world literature. In classical literature – classical in a broader sense –, there are stories and frames of reference that are shared by many and the history of literature encompasses many of the artistic masterpieces of humanity. For a greater understanding of current artistic expression and of the development of society in general, knowledge of the history of literature and cultural heritage is of great importance. It is a great loss if part of the population lacks opportunities to access it. (SOU 2012:65: 31-32)

The reading of high-quality literature is described here as a value in its own right, but this practice is also described as a tool for connecting to a universal cultural heritage. As Bjørnsen argues, this “civilizing mission” is still a typical trait of Nordic cultural policy, even though it is based on immeasurable values (Bjørnsen 2012). This is in line with cultural policy researcher Katya Johanson’s analysis of Nordic cultural policies for children, she writes that:

[...] in the Nordic nations there is a simultaneous emphasis on heightening the competence of children and their families to appreciate a particular body of professional [...] or state-prescribed [...] arts and culture, and an increasing tendency for the state to intervene to ensure that children are exposed to the kinds of cultural activities it considers appropriate. While these policies do not operate exclusively, they represent a shift [in] the emphasis from children creating culture, to children as the recipients of cultural heritage. (Johanson 2010: 399)

This aspiration of *Bildung* is not only part of the political discourse. In their cooperation with McDonalds, The Reading Movement used a discourse where the book

is deemed a holy object (Persson 2012). In the political documents, however, cultural heritage is connected to the more instrumental aim of enabling democracy. The connection between the two makes encouragement of the reading of fiction rational, since one of the problems of not reading (fiction), according to the Report, is that it cuts the ties between us and our heritage. Literary scholar Magnus Persson writes that in postmodern times, the values of literature and the reading of literature cannot be taken for granted. They need to be made both explicit and legitimate. A way to do this is to emphasise the universal aspect of aesthetic, where literature creates community, as well as develops the individuality of man (Persson 2012: 34). In Swedish literature policy, reading and qualitative literature are at the same time both tools for individuality (understanding oneself) and for universalism. *Bildung* values build upon a notion of voluntariness and free choice, which stand partly in conflict with the expressed obligation for parents to read for their children and function as reading role-models (see section 4.2, Dolatkhah 2013).

When reading as a skill measurable in large-scale surveys is equated with literary cultural heritage and literature as high art, as is the case in this material, two different epistemologies are interwoven. But the limited inclusion of the so-called *Bildung* values of reading literature in the Commission report, in comparison with frequent references to instrumental values, seem to indicate that from a literature policy perspective, instrumental values are prioritised.

Swedish cultural policy has since the 1960s been defined and delimited as an independent policy area through interaction between researchers, politicians and civil servants. Cultural policy researcher My Klockar Linder shows how positivist, empirical research on cultural activities and consumer behaviour has been used to underpin political actions, while humanistic research has been seen as incapable of research innovation (Klockar Linder 2014: 59–67). Scientific-based policy making tends to pose policy actions as rational, objective and non-negotiable even in cultural policy, despite suggestions that impact studies and evaluation of the arts are notoriously hard to conduct (see Belfiore & Bennett 2009). Put simply, it is easier to measure and create knowledge of the instrumental aspects of reading than of reading as a value in its own right. It may also be easier to argue for political interventions when the goals are democracy, socioeconomic growth, and education, rather than reading as an end-goal in itself. These results differ from similar Swedish and Norwegian studies showing that the transforming power of culture and literature are part of a discourse where art is understood as religious or holy artefacts (Bjørnsen 2012, Persson 2012: 150–151, Røyseng 2007). This is not the case in the studied documents, which can be attributed to the history and emergence of the policy field discourse in Sweden.

## 5. Concluding Discussion

In this final section, we return to our research questions to discuss the main problematisation of reading evident in Swedish literature policy during the years 2012–2013.

Q1. In the policy texts analysed in this study, the declining reading ability of children and youth in Sweden emerges as a central problem. The responsibility for this problem is placed on the school system, parents, and the use of computers and the Internet. It is seen as a threat to children's learning and development, democracy, and "the culture of reading". Furthermore, changing reading habits and abilities are threatening Sweden's economic competitiveness, as well as the market for literature. Thus, by promoting reading of the right kind of literature – which is high quality – many, partly contradictory values can be rescued. Not only will reading of the right kind of literature lead to better, more democratic citizens, but it will also help the national economy and the publishing industry as well as the literary art form. These far-reaching ambitions are an interesting development in Swedish literature policy. While earlier Literature Commission reports have focused mostly on production and distribution issues and to stimulating a qualitative and diverse book market, reading and reading mediation have now taken centre stage in the policy discourse.

Q2. Our analysis illustrates how the subject position of readers is formed around the notion of the non-reader. In other words, the policy practices produced in the analysed texts make particular political subjects into problems, in this case, non-readers. Bacchi and Goodwin suggest that policies often produce dividing practices when producing "subjects". These practices construct opposition between groups with the intent to promote certain ideal behaviours (2016: 50–51). In the Bill it is noticeable how dividing practices are created between non-readers and readers, making the latter desirable and the former harmful. It can also be argued that similar dividing practices are constructed around youth/adult, pupil/teacher, child/parent, and son/father where the latter is expected to educate and teach the former about the virtues of reading, making them readers and thereby desirable subjects. Although social class is not specifically mentioned in the policy texts, the problematising of the non-reader implies that class plays a role in the processes of subjectification produced in the analysed texts. The proposed recommendations in the policy texts, namely being reading role models and reading to children, are perhaps easier to follow for some care-givers than others.

Q3. In our analysis, we have identified how two seemingly contradictory knowledge practices are joined together in the policy texts. On the one hand, changes in reading habits and reading ability are described on the basis of large studies measuring the reading activities and abilities of the Swedish population. Thus, we can conclude that the transformative power of reading is seen to lie in

its potential contribution to society, both in abstract, idealistic terms such as its democratising effects, but also in more concrete terms such as contributing to success in school and working life, and thereby to national economic prosperity. On the other hand, the promotion of the reading of high-quality literature is also motivated by a non-instrumental argument where the autonomy of literature as an artform is emphasised. Thus, instrumental policy actions, based on seemingly rational, objective and empirical research is paired with humanistic *Bildung* values. These latter values also entail a notion of voluntariness, conflicting with the acute need for and obligation to improve reading ability of the nation, which is strongly expressed in the policy texts.

The political interest in reading is based upon welfare goals that have permeated Nordic cultural policy since the 1960s. But, unlike earlier policy actions it is not only the public institution's mission to guarantee an equal distribution of culture. Adults and parents are instead becoming the main facilitators when welfare becomes individualised and reading becomes a family affair. This could be understood as the “conduct of conduct” and the functioning of neoliberal governmentality where an important aspect is to make people regulate their own conduct. As Rose states:

In these new rationalities of welfare, individuals are to be nodes in little webs of connectedness, connections between the family machine and employment, which will simultaneously provide means of support outside the social state, and means of control of conduct outside the apparatus of social welfare. (Rose 1999: 266–267)

The family and parents are in this process made into responsabilised subjects “instilling the rules of moral order and ethical comportment into children” (Rose 1999: 266). As this study has shown, an attribute of today's rational and active subject is to become literate yourself, but also to educate and guide loved ones into becoming reading subjects.

The results of this study are, of course, limited with its focus on two policy texts produced in a particular historical era and nation state. However, our analysis indicates that the problematisations identified have historical roots. An important task for future critical studies of reading would therefore be to further analyse the politics of reading from a historical perspective. Such an analysis would need to take into consideration different institutional, material and social aspects, spanning several policy areas, in order to examine how and why the desirable reader is constructed.



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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All excerpts have been translated by the authors.

<sup>2</sup> All uses of the Swedish word *bildning* in the material, have been translated to *Bildung*.

<sup>3</sup> For international readers it may be relevant to know that parents who reside in the country enjoy 480 days paid parental leave and children's allowances regardless of income. Between 2008 and 2017, parents who shared parental leave equally were granted a bonus. Thus, Swedish parents who work outside of the home have comparatively more time at home with their children than parents in other countries.

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