

## **Constructing the Literate Child: An Analysis of Swedish Literature Policy**

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# **Constructing the Literate Child: An Analysis of Swedish Literature Policy**

## **Abstract**

This article examines Swedish literature policies since the 1970s and the construction of the literate child as expressed in policy texts. Literacy has in the last decades, in Sweden as well as in other countries, been linked to economic growth and citizenship. In these political processes, some reading practices are considered beneficial and others less beneficial or even harmful. Using Carol Bacchi's policy analysis, this study reveals an increased interest in children's reading practices. There has been a movement in the argumentation from identifying the lack of access to high-quality literature to emphasising lack of reading ability as the main problem. Also noticeable is that the responsibility of educating children about the virtues of reading are placed on parents in the later policy texts, whereas institutions such as school and libraries are defined as the sole reading-educators in earlier policies. The results presented in this study shed light on the changing conditions for library work.

**Keywords:** literacy, reading practices, children, literature policy, critical studies of reading, public libraries

## **Introduction**

Discourses about reading and literacy are constructed in different ways, in many contexts, such as popular culture, media, and research. For example, in popular children's movies reading is often the domain of "nerds", while the more action-oriented characters in the film seldom read.<sup>1</sup> Different representations of reading also occur in policy documents, classroom materials, reading promotion activities in libraries, and in educational programs for teachers and librarians. These representations shape perceptions of literacy in society – i.e., what

reading and writing should be like – and might affect how society enacts reading practices and how society responds to notions about reading.

Supporting the “right” kind of reading practices has always been politically important. In several countries in Europe, “book learning” started to become important in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually, standardized curricula, teacher’s guides, uniform examinations, and certification systems were established. Slowly, the state rather than parents were given the responsibility to educate children.<sup>2</sup> In the last decades, literacy has become a national concern linked to aspects such as economic growth and citizenship. In these political processes, some reading practices are considered beneficial for society and others are considered less beneficial or even harmful.<sup>3</sup> Critically exploring literacy by analysing literature policies in a Swedish context is particularly interesting considering the unique character of the Nordic cultural policy model, where welfare and cultural politics are blended.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1970s, Sweden has been active and progressive when it comes to the rights of children, resulting in, for example, very generous parental leave (480 days of paid leave per child). Although Swedish society has undergone changes in the recent decades, it can still be characterized as a welfare state, which is reflected in benefits such as parental leave and a relatively large public sector.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to the promotion of reading, children and young people are often the subject of governing.<sup>6</sup> Against this backdrop, it is especially intriguing to study the construction of the literate child.

In this paper, some of the historically rooted representations of reading practices and notions of literacy are explored. There is a focus on how children’s reading practices have been constructed and the making of the literate child, as this is expressed in the policy texts. Specifically, this paper explores governmental problematisations of children’s reading practices in Swedish literature policies since the 1970s. Drawing on Carol Bacchi’s Foucault-

influenced policy analysis, this paper assumes that policies ‘do not *address* problems that exist; rather they *produce* ‘problems’ as particular sorts of problems’.<sup>7</sup>

## **Aim**

This paper examines how children have been constructed as readers (and non-readers) in Swedish literature policy texts since the 1970s. I use the concept of knowledge practices to scrutinize how different kinds of knowledges (academic as well as professional) are used to support arguments for certain actions or interventions in policy texts. The following research questions have guided this study:

RQ1. What forms of reading practices are promoted as desirable and what practices are posed as risks for children?

RQ2. What forms of *knowledge practices* are used to support arguments made in the policy texts?

RQ3. What subjects and institutions are seen as responsible for constructing the literate child?

There are a number of different definitions of literacy. The study does not attempt to define or debate what literacy is – rather the aim is to analyse representations of literacy, i.e. what is defined as literacy and reading in the literature policy texts. In this article reading is understood as a dimension of literacy. The paper is structured as follows: The section below contains a selective review of related research. This is followed by an account of the theoretical framework, including the method used for analysis and the material. The main section of the paper presents the results. The paper is concluded with a discussion.

## **Previous Research on Libraries and Children’s Reading Practices**

As the previous research presented in this section critically examine, historical as well as present, constructions of reading, literacy, library-work and childhood they provide a starting point for the study at hand. Although earlier research concerning reading and literacy primarily have focused on cognitive and intellectual dimensions, some researchers have explored literacy as a social practice, for example, by examining what counts as literacy in a society.<sup>8</sup> The research interest in how literacy is used for different societal and political purposes has grown and in the last decades an increasing body of research has examined literacy critically. Harvey Graff's studies of literacy in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Canada and his concept of the *Literacy Myth* gave rise to a questioning of the notion of literacy as something essentially "good" in a society.<sup>9</sup> Brian Street's ethnographic work from 1984 evoked similar questions and came to influence a practice approach to literacy represented by researchers such as David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanic.<sup>10</sup> These researchers illustrated why some literacy practices are valued and others are marginalised in a society. Hamilton has examined how literacy is represented in a number of public contexts such as in international and national policy texts and the news media. She concludes that there are dominant public narratives of literacy as well as complicating narratives. The latter are competing and challenging more dominant notions of literacy.<sup>11</sup>

Several studies focus on children and literacy practices historically, most notably Carmen Luke's study of children in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. Luke illustrates how an educational apparatus developed, making children 'the legalized object of state scrutiny'.<sup>12</sup> Another study examining the lives of children in a historical perspective is Hugh Cunningham's *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*. Cunningham shows how governments describe children throughout the 1900s as future assets, not only for the family but also for the nation state. According to Cunningham, this notion of children as potential assets informs much of the policy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

In several studies, Suzanne Stauffer explores the history of children's librarianship. Using discourse analysis, Stauffer investigates changes in attitudes and practices towards children in public libraries from the late 1900s until the beginning of the next century.<sup>14</sup> Laura Skouvig's study of how the public library user is historically constructed is also noteworthy. Her study shows a bureaucratization of the user that resulted in a division of the population by user groups such as children, youngsters, adults, readers, and non-readers. The construction of user groups led to the notion that certain groups, such as the working classes, needed fostering, enabling the librarian to carefully monitor the user's reading abilities and control their reading development.<sup>15</sup> The historical studies on literacy and library history mentioned above have partly been informed by Michel Foucault, for example, by connecting literacy as well as the library with the governing and surveillance of the population. Several studies of contemporary literacy policies have in a similar way been influenced by Foucauldian thinking.<sup>16</sup> As concluded by these studies, there is in the West a growing governmental interest in literacy policy from 1990s up until present time, where literacy has transformed "from an educational concern to a national political issue".<sup>17</sup> From a historical perspective, this transformation has been swift, suggesting it has had consequences for institutional practices and the lives of people.<sup>18</sup>

Another strand of relevant research concerns the social and historical context of childhood and what has become known as Childhood Studies, represented by researchers such as the collaborating Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout. These studies examine childhood as a social construction and argue for studying children as active participants in society.<sup>19</sup> In the last decade, researchers have raised the need of recognizing children both as beings and as becomings: 'Rather, both children and adults should be seen through a multiplicity of becomings in which all are incomplete and dependent'.<sup>20</sup> Here, Prout suggests focusing on materiality rather than basing research on the idea of children as beings or becomings. How

children have been constructed in the context of Library and Information Studies (LIS), in particular in information behaviour research, has been investigated by Anna Lundh. Lundh shows that viewing children as requiring adult guidance establishes adults in a position of power over children.<sup>21</sup>

The present study adds to the rather small number of LIS-studies that draw from several research areas such as literature, history, ethnology, library, information science, and policy studies.<sup>22</sup> Although research of literacy, most often denoted as information literacy, is common<sup>23</sup>, critical studies of reading and literacy are scarce in LIS, making this study a valuable addition to LIS research. However, some interesting critical studies of reading have been made by LIS researchers, for example, Lindsköld, Dolathkah, and Lundh and Kann, Rasmussen, and Balling.<sup>24</sup> One article made by Lindsköld, Hedemark and Lundh is especially relevant for the study at hand because it critically examines literacy in contemporary Swedish literature policy. Lindskölds, Hedemarks och Lundhs analysis, particularly the section concerning the construction of children's reading practices, is developed further in the present study.<sup>25</sup> In comparison with the article mentioned above, the study at hand include a wider empirical material using literature policies from the 70s until present time, thus analysing the construction of the literate child from a historical standpoint.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The critical and discursively-oriented approach used in this analysis is informed by the work of policy analyst Bacchi, who emphasises the importance of studying both the assumptions of policies and their lived effects.<sup>26</sup> Bacchi and Goodwin argue that policies can be understood 'as a form of proposal and a guide to conduct'.<sup>27</sup> Bacchi has developed a methodological approach called "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) to analyse implicit and explicit representations in policy texts. In the present study, the WPR approach has been

narrowed down to focus particularly on the theoretical concepts of *knowledge practices* and *subjectification processes* to examine the construction of the literate child in Swedish literature policy texts. As mentioned above, knowledge practices denote the underlying assumptions of the arguments in policy texts. Whether they are well-founded or not, the assumptions are, in Foucauldian terms, ‘unexamined ways of thinking’<sup>28</sup> and need to be critically scrutinized because they tend to acquire the status of being the “truth”.

Subjectification processes refer to the way these knowledge practices construct certain subject positions. Policies not only reflect real, existing citizens but also are ‘involved in shaping what it is possible for people to become’.<sup>29</sup> The processes often result in dividing practices, creating more desirable and less desirable subject positions that work to steer the general population into the “right” behaviour.

## **Materials and Methods**

The empirical material consists of the main literature policies that have been produced in Sweden up to this date, namely commission reports on literature and reading from 1974, 1984, 1997, and 2012 and their subsequent government bills. A government commission examines a certain policy issue and reports its investigation and suggestions for further policy actions. A commission report is then distributed to stakeholders affected by the suggested actions so they can respond to the report before a bill based on the commission report is considered.

Policies concerned with literature, reading, and literacy are part of several different policy areas, most commonly cultural policy, but also education, library, and language policy. As stated in earlier sections, although there have been changes in the last decades, cultural policy in Sweden and other Nordic countries is characterized by issues of social welfare where one important aim is to guarantee citizens equal access to cultural activities.<sup>30</sup> This aim is evident



in the analysed policy texts where the main problematisation often is concerned with the citizens' lack of access to different cultural expressions, media formats, and information technology, as reflected in the sub-headings of the next section.

Literacy policy in Sweden has thus been framed within a context of inclusion, the idea being to support and to give access to literature that are considered good, not sanctioning what is considered bad. As part of cultural policy, literature policy has historically been under strong influence from the notion of *bildung* (in Swedish *bildning*), understood here as a process of educating and cultivating people to make them into well- functioning democratic citizens. However, this *bildung* process was in Sweden not only initiated by the state but also by the people themselves, through the popular education movement.<sup>31</sup>

The development of public libraries in Sweden in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were essentially a part of the popular education movement. In policy texts from this time period, public libraries' important role in popular education were underlined, particularly when it came to children. After the Second World War, public libraries functioned as central building blocks in the formation of the Swedish modern welfare society; the institution was instrumental when it came to providing access to quality literature for citizens.<sup>32</sup>

Since the beginning of the 1970s, when cultural policy was formed as a separate political area, four commission investigations on literature have been conducted. The first investigation resulted in several commission reports published between 1972 and 1974. The most elaborate one is *Boken (The Book)*, but other reports used in the analysis are *Försök med bibliotek (Experiments in the library)*, *Litteraturen i skolan (The literature in school)*, and *Läs och bokvanor i fem svenska samhällen (Reading and book habits in five Swedish communities)*. These reports were used as the basis for a bill passed in 1975. Two investigations – *LÄS MERA! (READ MORE!)* and *Folkbibliotek i Sverige (Public Libraries in*

Sweden) – were conducted between 1982 and 1984 and used as the basis for a bill passed in 1985. Another report, *Boken i tiden (The Book in Time)*, was published in 1997 and used as the basis for a bill passed in 1998. The most recent investigation was undertaken between 2011 and 2012, resulting in the report *Läsandets kultur (The culture of reading)* and the bill *Läsa för livet (Reading for life)* passed by parliament in 2013. All of these reports and the bills they inspired are analysed in this study. In the analytical process, I focus on the segments of the policy texts (i.e., bills) that concern the reading and non-reading child. The analysis included repeated close readings of the empirical material with a focus on knowledge practices and subjectification processes (see Theoretical framework).

## **Results**

The results are presented according to the four policy phases with time as the organising dimension of the analysis. The research questions are addressed in each of the following sections. All quotations have been translated into English by the author.

### **1970s: Access to Quality books and the Responsibilities of Institutions**

Although childhood is identified as an important period for instilling “good” reading practices, texts from the 1970s do not single out children as a specific or prioritised group. When children are mentioned, they are often talked about as pupils or students, emphasising their role as objects of education rather than free agents. One of the texts – *Litteraturen i skolan [Literature in school]* – is especially devoted to children and reading and clearly shows that school is identified as the main reading educator for children. The texts state that it is the task of the school system ‘to inspire and preserve student’s interest for books and for reading’ and it is ‘especially important to systemize and individualize the practice of reading’ since ‘many students in the Swedish school are lacking an interest in literature’.<sup>33</sup> As is evident in the statement above, the main problem is formulated as a lack of interest. When

ability is mentioned in this policy text, it is characterized as a kind of competence in distinguishing between good and poor literature. Since the desirable reading practices in this literature policy are regarded as the reading of quality literature, this competence is seen as essential for children to acquire:

Interest in reading and the ability to read with discernment and retention is established in childhood. Lack of books in childhood and neglected reading training can permanently inhibit access to literature. Substandard picture books and factory-produced series of children's and youth books risk affecting children's reading practices negatively and inhibit their reading development.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to teaching children how to distinguish good literature from poor literature, there is a noticeable concern about children's access to quality literature. The assumption is that sensational and even pernicious fiction are too abundant and, as noted in the quotation above, this has resulted in children reading the wrong kind of literature, which negatively affects their reading practices.

Thus, it is not so much children's interest in *reading* that teachers and librarians should stimulate; rather it is children's interest in *reading the books adults want them to read* that is at stake here. The policy texts portray children as particularly vulnerable to the lure of sensational fiction, so these texts encourage libraries and schools to carefully select children's books. In addition, the policy texts refer to public libraries' long tradition of fostering relationships with their users and suggest that the library should avoid purchasing books, particularly for the children and youth 'that are expected to have a demoralizing influence on readers'.<sup>35</sup>

According to Stauffer, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public libraries have served as a place where children are instilled with moral values by providing access to books judged appropriate for children.<sup>36</sup> This traditional role of guiding and controlling children's reading is reflected in policy texts from the 1970s, for example, in statements where librarians are encouraged to carefully select books to limit children's access to those books deemed inappropriate.

One problem noted in the policy text is the lack of research, particularly in reader studies: 'not one study exists where either readers or non-readers attitudes towards reading are mapped'.<sup>37</sup> Because of this research gap, the literature policy entails investigations, mostly quantitative surveys but also qualitative interviews, with readers and observations of library users. In some libraries, several experimental activities have been initiated, such as buying books according to reader's preferences, which paradoxically results in the purchase of sensational fiction since many library users prefer this kind of literature. These activities were aimed not only at children but also at adults.

### **1980s: Access to New Media and the Responsibilities of Parents**

As concerns about poor reading abilities grew in the 1980s, literature policy began to prioritise children's reading practices. In addition, the 1980s saw a rapid increase in new information and communication technology, which statements in the policy texts often claim interfere with children's reading practices. Furthermore, arguments in the policy texts state that these 'new media' are making both education and the Swedish language 'shallow' because the new media cannot provide readers with the same sense of national and cultural identity as books. This negative attitude about new media constitutes the main problematisation in the literature policy from the 1980s and is reflected in the quotation below:

Today, there are direct threats to the Swedish language. Many choose pictures as a way of getting fast and easy information. [. . .] This development needs to be stopped; we owe our children and youth – and adults lacking in schooling – a rich and nuanced language that allows them the potential both to give and take.<sup>38</sup>

The underlining assumption in the statement above is that the proliferation of new media risks impairing children's language and vocabulary skills, which in the end could jeopardize the whole nation's identity and cultural heritage. What needs to be done to stop this alarming development then? In comparison with the literature policy from the earlier decade, there seems to be an awareness in this policy text that exposing people to quality literature is not enough, because despite efforts being done 'strangely there are still a large group of non-readers in society'.<sup>39</sup> The proposed solution is therefore to more actively promote literature for children; that is, if children understand the virtues of reading books, they will become reading citizens as adults. This is explicitly stated in the text: 'The objective is to increase the awareness about good literature among the new generation. In a longer time-frame this will decrease the large group of non-readers'.<sup>40</sup>

As we can see in the statement above, in these texts as well as in the texts from the 70s, children are described as becomings, not as beings.<sup>41</sup> In the argumentation, focus is on what will become of them as adults if they have poor reading abilities. The child is not conceived of as a social actor in right of books and culture but as a future citizen and an awaiting adult.

Pre-school, school, and public libraries are identified as the institutions with the responsibility to make children literate by stimulating the right kind of literacy and reading practices that ultimately counteract the detrimental impacts of new media on children. In the earlier policy texts, schools, pre-schools and libraries are identified as the main reading educators, whereas

in this policy text parents are seen as having some responsibility for educating their children about the virtues of reading. Parents are ‘encouraged to read more for their children’<sup>42</sup> and it is stated that:

Young children become interested in books if they come in contact with them. The attitude among adults, at home and in pre-school, decides whether young children’s interest in books develops further. Parents have a huge responsibility for establishing the reading habits of children and youth.<sup>43</sup>

According to statements in the policy texts, the age of pre-school, (i.e. 2-6 years old) is particularly important for the development of children’s language skills:

It is therefore crucial to communicate culture to children as early as possible. Books are of particular significance when it comes to the development of children’s language skills, their imagination and their emotional life, as well as their intellectual and cognitive abilities.<sup>44</sup>

As we can see in the passage above, reading is associated with mental processes such as the development of language skills and perception and thinking, thus making the knowledge practices underlining the arguments in this policy text influenced by a cognitive perspective. This perspective is also evident in several other text passages, for example when referring to the lack of research about children’s understanding of texts and what kind of thought processes children use when interpreting texts.<sup>45</sup>

### **1990s: Access to Internet and the Responsibilities of Low-Educated Parents**

In the policy texts from the 1990s, new technology and media are blamed for the declining reading abilities among children and youth. Specifically, in these texts the Internet is mentioned as having a deleterious effect on reading ability:

New technology and the Internet could theoretically increase accessibility, but the encounter between the book and reader must take place physically – in the bookstore or in the library. The book exists in fierce competition with other media.<sup>46</sup>

As in earlier policy texts, the importance of access to quality literature is still being promoted and seen as in competition with newer media technology: ‘How is it possible to give the low-key book a voice discernible in the noise of television, computer games and MTV and make our children and youth eager readers in the future?’<sup>47</sup> The importance of encouraging children to read as early as possible is emphasized in these policy texts. With its use of question and exclamation marks, this is vividly expressed in the statement below:

Learning to read starts early, long before the child starts in school. Children need early stimulation to develop a rich language. Contact with books, at home and in pre-school, is very important. Research shows that reading aloud and reading on their own among young children are declining. Among children between the ages of 3 to 8 years, reading time has been halved since 1980! Are we about to lose the next generation of readers?<sup>48</sup>

Compared to the literature policy from the 80s, literature policy from the 90s more profoundly connects reading practices with the development of language skills. Literature, reading, books, and language are almost treated as synonyms and it appears as a given that reading literature

will improve children's language skills. Reading seems almost necessary if children are to develop a language at all, as we can see in the statement below:

Reading is the very foundation to making this possible. Children's first language training takes place by mimicking the speech of adults, but the ability to develop a language and understand its nuances is best practiced through stories and nursery rhymes. The importance of bringing the child in contact with books can therefore not be emphasised enough.<sup>49</sup>

Arguments that stress the potential consequences for children who are not exposed to books and reading rely on cognitive research. For example, it is stated in the policy text that reading stimulates and refines one's ability to interpret situations because 'reading forces us to use our imagination because we are building a picture [in our head] of what we are reading'.<sup>50</sup> Other discernible knowledge practices are based on statistical investigations that compare different group's reading habits. The use of these kinds of quantitative surveys illustrates how the argumentation in the policy texts partly takes place through numbers and comparison between different groups in society.

What kind of subjects are present in these policy texts? To some extent, arguments in policy texts seem to include all children; however, on closer examination, it is apparent that some children are in greater need of reading promotion than others, especially non-reading children and children whose parents have a low-level of education. This is explicitly stated in the following quotation; 'Fewer children read themselves or have someone reading aloud for them. This is especially true for children of parents with low education'.<sup>51</sup> Parents are hence put forward as 'responsibilized subjects' for their children's reading habits,<sup>52</sup> holding them accountable for their children's illiteracy. Although this is concerning, it is emphasised: '[i]f



the children of parents who for some reason cannot, do not want, or are unable to give reading inspiration are to be compensated, action must be taken early, when children are very young'.<sup>53</sup> That is, parents who do not take responsibility for supporting their children's reading development are seen as a problem. To compensate for these "problem" parents, the state must act decisively and swiftly to promote reading when children are very young. Otherwise, these children are at risk of not being able to participate in society or taking part in their cultural heritage. In the policy texts from the 1990s the main reading educators are defined as 'all social institutions where children spend their everyday life – child health centres, pre-schools, schools, and libraries'.<sup>54</sup>

### **2010s: Good reading Abilities and the Responsibilities of Fathers**

In the 2010s, the main problematisation is concerned with reading ability, or rather the poor reading abilities of Swedish children and youth that large-scale quantitative tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have revealed.<sup>55</sup> Obviously, these international literacy tests have influenced the knowledge practices informing the arguments made in these policy texts. In the policy texts, there is an articulated scepticism about the use of the Internet, suggesting that digital reading practices might negatively affect children's reading abilities. As evident in earlier policy texts, it is particularly important to make children readers:

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 life-long education is strengthened.<sup>56</sup>

Digital reading is set against so-called traditional reading (i.e., print fiction). Predominately associated with children and youth, digital reading (i.e., on-line reading) is characterized as

‘not require[ing] much of the reader’.<sup>57</sup> A constant theme in the policy texts from the 2010s is an expressed assumption that there is a lack of awareness among decision-makers and the population in general about the values of traditional reading. Adults, especially parents, are pointed out as particularly lacking in knowledge about the benefits of reading, an alarming development from this perspective since parents to a large extent are responsible for teaching their children how to enjoy reading:

It is difficult to stem the negative trend in 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 to their children. Although the education system has a great responsibility to provide equal opportunities for every child, awareness of reading at home is also an important aspect.<sup>58</sup>

That is, ensuring equal access to books and reading remains the responsibility of the welfare state and the school system, but parents are identified as key players when it comes to the development of their children’s literacy. As it is the parents’ obligation to help their children become ideal reading citizens, they are partly to blame for their children’s declining reading abilities. In the commission report from the 2010s, fathers are seen as the most important reading role models, implying that fathers, to a lesser extent than mothers perhaps, have not fulfilled their role as reading educators for their children, especially their sons.<sup>59</sup> Aspects of gender and class are connoted when certain groups are highlighted as in greater need than others:

Improved reading ability and children’s and young people’s motivation to read are prioritised. This is especially important in groups that studies have shown to have fallen behind in reading

development. Such groups include, among others, boys in general, but also children from socioeconomically marginalised families and children whose parents speak languages other than Swedish at home.<sup>60</sup>

Parents, in particularly fathers, are singled out as reading role models as well as reading educators for their children. In the literature policy from the 2010s, the welfare state is clearly being deemphasized, whereas parents are being promoted as the main reading educator for children.<sup>61</sup>

### **Concluding Discussion**

In this final section, I present the main findings and some overall conclusions from the empirical study.

*RQ1. What forms of reading practices are promoted as desirable and what practices are posed as risks for children?*

The analysis of policy texts reveals distinct changes from the 1970s to the 2010s. There has been a movement in the argumentation from identifying the lack of access to high-quality literature to emphasising lack of reading ability as the main problem. In addition, different notions of literacies are evident throughout the research period, each emphasising different actions and interventions to encourage children to read. In the 1970s, desired reading practices for children consisted of reading quality literature and the main problem was formulated as a lack of interest, not as a lack of reading ability. Therefore, schools, libraries, and other reading educators in the 1970s were expected to prevent children from accessing the wrong kind of literature by promoting the right kind of literature. In the 1980s and 1990s, there is an expressed concern with the proliferation of new media and the Internet as children and youth are the most vulnerable to these portals of information. Reading print books is seen

as the right kind of reading practice, whereas “reading” new media, including content on the Internet, negatively affects children’s reading practices, for example, by impairing their language and literacy development. At the core of the policy from 1970 is giving access to quality literature, in later policy texts it is emphasised that giving access is not enough – reading must be actively promoted, especially for very young children. By the 2010s, digital reading practices are seen as less desirable compared to traditional reading as these policy texts conclude that digital reading does not require much from the reader.

*RQ2. What forms of knowledge practices are used to support arguments made in the policy texts?*

The knowledge practices supporting the arguments in the policy texts, particularly in the later policy texts, are based on large-scale quantitative surveys, such as the PISA, that measure reading habits and literacy levels in the population. These tests cover a limited and standardised view of literacy and reflect a vision of what literacy ideally should be, at least according to experts and government institutions.<sup>62</sup> In the policy texts from the 80s and 90s there is a cognitive perspective underpinning arguments where reading is strongly connected to the development of language skills. The use of research in policy texts seems to be rather pragmatic. Ole Marius Hylland and Per Mangset, for example, show how politicians choose a knowledge base that best supports their argument; in other words, policymakers tend to find research ‘that fits the policy you [they] wish to have’.<sup>63</sup> Clearly, the research used by the policy texts create discourses around readers and non-readers.

*RQ3. What subjects and institutions are seen as responsible for constructing the literate child?*

The responsibility for reading promotion and education has changed over time and is ascribed to different actors and institutions. In the earlier texts, school is the key player when it comes

to reading education and stimulating children's interest to read. In the following decades, pre-schools and libraries are emphasised as important reading educators and advocates. This view resonates well with ideas present at the time, where the importance of starting children's reading education and exposing them to books as early as possible is stressed. Arguments about the necessity of developing the very young child into an adult reader was highly visible in the policy texts from 1980's and 1990's, making children *becomings*, rather than *beings*.

Noticeable, is a general development towards individualisation in the literature policies. In the earlier policy texts most responsibility are placed on the school system, whereas in later policy texts the parents are produced as responsabilized subjects. According to Nicolas Rose, this individualisation of governing is characteristic of neoliberal rationalities downplaying the impact of broad-based social factors.<sup>64</sup> In the earlier policy texts, the problems of illiteracy and low literacy skills are explicitly defined as entrenched in class and low education, whereas in the latter policies these conditions are implied. However it is defined, social class and social exclusion are the backdrop to the suggested solutions to turn non-reading children into reading children, which is evident in all the policy texts. In all the policy texts, reading literature, especially books, holds a special value, because there is a notion underpinning the arguments that reading the right kind of literature could potentially transform people into ideal citizens. These citizens are literate, wise, well-educated, and involved in democratic dialogues with other citizens.<sup>65</sup> Considering this, non-reading children stand out as problematic because they run the risk of being ill informed about democratic principles, casting them as the opposite of the ideal citizens. The construction of opposing subject positions in the policy texts – reading children and non-reading children – may stigmatize the latter group, downplaying the benefits of taking part in new media and reading new forms of media. Using Bacchi's and Goodwin's words, this creates dividing practices aimed to steer the population into desired behaviours.<sup>66</sup>

Another possible effect of discourses expressed in the policy is the tendency in the last decades to focus on educating parents in different reading promotion activities where both parents and children participate. Rosamund Stooke and Pamela McKenzie have shown how librarians in story time sessions often concentrate on encouraging parents to actively support early literacy. Åse Hedemark and Jenny Lindberg conclude that in library programs for babies, librarians focus more on teaching parents how to be reading role models, than actually reading to the babies.<sup>67</sup> This might suggest a practical implementation or reflection of discourses produced in the policy texts and in society, expressed for example in contemporary reading promotion activities in the library where educating parents is considered as important as promoting the love for books to children.<sup>68</sup>

The results presented in this study shed light on the changing conditions for library work. As this study indicates, reading practices were constructed differently at the beginning and the end of the analysed period, In the 1970s, libraries were expected to promote children's access to quality literature and protect them from harmful literature. At the end of the century, the discourse has changed and now we see notions strongly putting forward the promotion of reading abilities. These changes have altered the conditions under which libraries as institutions function, and perhaps challenge how libraries are able to meet the needs of their communities in relation to the political discourses expressed in policy texts. The results presented here contribute to the understanding of how discourses about reading and literacy have real effects on libraries as well as the lives of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams & Zenger, *Popular Culture*, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Luke, *Pedagogy, Printing, and Protestantism*, 138-139.

<sup>3</sup> See Hamilton, *Literacy and the Politics of Representation*; Kelly, *Governing civil society*.

<sup>4</sup> Hylland & Bjurström, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Wooddis & Nilsen, *Music for One and All?*, 98.

<sup>6</sup> Hedemark, *Det föreställda folkbiblioteket*.

<sup>7</sup> Bacchi & Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis*, 16; see also Bacchi, *Analysing policy*.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Heath, *Ways with words*; Street, *Literacy in theory and practice*; Gee, *The narrativization of experience in the oral style*.

<sup>9</sup> Graff, *The Literacy Myth*.

<sup>10</sup> Barton & Hamilton, *Local literacies*; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, *Situated literacies*.

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- <sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *Literacy and the Politics of Representation*, 1-19.
- <sup>12</sup> Luke, *Pedagogy, Printing, and Protestantism*, 139.
- <sup>13</sup> Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, 178-179.
- <sup>14</sup> Stauffer, *Developing Children's Interest in Reading*; Stauffer, *The dangers of unlimited access*.
- <sup>15</sup> Skouvig, *The construction of the working-class user*, 235.
- <sup>16</sup> cf. Kelly, *Governing Civil Society* ; Lo Bianco, *Policy Literacy*; Green & Cormack, *Curriculum history*.
- <sup>17</sup> Davenport & Jones, *The Politics of Literacy*, 45.
- <sup>18</sup> Kelly, *Governing Civil Society*, 55
- <sup>19</sup> James, Jenks & Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*, 207.
- <sup>20</sup> Prout, *The Future of Childhood*, 67.
- <sup>21</sup> Hampson Lundh, *Subject positions of children in information behaviour research*.
- <sup>22</sup> cf. Skouvig, *The construction of the working-class user*; Hedemark, *Det föreställda folkbiblioteket*; Dolathkah, *Det läsande barnet*; Hedemark & Lindberg, *Babies, Bodies, Books*.
- <sup>23</sup> cf. Case, *Looking for information*.
- <sup>24</sup> cf. Lindsköld, Lundh & Dolathkah, *Aesthetic reading as a problem*; Balling & Kann-Christensen, *What is a non-user?*
- <sup>25</sup> Lindsköld, Hedemark, Lundh, *Constructing the Desirable Reader in Swedish Contemporary Literature Policy*.
- <sup>26</sup> Bacchi, *What's the Problem Represented to be?*; Bacchi & Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis*.
- <sup>27</sup> Bacchi & Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis*, 18.
- <sup>28</sup> Foucault, *So is it important to think?*, 456, see also Bacchi & Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis*, 21.
- <sup>29</sup> Bacchi & Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis*, 50.
- <sup>30</sup> Mangset et al., *Nordic Cultural Policy*.
- <sup>31</sup> c.f. Harding, *BILDNING as a Central Concept*, see also Lindsköld, *So Bad it should be Banned*.
- <sup>32</sup> Frenander, *Styra eller stödja?*, p. 33 and p. 84.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Bill 1975*, 202.
- <sup>34</sup> *Boken*, 38.
- <sup>35</sup> *Försök med bibliotek*, 452.
- <sup>36</sup> Stauffer, *The dangers of unlimited access*.
- <sup>37</sup> *Boken*, 280.
- <sup>38</sup> *Läs mera*, 77-78.
- <sup>39</sup> *Läs mera*, 79.
- <sup>40</sup> *Läs mera*, 85.
- <sup>41</sup> c.f. James, Jenks & Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*.
- <sup>42</sup> *Läs mera*, 80.
- <sup>43</sup> *Läs mera*, 84.
- <sup>44</sup> *Folkbibliotek i Sverige*, 92.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Bill 1984/85*, 136.
- <sup>46</sup> *Boken i tiden*, 12.
- <sup>47</sup> *Boken i tiden*, 22.
- <sup>48</sup> *Boken i tiden*, 257.
- <sup>49</sup> *Boken i tiden*, 294.
- <sup>50</sup> *Boken i tiden*, 27.
- <sup>51</sup> *Boken i tiden*, 21.
- <sup>52</sup> Bacchi & Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis*, 73
- <sup>53</sup> *Boken i tiden*, 23.
- <sup>54</sup> *Boken i tiden*, 29.
- <sup>55</sup> The international literacy test PISA is regularly conducted and published by OECD, for example, in 2010 and 2012.
- <sup>56</sup> *The Bill 2013/14*, 7.
- <sup>57</sup> *The Bill 2013/14*, 9.
- <sup>58</sup> *The Bill 2013/14*, 27-28.
- <sup>59</sup> cf. Lindsköld, Hedemark & Lund, *Constructing the Desirable Reader in Swedish Contemporary Literature Policy*.
- <sup>60</sup> *The Bill 2013/2014*, 27.
- <sup>61</sup> c.f. Lindsköld, Hedemark, Lund, *Constructing the Desirable Reader in Swedish Contemporary Literature Policy*.
- <sup>62</sup> Hamilton, *Privileged Literacies*.

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<sup>63</sup> Hylland & Mangset, *Knowledge Production as Mediator*, 179.

<sup>64</sup> Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, see also Linsköld, Hedemark & Lundh, *Constructing the Desirable Reader in Swedish Contemporary Literature Policy*.

<sup>65</sup> cf. Kann-Rasmussen & Balling, *Ikke-læsning som "problem"*.

<sup>66</sup> Bacchi & Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis*, 49-53.

<sup>67</sup> Stooke & McKenzie, *Leisure and Work*, 658; Hedemark & Lindberg, *Babies, Bodies, Books*.

<sup>68</sup> See Linsköld, Hedemark & Lundh, *Constructing the Desirable Reader in Swedish Contemporary Literature Policy*.