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To cite this article: Linnéa Lindsköld & Åse Hedemark (2024) Changes in the governance of the reading subject: Swedish reading policy, c.1949–1984, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 30:2, 253-267, DOI: [10.1080/10286632.2023.2187052](https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2023.2187052)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2023.2187052>



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Published online: 09 Mar 2023.



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Changes in the governance of the reading subject: Swedish reading policy, c.1949–1984

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses significant changes in the political rationality underpinning Sweden's official reading policy between the 1940s and 1980s. Using official inquiry reports as empirical material and drawing on a discourse analytical method, we examine policy changes regarding ideal readers (what reading should result in) and administrative practices (what policy actions could be used) and the kinds of academic knowledge that was used to justify specific measures. It is found that official reading policy ceased to be limited to distributing literature and expanded to include active reading promotion. The replacement of sociological perspectives by cognitive viewpoints as constituting knowledge is also noted. It is concluded that changes in the political rationality had consequences for how the individual reader was construed, from a subject with the potential to change society to a subject who had to adjust to society. We argue that the cultivation of readers evident in reading policy constitutes a specific technique of governance not sufficiently considered in previous cultural policy research.



ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 June 2022
Accepted 28 February 2023

KEYWORDS

Reading policy; policy analysis; Sweden; historical analysis; policy change

In Sweden today, just like a hundred years ago, reading is encouraged as a way to cultivate individuals to become modern subjects in a democratic society. The ideal of cultivation and the potential of culture to form a new kind of human is a core issue in Nordic cultural policy (Hylland and Bjurström 2018). The promotion and prohibition of reading can be understood as political tools, serving the ambition of making citizens more productive and democratic, and of creating a sense of national community. This promotion and prohibition of reading is for example manifested in reading policy. Contemporary Swedish reading policy builds on the rationality that reading in the 'right' way inevitably will lead to cultural advancements for the individual as well as for the country through fx. increased participation in democracy, economic prosperity and social mobility (Lindsköld, Hedemark, and Lundh 2020). This rationality developed through several changes in policy actions and in the knowledge informing reading policy during the second half of the 20th century. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the transformation of political rationality through an analysis of Swedish commission inquiry reports on reading and literature, published between 1949 and 1984 – a significant and formative period in Swedish society, where the welfare state peaked. The inquiries are a suitable source material for identifying political rationalities since they combine scholarly and practical knowledge with political evaluations and aims. The present study focuses on reading policies in cultural policy as being likely to entail relevant arguments about free or voluntary reading for adults and children. Using Duelund's broad

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definition of cultural policies as ‘a product of an ongoing debate on values and ideas considered important’ (2008, 11), reading policy is part of the cultural policy field, and also spans several other policy fields, including cultural, education, library, and language policy. However, as this study finds, reading policy is simultaneously aligned with and distinct from the wider field of cultural policy.

When considering reading policy, the case of Sweden is quite exceptional in comparison to other Western countries. What makes Sweden unique and highly relevant to study, is the notable and long-standing tradition of governing people on how to read and what to read in their private homes. For example, during the 18th century the heads of households were responsible for their family members’ ability to read. The parish vicar was obliged to conduct annual interviews (*husförhör*) to control the religious knowledge as well as the literacy of all inhabitants in a household (Johansson 2009). Furthermore, the free public education movement from the end of the 19th century relied heavily on reading in study circles and circulation of texts through libraries and colporteurs in their struggle for universal suffrage (Bengtsson 2019). Thus, putting individual reading and books at the heart of the origin story of Swedish democracy. Today, the current cultural policy debates on reading almost exclusively focus on the need for people to read more and to read in a certain way. When literature is addressed as a subfield in cultural policy in other countries, it usually consists of policy actions towards the book industry, not towards readers. Consequently, the political ambition of encouraging reading in private homes makes Sweden stand out in comparison with similar countries such as Germany and Norway (Lindsköld 2022). Today’s motivation behind governing people on how to read is not fuelled by religious concerns as it was in the 18th century, but by a perceived crisis in reading. This crisis discourse includes, among other things, results from large-scale surveys such as the Programme for International Student Assessment or PISA, which showed a decline in reading ability of children and young people (OECD 2012). To remedy this, several political measures have been taken in the last decade, ranging from increased support for reading promotion projects in libraries and schools, to librarians making home visits in underprivileged areas (Lindström Sol and Ekholm 2021). As these short examples show, reading at home – outside of the education system – has always been deemed so important that it cannot be left to citizens without careful governance.

Theoretical and methodological approach

In the present study, we use the theoretical concept of ‘political technology of individuals’, (Foucault 1988). For Michel Foucault a key feature of modern political rationality as it evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that the state need only worry about individuals ‘insofar as they are somehow relevant for the reinforcement of the state’s strength: what they do, their life, their death, their activity, their individual behaviour, their work, and so on’ (1988, 152). Foucault claims that the state’s concern for its citizens largely depends on whether they contribute to strengthening the state; the corollary is that it behoves the state to integrate individuals – assets – in the state’s utility. We argue that reading can be understood as a particular political technology of individuals, which cultivates and integrates people into society. In other words, the state doesn’t support reading just for the benefit of its citizens. The state wants something back, whether it is productive workers, diligent school children or critically thinking individuals.

To support this political rationality, there are various techniques, namely dream or utopia, certain institutions’ practices and rules, and knowledge (Foucault 1988). While dream or utopia is concerned with the shaping of a new kind of modern, elevated and educated man, the second technique – practices and rules – constitutes the administrative practices of this shaping. The third is knowledge, primarily knowledge produced in academic settings (Foucault 1988, 154–159). Changes in the political rationality underpinning reading policy is the analytical object of this study, and Foucault’s terminology is used as an analytical framework, focusing on the three techniques.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How are ideal readers described in reading policy?
- (2) Which administrative practices, i.e. policy actions, are deemed suitable for realising policy goals in reading policy?
- (3) How is knowledge utilised in the shaping of the ideal reader and administrative practices?
- (4) What possible consequences for current conditions for reading and readers are produced by the political rationality identified in the analysis?

The study of reading policy over time does not entail a linear story of progression, nor is it a search for the essence of reading policy. Rather, reading policy can be charted as the outcome of a political rationality that makes certain policy actions possible. This rationality can be analysed to identify how aspects of it have been transformed, added, or rejected over time (Foucault 1988; 1993).

In the following we present the empirical material of the study, its characteristics, and how the analysis was made. In the subsequent results section, we are drawing on Foucault's techniques, to examine the alterations in how the ideal reader is portrayed in policy texts, how different administrative practices are described, and the kinds of academic knowledge that is used in the texts to justify certain actions, in the light of earlier research on cultural policy and reading. In the final section, we use these theoretical concepts to discuss how reading transformed between 1949 and 1984, and the consequences this political rationality entailed for the ideal reader.

Methodology and empirical material

Reading policy is used as an empirical entity in this study. The empirical material consists of policy texts on literature and reading, as these are regarded as 'a form of proposal and a guide to conduct' (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 18). Policy texts suggest solutions to specific problems – such as lack of access to quality literature – so by identifying both the problems and the proposed solutions we can gauge the implicit notions of this particular political technology of individuals. Consequently, this study is a response to the recent call for cultural policy studies using policy theory (Belfiore 2021). The analysis was conducted on a discursive level, identifying conceptions of ideal readers (what reading should result in), administrative practices (what policy actions could be used), and the kinds of academic knowledge used to justify specific measures. Through this analysis we have identified changes relevant for the political rationality underpinning reading policy. During the studied period, there are larger societal, economical, technological, and political changes taking place that are out of scope for this study.

The empirical material was read repeatedly by the two authors and examined with regard to both their explicit and implicit content. The authors had repeated discussions of analytical interpretations to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis.

The results build upon an analysis of five Swedish commission inquiry reports, published between 1949 and 1984: two public library inquiries (SOU 1949:28, 1984:23), the second of which included school libraries; two book inquiries (SOU 1952:23, 1984:30); and a literature inquiry (SOU 1974:5). Although they are titled differently, both book and literature inquiries concern the production, distribution, and consumption of literature. The latest inquiry on this subject in 2012 went by the name 'The reading inquiry', thus emphasising the shift in focus from the physical artefact to the practice of reading. The fifty-year period makes it possible to chart changes in Swedish reading policy. Commission inquiries are appointed by the government to examine specific issues, publish their findings, and suggest policy in their reports. The members of the commission consist of politicians, civil servants, and experts in the field, who can include academic scholars, as well as representatives from organisations and civil society. Stakeholders are then invited to respond to reports before any parliamentary bill is proposed. The inquiries often include surveys and other kinds of investigations to take stock of the issue. However, from the 1980s and onward, some general changes can be identified. The commissions have been reduced in numbers (often consisting of just one member), the deadlines for delivering final reports have been shortened, and the reports have

become shorter. The system has been an integral part of the policy making process in Sweden. During the period under study, these reports were used for creating a qualified knowledge base for policy making, including historical backgrounds, international comparisons, and different policy alternatives (Petersson 2016).

Reading policy in context

In this section we introduce earlier research on reading policy and situates it within the fields of cultural policy research and reading research.

Reading policies for individuals are often studied from separate areas, such as education policy (Sundström Sjödin 2019) or cultural policy (Kann-Rasmussen and Balling 2015). However, in a Nordic context, the various policy areas of literature, libraries, education, and free public education share a common historical ground in the ideals of *Bildung* (*bildning*) and the campaigns for free public education (Lindsköld, Dolatkah, and Lundh 2020). Therefore, when surveying Sweden's current reading policy, its past cultural policies, and the state of the art in reading research, we include the role of *Bildung* in both cultural policy generally and reading policy more specifically.

Cultural policy scholars in the Nordic countries have made considerable advances in defining and describing the common traits in Nordic cultural policy and its transformations (see, e.g. Duelund 2003; Mangset et al. 2008). In all the Nordic countries, cultural policy, is built on a *Bildung* tradition that situates a combination of culture and social welfare, as necessary tools for personal development, resulting in relatively large state subsidies for the production and distribution of culture (see, e.g. Hylland and Bjurström 2018).

Bildung is a complex concept with a long tradition. Broadly, it began with an ideal of *Bildung* in the 19th century inspired by the civilisation project of the Enlightenment, as well as by the German bourgeoisie *Bildung* ideal. It referred to an elevation and cultivation, not just of individuals but of humankind. This ideal was later incorporated in the free public education movement (Hansson 1999). The movement, *folkbildning* in Swedish, combined a striving for democracy with an older individualistic and bourgeoisie ideal, and has been central to Swedish cultural policy and civil society alike (Harding 2015, 162). Although the ideals of free public education were egalitarian, the workers' movement had a clear hierarchy in which bourgeois art was regarded as far superior to amateur culture or mass-market culture (Sundgren 2007). In the Nordic countries, *Bildung* as adopted by the workers' movement, was a tool used by representatives of the working class both for class struggle and to civilise individuals *within* the working class, thus continuing the conflicting conceptions of *Bildung* as an elitist concept and as a necessary tool for equality. The *Bildung* project of the free public education movement dwindled with the building of the welfare state. More specifically, the role of culture and humanistic education was surpassed by influences from social science (Hansson 1999). But the free public education movement was still an influential institution in Sweden in the 20th century through educational associations (*studieförbund*) and trade unions.

When large-scale welfare policies were introduced in Sweden, politicians and the leaders of the workers' movements assumed that, as their well-being increased, Swedes would automatically take an active part in cultural life, for example by reading high-quality literature. This supposition was increasingly criticised by politicians and public intellectuals after the Second World War (Sundgren 2007, 288; Frenander 2014, 130). Several government initiatives on culture and literature were launched in the 1960s to make quality culture accessible to everyone, regardless of education and location. Similar measures were taken in Europe in what is known as the democratisation of culture (see, e.g. Duelund 2008). When describing the history of cultural policy in Western Europe, it is common to refer to paradigms or rationalities. Cultural democracy was an example of a dominant paradigm that emerged in the 1970s to broaden the concept of culture by including other cultural expressions than the so-called 'fine arts' in the pursuit of cultural diversity. In the 1980s culture became an important factor in economic and regional development. In Europe in recent decades, culture and cultural policy have both been used as tools for a variety of purposes such as for

emancipation through participation or strengthening nationalism and right wing-populism (Duelund 2008; Lindsköld 2015; Bonet and Négrier 2018). In Sweden there is a strong tendency for cultural policy to be integrated in other policy areas. One example is social policy, with its outreach programmes where librarians visit families with newborns to teach parents how to read to their children (Lindström Sol and Ekholm 2021). In a Swedish context this general development should not be seen as definite changes or new directions for cultural policy, rather it can be seen, as Henningsen suggests for Norwegian cultural policy, as a 'sedimentation' where new layers are added onto already existing policies (Henningsen 2015).

When considering reading policy, attention must be paid to two other developments in Sweden between the 1960s and 1980s that have implications for our study. The first is the greater focus on technology and skills. When the new compulsory, comprehensive school system was introduced in 1962, there was an abrupt change in the reasons for reading literature given in educational policy documents, where what to read was replaced by how to read – 'from a governing of taste to a governing of skill' (Lindsköld, Dolatkah, and Lundh 2020). 'Informational reading', or quickly identifying correct information in a text, has been a strand in Swedish education since the 1960s, long before the information technology that today is associated with quick, fragmented reading (Dolatkah and Hampson Lundh, 2016; Lundh, Dolatkah, and Limberg 2018). The 'governing of skill' is also visible in a library context where librarians instruct parents on how they should support their children's literacy, focussing on educational aspects of reading (Stooke and McKenzie 2009, 658; Hedemark and Lindberg 2018). The second development, starting in the 1960s in Sweden, is the continuing conflict between the ideals of *Bildung* and the individual in Sweden. The public debate about *Bildung* was sparked by Bengt Nerman, a leading figure in the movement and the son of another, who criticised the advocates of free public education for being too moralistic and ignoring the free will and choices of the individual (Nerman 1962). In essence, he objected to a view of *Bildung* which reduced the individual to an object to be moulded into a certain shape, and where the ideal was adaptation and not change (Ginner 1988, 24–25). These two developments highlight the ongoing conflict between more or less instrumentalism in reading promotion and free public education.

It should be noted that official cultural policies across the world tend to centre on a 'civilizing mission', wherein culture and the arts are intended to improve individuals and society, not least morally. It has a long colonial history, and is still used to exert control over ethnic or other minorities, who are expected to integrate (Belfiore and Bennett 2008). Although the ideals of cultural policy proper can work towards equality and social justice or economic or regional growth, there still exists a strong belief in 'the good of the arts' in Nordic cultural policy (Hylland and Bjurström 2018, 7). Consequently, the *Bildung* tradition, which holds to the transformative power of the arts closely connected to democracy, is where contemporary Nordic cultural policies differ to countries where cultural policy is legitimised with measurable indicators of social impact (Bjørnsen 2012).

In cultural policy there is a separation between humanism and *Bildung* on the one hand and instrumental values closely connected to the social sciences on the other. This can be traced to the formation of cultural policy in the 1950s to 1970s. My Klockar Linder (2014, 99) has shown how Swedish cultural policy as a political category during this time period ended up using an empirically driven, objective research field closely connected to sociology and behavioural studies. This separation can also be found in contemporary Swedish reading policy, which has two overlapping yet conflicting rationalities. The latest official inquiry into literature (SOU 2012:65) juxtaposes instrumental values (participating in the democratic conversation, better school results) with what it calls 'humanistic *Bildung* values' that prepare the reader for aesthetic experiences (30–33; see also Lindsköld, Hedemark and Lundh 2020).

As Hylland and Bjurström (2018) note, knowledge production is needed if cultural policy is to underpin its actions, since it is a 'value-driven, legitimacy-needing' policy area and an 'especially insecure form of policy' (166). However, the urge to legitimise cultural policy using evidence-based research that demonstrates the social impact of culture and the arts is at odds with the legitimising

of cultural policy using values that are more difficult to evaluate with scholarly methods (Hylland and Bjurström 2018, 167; see also Belfiore and Bennett 2008). Setting aside the century-long philosophical debate about *Bildung* and its uses, it is enough to note here that *Bildung* values and more instrumental values are explicitly separated in Swedish reading policy.

Critical studies of reading

In this section we situate our perspective on reading policy within a research field where the politics of reading is critically examined.

Literature, book history, and reading have long held the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines – literature studies, the sociology of literature, library and information studies, didactics, and pedagogy (for example, Radway 1983; Appleyard 1990; Langer 1995; Cavallo and Chartier 1999; Dolatkhah 2011). Yet the research interest in the politics of reading, which maps and analyses the political rhetoric and policy measures, is more recent. One strand has focussed on how literacy is used for political purposes. Mary Hamilton (2012) has studied narratives of literacy in international and national policy in the UK, and Stephen John Kelly has examined the deployment of literacy by the Australian government in the public debate about national security (2018). Their results demonstrate how literacy is used as a governmental technology or a narrative in the shaping of the right kind of subjects. When reading policy is framed as of utmost importance to society, the result is a discourse that places the initiative above ideology or alternative scholarly claims (see, e.g. Patel Stevens 2003, 667). In the Swedish context, Andersson (2020) has analysed how the ideal reader, and more specifically the ideal girl reader, is formed through reading surveys. She notes that these large-scale surveys of reading abilities dampened the interest in social factors that affected reading. More precisely, when reading is understood as a cognitive skill, social or class structures affecting reading tend to get downplayed, resulting in a depoliticisation of the reading citizen, since the route to ‘citizenship’ through reading is reliant on diligence (171). Sundgren (2007) identifies a similar tendency in the cultural policy debate of the 1950s, calling it a psychologisation of solidarity: ‘It is not poverty, or material disparities to be combated in the first place, but a mentality’ (313).

In recent decades, there has been an increasing number of critical studies of reading. Scholars have questioned the ‘goodness’ inherent in reading the right texts (Persson 2015; Price 2019; Sundström Sjödin 2019). This research has critically examined the historical and current politics of reading, and several have been influenced by Michel Foucault (e.g. Kann-Rasmussen and Balling 2015; Andersson 2020; Hedemark 2020). The present paper is an example of this critical strand in reading research, which we term critical studies of reading (Lundh, Hedemark, and Lindsköld 2022). The purpose of this research field is to problematise how reading is practised and how best to understand it in a particular social and historical setting. The aim is not to define, evaluate, or develop the ‘right’ kind of reading practice; rather, the premise is that contemporary reading practices are best understood in relation to other contemporary or historical reading practices.

Changes in reading policy

We begin the results section by analysing the changing ideals of readers and reading (what reading should result in) and its administrative practices (what policy actions could be used), expressed in Swedish reading policy after the Second World War. The first section correlates to the first and second research questions where the ideal readers and administrative practices are captured. In the second section we move on to analyse the knowledge utilised to argue for certain practices, thus underpinning the political rationality of reading policy. The analysis is structured both chronologically and thematically to capture changes in reading policy during the period.

Ideal readers and practices

After 1945 the pressing problem for reading policy was how to distribute quality literature to all segments of the population across the country, whether rural or urban. This was explicitly stated in 1949 as ‘the book supply problem’ (SOU 1949:28, 41). The policy text further argued that libraries should receive more resources if they were to be part of the solution. In 1952, the problem of distributing the right books continued to be an issue:

A cultural rearmament, with the objective of heightening our population’s *Bildung* making the spiritual values an important part of people’s lives, cannot ignore literature and its central role in culture. The book is still the most important tool for spreading culture, but unfortunately, it reaches only limited strata of the population. (SOU 1952:23, 11)

One reason the distribution of books played such a prominent role was the dominant idea that people, when presented with quality books, would automatically become readers, and transform into the enlightened and educated citizens the state needed (Sundgren 2007, 288). Since quality literature was presumed to elevate its readers to be more educated, democratically active citizens, it was important they had access to it rather than the poor-quality literature that was more available. The administrative practice used was not active promotion of certain ideal ways of reading or strengthening reading skills, but rather distribution of the right literature, after which the cultural development of people and society would automatically follow. However, the statistics on which the 1952 book inquiry built its case were ambiguous and indicated that the notion that the population would automatically turn into readers once quality literature was distributed across the country, was not always accurate. For example, there were rural areas where reading interest was high, despite the difficulty of obtaining books in those parts of Sweden (SOU 1952:23, 47). Apparently, a lack of reading interest could not always be explained by a lack of books. However, in 1952, the proposed solution to the book supply problem was still to improve the production and distribution of quality literature. The 1949 public library inquiry had announced that owning books was superior to other ways of obtaining literature. As the book inquiry put it, ‘An interest in books that does not materialise as a desire to own books, but only as an interest in borrowing books, can rightfully be considered an unfinished and half-hearted interest’ (SOU 1952:23, 181). Thus, the ideal reader should feel a desire to own books, not primarily borrow them.

The argument that people would automatically take up reading was already under fire in the 1960s, but it was not until the literature inquiry and reader surveys commissioned in 1968 (SOU 1974:5), that the implications of its failure were widely discussed. The surveys showed that it was not only underprivileged groups that read ‘substandard’ literature, but also people with a high educational level (86). This was received with some shock, since it was generally believed that at least well-educated people read quality literature. The question of how this development could be halted was a matter of public debate. However, the inquiry also acknowledged that the means available for reading policy were limited:

In conclusion, the inquiry would like to make clear that it is aware of the difference between the physical accessibility of a literary work and the conditions of an individual to assimilate it. The former can be accomplished by different kinds of literature policy measures; the latter is a result of individual prerequisites and societal measures of a partly different and more long-term nature. (SOU 1974:5, 97)

As conceded in this statement, the pursuit of advocating and governing the population’s reading habits was not possible through the administrative practices that were deemed available in a cultural policy context. Instead, other policy areas were acknowledged as more important for affecting the reading of individuals: ‘The inquiry is aware that fundamental political decisions resulting in changes, improvements in peoples’ work conditions, housing conditions, education etcetera eventually will have a crucial effect for our area of work’ (SOU 1974:5, 97). Still, the inquiry recognised the potential for political as well as spiritual transformation through the reading of literature. In fact, literature as a tool for political change was highlighted before the mention of reading literature for pleasure (SOU

1974:5, 83). Consequently, the ideal reader during the 1970s was someone who used literature to change their own life and society for the better, in line with the ideals of the free public education movement.

In the 1970s, welfare policies were seen as more likely to have an impact on the making of the ideal reader, rather than reading policy, which was limited to supporting the production and distribution of literature. The limitations did however not stop there. The inquiry noted that since the book industry had a 'demand for profit' the industry could not 'fully implement the goals desirable from a societal point of view' (SOU 1974:5, 94). Reading policy measures were reduced to make it easier to borrow or buy 'good books' (SOU 1974:5, 94). Concrete examples of policy measures first implemented in 1975 were state support for the production of literature, a publicly funded publishing company owned by the main free public education organisation, and public funding for workplace libraries (a collaboration between trade unions and public libraries). The workplace libraries were presented as a way to introduce what the public library had to offer for people who were not regular library users (SOU 1974:5, 42). Access to literature for new groups was framed as a redistribution of power. The trade unions put forward libraries as an essential tool for union work and for changing working conditions. The explicit connection to unions and social-democratic politics made support for the workplace libraries unpopular among liberal and conservative parties, and the funding was removed in 1985 (Herder 1986). The administrative practice during the period was managed by a collaboration between public institutions (libraries) and trade unions. Through these measures the workplace became an important object for reading policy.

Moving into the 1980s the main issue for reading policy, as expressed in the policy texts, had changed in a significant way. It was not the distribution of quality books but rather the proliferation of new kinds of information and communication technology that was perceived as occupying people's attention, steering them away from reading. Reading policies from the 80s stated that easy access to the new media and their content confused children and young people and had a negative impact on their view of the world:

Different media are competing for viewers, listeners, and readers. This tends to skew the information, making the content polarised and simplified. Children and young people get a fragmentary view of the world. (SOU 1984:30, 81)

More precisely, new media distorted children's experiences of the world, steering their attention away from reading books. This was formulated as the main problem in reading policy at the time. In comparison with earlier reading policy, it entailed a noticeable change in ideals of readers and reading (what reading should result in) and its administrative practices (what means could be used). During this time period, reading policy argued that exposing people to quality literature was not enough to make them readers, because despite all the efforts, 'strangely there is still a large group of non-readers in society' (SOU 1984:30, 79). The proposed solution was to actively promote the reading of quality literature, especially to children:

The objective is to increase awareness about good literature among the new generation. In a longer period, this will decrease the large group of non-readers. (SOU 1984:30, 85)

Thus, the change in administrative practices can be described as from distribution of books to active promotion of reading. The assumption here was that if children understood the virtues of reading books through active reading promotion, they would become ideal readers as adults. In the 1980s when the ideal reading practices were described in reading policy the main target group shifted from adults to children. Perhaps because of the substantial focus on children, there was a striking feature of the reading policy in the 1980s – a strong cognitive approach.

The academic knowledge of reading policy

We now turn to the academic disciplines instrumental to the political rationality that created reading policy and subsequent changes in policy. The 1949 inquiry had an explicit sociological point of departure. The ambition was to map and analyse book distribution and reading habits in order to understand what could be done politically, to encourage reading in the population. Differences in reading interest were primarily understood as the result of age, education, social environment, access to books and spare time, and reading habits in childhood and adolescence. Farmers and housewives were the main groups identified as non-readers, simply because they lacked spare time. The inquiry noted that they found no evidence of mental differences between sporadic readers and avid readers (SOU 1952:23, 66). The inquiry also concluded that sociological, quantitative methods could not fully explain people's interest in books:

it is highly influenced by personal, psychological variables unreachable by statistics. If this interest is once awakened in the individual citizen, external obstacles to book reading no longer have meaning. Then interest in books is a verdict of cultural consciousness, that feeling of co-responsibility for cultural development that can be called the equivalent to political democracy, in cultural life. (SOU 1952:23, 169)

Although reading policy construed readers as belonging to sociological groups which defined their reading preferences and habits, it was suggested (as exemplified by the previous statement) that the psychological disposition of individuals influenced their reading in different ways. This can be understood as a premonition of a change from sociological research methods and viewpoints to a 'cognitive revolution' in research (Pollatsek and Treiman 2015, 3). The cognitive approach is a rationalist, psychologically grounded viewpoint where the mind and its inherent cognitive abilities define people's social lives. In the late 1950s the approach gained influence in several disciplines, including reading research (see Pollatsek and Treiman 2015; Røyseng 2021). In the cognitive approach, it is emphasised that intellectual activities are superior to bodily sensations; the world is external to us as 'selves', because the individual is constructed through cognitive reasoning in the mind of the self. One premise in the cognitive approach is that to gain new knowledge, an individual acquires, processes, and combines information – knowledge is described as mental models, schedules, or cognitive structures, stored in our long-term memory (see Säljö 2010, 154–160; Røyseng 2021, 26).¹

As hinted at in the quote above, contemporary sociologically imprinted reading research was not seen as sufficient to understand reader's preferences and experiences of literature. In the cultural policy debates of the 1950s, there was a demand for further scholarly research on how the individual could be governed – transformed – to become a new, independent person who would not be subject to totalitarian ideologies. The same development was evident in Sweden's education policy, where the conflict between coercion and voluntariness regarding children's reading was constant (Lindsköld, Dolatkah, and Lundh 2020).

Moving into the 1970s this notion became more explicit, especially considering the survey on reading habits conducted on behalf of the 1968 literature inquiry. The results indicated that well-educated people with high salaries read 'poor, substandard and cheap literature' to the same extent as people with lower education and incomes (SOU 1974:5, 86). Given these results, the inquiry decided that new reading research was needed. Previous inquiries focussed on readers and their preferences and habits, but now it was time to concentrate on the psychology of readers, especially non-readers. It was stated that apart from studies made for the inquiry there existed 'no previous study with the aim of exploring readers' or non-readers' attitudes to reading books' (SOU 1974:5, 280).

Some reading research (mainly in the shape of large surveys of reading habits) was already underway, but the cognitive perspective sparked a new research interest in several topics. It brought an emphasis on what was happening in the minds of individual readers and provided a research base for instruction in reading (Pollatsek and Treiman 2015, 1ff.), making cognitive research perspectives and topics the answer to what the literature policy in the 1970s had explicitly asked for. Although

previous reading policy claims aligned with literary cognitivism (expressed, for example, in arguments of how literature was a source of knowledge and *Bildung*) the cognitive approach was far more pronounced in the reading policy of the 1980s. While reading in the 1940s and 1950s was recognised to be important for educating the population and providing people with the right cultural values and taste, reading in the 1980s was deemed essential for the development of children's intellectual abilities, such as vocabulary and 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. (SOU 1984:23, 92)

As this statement shows, reading was associated with processes in the human mind such as cognition, perception, and thinking, aspects that would suggest the influence of a cognitive approach (see also Hedemark 2020). Further, '[f]or young children, books, particularly good picture-books, have a central function when it comes to the development of language and the ability to conceptualise the world' (SOU 1984:23, 56). Thus, reading was closely associated with language development: it was crucial that children read or be read to if they were to develop a language:

Every child has the right to have a command of his/her own language with the use of pictures and words. By receiving descriptions and by learning how to describe it, the child can discover and understand the world. It is [only] through the child's own experience the child may gain insights into his/herself and become a self-reliant individual interacting with other individuals. (SOU 1984:23, 42)

Stimulating children's ability to discover the world and allowing them to have their own physical and intellectual experiences were central tenets in the reading policy of the 1980s. However, children, and particularly non-reading children, could not be left to their own devices to discover the world through books; their reading interest had to be awakened by literature promotion, which was mainly defined as a task for preschool teachers, primary teachers, and librarians. Since the remedy for instilling the ideal reading practices among the population was identified as the active promotion of books, a new group was suggested in the inquiry from 1984 – promoters. Some were described as people who to some extent worked with cultural political objectives and/or were interested in books and met many people professionally, while another important group of promoters were parents, who were strongly encouraged to read aloud to their children (SOU 1984:23, 93). In the concluding discussion, we will return to the effects this depoliticisation may have for the ideal of the individual reader.

The political rationality of reading policy: possible implications

Our analysis highlights several noticeable changes in reading policy during the period.

There was a change in the administrative practices: from the notion in the emerging welfare state of the 1940s that distributing qualitative literature was enough to make the population read, to a growing concern in the 1970s that this was not actually the case. In the 1980s the argumentation was different. Distribution was no longer the main issue, and the idea that people would automatically become readers when they had access to good literature was abandoned. Instead, active promotion, particularly among children, was identified as the main administrative practice necessary to direct people to the right kind of reading. This change in reading policy – from becoming a reader 'naturally' by being exposed to books at the library, bookstore or at the workplace, to being encouraged to be a reader by professional promoters – pushed back the limits of what could be done in the name of reading policy. In earlier policy texts, factors affecting reading behaviour (such as promoting reading to awaken individuals' interest) were not defined as part of reading policy. In the policy texts of the 1980s such actions played a prominent role: the suggested practices to promote reading were built on knowledge from a cognitive perspective, where the benefits of reading were mainly explained in terms of usefulness. Reading was thought necessary for the

individual to develop language and other cognitive processes. Children were targeted in the reading policy of the 1980s, arguably as a reaction to the failure of automatically mobilising adults as readers by distributing high-quality literature.

The changes in reading policy enabled and encouraged certain ideal readers that can be understood as 'political' subjects. As Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) argue, policies play an important part in processes of subjectification, because they shape 'what is possible for people to become' (50). This does not mean that policies determine what kinds of political subjects it is possible to become, but they cultivate subjects who are relevant for the state (Foucault 1988, 152). It is therefore worth considering how the individual reader in the political rationality of Swedish reading policy was construed. For this, we need to revisit Bengt Nerman (1962) and his criticism of the free public education movement. He advocated an ideal where *Bildung* emanated from the individuals' own interest and reality, and where free public education was unconditional. The conservative view he criticised was the very different wish in the cultural policy debate of the 1940s and 1950s to govern people into becoming more independent.

In the 1970s, the purpose of literature in society was said to be complex. Its radical, subversive possibilities were highlighted before mentioning literature as a pleasure in itself (SOU 1974:5, 83). Workplace libraries were an example of how trade unions took several initiatives, advocating the use of literature and culture to change people's working conditions for the better. They combined the social-democratic politics of the time with the ideals of outreach work and professional librarianship. Readers, in this understanding, could transform their lives and their environment by reading literature (and by extension be transformed by social democracy). The administrative practice thus identified the workplace as an important object for reading policy.

The balance in reading policy between using reading to change society or to adapt to society was visible throughout the period. At the end of the period, reading for children and youth was described as needed for adapting to society. The changes in reading policy seem to have transformed the political rationality that governed reading. A comparison can be made to the latest 2012 inquiry on reading. The value of reading (of long-format texts) is presented as reading for its own sake, participating in the democratic conversation, and reading for educational success, all connected to *Bildung* and Sweden's literary cultural heritage (SOU 2012:65, 30–31). However, the possibility for political and social change through reading and literature was not as evident as it had been in policy texts in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead of positioning the reader as *changing* society, as suggested by Nerman, the political rationality now advocates a position where readers need to be *part of* society and the necessity of reading to become a productive member of society, an implication supported by earlier research (Sundgren 2007; Andersson 2020; Lindsköld, Hedemark, and Lundh 2020). Although the concept of *Bildung*, free public education, and the memories of the democratic movement in the early twentieth century are still vivid in Sweden's reading policy, there has been a deradicalisation of the possibilities for the ideal reader. The origin of this movement, resulting in a new kind of relationship between society and the reader, can be traced back to the studied time-period where the techniques supporting the political rationality changed.

We argue that the cultivation of readers evident in reading policy constitutes a specific technique of governance not sufficiently considered in previous cultural policy research. Employing the concept of the political technology of individuals reveals the increasing governance of reading in Sweden in recent decades. Paternalistic instructions about what to read to develop good taste and become a good citizen have been dropped from the official inquiries, superseded by the education of families and instruction in reading skills (see also Hedemark 2020). In this paper, we have illuminated this governing technique for reading, but it may also be useful for studying the governance of other art forms. Although current reading policy and explicit cultural policy are closely intertwined, a difference may be visible in the respective areas' use of scholarly knowledge. And while it is closely connected to education, the latest reading inquiry distinguishes *Bildung* from instrumentality, linking it to knowledge of cultural heritage instead (SOU 2012, 65). *Bildung* values are described as harder to measure than instrumental values, which can be captured using large-scale quantitative surveys investigating reading ability (Lindsköld, Hedemark and Lundh 2020). This

differs from the interpretation of *Bildung* that Sigrid Røyseng (2021, 29) observes in contemporary Norwegian cultural policy, where it equates to a scholarly, *Bildung* view of culture as developing certain intellectual and cognitive capacities.

The cognitive influence from reading research impacted how practices such as policy measures have been formulated. These influences have built on knowledge from the social and natural sciences and have been positioned in the analysed policy texts as something other than *Bildung* values. Reading policy thus differs from cultural policy in general in the Nordic countries, which still has a strong connection to *Bildung* and the view of the arts as transformative for the individual (Hylland and Bjurström 2018 and Bjørnsen 2012). But in line with the sedimentation of cultural policy as described by Henningsen (2015), these values co-exist in cultural policy as well as in reading policy. However, there seems to be a difference in emphasis between cognitive values in reading policy on one hand and *Bildung* values in cultural policy on the other hand. In the case of Swedish reading policy, this can perhaps be explained by a continuation of the long tradition of the governance of reading in people's private homes, paired with a scientific view on cognitive reading skills as necessary for belonging to society. This 'fusion' of knowledges contributes to a strong foundation for the current political rationality of Swedish reading policy.

Note

1. The idea that literature supplied cognitive values and could serve as a source of knowledge was much discussed in the philosophy of literature, for example literary cognitivism (see, for example, Harold 2015).

Acknowledgments

This study builds on *The Making of the Reading Citizen: Public Debate and Policy 1945–2017*, a project funded by the Swedish Research Council in 2018–2021 (Grant 2017-01542). The authors wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for constructive comments, Anna Lundh for her useful comments, and Merisa Martinez for her help with the English editing of the manuscript. An earlier version of this article was presented at the *Nordic Conference for Cultural Policy Research* in Borås, Sweden 10–12 November 2021. The authors are grateful for comments and suggestions received there. Finally, Linnéa Lindsköld would like to thank Harald and Louise Ekman's Research Foundation for a visiting grant at Sigtunastiftelsen, where part of this paper was drafted.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Vetenskapsrådet [2017-01542].

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