

Teachers' selection of content in the age of standard-based policy

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Introduction

This paper explores the latest curriculum for compulsory school in Sweden, Curriculum Standards for Compulsory School (CSCS), with focus on its implications for teachers' selection of content and how subject-matter content is foregrounded in teaching. In the case of CSCS, standardised learning outcomes and a prescribed core content are given a central role in the curriculum structure (see below). These are essential aspects and from this point of view, the following research questions will guide us: How and on what foundations is the selection of content made by the teachers? What are the implications for teachers' teaching practices in terms of e.g. preparation when prescribed content and learning outcomes is given a central role in the curriculum structure?

In this study, we draw on empirical material from teachers and their teaching in the social studies subjects (Civics, History, Geography, Religion) classrooms over one year. The data consists of semi-structured interviews with teachers, principals and students, and coded transcripts of video-recorded lessons.

The Swedish curriculum in the light of standard-based policy.

In the last two decades, transnational organisations and agreements have become increasingly important as driving forces in the making of curriculum. The international education policy movement towards so-called standards-based curricula has been characterized by top-down accountability and linear dissemination (Andersson-Levitt, 2008; Sivesind & Karseth, 2010). This also applies to the formation of Swedish curriculum policy discourses. The curriculum CSCS can foremost be described as a standards-based curriculum, which puts it in line with a "systematic curriculum tradition" where the objectives and performance standards are put in the foreground for what students ought to do and know (Null, 2011). Beside these performance standards it is important to take notice of that there within the scope of a standards-based curriculum is possible to discern 'content standards' – in terms of standardised aims and knowledge content.

The salient standard-based features of CSCS become visible in the 'knowledge requirements', which express progression and the level of complexity in a subject, e.g. to perform an assignment 'in a nuanced and reflective way' or 'in a purposeful and effective way'. The knowledge requirements are supposed to be 'transparent', and regardless of subject, they regulate the relationship and alignment between purpose, content, results and assessment. The second aspect of standardisation in CSCS, the content standardisation, comes visible in the Swedish curriculum in the so-called 'core content of the subject'. In this part of the curriculum the teachers and the students finds a description of the central content of every subject matter, that must be addressed in teaching (National Agency of Education, NAE, 2011, 2015).

Theoretical Points of Departure

The curriculum is the classification, framing and normative selection of knowledge that will influence the teaching process in the classroom (Bernstein, 2000). Teaching represents the realisation of a particular discourse where different conceptions of knowledge are put in the

foreground and some in the background. In the recontextualisation (Bernstein, 2000) from the national/programmatic level to the classroom level (Doyle, 1992), curriculum is subject to decisions made within the school that shapes the 'what', the 'why', the 'how', for 'whom' and 'whose knowledge'. Following Doyle's (1992) perspective on the transformation of curriculum into teaching, teachers author 'curriculum events' in the classroom and the students act as 'co-authors'. This serves as the basis for the analysis of the recontextualisation of content and knowledge conceptions in the local school and classroom settings.

In the Nordic tradition of research on curriculum theory, the 'frame-factor theory' (Dahllöf, 1967; Lundgren, 1972, 1989) was developed to examine factors that lies beyond the direct control of the teacher, but create conditions for processes and outcomes of the teaching. When studying recontextualisation process between the 'programmatic' and the 'classroom level' of the curriculum making (Doyle, 1992), it is crucial to be aware of external frame-factors such as time, equipment, the composition of the class, school culture and (of course) the current curriculum and so on. By changing the frames – with for instance extra resources, new organisation of classrooms, teachers' professional development or adjusting the schedule – the conditions of teaching will change. In turn this may influence the teaching processes and the outcomes. However, there is no strict causality between a specific frame and a specific outcome. Instead, frames should be considered as factors that enables or limits the teaching processes and its outcomes. In this paper, a frame-factor theory perspective will be used to understand the conditions for as well teachers' selection of content and the enacted curriculum content in the teaching practices.

Teachers' Selection and Recontextualisation of Curriculum Content

When teachers in the social studies subjects were asked about to what extent CSCS decides the selection of content in their teaching, no less than 76 percent answered 'to a very large extent' (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015). In the curriculum, it is clear what curriculum tasks and what core content that must be included in teaching, but teachers still have some room for action; There is no regulation regarding time for a certain curriculum task within the framework of the time plan of the subject. Curriculum tasks can be combined and the teacher can emphasise different parts of the central core content. The knowledge requirements must always be focused, because they provide the basis for assessment and grading (NAE, 2015). From the analysis of the empirical material, we have identified two different, but related, processes in the teachers' selection and recontextualisation of curriculum content. Firstly, a process of recontextualisation where the core content and the abilities within curriculum tasks are transformed in three interlinked phases: a collective phase, an individual phase and a phase in the interaction with the students in the classroom. Secondly, there is a process of content selection conditioned by frame-factors and curriculum tasks within the different subjects.

The first process: Three phases in the selection of content.

The first process identified in the analysis can be characterised by three different phases: a collective phase between the teachers, an individual phase by the teacher and, an interactive phase in the classroom between teacher and students. The CSCS creates specific conditions

for teachers in order to deal with the different curriculum tasks. The collective phase in the selection of content rests on teachers' common work on the local school level. According to the teachers, the dialogue with colleagues is essential, because it provides a support for translating the core content and knowledge requirements. In this respect, the curriculum tasks stated in the specific syllabus is not only recontextualised by a teacher team, but as a teacher describes in the following quote, they may also be shared to other teams:

We have made interpretations of the central core content in the teacher team and then we have shared it with the other school where we have picked out the most important (Teacher 2).

This co-operation extends into other subjects and curriculum tasks as well. An example of how the collective selection of content for the different curriculum tasks is framed and structured is the making of pedagogical plans (PP), which is included in the recommendations from the NAE (2011). The PP can be designed in different ways, but must fulfil the requirements stated in the Education Act and the curriculum. The teacher is responsible for a structured education that help students achieve the goals of the curriculum. A PP can either cover a single curriculum task or a number of curriculum tasks. It must contain the knowledge requirements, the core content, aims and goals, performance of teaching and how and on what foundations the students will be assessed. Below is an example of how knowledge requirements from Civics are articulated in a PP, which encompasses a curriculum task with different themes:

This is what I will assess:

- Your ability to reflect on how individuals and societies are shaped, changed and work together,
 - Your ability to analyse and critically examine topical issues in society,
 - Your ability to apply concepts and analyse societal structures,
 - Your ability to express your opinion about topical issues in society and argue on the basis of facts, values and different perspectives,
 - Your ability to search for information and critically examine it,
 - Your ability to make conclusions from your own knowledge and others' arguments
- (Excerpt from PP3:2).

The knowledge requirements encompass the central core content (concepts, topical issues) and the abilities (e.g. analytical ability, critical examination, argumentation, application of concepts, to draw conclusions). Thus, the abilities to analyse, to perform criticism of sources, to argue and express your opinion, to interpret and to reflect, to communicate and so on, are integrated in the knowledge requirements of all subjects.

The NAE recommendations for a PP underlines increased standardisation as a consequence of the most recent curriculum. In the current study, there are examples of schools that develop a particular model or template for the PP, which becomes a common foundation for the teachers. This how a teacher describes it:

We have a template that we've prepared. Using that template, we have discussed together, you know, like when Anna worked with Religion, the Old and the New Testament, she asked me, 'Can you help me'?/.../And

when she moves on to the next theme, she will make a new PP. So then we have a collection of PP that all look the same (Teacher 3).

Co-operation between teachers in terms of creating a common standard by using a specific template and sharing documents are important aspects of the impact of the standardised knowledge requirements and the differentiation between the school subjects. It is also an example of how teachers deal with practical dimensions of clarity and equity in assessment in relation to CSCS.

The second phase is what is referred to as an individual phase where the curriculum content is recontextualised. The teacher must plan his or her teaching based on individual judgments of for example specific contextual conditions and the specific needs of students. Doyle (1992) calls this ‘authoring’ of curriculum events in order to facilitate the students’ learning. In the individual phase of recontextualisation of a curriculum task, a PP is turned into lesson plans, instructional material and assignments. The following passage from one of the teachers illustrates how this usually is done:

I thoroughly go through what parts of the knowledge requirements I must assess the students on. Based on what I have to assess them on, I check the core content: Which parts do I have to include in order to assess them on this? And from that, I look at the textbook I have and consider what things I have in the textbook that cover those parts. I look at which parts I have to present for the whole group and focus on which parts I can cover a bit less of what’s in the textbook. And finally, I examine what is not fully covered and what I have to add more of, and then I look at the National Agency for Education [refers to the agency’s webpage, authors’ note], for example, old tests and that kind of thing. Then I check out YouTube and other media.
(Teacher 3)

In one of the interviews, a teacher compares the curriculum to a handbook, which he uses ‘to be able to strip away what you really should not do and be able to focus on the things you ought to do’ (Teacher 4).

The textbooks are generally adapted to curriculum tasks and often there are work sheets related to the textbooks and publishers also provide interactive online material like animations, movies, pictures and so on. Different kinds of material play a role for the content in a particular curriculum task. In the quote above – and in the interviews – teachers mention social media, for example Facebook, and the Internet with teacher blogs and teacher communities as sources of inspiration and support in terms of choosing appropriate content. Through the Internet, teachers share PP:s and instructional material; ‘Raw material’ which they can build into their teaching.

The two first phases – the collective phase, and the individual phase – are exclusively teacher-centred. The third phase that is referred to as the recontextualisation of content in the interaction with the students in the classroom is harder to identify and grasp. In the interviews, the teachers rarely refer to situations regarding student influence and participation.

This observation is supported by results from Wahlström & Sundberg's (2015) evaluation study of CSCS: 41 percent of the teachers in the survey thought that the students have very little influence over the content. Only 25 percent of the teachers in social studies agreed in the statement that CSCS grant students great opportunities to influence the teaching content.

The overall impression from the classroom analyses is that students do not influence the selection of content in classroom interaction, apart from spontaneous situations when the teacher gives some space for students to discuss topics that interest them and/or give way for the students' experiences. The students can to a greater extent influence 'how' they would like to work, rather than 'what' they have to work with.

The second process: Collaboration and 'lending' as a strategy.

The second process of content selection identified in this study is conditioned by frame-factors and curriculum tasks within the different subjects. According to recommendations from the NAE, teachers are free to combine curriculum tasks and what core content to emphasise as long as it is included within the time frames of the subject (NAE, 2015). Due to the fact that there are many curriculum tasks and subjects on the schedule, there is an apparent risk for crowding of content and a lack of time. A lot of content has to be included and assessed, indicating that the selection of content is conditioned by time as a frame-factor. In this respect, the standardisation through knowledge requirements and prescribed content in CSCS many times forces the teachers to collaborate, or as a principal describes it:

...if you don't work together in the subjects or on an over-arching level now you become super-stressed. /.../ Maybe the idea is that you will become aware of what's common for the different subjects or to do more themes or more together with the other teachers. (Principal 3)

As suggested in the quote, a result of the standardisation is that co-operation between teachers becomes necessary to handle the large amount of content. They have to manage the situation 'on an over-arching level'. The selection of content does not only occur in the three interlinked phases described in the first process above. Recontextualisation of content also can be distinguished in the second process, where teachers employ a strategy of 'lending' content from curriculum tasks in other subjects and use the required abilities as a kind of 'glue' between the subjects.

The knowledge requirements and abilities provide the basis for assessment and grading in all subjects. This implies that the abilities to analyse, to perform criticism of sources, to argue and express your opinion, to interpret and to reflect, to communicate and so on, are integrated with the core content of a curriculum task. A principal commented her early experiences of working with CSCS in the following way:

Maybe the Arts teacher had to talk with the Maths teacher about how you work with drawings, where you can find a similar view and where you can look at abilities in both subjects. (Principal 2)

Thus, the abilities make it possible to transcend the curriculum tasks and the disciplinary borders of school subjects. A very common subject to 'lend' from is Swedish: 'And it's really good because this comes back in Swedish, this with seeking information and that kind of stuff. So that's where...there I will work with both Swedish and Civics when it concerns this curriculum task' (Teacher 4). A similar example comes in the following quote:

If you try to separate all the subjects—which in no way is a good thing—then you won't have time to go through everything/.../Many times you can weave it together. In Swedish I always try to do so. The Social studies I have kept a bit more apart, but instead you can bring it together. For example, 'Do you remember when we talked about Religion?' And then we move on to History: 'Well, how was it really with Christianity in Sweden?' Then you might do that section faster because you bring in what they've already learnt. (Teacher 3).

The curriculum tasks in the social studies subjects are integrated with each other and the core content in one curriculum task may work as a 'scaffold' for another curriculum task. This transformation of curriculum content through integration may not however only be confined to Swedish and the social studies subjects. The teachers combine curriculum tasks from different subjects:

Teacher: Geography is not only geographical names on a map; it is also phenomena that relates to natural sciences. This is something I sometimes can be made aware of, and they might bring this up in natural sciences as well, but there are somewhat different perspectives there, for example, the water cycle and so on. (Teacher 3)

Interviewer: What parts of the curriculum intersect here?

Teacher: Above all Civics and Geography, and then some History as well. We talk about the Yellow River and the Nile and then History is made tangible for the students. (Teacher 3)

To conclude: The curriculum CSCS makes a clear distinction between the different subjects and the knowledge requirements of the curriculum tasks are at the heart of the recontextualisation of the curriculum content. However, even if such boundaries between the subjects are emphasised, the CSCS pushes the selection of academic disciplinary knowledge in an interdisciplinary direction. Frame factors – primarily time – and the crowding of content 'forces' teachers to collaborate. This recontextualisation occurs through the 'lending' of content from different curriculum tasks, where the abilities become intermediating factors.

Concluding Comments

CSCS is to a great extent influenced by a standards-based tradition (Null, 2011; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). Both teachers and principals in our study consider the core content and the knowledge requirements to be central, and together with frame-factors – mainly time – they have an impact on the selection of content. At the same time, the recontextualisation of content is an active social process of translation and transformation that implies elaborations, negotiations, diffusions, translations, appropriations and rejections (Bernstein, 2000; cpr Doyle, 1992). Teachers' transformation of curriculum content and their 'authoring' of

curriculum events in the classroom (Doyle, 1992) can be described as i) a recontextualisation process with three interlinked phases – a collective, an individual and an ‘interactive’ selection with students in the classroom, and ii) a recontextualisation process of ‘lending’ and combining content in different curriculum tasks for finding synergies and saving time.

Due to the content standards of the curriculum, teachers struggle with a crowding of content and they are under pressure to fit different curriculum tasks into an over-arching plan for the whole semester. If teaching in different subjects does not keep pace with each other, the teachers might get problems to assess the students’ knowledge and abilities according to the knowledge requirements within the ‘time slot’ reserved for each subject. Here, the abilities in the knowledge requirements become important. Teachers use them to interlink curriculum tasks in the social studies subjects and between other subjects. Teachers focus on central concepts in the curriculum tasks, derived from academic disciplines, while they at the same time employ a strategy to patch subjects and their specific content together. By doing this, they seek synergies for assessing the students’ abilities and performance – together with content knowledge – by ‘lending’ between the subjects.

A part of the content standardisation in the curriculum CSCS is a differentiation between and an emphasis on the disciplinary borders of academic subjects. At the same time, CSCS pushes the selection of academic disciplinary knowledge in an interdisciplinary direction. Time as a frame factor and the crowding of content ‘forces’ teachers to collaborate. This collaboration occurs through the ‘lending’ of content from different curriculum tasks, where the abilities become intermediating factors. In this respect, there is an interdisciplinary dimension in the Swedish curriculum that not primarily is based on pedagogical assumptions or ideas about ‘good teaching’. Instead it seems to be different frame factors, not least the composition of the curriculum, crowding of content and teachers’ time constraint, that push the selection of content in such a direction. This might also explain why students have little participation in deciding ‘what’ they should work with, while they seem to have somewhat more influence on ‘how’ they would like to work. An obvious reason is that teachers avoid what might distract and lead the attention away from the prescribed content and knowledge requirements. Such a distraction is, from the logic of a standards based oriented curriculum like CSCS, something that would not benefit either teachers’ work or students’ ability to reach the knowledge requirements in the curriculum.

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