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Carl-Henrik Adolfsson

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## Upgraded curriculum? An analysis of knowledge boundaries in teaching under the Swedish subject-based curriculum\*

Carl-Henrik Adolffsson 

The Department of Educational Research, Linneaus University, Kalmar, Sweden

### ABSTRACT

This article offers a contribution to the current debate about knowledge and the curriculum, especially initiated by social realist writers. The enacted Swedish subject-based curriculum for compulsory schooling is examined and is also used as a significant case with the aim of discussing practical implications of social realist claims regarding knowledge and the curriculum. Video-recorded lessons from grade six in six different Swedish schools, in combination with teacher interviews, are explored within the scope of a curriculum theory framework with the purpose of illuminating dominant patterns of knowledge boundaries and knowledge conceptions. The study shows how the Swedish subject-based curriculum frames teaching in a direction where a disciplinary knowledge conception with fixed knowledge boundaries predominates over other knowledge forms. The subject-based curriculum also appears to produce an 'overloading' of content, which implies that pupils' questions and experiences are avoided and dismissed in the teaching practice.

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, a number of curriculum trends can be distinguished in contemporary international educational policy. Priestley and Sinnema (2014) discuss these trends in terms of 'curricula turn' or 'the new curriculum'. Even if these trends vary in form and content from country to country, it is still possible to identify some common features. The first trend within this 'new curriculum' is described as a movement away from prescribed subject-based curricula towards competence-based curricula. With a clear economic undertone in combination with a discourse of 'lifelong learning', this movement is strongly reinforced, by such international education policy actors as the OECD and the EU (OECD, 2011). The second trend, according to Priestley and Sinnema (2014), is an increasing focus on the centrality of the learner and an emphasis on active forms of pedagogy. In line with progressive pedagogical ideas, students' interests, experiences and pace of learning are regarded, from this point of view, as crucial elements of the curriculum. Among other things, the primary aim of this learner-centred focus is to place the responsibility for the learning path in

**CONTACT** Carl-Henrik Adolffsson  [carl-henrik.adolffsson@lnu.se](mailto:carl-henrik.adolffsson@lnu.se)

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the hands of the students (Sinnema & Aitken, 2013). Finally, the third international curriculum trend can be described as a movement towards standards-based and outcome-based curricula (Sinnema & Aitken, 2013). In terms of prescribed learning outcomes, top-down accountability and specified assessment criteria, the state sets the standards for teaching and learning, with the aim of improving students' equality and achievement (Andersson-Levitt, 2008; Hamilton, Stecher, Marsh, McCombs & Robyn, 2007).

At the same time, it is worth noting that this change in the international landscape of curriculum trends has undergone a lot of criticism. In particular, social realist writers like Young (2008), Young & Muller (2015), Young & Muller (2010), Rata (2012) and others have thoroughly criticised this 'new curriculum' for what they consider a 'downgrading' of knowledge. Regardless of what one thinks about the question as such, discussions about curriculum and knowledge have actualised one of the most fundamental questions in curriculum theory, curriculum making and teaching: 'What should count as knowledge?' What knowledge is the most valuable and desirable, and what kinds of knowledge should be included and excluded in the curriculum and in teaching? (Deng & Luke, 2008). This article offers an empirical contribution to this contemporary discussion. In light of the social realist critique, and using the recent Swedish subject-based curriculum for compulsory schooling (Läroplan för grundskolan 2011, henceforth Lgr 11) as a significant case, the overarching aim is to examine the question of knowledge from a classroom perspective.

### ***The question of knowledge from a social realist perspective***

As mentioned above, social realists have strongly criticised contemporary international curriculum development for disparaging discipline-based knowledge. In contrast, they argue for the existence of rational, objective and, therefore, universal knowledge, available to all. The curriculum should, therefore, be subject-based and should rest on established discipline-oriented concepts and upon facts which are differentiated from the experiences students bring to school (Young, 2010). When it comes to the construction of the curriculum, this perspective provides an emphasis on the 'irreducible differentiatedness of knowledge' (Young & Muller, 2015, p. 68), which implies:

- a distinction between curricula and pedagogy;
- clear boundaries between knowledge domains and between school and non-school knowledge;
- differentiation between 'theoretical' and 'everyday' concepts;
- epistemological constraints on the scope of policies for widening participation and promoting social inclusion;
- the 'objective' basis of the authority and professionalism of teachers and other experts;
- the limitations of 'generic skills' and competences as a model for 'general education'; and
- the emphasis of 'subject-specific content' and the importance of distinguishing between 'subject content' and 'information'.

From that perspective, subject-specific concepts become crucial in the way they are treated as reliable tools for enabling students to acquire knowledge and make sense of

the surrounding world. However, these concepts must be linked to the content of facts which give them meaning and to the activities involved in acquiring them (Young, 2013).

The fundamental problem with contemporary international curriculum trends is the existing loose boundaries between subjects, on the one hand, and subject-specific knowledge (school knowledge) and everyday (or common sense) knowledge, on the other. From this social realist point of departure, the competence-based curricula trend is criticised for its univocal instrumental focus on students' future citizenship and working life, its interdisciplinary approach, and at the same time its lack of a theoretical basis or a link to established disciplinary knowledge. The learner-centred curriculum, in turn, is questioned for its emphasis on students' experiences and interests. The consequence becomes, according to the social theoretical point of view, a blurring of the distinction between everyday and disciplinary knowledge, which, in turn, tends to end up in knowledge relativism, where students' everyday experiences are equated with scientific disciplinary knowledge (Young, 2008). Such a curriculum risks denying students access to central evidence-based 'powerful knowledge' (Rata, 2012; Young, 2013) which enables students to be taken beyond their own experience and contextual understanding. This potential result particularly implies negative consequences for students who come from homes with low social and cultural capital.

From that point of view, Young and Muller (2010) discuss three different scenarios, or futures, with respect to how knowledge boundaries might be approached, and with what consequences, in the curriculum and teaching. In the so-called Future 1 curriculum, the knowledge boundaries are treated as given and fixed. This implies a highly given and unquestionable curriculum content which prescribes to the last detail what the pupils should learn. For Young and Muller (2010), such an approach implies an 'undersocialised' concept of knowledge, which in turn is the very opposite of the so-called Future 2 curriculum. This curriculum can be regarded as a social constructivist response to the first conservative, static model. The Future 2 model is characterised by a 'boundary-less' curriculum when it comes to the relationships both between subjects and between school and everyday knowledge. According to Young and Muller (2010), such an approach tends, in turn, to end up in an 'oversocialised' concept of knowledge. The authors argue that both approaches are strongly problematical, so they offer a third alternative, the so-called Future 3 model. Future 3 emphasises the continuing role of boundaries, not as given entities but in defining domain-specific knowledge (see the discussion above). To the discussion about Future 3, Young and Muller link the concept of *powerful knowledge*, which refers to the theoretical and discipline-grounded knowledge pupils should acquire in school. This, in turn, enables pupils, taking them beyond their own experiences and everyday common sense (Young, 2013).

Based on the discussion above, it becomes clear that a central aspect of the 'question of knowledge' is about knowledge boundaries, in this case particularly in terms of how the boundaries between subjects and between school knowledge and non-school knowledge should be constituted and handled in the curriculum and teaching. That is, different forms of knowledge boundaries will create different forms of knowledge conceptions. In light of the theoretical points of departure of social realism, the focus will therefore be continuously directed to the boundaries of knowledge, but from a classroom perspective.

Below, it is argued that there are some crucial convergences between the recent Swedish subject-based curriculum and the social realistic approach, which makes the Swedish

curriculum an interesting case. However, first, the aim and the research questions of the article will be presented.

### **Aim and research questions**

The aim of this article is to examine the enactment of the recent Swedish subject-based curriculum from a classroom perspective. A study was conducted using video-recorded teaching in six different grade-six social studies classrooms (civics, history, religion and geography) in one school year in Sweden, in light of the social realist writers' critique of the 'new curriculum'. Having done this, it is possible in the next step to examine and discuss conceivable practical implications of social realist claims regarding the curriculum and knowledge. More specifically, in a subject-based curriculum like the recent Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling:

- How are the boundaries of knowledge constituted in the teaching?
- What dominant patterns of knowledge appear in the same teaching?
- In addition, as a supplementary question: what practical implications may a social theorist perspective on the curriculum and knowledge have on teaching practice?

### ***The Swedish curriculum as a significant case***

When looking at the Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling (Lgr 11) in light of the current international curriculum movement, one finds some convergence but most of all, some crucial divergences. I will therefore argue that Swedish curriculum developments in the past decade have in many ways partly taken an opposite direction, compared to this 'new curriculum', towards a more subject-based curriculum. The social realist approach and critique against the new curriculum makes the Swedish curriculum an interesting case. Besides clear influences of the standards-based policy movement, especially in terms of strengthened national knowledge standards, assessment criteria and a predefined knowledge corpus (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017; Wahlström, 2016), the Swedish curriculum diverges from the international curriculum movement in a number of central respects (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016).

One example of such salient divergence is that the discourse of cross-curricular and generic competences does not have a prominent place in the current Swedish curriculum. In this curriculum, you find so-called 'knowledge abilities' which could be seen as corresponding to what is meant by the concepts of 'skills' or 'competences'. Nevertheless, there are some crucial differences compared, for example, to the EU and OECD so-called *key competences*. The latter have more of a dispositional character, which means that besides learning the competences as such, the learner should also develop motivations, emotions and attitudes which will promote a readiness and willingness to use them appropriately in a range of contexts and situations (Sinnema & Aitken, 2013). Despite strong pressure from the OECD and EU that national education systems should place competencies at the very core of any curriculum, this meaning of 'abilities' is not found in the Swedish Lgr 11. Instead, the 'abilities' in Lgr 11 are much narrower and more subject-oriented, which implies that these, unlike the key competences within transnational policy, constitute an integral part of subject matter-oriented content. This is also a clear difference compared to the former

Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling from 1994 (Lpo 94), where one found an opposite curriculum structure with a great emphasis on generic, non-subject-specific competences in favour of the traditional subject matter (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016).

A similar shift between the former and the present Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling, and at the same time a second divergence due to the international 'new curriculum', comprises the prescription for student influence on the teaching and the teaching content. The former curriculum, Lpo94 (The National Agency for Education, 1994), was to a high degree influenced by a sociocultural knowledge approach, which stipulated that the students' own experiences and interests should provide an important basis for the teaching. In the current Swedish curriculum, Lgr 11, this student-centred approach is not emphasised in the same way. Instead, the current curriculum is to a high-degree subject-based, with the emphasis on subject-based knowledge standards and subject-oriented facts and concepts (Adolfsson, 2013). This means that every single subject syllabus has its own defined learning outcomes and core content and its own assessment criteria (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012).

The political argument from the former right-wing government which lies behind the present curriculum for compulsory schooling in Sweden was that the long tradition of social democratic government in Sweden had led to what they argued was a crisis in the Swedish school system. A weakening of subject knowledge among students had become visible in the form of successive decreased results in different international knowledge measurements, for example, PISA and TIMSS, and a decreased equality between schools. A greater emphasis on subject-based knowledge standards and clear assessment criteria would solve these problems and would, in turn, promote the democratic function of schooling (Government Bill 2007:28; Government Bill 2008/2009:87). To ensure the quality of the teaching and the professionalism of the teachers, a revision of the Swedish Education Act was also carried out in 2010. This revision stipulated, among other things, that all teaching would rest on a scientific basis and that all students had the right to be taught by an educated and legitimised teacher (Swedish Education Act, 2010:800).

If we return to the social realists' discussion of the subject-based curriculum, the recent Swedish curriculum discourse corresponded to their claims in some central parts. One primarily thinks of aspects of the Swedish curriculum such as (1) an emphasis on subject-oriented concepts; (2) prescribed subject-based content; (3) clear boundaries between school subjects; (4) a subordination of generic competences to subject-specific abilities; (5) a research-based teacher profession and (6) the argument that equality between schools is attained through common research-based curriculum content.

This does not mean that the Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling is completely consistent with the social realists' claims about what they regard as a 'good curriculum'. However, some crucial convergences imply that if one is interested in examining possible practical implications of a subject-based curriculum, the enacted Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling may constitute a feasible case.

### ***Theorising the curriculum and school subjects***

In this study, the formation of content in teaching is examined from a curriculum theory perspective. The overarching aim in curriculum theory is to acquire knowledge about how goals, content and didactics are formed within educational processes and how these are

embedded into society (Pinar, 2004; Lundgren, 1989). An important perspective, that especially has been developed in the Nordic countries, within the curriculum theory tradition is the so-called 'frame factor theory' (Dahllöf, 1967; Lundgren, 1972). The 'frame factor theory' was developed to examine factors which lie beyond the direct control of the teacher but which, at the same time, create conditions for the processes and outcomes of the teaching. From such a perspective, it is crucial to bring external frame factors, such as time, the composition of the class, the structure of the curriculum and so on into the analysis of the enactment of the curriculum. At the same time, it is also important to emphasise that there is no strict causality between a specific frame and a specific outcome. Instead, in this study, frame factors are understood as external factors which enable or limit the teaching process and its outcomes.

### **Analytical concepts to illuminate patterns of knowledge in teaching**

When it comes to illuminating and distinguishing patterns of knowledge boundaries and knowledge conceptions, some theoretical concepts are necessary. Deng and Luke (2008) make three general distinctions about different knowledge classification schemes which provide an analytical framework suitable for this study.

The first knowledge distinction is called a *disciplinary conception of knowledge*. This knowledge conception is characterised by putting facts, concepts and methods, linked to a specific academic discipline, in the foreground (Deng & Luke, 2008). 'Good' knowledge is characterised as being external, objective and impersonal in contrast to subjective experiences and apprehensions).

The second conception of knowledge is the *practical conception of knowledge*, defined in terms of '...knowing what to do in practices and actions, with an emphasis on the application of knowledge to practical and sociocultural problems' (Deng & Luke, 2008, p. 69). Such knowledge can range from the very practical, for instance, being able to repair a pair of jeans, to a complex cognitive activity such as programming computer software. This, in turn, means that knowledge cannot be reduced to a specific set of skills, because it also involves good judgement and the capacity to make right decisions depending on the specific situation and context (Deng & Luke, 2008).

The third alternative notion of knowledge is an *experiential conception of knowledge* (Deng & Luke, 2008). Instead of seeing knowledge as something separated from humans, as the first academic disciplinary conception does, the experiential conception '...locates knowledge in the realm of ordinary human experience' (Deng & Luke, 2008, p. 69). From this perspective, knowledge is not a final product but a process in terms of an ongoing construction of meaning between an actor and her environment and other actors.

With the aim of distinguishing dominant patterns of knowledge and how knowledge boundaries are constituted in the empirical material in the present study, these three knowledge conceptions will serve as analytical tools. However, some methodological aspects and considerations must first be discussed.

## **Methodology**

This study is part of a broader research project, 'Understanding Curriculum Reforms – A Theory-Oriented Evaluation of the Swedish Curriculum Reform Lgr 11'. The overarching

aim of that project was to evaluate the enactment and consequences of the recent Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling. Within the scope of this project, a mixed-method approach was used, and an extensive amount of data, both quantitative and qualitative, was collected at different levels of the school system.

This specific study is drawn from data from 71 social studies classroom observations in six classes, all in school year six, at six different schools. In each school, 12 lessons were video-recorded, and the data collection period covered a full school year (2015/2016). After some of the lessons, the video-recordings were followed up by interviews (post-video-analysis) with teachers ( $n = 24$ ) in the selected classes.

The schools in the study represent both urban and rural areas with differences in socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. They also differ when it comes to more traditional and alternatively organised teaching. Each school was followed for a school year, which also made it possible to contextually place the classroom studies within the structure, organisation and culture of the school, and in the context of the local authority.

### Data analyses

In the 'broader' research project, the analyses of the classroom observations followed a code scheme comprising three differentiated aspects of the teaching (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017). The first aspect focussed on patterns of *organisational repertoires* in the classrooms and the second on *pedagogical repertoires* in teaching, while the third aspect of the code scheme was directed to patterns of *content*. Due to the aim of this study, the focus hence lies on the latter aspect, meaning that the code scheme in Table 1 was used.

In the coding work, every explicit code was concretised with a short description of the current lesson content. It is important to note that several of these codes could apply at the same time to the same teaching sequence. For example, the content in a specific teaching sequence could simultaneously be characterised as being both fact- and consensus-oriented as well as taken from a textbook.

Inspired by a qualitative content analysis approach (Bryman, 2012; Schreier, 2012), the analysis followed a two-step procedure. In the first phase, all 71 coding schemes were analysed with the aim of elucidating patterns of teaching content. Based on this mapping, in the next step, central teaching sequences were selected and analysed more deeply in

**Table 1.** Code scheme regarding the character of teaching content – video observations of classroom teaching.

	Code
1a)	The content deals with general issues or questions
b)	The content deals with specific issues or questions
2a)	Content as academic or/and fact-oriented
b)	Content as moral/ethical issues
c)	Content as generic competences or skills
3a)	Content is taken from textbook
b)	Content is taken from website
c)	Content is taken from other teaching material
d)	Content is taken from students' daily lives, experiences and questions
4a)	The content is presented as consensus-oriented
b)	The content is presented as conflict-oriented, where more than one perspective is discussed
5a)	The content is presented as something that is useful for the future
	The content is presented as 'eruditeness' — 'as something you should know'

relation to the theoretical points of departure of the study. In this phase of the analysis, data from the teacher interviews were also used to get a picture of teachers' perspectives on the current teaching and on their selection of content. In relation to current central frame factors, the aim of this second step was thus to examine boundaries of knowledge as well as which knowledge conceptions appeared in the teaching and with what implications.

## The analysis

### *Fixed knowledge boundaries with a defined subject matter content*

During the analysis of the lesson protocols and video-recorded lessons, some patterns regarding the teaching content become apparent. First and foremost, the teaching content is characterised to a high degree as being strongly framed by the school subjects in terms of subject-oriented facts and concepts. In other words, an explicit and predefined corpus of content exists which every student should acquire from a certain lesson or curriculum unit. Two short examples from two different lessons in two different schools may concretise how such fixed knowledge boundaries appear in teaching practice. The first involves a history lesson about shifts in power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Sweden. In the sequence below, the teacher instructs the students about the period when Gustav Vasa took power in Sweden.

#### *Sequence 1*

[The teacher stands in front of the class with the textbook in his hand]

Teacher: Gustav Vasa became king 1523, 6 June. His first job...actually, he grounded Sweden. There was now a sense of nationality among people; earlier, it was not important if you were a Swede or anything. It was much more important which family you came from. Therefore, he started to build up different administrative authorities and stuff, and he made himself quite strong. He was from the 'council' from the beginning; he belonged to the nobility, and he was no real king.

Peter: He died in some way, or it was something that happened?

[The teacher ignores or does not hear the question from the pupil. Instead, he turns around and starts to write on the whiteboard. He draws a timeline and writes 'Gustav Vasa'. He points to the line.]

Teacher: This line illustrates the one who, at the time, had the power...

The other sequence is chosen from a civics lesson about the economic system in Sweden and serves as a second example of how subject-matter- and fact-oriented content is expressed in teaching. In this sequence, the teacher stands in front of the class and asks questions from a study booklet which the students have worked with in the previous lesson.

#### *Sequence 2*

Teacher: Where does all the state's money come from?

Johanna: Taxes.

Teacher: Yes, that is right, and different kinds of taxes exist — they can be income taxes, corporate income, car taxes and payroll taxes. All these together go to the nation's treasure chest. Moreover, the money is distributed to municipalities and county councils.

Teacher: And after that, what is the money used for?

Tom: Healthcare, infrastructure...

Teacher: Yes, for example, but even education, police and the library...that is where the money goes.

These examples give us a glimpse of the character of this subject- and fact-oriented teaching content. This kind of content is primarily characterised as informative and objective and aims to give the students as true and objective a picture of as possible. With such content, the textbook seems to become crucial, not least when it comes to selecting, concretising and defining which subject-matter- and fact-oriented content should be regarded as significant in the scope of a lesson or a curriculum unit.

In close relation to and interspersed with the fact-oriented subject-matter content, the analysis of the coding schemes points to the fact that teachers therefore pay considerable attention to subject-specific concepts. Many of the interviewed teachers described these concepts as a form of fundamental of the teaching content: 'If the students are not aware of the concepts, it will be impossible for them to keep up with the teaching' (Teacher 3). Another teacher describes how she integrates central conceptions into the ordinary teaching content:

I try continuously to use difficult conceptions in my teaching...and at the same time define them. Take the concept 'cremation' as an example. If I just say 'cremation', nobody will understand, but if I continuously explain the meaning of the concepts at the same time, I think they eventually will learn. The curriculum emphasis is that we use the subject-specific concepts in the teaching. (Teacher 2)

Just as the teacher above underlines, the emphasis of subject-oriented concepts is in line with the intentions of the current curriculum for compulsory schooling. An empirical example from a civics lesson can serve as an illustrative example of the centrality of the concepts. In the current sequence, the teacher begins the lesson by repeating what they had talked about in the previous lesson and which central concepts then stood in focus.

### *Sequence 3*

Teacher: What did we talk about more?

Catrine: We talked about goods and services.

Teacher: Exactly, we talked about goods and services. These concepts, goods and services, are a little bit tricky...You can produce something that you cannot touch. And in line with what you said, goods and services are examples of different concepts that are important to learn.

[The teacher asks a question rhetorically]

Teacher: A good or a service — what does it really mean? That is the question when you talk about concepts like these.

Teacher: We also talked about where people are working most of all in Sweden.

Benjamin: The public sector.

Teacher: Yes, and where can you work within the PUBLIC SECTOR?

Lisa: In a hospital and places like that.

From the excerpt above, we thus see the close link between the concepts and the current subject matter content. It is obvious how the Swedish subject-based curriculum, Lgr 11, frames the teaching content in a distinct way in the direction of, on the one hand, a domination of subject-oriented facts and, on the other hand, an emphasis on subject-oriented concepts. The boundaries between the subjects are hence quite fixed. Altogether, in combination with a close connection to the corresponding academic disciplines, this points to an *academic disciplinary knowledge conception* (Deng & Luke, 2008) comprising an important part of the teaching content.

Teaching which focusses on central subject-oriented facts and concepts is completely in line with both the official Swedish curriculum and the social realist claims about the curriculum. However, a challenge for the teachers in the investigated empirical material of this study seems to be the great amount of curriculum content which must be processed and assessed within the scope of each curriculum unit. In teacher interviews, several teachers describe this phenomenon in terms of a ‘crowding of content’ or an ‘overloaded curriculum’. Even Strandler’s (2017) study of social studies teaching in Sweden points in similar direction: ‘All the teachers perceived the new core content to be extensive, while the time available for social studies teaching was perceived as scarce’ (p. 61). When examining the empirical material, one consequence of this overloaded curriculum seems to be that little time is available to stop and discuss a specific phenomenon more deeply. Similarly, the overloaded curriculum frames the teaching in such a way that little time can be given to practising the application and ‘use’ of these facts and theoretical concepts in other non-school-related events and dilemmas. This will be further discussed in a later section of the article.

### ***Knowledge abilities within the scope of fixed knowledge boundaries***

Closely related to the discussion about applying theoretical knowledge in real-life conditions is the question of competences and skills. As discussed previously, one main social realist critique against contemporary international curriculum trends is the movement away from subject-based to competence-based curricula. Examining the subject syllabus within the scope of the Swedish curriculum, you find different forms of so-called ‘abilities’, such as source criticism, information retrieval on the computer and performing analyses, comparisons or argumentation, which pupils should acquire through the teaching. These abilities have a distinct link to the knowledge requirements in each subject syllabus and are therefore of special importance when it comes to examinations and enabling students to acquire higher grades on the grading scale. Several teachers in the interviews also emphasised this, for example: ‘There are all these abilities that you should work with in the teaching. That you try to cover so many abilities as possible in your planning of a curriculum unit’ (Teacher 5).

However, when analysing the curriculum and the teaching practice from the recorded material, one rarely finds these abilities disconnected from the subjects. That is, the ability, as such, does not constitute the basis of the teaching content; rather, it is integrated into the subject content. For example, in a curriculum task about geography, the students worked in smaller groups with a task aimed at their making explanations and showing causality. In the following example, the students were to answer why and in what ways trees could protect people from earth flow. After the students had worked with the task

during, at most, half of a lesson, each group had to present their answers for the rest of the class. In the sequence below, Sara has just presented her group's answers, and the teacher is now commenting on and assessing these answers:

### **Sequence 4**

Teacher: The first thing you mentioned was that the trees' roots in the mark help the soil to remain in the earth, which in turn decreases the risk of earth flow.

Pupils in the group: Yees.

Teacher: Then we have one explanation and one causality. Attention, please! Then you said that the trees get in the way so stones and soil cannot fall down. They protect houses from being damaged.

Teacher: So, now we have two explanations and two causalities. That is very good!

Pupils in the group: Yeea!

This excerpt thus shows an example of how knowledge abilities are handled within the Swedish subject-based curriculum. Significantly, as mentioned before, teaching is not primarily organised thematically, where a specific competence or skill dominates the school subjects. Rather, the current ability, i.e. the ability to make explanations and point to causalities, is clearly defined within a specified limited subject matter. That is, the knowledge boundaries are strong, which implies that the subjects constitute the main unit of the curriculum. Related to the theoretical framework of knowledge conceptions, we thus see how a variant of a *practical knowledge conception* can be distinguished in the teaching practice but how this conception, at the same time, is strongly framed by an *academic disciplinary knowledge conception*.

### **Pupil-oriented content under a subject-based curriculum**

As discussed initially, one main critique by social realist writers against the contemporary curriculum movement is the increased focus on learner-centred teaching. The problem with such a curriculum trend, according to the social realists, is a weakening of boundaries between school and non-school knowledge, which in turn risks the impoverishment of the curriculum and teaching content. A central question, from that point of view, is how pupil-oriented teaching content, for example, in terms of students' experiences, questions and interests, is handled by the teacher under the Swedish subject-based curriculum. Therefore, two excerpts from the recorded lessons will first be discussed.

We start with a sequence from a civics lesson about private economy. The teaching content in this example encompasses household incomes and expenditures, with an explicit focus on the allowance system.

### **Sequence 5: private economy**

[The teacher stands in front of the class and reads aloud from the textbook]

[A student, here called Lisa, has been sitting and thinking for a while; she raises her hand with a question.]

Lisa: But should you really give money to beggars?

[An intensive discussion starts among some of the pupils in the class]

Salah: No, I do not do that!

Peter: No, because someone drops the beggars of and forces them to beg for money, and after, they take all the money...

Teacher: Ssssssh.

[The pupils continue to discuss this]

Teacher: Ssssssh.

[The teacher turns against the whiteboard and points]

Teacher: Here we have an example of a family that lives in a house...

Lisa: But if they really need the money?

[Some of the pupils continue the discussion]

[The teacher looks at one of them]

Teacher: Martin! From now, I do not want to be interrupted!

In the example above, an ethical dilemma was initiated and discussed by some of the pupils. Worth noting is that in Sweden, at that time, this was a very topical question. Many beggars, especially from Hungary and Romania, had come to Sweden to beg, and a central question in the debate at the time was how the situation should be handled. Yet even if the topic, initiated by the pupil, could have been regarded as relevant and adequate in the way it pointed to an important ethical question, the teacher did not build on the students' ideas and thoughts. Instead, the discussion was concluded and ended by the teacher moving on with the intended lesson plan.

A sequence from a geography lesson in another school serves as a second example of a similar teaching pattern. The lesson is about the world map and different country locations and how they are located in relation to each other. The teacher stands in front of the class and shows on a big world map, which hangs from the ceiling, where people in the world mostly live.

## *Sequence 6*

[A student, here called Anna, thoroughly studies the map, and after a while, she raises her hand with a question]

Anna: In Australia, you find one of the most dangerous animals in the world...but New Zealand, or whatever it's called, is located really close...but why are there no dangerous animals there?

Mohammed: You are wrong, dangerous animals surely exist there.

Anna: No, no poisonous snakes! My mom said that!

[A discussion starts in the class]

Teacher: Ehh...I do not know if this really is relevant, maybe it is...it is all about the different latitudes that the countries are located on. Poisonous snakes need a warmer climate, and in New Zealand it is not very warm.

Anna: Yes, but the countries are really close to each other?

Teacher: Yes, but not so close...you can search on the Internet about this, you know, you can find everything there.

[Linda, who has been sitting quietly and studying the map points to it]

Linda: But in Thailand there are a lot of poisonous animals, and that country is not so far down on the map as New Zealand.

[Once again, a discussion starts in the class]

[The teacher hushes the students]

Teacher: We have to go on now!

[Anna makes a last attempt to get an answer to her question]

Anna: But can't we ask John? (The researcher in the project who, at that moment, was sitting outside the classroom)

Teacher: OK, everybody; take a look at this table now!

Once again, we see an example of how a teacher avoids what can be considered a relevant question and instead continues with the current teaching plan. A given question, then, is what factors lie behind such actions by teachers. Once again, as in the previous discussion, a central factor seems to be the 'overloaded curriculum'. Even when it comes to students' questions and interests, teachers have to find teaching strategies to manage these in relation to a large amount of curriculum content in combination with limited teaching time. An interviewed teacher expresses how one, as a teacher, might handle these frame factors:

In a curriculum task, it can be good to let them talk a little bit about something they already know, but it can degenerate, and then you have to get the discussion back on track again. (Teacher 6)

The two sequences above give us some examples of how the explicit boundaries between school subjects and 'non-school knowledge', in terms of students' experiences and questions, are constituted in the examined teaching practice. The knowledge boundaries are distinct and clear, not only between the different subjects but also between the school subjects and 'non-school knowledge'. In turn, this conclusion can be related to the results from a recently conducted large-scale evaluation of the implementation of the Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling. In a teacher survey ( $n = 1887$ ), teachers in the social studies subjects were asked to what extent Lgr 11 determines the selection of content in their teaching. No less than 76% answered 'to a very large extent' (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015). In sum, this points to how the Swedish subject-based curriculum to a great extent frames the content in such a way that the knowledge boundaries are maintained, both between the subjects and between the school subjects and 'non-school knowledge'. That, in turn, means that an 'experiential knowledge conception' (Deng & Luke, 2008) seems to play a subordinated role in the enacted Swedish curriculum.

In Young's (2010) discussion about the relationship between 'theoretical' experiences and students' 'everyday' experiences, he emphasises:

This does not mean that the everyday concepts that students bring to school are not important, but rather that they should be a pedagogical resource for teachers (and for students) not a goal of the curriculum. (p. 17)

However, one implication of the crowding of content in combination with strong subject boundaries in the Swedish curriculum seems to be that teachers do not even have time to use the students' everyday experiences and questions as a pedagogical resource. I aim to deepen that discussion in the final part of the article but will first highlight an empirical finding which in some way points in another, even contradictive direction compared to the previous results.

### ***An interdisciplinary aspect of the Swedish subject-based curriculum***

As discussed above, teachers' neglecting of pupil-oriented content seems to be a strategy by which to handle the great amount of content which must be included and assessed within the scope of a specific curriculum unit. But an examination of the empirical material also shows how the teachers use another strategy which, in many ways, goes in an opposite direction to the principle behind the subject-based curriculum.

As a way to save time, teachers sometimes choose to work across the subject boundaries. One teacher justifies this interdisciplinary approach in this way:

If you try to separate all the subjects, which in no way is a good thing — then you will not have time to go through everything... Many times you can weave it together. Then you might do that section faster, because you bring in what they've already learnt. (Teacher 3)

That means that despite these clear boundaries between the subjects, the 'overloaded curriculum', in combination with time constraints on teaching, pushes the teachers in a cross-subject direction where they are 'forced' to collaborate across subject boundaries. This interdisciplinary way of working across the subject boundaries primarily occurs through the 'borrowing' of content between different subjects. This means that when the students practise and are assessed on specific content in one subject, the teacher can take advantage of this work in the assessment of other subject content. Fore and foremost, the teachers seem to work in an interdisciplinary way between their 'own' teaching subjects, for example, between the different subjects within the social studies. However, the overloaded curriculum may also 'force' a collaboration between teachers:

I think you will hold on more to the specific subjects in the beginning, before you are familiar with the subject matter... However, in the long term, we have to cooperate more, especially those of us who teach many parallel subjects. If not, we will not cope with them. (Teacher 3)

These two quotes point out that it is primarily aspects of rationality and efficiency which lie behind teachers' decisions to work across subject boundaries and collaborate with teacher colleagues. In this respect, there is an interdisciplinary dimension in the Swedish subject-based curriculum, but it is not primarily based on pedagogical assumptions or ideas about 'good teaching'. Instead, it seems to be different frame factors, such as an 'overloaded curriculum' in combination with teachers' time constraints, which sometimes push the teaching in such a direction.

### **Conclusion**

Here I will sum up some of the central empirical findings and, in light of the social realist perspective on knowledge and the curriculum, will discuss potential classroom-level

implications of a subject-based curriculum. Based on the analysis of the recorded lessons, it is noticeable how an *academic disciplinary knowledge conception*, in terms of clear subject boundaries between the school subjects and between school knowledge and non-school knowledge, constitutes a dominant pattern in the teaching content. I have shown how, in different ways, this knowledge conception predominates over other forms of knowledge. Based on the structure of the Swedish curriculum, where the subjects constitute an important basis of the curriculum, this may not be surprising. Following the social realist claims about a 'good' curriculum and 'good knowledge', this means that the curriculum development in Sweden, against a more subject-based curriculum, should count in many ways as an 'upgrading' of the curriculum, as such, as well as of the teaching content, both in light of the previous Swedish curriculum for compulsory schooling but also in relation to the contemporary international curriculum movement initially described.

One main argument from social realist writers is that a subject-based curriculum creates conditions in which pupils can develop what these writers call *powerful knowledge* (Young, 2013). From the social realist perspective, this is defined as knowledge which enables pupils by taking them beyond their own experiences and, in that way, creating conditions for them to better understand and act in the world (Young, 2013). Therefore, powerful knowledge cannot originate or be based in pupils' own experience but rather in discipline-based knowledge. An important point, according to Young (2013) and Rata (2012), is that access to this powerful knowledge should be a right for all and not just for the few in society. This social inclusion ambition also marks an important difference between what Young and Muller (2010) term the Future 1 and Future 3 of schooling.

In the investigated video-recorded lessons, it is obvious how the teachers put great emphasis on getting pupils to learn subject-oriented facts, concepts and abilities. However, applying, using and relating this theoretical knowledge to pupils' own experiences and questions, as a way for the pupils to better understand the surrounding society, does not seem to occur to the same extent. That is, a great emphasis in social studies teaching is directed to teaching pupils about the society's central structures and functions. Yet at the same time, pupils have few opportunities to discuss different perspectives on societal phenomena, potential underlying societal problems or conflicts. Whether or not this is seen as a problem basically relies on how one answers the fundamental 'knowledge question', i.e. 'What should count as knowledge?' And if one considers that knowledge like this is important for the upcoming generation to acquire, yet this acquisition does not occur within the scope of the social studies teaching, the relevant question becomes, 'Where will this occur?'

Based on the findings in this study, it seems that little opportunity is given to pupils to attain that 'powerful knowledge' which constitutes the basis and goal for what Young and Muller (2010) describe as Future 3 schooling. A significant challenge with a subject-based curriculum therefore seems to be not to end up with Future 1 canonical teaching content. However, this is not necessarily an argument for a progressive or competency-based curriculum. To the contrary, in a time of the increased presence of 'alternative facts' and 'post-truths', there are strong arguments in society for a discipline-based curriculum. At the same time, even if the particular subject matter is fundamental to the curriculum, it still seems important to provide some flexibility in teaching practice between the knowledge boundaries, both between subjects but also between subject-oriented knowledge and non-school knowledge. Such flexibility should create conditions for qualitative and

meaningful teaching, where pupils' questions and experiences can be used as important pedagogical resources for the teachers without disregarding discipline-based knowledge.

The problem (if one considers this a problem) may not primarily be the subject-based curriculum, as such, but a number of frame factors which drive the teaching in the direction of Future 1 schooling. The current study has especially shown how an 'overloaded curriculum' and teachers' time constraints in combination with a general 'results fetishism' within national and transnational education policy (Adolfsson, 2013) force teachers to find strategies to handle frame factors like these. In the continuous debate regarding knowledge and the curriculum, it is therefore desirable to include frame factors and their implications in the discussion, both on a theoretical and practical level with respect to the curriculum.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Carl-Henrik Adolfsson* is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Linnaeus University in Sweden. He is a member of the research group SITE (Studies in Curriculum, Teaching and Evaluation) and his research interests mainly concern curriculum theory with a special interest of the 'content question'.

## ORCID

*Carl-Henrik Adolfsson*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1911-6615>

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