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"It will take time" – visual arts teachers' professional freedom in policy enactment

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to add to what is known about how contextual prerequisites and governance systems affect art teachers' professional freedom, a topic of global significance. Previous research shows that Visual Arts education has not been aligned with current syllabi. This discrepancy is partly explained by 'a lag' in the teachers' subject conceptions given that visual arts teachers traditionally enjoy considerable professional freedom while designing their teaching. That is only one explanation; in contrast, this article, set in the Swedish educational context, enhances understanding of policy enactment in the visual art subject, with relevance for global educational policies. To understand how contextual conditions and patterns of governance determine the level of teacher autonomy, in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten art teachers in the Swedish 9-year compulsory school were conducted over 10 months in 2022, coinciding with the implementation of a new curriculum. In addition, staff from the National Agency for Education (NAfE) were interviewed, and NAfE materials were analyzed. Employing policy enactment theory, the analysis shows that contextual factors significantly influence the prerequisites of policy enactment. Further, the goals- and results-based management of schools challenges art teachers' professional freedom as teachers adapt to the principles of governmentality. This, in turn, makes enacting new art policy challenging and time-consuming.

KEYWORDS

Visual arts education; policy enactment; professional freedom; governmentality

Introduction

The study is concerned with the ways contextual prerequisites and governance systems affect art teachers' professional freedom. To understand how contextual conditions and patterns of governance determine the level of teacher autonomy, Sweden is used as a case.

The arts are often described as marginalized compared to other school subjects (Chapman et al., 2018; Lilliedahl, 2022; Åsén, 2006), even though the knowledge and competencies learned in visual arts education are seen as important in today's society (Ahrenby, 2021; Chapman et al., 2018; Freedman, 2018; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Åsén, 2006). Along with a marginalized position comes a low allocation of resources, yet also freedom since marginalized subjects are not as controlled like more prioritized subjects (Maguire et al., 2015).

Professional freedom allows teachers to make choices and design teaching based on their professional knowledge (Ball et al., 2012; Hopmann, 2015). Traditionally, art teachers do not use published teaching materials to the same extent as in many other subjects and, instead, art teachers borrow and incorporate material into self-produced teaching material (Skolverket, 2006; Skolverket, 2015; SOU 2021:70). Art teachers thus seem to hold a considerable influence on the practice and content of art education at the classroom level. In line with these arguments, Åsén (2006) ascribes a 'lag' in art education, compared to the syllabi, with respect to teachers upholding older subject conceptions.

However, research shows that teachers' professional freedom is regulated and often constrained within the school system (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2012). The transnational trend toward goals- and results-based management is due to the introduction of New Public Management (NPM). Through neoliberal governing by governmentality, teachers control themselves as they strive for goal achievement (Ball, 2013). In the system of goals- and results-oriented management, high-stake subject teachers (subjects focused on

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numeracy, literacy and science) are often under great pressure to deliver pupils who score good grades (Ball et al., 2012). On the other hand, marginalized subjects can often "go under the radar" (Maguire et al., 2015, p. 494) as they are not put under the same pressure. This leads to questions about the professional freedom of art teachers within the current goals- and results-based management system of the school and the preconditions for enacting new policy in the school subject of visual arts.

Aim and research questions

The study aims to increase knowledge about the preconditions needed for enacting new policy in the school subject of visual arts. The aim is broken down into two research questions:

1. How does the local context shape the prerequisites for teachers' interpretation of a new art syllabus?
2. How do school governance systems affect teachers' professional freedom and the conditions for teachers' interpretation of visual arts policy?

Background

Curricula and educational context

Although most education systems follow a standardized curriculum, the level of detail on which curricula control the content of subjects and teaching varies. In the case of Sweden, curriculum and syllabi state what is to be taught. The method and educational design are left to the teachers and their professional knowledge to determine (Ahrenby, 2021; Hopmann, 2015). Like in many countries, student grades and national along with international tests are then used to evaluate goal achievement.

Hopmann (2015) says the "chronic crisis" of the education system has led countries to start looking for new educational strategies. Educational systems have accordingly seen changes in many countries, including Sweden. In the latter, ever since the 1994 curriculum international influences and the arrival of New Public Management (NPM) have brought a shift from the rule management of schools to goals- and results-oriented management (Lingard et al., 2013; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). Wahlström and Sundberg (2018) conclude that the Swedish curriculum from 2011 is:

> shaped by two powerful international influences: a technical-instrumental discourse on curriculum, which emphasizes learning outcomes, and a neo-conservative discourse on curriculum, which emphasises curriculum content as an uncontested body of knowledge. These international influences resulted in a standards-based curriculum. (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018, p. 9)

In line with this development, the Swedish Ministry of Education called for clearly defined subject content and measurable goals in Government Bill 2007:28 (SOU 2007:28). In the same legislation, the balance between government steering and teachers' professional freedom was addressed:

> Future principles for curriculum design must, as now, give freedom and responsibility for teachers to plan the teaching together with the students based on local conditions and interests. At the same time, the course plans should provide so much control that the goal of an equivalent school is maintained. It is essential to find an appropriate balance point between these requirements. (SOU 2007:28, p. 192) [Author's translation]

The above quote shows that professional freedom is addressed because of the demands to alter the curricula structure due to the changed steering system.

The shift in steering the system toward goals- and results-based management, denoted by governmentality and performativity, is also impacting teachers' mindsets (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2012; Ball, 2013; Englund & Frostenson, 2017). Teachers govern themselves (and others) in this way through techniques of governmentality (Perryman et al., 2018). Teachers who have adapted to the performativity that comes with the goals- and results-oriented management struggle while being uncertain about what is being evaluated, if they are doing the 'right' things, and where is the limit for 'good enough' (Ball, 2003; Englund & Frostenson, 2017). Englund and Frostenson (2017) argue that teachers who have adapted to the system and work with this uncertainty become, what they call, struggling performers.

Curriculum structure

In the Swedish 2011 syllabi, the policy movement toward increased goal- and results-management led to a new syllabus structure and a more detailed description of what was to be taught and measured. Still, the didactic question 'how' remained left up to the teachers (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). The shift to goals- and results-based management also led to the grading criteria becoming more important

regarding what counts as knowledge in a school subject than the syllabus Aim and Central Content (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2017; Ahrenby, 2021; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012).

Since 2011, each syllabus has consisted of three parts: 1. Subject Aim; 2. Central Content; and 3. Knowledge Requirements. This syllabus structure has been retained in the new curriculum, *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time center 2022* (Skolverket, 2022a), called Lgr 22.[1] Although the Knowledge Requirements are now named Assessment Criteria. Lgr 22 applies from July 2022 and is produced and distributed by the National Agency for Education (NAfE).

The National Agency for Education

The National Agency for Education is a government agency whose work is based on the government's instructions to the agency. The NAfE's tasks thus include interpreting and implementing the mission and responsibilities assigned to them by the government. Employees at the NAfE can thereby be seen as what Lipsky (1980) calls *street-level bureaucrats*. Among others, the NAfE draws up syllabi, subject plans, assessment criteria, national tests, regulations, and general advice for schools, as well as produces statistics on and in-depth studies about school education. The NAfE is also responsible for Swedish participation in international studies like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) developed and organized by the OECD.

The latest revision of the national curricula was initiated by the NAfE and motivated as part of its assigned tasks. The NAfE carefully explains that this revision is only a revision and that the revisions only increase teachers' ability to implement the curriculums' intentions, including syllabi. The revision can be understood as the NAfE's interpretation, translation and enactment of the government's instructions.

The visual arts subject

Policy for the Art subject has been concurrent with society's development (Bolton, 2006; Lindström, 2011; Åsén, 2006). Even though knowledge and skills learned in Art are closely connected to knowledge and skills seen as necessary in society, the arts are marginalized relative to other school subjects (Chapman et al., 2018; Maguire et al., 2015; Sabol, 2013; Wikberg, 2014; Åsén, 2006). The weakening status of the arts is a global trend (Lilliedahl, 2022, 2023). Lilliedahl (2022) argues that the arts are not perceived as important for higher education or vocational competence and therefore not seen as core knowledge—a view of knowledge driven by a neoliberal approach to knowledge that corresponds with today's knowledge economy.

A marginalized position entails, on one hand, less allocation of resources and, on the other, certain forms of freedom. For example, the relatively low allocation of resources can manifest the low prioritization when it comes to location and scheduling, fewer hours than prioritized subjects and, thus, fewer subject specialist teachers (Ball et al., 2012; Bautista et al., 2021; Lilliedahl, 2022; Maguire et al., 2015). The freedom that comes with a marginalized position entails freedom from control and freedom while enacting policy (Ball et al., 2012; Maguire et al., 2015). For example, in Western Australia, the arts were among those subjects that did not have to fully adopt the national curriculum, as was required of English, Mathematics, Science and History. An "adopt and adapt" approach was applied to the arts. This includes freedom of interpretation and translation (Chapman et al., 2018). Chapman et al. (2018) found that the support of school leaders and administration, such as designated time for interpretation and translation, was very important to teachers to develop their education as the new policy was to be implemented. When the conditions are the opposite—when support and designated time are lacking—teachers tend to make fewer changes and stick to what they know. Chapman et al. (2018) also argue that the adopt and adapt approach not only opened up local translations of policy but also increased the marginalization of the arts.

As teachers in a marginalized school subject, visual arts teachers are often the only teacher in their subject at their school (Bautista et al., 2021). Bautista et al. (2021) state that art teachers experience professional isolation, which negatively impacts their professional growth and students' learning. Other factors adding to the lack of peer interaction include tight schedules and heavy workloads, which contribute to limited time for meetings with art teacher colleagues. With support from a study by García-Arroyo et al. (2019), they call attention to teacher isolation hindering achievement of the curriculum.

As mentioned above, the freedom that comes with a marginalized position includes less pressure to enact policies in a certain way because pupils' knowledge is less tested on the national or international level (Maguire et al., 2015). In Sweden, *National Tests* are conducted in certain subjects in grades three, six and nine. No National Tests are conducted in visual arts,

reflecting its marginalized position. Still, assessment and assessment criteria inform education and what is seen as necessary in the visual arts subject due to the school's goals- and results-based management (Ahrenby, 2021; Graham, 2019).

Ball (2003) also argues that this (global) education reform, including performativity, is altering schools' and teachers' practices. He claims that the new steering system based on governmentality and performativity challenges teachers' values and mindset since they are to control and compare themselves according to the learning outcome—often appearing in the form of numbers (Ball, 2003; Ball, 2013).

Policy enactment theory

From a policy enactment perspective, the enactment of policy is a complex process that entails the *interpretation*, *translation,* and *enactment* of policy. In this way, policy is seen as created in the process of enacting (Ball et al., 2012). While teachers translate policy, such as the visual arts syllabus, they select from and recontextualize syllabus content into lesson planning. Thus, teachers play an active role in recontextualizing a policy text in practice. They are what Ball et al. (2012) label *policy actors*, but also *policy subjects*, given that policy also changes teachers. Different policies call for different policy subjects. Some policy calls for more passive policy subjects, while others offer more space for creativity and professional freedom. Either way, policies "shape what it means to be a teacher" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 92).

In the process of enactment, teachers interpret written policies and translate them into a *contextualized practice*. Policy enactment research has drawn attention to the local context and its influence on policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012). Ball et al. (2012) notes that "policies are enacted in material conditions, with varying resources, in relation to particular 'problems'" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 21). This means that policies are interpreted and translated in relation to the particular context of each school.

Ball et al. (2012) identified four different *contextual dimensions*: *situated context*, *professional cultures*, *material context,* and *external context*. In this study, situated context is understood to include locational factors, like intake. Professional culture includes, on a personal level, teachers' subject conception, experience, and values. On a group level, a school's professional culture is constructed by the school's narrative about itself (Ball et al., 2012). The material context concerns the buildings, classrooms, available material, number of pupils per class, and schedule. External context includes the material and support that inform, enable or restrict policy enactment from outside the school. It can entail different, non-mandatory policy documents like the *Commentary Material* (Skolverket, 2021), material on the NAfE subject webpage, published teaching material, and the influence of art education organizations and interest groups.

Using policy enactment theory, as presented by Ball et al. (2012), the contextual dimensions and complexity of the process of interpreting, translating, and enacting policy are highlighted. The complex entanglement of different factors that shape the prerequisites for enacting policy and space for teacher professional freedom is thereby made visible (Ahrenby, 2021; Ball et al., 2012; Chapman et al., 2018). To obtain a broader understanding of enacting a new visual arts syllabus, it is necessary to look more closely at the process of interpreting and translating a new syllabus that is to be implemented.

Methods

To add to knowledge concerning the prerequisites for enacting a new policy in the school subject of visual arts, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Cohen et al., 2011) with ten visual art teachers in the Swedish 9-year compulsory school were conducted over ten months starting in February 2022. In the autumn of 2022, an interview with two NAfE officials about NAfE information sent to schools and its published implementation material was conducted. The analyses of the NAfE materials and the statements by the NAfE representatives generated knowledge about the agency's role in creating the conditions for teachers' work in enacting new policies. These results serve as the background to help understand what the teachers need to relate to in the process of interpreting and translating a new syllabus. The two interviewed NAfE officials formed part of a team that was in charge of implementing Lgr22. In this article, they are given the pseudonyms Nina and Nadia.

The ten interviewed teachers all work at municipality-run schools and together teach classes from grades one through nine. The teachers all had teacher education but different ranges of teaching experience. One teacher was male, while nine were female. Besides visual arts, eight teachers were teachers of a second or third subject, special education, or leisure-time pedagogy.

In visual arts, the whole class is often taught simultaneously (in Table 1 described as 1/1). Classes are sometimes divided into two groups (1/2), or two classes are divided into three groups (2/3) to reduce

Table 1. Schools and teachers.

Teachers	T1-Anders	T2-Beatrice	T3-Berit	T4-Charlotte	T5-Dalia	T6-Eva	T7-Fiona	T8-Greta	T9-Helen	T10-Iris
School name	Alder school	Birch school	Birch school	Carnation school	Daisy school	Elm school	Fern school	Garden school	Hawthorne school	Ivy school
Grades at school	F–6	7–9	7–9	F–9	7–9	F–9	F–6	F–6	F–9	F–9
Art classroom	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Group size in Art classes	1/1, 20–26	1/1, 25–30	1/1, 25–30	1/1 1/2 2/3	1/1 1/2	1/1 26–32	1/1 22–27	1/1	1/1≈22	½≈15
Subjects the teacher is qualified to teach	Art, Religion, Mathematics	Art, Sloyd	Art, Sloyd	Art	Art, Special education	Art, History	Art, English	Art, Leisure time- teacher	Art	Art Swedish
Teaching experience in years	1+	4	20+	20+	20+	18	2+	8	20+	
Interviews conducted	2	3	3	1	1	1	2	1	2	1

the number of pupils per lesson. Pupils in grades one through six often have their art classes in their regular classroom and not in an art classroom, as is often the case for pupils in grades seven through nine.

Five teachers were interviewed once, three teachers were interviewed two times, and two teachers were interviewed three times. Three teachers were interviewed early in the spring semester and therefore extra interviews were conducted at the end of the spring semester since by then they had obtained more time to work with the new syllabus. Additional interviews were also conducted due to relevant information that arose in the preliminary analysis. Three teachers were interviewed in person, and the others over Zoom's digital communication program. Notes were taken during the interviews, with the latter being audio-recorded.

An initial analysis was performed by identifying relevant content for answering the research questions in all of the interview notes and recorded interviews. The interviews were transcribed in NVivo (a data analysis software), and relevant parts of the interviews were listened to many times and carefully transcribed. NVivo was also used to categorize the material. The contextual dimensions *situated context*, *professional cultures*, *material context,* and *external context* were used as categories for the analysis, along with categories created after the initial analysis where all of the interview notes were read and all interviews were listened to. The following categories were created: Subject content, new syllabus, teachers, pupils, teaching materials, school leaders, organization of implementation, NAfE, time, and changes in teaching. These categories also had subcategories. In Table 1, the contextual aspects related to each teacher and school are summarized.

In addition, the new visual arts syllabus, the commentary material, and the NAfE subject website were read and analyzed to ensure a more complete picture of subject changes, syllabus form and structure, teachers' choices of implementation material, and teachers' policy interpretations.

Researcher positionality

In the research, I recognize the significance of researcher positionality. I am a former visual arts teacher and current art teacher educator and researcher at Umeå University. The mentioned background informs my approach to interviewing the informants and analyzing the data through policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012) and a hermeneutic process

(Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). My prior experience provides a unique perspective yet also introduces potential subjectivity. I maintain reflexivity to address biases and ensure a credible and insightful exploration of the prerequisites for policy enactment and room for teachers' professional freedom.

Research ethics

The Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines for good research practice (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) were followed in all parts of the research process. In line with these guidelines, all participants were informed of the study and consented to participate before being interviewed. Both participants and schools are given pseudonyms in the article to assure the participants' anonymity and protect their integrity. As the research does not include sensitive personal data, the study does not fall under the Ethical Review Act (2003:460) and hence does not require an ethical review. The recorded interviews are stored securely as described in the data storage plan for this study according to Umeå University regulations.

Results

The results are presented based on the categorization by Ball et al. (2012) of the contextual dimensions, starting with the state's intentions interpreted through the NAfE. The NAfE material, including the syllabus and the NAfE representatives' interview statements, is presented. The analysis of the NAfE material and the interviews with school NAfE representatives help with understanding the external context and the role and position of the authority in the management of the objectives. The results of the NAfE material and the interviews with NAfE representatives accordingly serve as a background for understanding the external context and the goals- and results-oriented management that teachers need to relate to in their work of interpreting and translating the curriculum. For this reason, the results of the analysis of the school curriculum are first presented together with the statements of the NAfE representatives. Moving on to the teacher interviews, the results are presented in relation to the material and situated context, the external context and the professional culture.

The NAfE material and the syllabus

The material produced by the NAfE may be attributed to the external context since it is produced outside the school and intended to both steer and support teaching in schools. The syllabus is normative as it is a governing document. Other materials like the NAfE implementation materials are not mandatory or considered to be governing documents. These documents were created to assist teachers with interpreting and implementing new syllabi, forming part of the prerequisites for policy interpretation.

The NAfE has published subject webpages with information about the new syllabi, and implementation material. The implementation material consists of questions for subject discussions, a published text called *Commentary material to the syllabus in visual arts*[2] (Skolverket, 2021), and a document listing changes from the former (called Lgr 11) to the new syllabus (called Lgr 22).

On the subject webpage for visual arts, suggestions are given for how to organize the preparations for implementing Lgr 22. Subject discussions with peers are advocated: "The process of familiarizing yourself with the syllabus and commentary material is good to do with subject colleagues" (Skolverket, 2022b). When representatives from the NAfE were asked about organizing the subject discussion, they said they recommend teachers from the same subject for the subject discussion and not to involve teachers from the different 'practical-esthetic' subjects in the syllabus discussions. The NAfE representatives Nadia and Nina stated that they urge school leaders to find other ways to enable peer conversations, such as through digital video communication tools if art teachers are alone at a school.

Some conversation models are advocated, while the discussion questions on the webpage are recommended for these discussions. A few discussion questions were repeated for all subjects. In visual arts, two of the nine questions were subject-specific. The NAfE representatives say that the subject-specific questions are "related to the most important changes in the syllabus" (Nadia, NAfE representative). The first subject-specific questions revolved around how to work with images dealing with norms and values with pupils in different age groups, and the second around the increased focus on ethical issues as well as rights and obligations while using images (Skolverket, 2022b). According to the NAfE, these are to be understood as the most significant changes in visual arts teaching. Thus, it is evident that certain policies should be given greater weight than others.

In the comparative document, the NAfE lists all changes in the art syllabus from Lgr11 to Lgr22 regardless of how significant, big or small the changes in the text are. Text changes were listed beside each

other in the document, making it easy to identify the difference.

The NAfE art subject webpage begins with a short text about the page structure, followed by a short list with four bullet points of changes in the art syllabus. The NAfE uses the bullet points to highlight the biggest changes: "Those which have greater weight" (Nadia, NAfE representative). The bullet points read:

- Practical and esthetic skills are more in focus.
- A new long-term goal concerns the ability to develop ideas and choose approaches. It has replaced the previous goal of investigative visual work. The aim is to make ideas and considerations visible.
- The core content on ethical issues, and rights and responsibilities while using images has been extended to cover all stages.
- The central content on images dealing with norms and values has been expanded to cover all stages (Skolverket, 2022b). [Author's translation]

There is a difference in what is highlighted in the discussion questions compared to the bullet points on the home page. The bullet points start by highlighting practical and esthetic skills and the ability to develop ideas and make choices in the image-making process. The discussion questions focus on visual communication and the critical analysis of images.

The commentary material is 23 pages long and to be understood as complementing and explaining the syllabus. The NAfE stresses the importance of the commentary material:

> We want the teachers to read the commentary material, because alongside the curriculum it is the most important document, even if it is not a governing (policy) document in the same way as the curriculum. (Nadia, NAfE representative)

The analysis reveals variations in how the subject aim and content appear in the commentary material and the syllabus. In the commentary material, a more significant emphasis is given to visual culture:

> The emergence of global visual culture that influences lifestyle, career choices and identity has brought in a broadened view of what constitutes an image. In the art subject, students must be given the opportunity to explore, and process influences from the visual culture. (Skolverket, 2021, p. 5) [Author's translation]

Consequently, knowledge in *image analysis* and *visual communication* is expressed as important—in that order. Yet, in the syllabus, this is not described as clearly, and visual culture is not emphasized in the same way.

The material and recommendations provided by the NAfE are intended to help school leaders and teachers implement the new curriculum and syllabi. The various documents have different weights and the NAfE representatives note that some things from the NAfE are prescriptive while others are not:

> It is quite an important one, we standardize certain things, which is the text in the syllabus, and it is standardized. Then we won't talk about methods and how this should be implemented, it's … then it is the case that if we see that this is becoming difficult and complicated, then we have to try to step in and help and assign the questions and such. (Nina, NAfE representative)

Here, a balance between the steering and teachers' professional freedom in the external context is stressed, pointing to a tension between them.

Summary of the NAfE material and the syllabus

To summarize, the NAfE has produced material intended to help teachers familiarize themselves with the new syllabus, a process in which peer discussions are seen as essential. Still, organizing peer discussions on how to work is a mere recommendation, and school leaders are free to organize implementation preparations as they see best. At the same time, the various materials highlight different aspects of visual art education, emphasizing different policies. Here, teachers' professional freedom in the translation of policy text into practice is stressed. It is namely up to school leaders and teachers themselves to ensure that they are fulfilling the mission—in line with the mechanisms of governmentality.

The material and situated context

In the following two parts of this article, the results based on the teacher interviews are presented. The first part focuses on what Ball et al. (2012) call the material and situated context. The material context includes, among others, group size, classrooms, available material, timetabling, and organization of support for teachers at, for example, workplace conferences dedicated to the interpretation of new syllabi. The situated context has to do with where the school is located and, therefore, its student intake (Ball et al., 2012).

The teacher interviews show that most school leaders had organized implementation workplace

conferences for teachers to engage with the new syllabi. Among the ten teachers, eight have had at least one subject-specific workplace conference—with other art teachers at their school or on their own. This was independent of the situated context since schools located in cities, a suburb of Stockholm, and schools in villages in southern or northern Sweden all had similar arrangements in place when it came to allocating the time and resources for teachers preparing the implementation of the new curriculum, including the syllabi. The two exceptions cannot be ascribed to the situated context. School leaders organized workplace conferences dedicated to the new syllabi in a similar matter to what Eva describes:

> Hanna: Have you had any opportunities to work with the new syllabus?
>
> Eva: Yes, we have had two opportunities for subject teachers in the municipality during the spring semester. Then, we also have more opportunities at our school (Elm School) during the semester, but then there is only one art teacher.

As Eva at Elm School explains, they have organized workplace conferences for subject discussions at the school where teachers from different schools within the municipality met. The organization of these workplace conferences impacted the teachers' possibilities to take time to read, discuss and interpret the new visual arts syllabus. At Ivy School, school leaders organized implementation workplace conferences to enable teachers to attend all of the conferences for all subjects they teach. The other teachers who teach more than one subject had to choose which subject conference to attend. They all prioritized their second subject (English, Mathematics, Sloyd/Craft) at first, mainly because they had colleagues to discuss with, which is not always the case in visual arts, as Eva explains in the above quote.

Marginalized school subjects, such as visual arts, are allocated less time and resources than prioritized subjects, which means the subject does not need so many teachers (Ball et al., 2012; Bautista et al., 2021; Lilliedahl, 2022; Maguire et al., 2015). Moreover, a generalist class teacher often teaches visual arts rather than a specialized art teacher in primary school (Skolverket, 2015). The presented study shows that being the only art teacher at a school limits the opportunities for peer discussion about a new syllabus.

In some cases, the school management suggested that Visual Arts, Craft, Music, Home Economics, and Sports teachers discuss the new syllabi together:

> But then, we merged the subjects Crafts, Home Economics, Music and Sports, the Sports teachers did not show up. (Eva, Elm School)

Although the subject content differs in the subjects Eva mentions, they are seen as a group due to their practical nature and are often called *practical-esthetic subjects*, even by the NAfE (Skolverket, 2022b). Although the NAfE advised against merging teachers from different subjects during the syllabus discussions, teachers in what are described as practical subjects were still brought together for syllabus discussions in some schools. The differences between the subjects determine the likelihood of subject-specific content discussions:

> There are general things that can be discussed. But when it comes to the practical application, I do not have any colleagues to consult with. (Anders, Alder School)

This shows that the historical understanding of the practical-esthetic subjects as a unit triumphed over the NAfE recommendation not to bring teachers from different subjects together for syllabus discussions. Many educational leaders have organized meetings to discuss the art syllabus, inviting teachers from various schools to participate. However, based on the interview data, it appears that art teachers engage in fewer of these discussions with their colleagues who teach other high-priority subjects. Accordingly, the analysis indicates that the marginalization of the art subject may shrink the amount of valuable time dedicated to peer discussions on subject policies.

Even though most school leaders had organized at least one, often two or more, subject-specific workplace conferences, the Visual Arts teachers needed greater opportunities to discuss the new art syllabus with their peers.

> We had some conference time and I had started reading some. The first thing, like, … I myself and start dissecting, a bit, the central content. Or the purpose was probably only there at first (laughs slightly). But it takes time. So, you can sit for several hours, and then we still have questions to discuss./…/You have to think about how much work that is, but at the same time… it will take time. (Charlotte, Carnation School)

Charlotte at Carnation School expresses how time-consuming taking on a new syllabus is and how the allocated workplace conferences do not offer sufficient time for interpretative work. The material context thereby entails limited workplace conferences with other art teachers, contributing to art teachers requiring bigger opportunities for peer discussions.

The limited opportunities to discuss new policy with peers leads the interviewed teachers to express they need to take the time for the interpretative work elsewhere. Still, not all teachers have the time or energy to work with the new syllabus outside the allocated workplace conferences. At Birch School and Fern School, there are a relatively large number of conflicts between pupils, and lessons evolve more around keeping pupils calm and working than focusing on the subject content:

> Much of one's own time goes into solving conflicts, so the teaching has to wait a little bit today. (Beatrice at Birch School)

Berit at Birch School and Fiona at Fern School stress that conflicts take time and energy, leaving little room for extra reading, analyzing, and discussing the new syllabus.

At Birch School, which is a lower secondary school, several teachers use the art classroom, making the storing of material functionally tricky. Material thus often goes missing. The art classroom is also designed for about 15 pupils, yet visual arts is taught in classes with up to 30 pupils. Therefore, the room is crowded, making it impossible to work with larger images. Beatrice and Berit claim that the crowded space also makes it difficult to have discussions, and it causes conflicts:

> And then, if we had smaller groups in this art classroom, we could have the opportunity to fit in the classroom. There would be fewer conflicts. Because (now) they collide here, the chairs fall over every single lesson, so there are chairs lying there…. (Berit, Birch School)

At Birch School, any conflicts that occur in the art classroom or the hallway are the teacher's responsibility to resolve. No other staff, like a school counselor, deals with this, which is tiring and leaves less energy and time for reading and interpreting new policies. The conflicts and staffing could not be attributed to the situated context since at Fern School they varied among classes. At Birch School, the teachers considered that conflicts are triggered by other factors like large classes and a small arts classroom. Instead, it is the material context that, by and large, affects the prerequisites for teacher possibilities to take time for policy interpretation.

Summary of the material and situated context

To summarize, it appears that the material context has a significant impact on the requirements for teachers' interpretation of syllabi. The importance of contextual factors that shape the nature of the work teachers engage in and the skills and knowledge they need to possess to perform their duties effectively is thus stressed. Given that the time for reading and reflecting upon the new syllabus as well as possibilities for peer discussions are largely made possible yet also limited by the material context insofar as school leaders organize the workplace conferences, the possibilities for peer discussions and demanding workloads limit teachers' energy and time to work with the new syllabus outside of working hours. The marginalized position held by Visual Arts also means there are few opportunities for peer discussions because art teachers rarely have fellow art teachers at the same school. The limited time for reading and reflecting on the new syllabus coupled with the limited possibilities for peer discussions make the process slow, shifting the responsibility to teachers—in compliance with NPM and goals- and results-based management. Following Ball (2003), it contributes to increased performativity. In the interview analysis, the situated context, on the other hand, did not influence the preconditions for teachers' interpretations of the new visual art syllabus.

The external context and professional culture

The external context includes support and pressures from a broader policy context, i.e., outside the school (Ball et al., 2012). In this context, I include implementation material published by the NAfE, interest groups (on Facebook and the like), and Arts teacher organizations and published teaching materials. The professional culture includes teachers' subject conception, experience and values (Ball et al., 2012).

The interviewed teachers express the need for peer discussions as they find the syllabus to be open to interpretation. This has to do with the form and formulations in the syllabus and perceived need for external contextual support, such as published teaching materials or guidance with selections in the form of National Tests, in translating the syllabus to classroom teaching.

The teachers directly used the NAfE material in the interpretation process, as they were recommended to do by the school leaders. Subject-specific discussion questions from the NAfE subject webpage were mainly utilized during workplace conferences—especially when art teachers had peers to discuss with. Most of the interviewed teachers said they started by reading the comparative document:

> There is, after all, on the website of the National Agency for Education to print this comparison

> between the old and the new in two columns. They were probably the ones we actually started looking at and started discussing the differences together. That's what we did during the spring semester, a lot. (Iris, Ivy School)

The comparative document is chosen because it gives an accessible overview of the differences between Lgr11 and Lgr22. All of the teachers have also read the new art syllabus. Hence, the teachers chose the governing steering documents and the material that helped them identify the changes in the new curriculum compared to the former one.

It was clear in the teacher interviews that some of the NAfE material had guided the teachers' reading and attention. All teachers noted that practical image-making should be given more space, as emphasized on the subject webpage.

> It is more practically and aesthetically now. It actually feels good to us aesthetes when image-making is to be given more room. And. In some way it´s like you would make the Art subject more important by adding theoretical parts. And so… In this way, we have lost (the interest of) a great many pupils this way. (Berit, Birch School)

As the above quote shows, teachers interpret this policy as being important in the translation of the syllabus since it is about how to work in the art subject—what to focus on. Since image analysis is understood as theoretical, the emphasis on practical image-making is interpreted to be given more room at the expense of image analysis. In this way, this policy became superior to other policies, especially the policy on image analysis, even though image analysis is highlighted in the NAfE art subject commentary material. In line with Ball et al. (2012), the results show how some policies exceed others and that understanding of which policies are seen as relevant is shaped by both teachers' professional culture and the external context.

Fiona at Fern School says that the school leaders recommended that teachers look at the NAfE subject webpage and read the curriculum, including the syllabus and the commentary material. Still, as the NAfE representative also pointed out, the commentary material is not a governing document whereas the curriculum, including the syllabi, is. The documents' different functions and weights make it understandable that teachers focus on the curriculum. Therefore, the teachers' interpretation of the new art syllabus in relation to the external context is mostly informed by the NAfE subject-specific homepage, the subject-specific discussion questions, the comparative document, and the syllabus itself.

The teachers expressed the need for more support from the external context as they found the space for interpretation too large and needed to find sufficient clarity regarding how to interpret the new syllabus in the documents they used. Due to this space for interpretation, a teacher's professional culture shapes the transformation from syllabus text to teaching on the classroom level. The interviewed teachers were aware of this and showed concern for its consequences. In the interviews, the teachers indicated they do not find the answers they seek in the NAfE-published material and look for answers elsewhere.

The interest group Art Teachers National Association (ATNA) offers a subject-specific discussion forum. The considerable room for interpretation and the unequal material conditions are discussed here as possible problems for equivalent visual arts education. On one hand, Helen expresses her thoughts regarding equivalent art education and, on the other, professional freedom:

> And that freedom is, in a way, for me personally, that freedom is really wonderful. Because I've had to design a lot according to my own head. Now, as I said, I don't think it's okay that you go to ten classrooms in Sweden, and it looks like ten different subjects. (Helen, Hawthorne School)

When experienced teachers were asked if these concerns about equivalent art education have always been a subject of concern, they answered that 15 years ago the discussion was more about the material context:

> We have always talked about equivalent art education. But, then (10–15 years ago) it … it was more about digital equipment. We were supposed to work with digital images, but we didn't have … computers or (digital) cameras. It was also very different at different schools. I had (digital equipment) but others did not always…. (Berit at Birch School)

The teachers' statements suggest there has been a shift in what equivalence is about. While before it was not seen as a problem that an art teacher designed their classes somewhat differently, today this is viewed as problematic and an issue of equivalence.

The question of equivalence is important for art teachers and led to ATNA inviting the NAfE to a member meeting attended by Dalia, Greta and Helen. The teachers asked the NAfE for more support in the selection and how to translate the Central Content on the different levels in primary school with respect to the varying levels of knowledge: "Someone asked, 'How do I know if I'm teaching the right things and at the right level?'" (Dalia,

Daisy School). This quote shows that there is uncertainty among teachers concerning how to make selections and enact the curriculum while designing teaching. Dalia and Helen state that they did not receive any concretizations. On the contrary, the NAfE highlighted the benefits of this interpretative freedom. Here, the balance between steering from the NAfE and teachers' professional freedom is made visible.

The complex dynamic between governance and professional autonomy is thus highlighted. The normative curriculum that the teachers find to be vague and open to interpretation when it comes to both *what* to teach and *how*, and the NAfE mission in relation to teachers' professional judgment in policy enactment. The syllabus is to be normative regarding the content—what is to be taught, which is to correlate with the measurable subject goals due to the school's goals- and results-based management. Nonetheless, the form and formulations in the syllabus and the interpretative freedom a marginalized subject obtains make it hard for art teachers to interpret what is to be taught. Teachers are hence shown to adapt the performativity that comes with the goals- and results-based management of the school.

As teachers do not find sufficient answers in the syllabus or the implementation material they are using, they seek support in their interpretive work in other places like art teacher organizations or interest group forums on social media. The ATNA is a strong actor here within the external context. This, in turn, directs focus in a specific direction as the ATNA concentrates on equivalence. In this way, the external context, professional culture, and material context interact, creating the prerequisites for visual arts policy enactment.

Summary of the external context and professional culture

To summarize, teachers adapt to the mechanisms of governmentality with increased performativity as they express their wish to teach the 'right' things and to be sure they are interpreting the intentions of the syllabus goals correctly. The results show the external context is becoming more critical for visual arts teachers' interpretation of the new syllabus than their professional culture and knowledge. As teachers do not find sufficient guidance in the documents they are using, they seek support elsewhere. The interest organization ATNA offers space for peer discussions; in this group, a narrative of lacking equivalence is taking shape.

Summarizing answers to the research questions

First, the research questions will be answered briefly, seriatim, before the results are discussed.

Research Question one: How does context shape the prerequisites for teachers' interpretation of a new art syllabus?

The analysis reveals that the material context is essential for the prerequisites since organized time for interpretative work and peer discussions is vital for art teachers to make sense of what the new syllabus means for visual arts education. Teachers' professional culture—especially in the form of teachers' subject conception—works as a filter for interpretation as the external context, including the syllabus, does not offer sufficient support or the guidelines the teachers feel they need. The situated context, in contrast, did not appear vital for shaping the prerequisites for art teachers' interpretation of a new syllabus in this study.

Research Question two: How do school governance systems affect teachers' professional freedom and the conditions for teachers' interpretation of visual arts policy?

The analysis shows that the school's shift to goals- and results-based management has put increased pressure even on teachers in the marginalized subject of visual arts to deliver the 'right' art education, which leads to insecurity when it comes to selecting educational content. The mentioned insecurity and desire for equivalent art education creates the need for support, guidelines, time, and possibilities for peer discussion. This shows how the goals- and results-based management constrains teachers' professional freedom and adds to teachers' need for guidance from the external context.

Discussion and conclusions

The results presented in this article introduce nuance into the conclusions of previous research that suggest teachers' subject conception is not in line with current policy documents and partly explains what Åsén (2006) called "the lag" in art education teaching.

The results show that the material context is the most apparent contextual dimension for the prerequisites for policy interpretation when teachers implement new policies. The material context includes the time allocated for policy interpretation and translation. Chapman et al. (2018) show that curriculum development is provided when support is assured through, for example, sufficient time for the interpretation and

translation of new policy. However, with low support, it is the other way around, which makes syllabus implementation slow. Against the background of Chapman et al. (2018) research and the results of this study, I claim that insufficient time for the interpretation and translation of a new syllabus can be one of the explanations for the 'lag' in art education on the classroom level that Åsén (2006) highlight. In conclusion, the results of this study show that this 'lag' has more to do with preconditions created by the material context than teachers' subject conceptions.

The material context is, in turn, affected by the art subject's comparably marginalized position, which often leads to only one art teacher being employed at a school. Being the only art teacher at a school was a reason for not prioritizing visual arts at workplace conferences appropriating the new syllabi.

The syllabus itself is not very detailed and offers space for professional autonomy and freedom to enact it in different ways, according to the teacher's professional judgment. The art subject's marginalized position compared to other subjects means it is less controlled within the educational system. A marginalized position thereby brings even more professional freedom for teachers (Maguire et al., 2015). The results show that the freedom appreciated by the art teacher at the same time makes the interpretation and translation of a new policy difficult.

The syllabi, constructed by a government agency, express the aim for the subjects, prescribed only in broad terms regarding what should be taught, and say nothing about *how* the subject content shall be taught. Accordingly, the translation into lesson planning and teaching is up to the teachers (Deng & Luke, 2008; Hopmann, 2015). Still, the visual arts subject is part of the school and its goals- and results-based management, which requires that pupils reach pre-determined subject goals. As Graham (2019) notes, school subjects are validated by assessment and pupils achieving subject goals. Yet, as this study shows, a clash between room for professional freedom and the goals- and results-oriented management is evident here. The mentioned clash is made visible regarding teachers' uncertainty about their interpretations and demand for guidance. To explain this clash, I draw on Hopmann (2015), Wahlström and Sundberg (2018) and Ball (2003) who describe the international trend of NPM with a focus on testing learning results leading to increasing the pressure on performativity. The presented study shows how art teachers struggle to navigate. In line with demands that follow the school's goals- and results-based management, they look for clear goals and explicit information about what subject content should be taught and evaluated. Simultaneously, teachers are prepared to give up some of their professional freedom. In line with the principles of governmentality (Ball, 2013), the art teachers in this study adapt and control themselves. They do so without expressing resistance even though it affects their professional freedom.

The prerequisites for enacting new policy in visual arts education are shaped by the unclear content of the visual arts subject and the insufficient support concerning the material and the external context, which leaves the teachers insecure about their interpretation and translation of the new syllabus. Change on the classroom level is thus slow and time-consuming.

The shift in the steering system not only constrains teachers' professional freedom; the analysis in this study shows, similarly to Lilliedahl (2022), that it is also especially challenging in a subject like visual arts. With its marginalized position and low support and pressure from the external context in the form of published teaching materials, explicit guidelines and National Tests, teachers feel left alone and uncertain while interpreting the syllabus as they adapt to the school's goals- and results-based management system.

Following Ball (2003), it is thus suggested that the governing system of schools, which includes performativity, is changing art teachers so as to align with the goals- and results-based management—despite the lack of any direct pressure. In this way, the teachers are adapting to the performativity built into the goals- and results-based management, and the teacher subjects are moving toward becoming what Englund and Frostenson (2017) call struggling performers. I therefore conclude that the freedom that comes with a marginalized position is simultaneously somewhat fictional as the visual arts operate within a school system imbued with goals- and results-based management.

Notes

1. Lgr is short for *Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet* [Curriculum for the compulsory school, pre-school class and the leisure-time centre]. The number after Lgr indicated the year the curriculum was first published. 11 = 2011, 22 = 2022.
2. Authtor´s translation. Original title: Kommentarmaterial till kursplanen i bild.

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