



## OPEN ACCESS

## EDITED BY

Clifford A. Shaffer,  
Virginia Tech, United States

## REVIEWED BY

Francis Thaise A. Cimene,  
University of Science and Technology of  
Southern Philippines, Philippines  
Milos Milovancevic,  
University of Niš, Serbia

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Sylvi Vigmo  
✉ sylvi.vigmo@ped.gu.se

RECEIVED 06 December 2023

ACCEPTED 28 March 2024

PUBLISHED 10 April 2024

## CITATION

Bäcke M and Vigmo S (2024) Lost opportunities for globalisation, digitalisation, and socially sustainable education? Advocating for digital and global Bildung in Swedish upper secondary schools. *Front. Educ.* 9:1351709. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1351709

## COPYRIGHT

© 2024 Bäcke and Vigmo. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

# Lost opportunities for globalisation, digitalisation, and socially sustainable education? Advocating for digital and global Bildung in Swedish upper secondary schools

Maria Bäcke<sup>1</sup> and Sylvi Vigmo<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Language, Aesthetic Learning, and Literature, School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, Jönköping, Sweden, <sup>2</sup>Department of Education, Communication and Learning, Gothenburg University, Gothenburg, Sweden

In this article, we point to how the making visible of diverse linguistic, digital, and cultural competences can contribute to more sustainable and inclusive classroom contexts and future societies. Western notions of universal knowledge reproduces a western way of viewing the world and, as a result, this usually discounts alternative knowledge systems, which perpetuates inequality and may cause tensions in today's diverse classrooms. Our 2022 pilot study, drawing on an online survey with more than 700 respondents and focus group interviews with 27 participants, indicates that for some multiethnic, multi-abled, and otherwise diverse upper secondary students underlying, often ethnocentric, norms of Swedish education create hurdles in educational contexts. Firstly, in the Swedish context, non-normative and often global experiences are not recognised at school. Secondly, topics addressed in the courses they take are primarily focused on aspects originating in a Swedish, Nordic, or Western tradition. Curricular policies and classroom practices must take lost opportunities, which we argue are not socially sustainable, into account as a more global and holistic approach when articulating what educational learning is supposed to be about, for, and for whom, and thus integrating learning, digitalisation, and social sustainability.

## KEYWORDS

learning, education, globalisation, digitalisation, social sustainability

## 1 Introduction

Globalisation in terms of migration and movement affects most countries in the world in many ways, making them more connected and interdependent. Trade and technology are at the peak of this development, but in the school context globalisation in terms of student population diversity becomes even more prevalent. Some multiethnic, multi-abled, and otherwise diverse upper secondary students indicate that underlying, often ethnocentric, norms of Swedish education create hurdles for them (pilot study, 2022). Firstly, in the Swedish context, their non-normative and global experiences are not recognised in school. Secondly, topics addressed in the courses they take are primarily focused on topics originating in a Swedish, Nordic or Western tradition. This may cause tension, as [Andreotti and de Souza](#)

(2008) indicate: “uncritical reinforcement of notions of the supremacy and universality of ‘our’ (Western) ways of seeing... can reproduce unequal relations of dialogue and power and undervalue other knowledge systems” and, as Biesta (2020, p. 1023) contests, that although education seemingly is “all about learning, without ever asking the question what such learning actually *is*, what educational learning is supposed to be *about* and supposed to be *for*, and *who* should have a say in answering these questions,” which risk leaving definitions to the global educational measurement industry. As Biesta’s questions indicate, undervalued competences risk remaining untapped by those engaged with students in different contexts. As a result, students’ sense of agency and trust (Pleschová et al., 2021) may suffer, resulting in lack of relevance and motivation. Moreover, and with this article’s point of convergence in the trinity of learning, digitalisation, and social sustainability in mind, we have learned that students sometimes find interpreting and participating in digital media cumbersome from perspectives of learning and social sustainability, which may impact educationally, financially, as well as societally in a negative manner.

For our article, we draw on selected parts of a dataset consisting of 712 responses from a survey we conducted in Spring 2022 with students at an upper secondary school in southern Sweden. While its main focus is reading, it becomes clear that language learning and use, digital ways-of-being-in-the-world, and, for many students, contextualisation based in various countries and linguistic spheres, have bearing on much more than reading. In their responses, issues of agency, equality, and equity are brought to the forefront. Focus group interviews, involving 27 students in six groups, provide wider perspectives.

Social sustainability in the educational context is a prioritised field. The United Nations (2015) “recognize[s] that ending poverty... must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth.” Likewise, Facer and Selwyn (2021, p. 2) argue that when creating “educational practices that work towards the common good and towards sustainable futures, our first concern must be to attend to the causes of existing injustices, individualisation and unsustainability and to proceed from there.” One of these causes is the uneven distribution of digital access and equipment, which has become a prominent and prioritised feature of education all over the world. This raises questions of equity, but also issues of data ownership and regulations (Bäcke, 2022). Facer and Selwyn acknowledge the importance of digital technology, but they also stress that “digital technology alone is not capable of creating sustainable educational futures” (2021, p. 2).

At the heart of education lies the notions of *bildung* with a focus on “values-driven and civically orientated [*sic!*] impacts” (Sefton-Green and Erstad, 2017). Digital literacy is, just like social sustainability, a priority all over the world, brings convenient solutions and is one of the aims in education globally (Lankshear and Knobel, 2015; Pangrazio, 2016; Regeringskansliet, 2017 [Sweden]; *Digital India*; Digitaliseringsrådet, 2020 [several countries]; Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019 [Denmark]; Department for Education, 2019 [United Kingdom]; Federal Ministry of Communication, 2024 [Nigeria]). Parallel with national processes, the United Nations (2021) and the European Commission (2020) have launched digitalisation initiatives, framed as the need to reimagine, revitalise, and reset education so that it is inclusive and

accessible for all. UNESCO (2021) frames learning in “a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty and precarity” that requires an educational re-think. Education is to contribute to the development of critical digital literacy, as the impact of increased digitalisation leads to profound transformation with substantial impact on educational structures, people’s everyday lives and on society at large. Researchers as well as authorities stress the risks of data gathering in the field of educational technology (Selwyn, 2015; Lindh and Nolin, 2016; Selwyn, 2018; Simanowski, 2018; Bäcke, 2022), and accentuate the need for *digital Bildung* as technical know-how regarding ownership of data and data usage must be viewed as dimensions thereof. In Germany, this realisation has led to the 2016 strategic document “Bildung in der digitalen Welt” (German: *Bildung in the digital world*), which highlights that the focus is neither on teaching methodologies nor on protection of user data, but on social and cultural effects of technological developments in society (Simanowski, 2018, 84, *our translation*), which echo a focus on socially sustainable solutions. German authorities are cognizant of potential detrimental effects of digitalisation and work towards mitigating its impact by prompting schools to take this issue seriously (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2016). Their work shows how the control of information, knowledge and learning constitute issues of power. We argue that a holistic understanding of students’ reasoning about digital tools is called for in order to chart ways to build enhanced digital literacy, which moves beyond the mere usage of digital tools and becomes linked to enhanced multilingual literacy. Both are crucial from a democracy and social sustainability perspective and are highly relevant when attempting to regain what otherwise may be lost opportunities for globalisation, digitalisation, and socially sustainable education. In this article, our aim is to point to how the making visible of diverse linguistic, digital, and cultural competences might contribute to more sustainable and inclusive classroom contexts and societies.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Reading, writing, and fiction literature in Swedish schools

Although we will focus extensively on learning, digitalisation and social sustainability, our study began with perspectives on reading, and, as our survey indicates, for most students reading equals reading fiction literature. Indeed, Swedish national curricula foregrounds literature studies (read: fiction), but in reality, and from a critical perspective, schools treat it mainly as an instrumental tool for language learning:

In Swedish schools, literature studies have become focused on instrumental components such as comprehension and proficiency (Ewald, 2007; Johansson, 2014) – in line with requisites of neoliberal educational reforms. Ewald (2007) concludes that Swedish studies are assigned the main role in the students’ language development. This movement from aesthetic elements might result in students’ disinclination for reading (Schiefele et al., 2012), which would, then, create a negative correlation between literature studies and students’ general reading habits (Wintersparv, 2022, p. 443).

Wintersparv (2021) situates written fiction as a “cornerstone in upper secondary Swedish first language (L1) studies,” but at the same time points to how international assessment (for instance PISA) creates and maintains a focus on measurability, leaving “non-measurable aspects of literature teaching,” such as immersion and the notion of literary texts as aesthetic experiences, unexplored and unproblematised. Emphasis must be put on reading that engage “readers’ passions, histories, and memories,” since “reading is an event of becoming” (p. 445, Wintersparv referring to Felski, 2015 and Macé, 2013). The results from Wintersparv’s three initial studies indicate that it is considered imperative for many of the teachers of Swedish to control the students, that there is a hierarchy in which the printed text is primary, that literature teaching is characterised by instrumentality and utility perspectives as well as a normative formalistic use of literature-analytical concepts (Wintersparv, 2021). The formalistic approach created a framework both in the manner the participants presented texts as well as the focus in questions posed to the students, and was generally combined with teacher-centred modes of teaching (Wintersparv, 2021). Moreover, the hierarchised relationship between written and oral text must be problematised together with the lack of aesthetics in teaching as a crucial dimension of literature (Wintersparv, 2022). The dichotomy, in which the written is preferred, could be dismantled and increase the accessibility for the students (Wintersparv, 2021). In addition, Wintersparv argues that harmonising the discrepancy between national curricula and classroom practice may increase both conditions and outcomes in literature teaching (2021). He stresses the school’s socially equalising duty, i.e., to work towards a more equal society, which risks being set aside when students, who are unused to reading, are not offered compensatory strategies to improve their reading skills to meet the knowledge goals (2021). Wintersparv primarily deals with a teacher perspective, while we, for the purpose of this article, add a student perspective.

An important aspect of the student perspective is “the extent to which identities and investments structure their engagement with texts, whether these be written, oral or multimodal.... [as] both the comprehension and construction of the text is mediated by the learner’s investment in the activity and the learner’s identity” (Norton, 2010, p. 358). Identity can be expressed through writing texts to strengthen students’ perception of identity and value (Cummins, 2017; Sandell Ring, 2018). Acknowledging multilingual students’ identities and experiences in turn has an impact on motivation to learn (Sandell Ring, 2018). This perspective also includes students’ life beyond the school context (Cummins, 2017; Wedin, 2019). By including the non-formal context, social power relations in the classroom can be targeted through teachers’ awareness of an acting upon (2017, 2019). Learner identity, in this case framed through their description of their linguistic and digital competences, becomes a lens through which we discuss inclusion, diversity and social sustainability.

## 2.2 Socially sustainable use of digital technology in schools

As the current Swedish government in January 2023 “paused” the digitalisation strategy proposed by Skolverket in December 2022 and indicate a more restrictive view on the use of digital tools in schools – especially in younger age groups (Wennerberg, 2023), the former

government’s aims from 2017 (Regeringskansliet, 2017, p. 3), that are still valid, stress that “Sweden is to continue to inhabit a leading position regarding digital competency. Swedish schools play a central role in this endeavour by providing opportunities to explore the abilities to use and create with digital technology and an understanding of how digitalisation affects the individual and society’s development.” In this manner, the former government opened up for exploring digitalisation in a broader perspective and accentuates the need for a deeper understanding of the possibilities and dangers of digitalisation.

Similar issues are addressed by researchers around the world, and in “What might the school of 2030 be like? An exercise in social science fiction,” Selwyn et al. (2020) speculate on “the ways in which digital technologies might be used in one Australian high school in 2030 (Lakeside), and what this might mean for the people whose lives are enmeshed with these technologies” (2020, p. 90). Predicting and speculating the *ordinary* future for schools, people’s everyday life is described as “enmeshed with technologies” (Selwyn et al., 2020). Through a playful approach with vignettes, aspects of digitalisation in education are problematised, together with exploring potential benefits as well as dangers such as commercialised and datafied education. Schools in the future are described in terms of datafication, platformisation and their potential consequences. The fully integrated school management through platformisation leads to deprofessionalisation of the teacher, which in turn may lead to classroom assistants replacing teachers since decisions are grounded in the abundant data collection made by software. The consequences for “datafied schools,” and their processing of detailed and in-depth information of behaviours and how generated, “data-mined,” data can be used to profile, predict, monitor and standardise performance in the service of learning. The generated data also allows for disciplining students as well as teachers (Selwyn et al., 2020). This already exists, as user data, and thereby also the users, risk being turned into commodities, but this is still not widely acknowledged in schools (Bäcke, 2022). These ways of looking into the future help us visualise more sustainable and inclusive future classrooms (Selwyn et al., 2020), a future in which the passing on of societally relevant knowledge might become more sustainably sound than the commercially purposed gathering of data. For the purpose of our study, we depart from a future-oriented perspective on socially sustainable use of digital technologies in school, underpinned by science. This implies also acknowledging students’ everyday social life beyond school, and the necessity to problematise potential consequences of commercial and politically driven interests in digital technologies in schools.

## 2.3 Knowledge in a globalised world

What is knowledge, then? Knowledge, the understanding of or familiarity with something, as a concept has often been synonymous with strategic, growth-oriented notions of what is needed or relevant in a society. Subsequently, everything that does not further this agenda is considered irrelevant knowledge. As Andreotti and de Souza put it:

[A]pproaches to global citizenship education in Europe address the agenda for international development in a manner that leaves assumptions unexamined and ignores how this agenda is re-interpreted in other contexts. Not addressing these different readings may result in the uncritical reinforcement of notions of

the supremacy and universality of ‘our’ (Western) ways of seeing, which can reproduce unequal relations of dialogue and power and undervalue other knowledge systems (Andreotti and de Souza, 2008, p 3).

Andreotti and de Souza thus highlight the ranking and inequality in the perception of different knowledge systems. They point to the manner in which unproblematised assumptions of knowledge may lead to the risk of students with a background in other traditions or knowledge systems feeling diminished or irrelevant. This can be linked to language learning. Several of the respondents in our study can be described as heritage language users, i.e., they learn languages at home or with their families that may or may not be visible in the normative linguistic landscape in the culture where they reside and their language learning may shift over time (Duff, 2010, p. 446) explains:

Students may also learn and relearn languages in sequences that prove highly variable, unpredictable and nonlinear: starting with a heritage (native or ancestral) language spoken in the home; then often shifting to the dominant societal language with public schooling; later adding an additional (‘foreign’) language at school, and subsequently returning to a study of the heritage language if well disposed to recultivating the latent knowledge and building upon it.... Such sequences, codeswitching, and functional multilingualism are pervasive in much of the world.

For students at upper secondary level learning the language of their parents or ancestors may not always be aligned with strategic, growth-oriented notions of what is needed or relevant in society and the incentives of making the effort of doing so varies from individual to individual – especially since the learning of these languages may not receive positive reinforcement in schools. With our study, we aim to contribute to the current debate of what counts as knowledge and from whose perspectives knowledge is requested and defined. Our approach rests on questioning dominant norms, expectations and Western perceptions of “proper” knowledge, which risks excluding young citizens’ whose perspectives reach far beyond European borders.

## 2.4 Education and trust

Positive reinforcement in school is linked to trust and the relationship between teachers and students. Although the focus in Pleschová et al. (2021) article is primarily on conversations that make meaningful change in teaching, teachers, and academic development, it can also point to relevant aspects of students’ sense of agency and trust. Drawing on researchers such as Kahneman (2011) and Kahneman and Tversky (1979) who “explain how people make economic decisions in situations that involve risk and uncertainty,” they provide an insight into how students’ trust in their teachers may play a role in their willingness to engage in “a trusting and trusted community” (Pleschová et al., 2021: 202).

Five conditions form a foundation of pedagogical conversations: cross-disciplinary participation, trustful relationships, conducive spaces, co-construction practices, and caring attitudes. The presence of multiple conditions leads to greater opportunity for meaningful

change, whereas lack thereof may result in a lack of relevance and motivation. Trust as a condition, defined as “a willingness to become vulnerable, based on positive expectations of another person’s behaviour or intentions,” entails the following three dimensions: “ability, benevolence, and integrity” (Pleschová et al., 2021: 205). Hence, a trustful relationship in a teacher-student context requires the ability to act with benevolent integrity to build robust relationships in a socially sustainable educational context.

## 2.5 Socially sustainable education

How is “good” education defined? Definitions from a social sustainability perspective are rare, but the UN sustainable development goal number four states that we are to “[e]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations). Biesta (2020) reflects on the good of education and highlights OECD *lack* of definition:

By suggesting, as is implied in such measurements, that education is ‘all about learning,’ without ever asking the question what such learning actually *is*, what educational learning is supposed to be *about* and supposed to be *for*, and *who* should have a say in answering these questions, the global educational measurement industry has actually promoted a very specific definition of education’s good, without ever articulating this definition explicitly, let alone providing a justification for it (2020, p. 1023, emphasis in the original).

A clear-cut definition of good education is thus not evident, but Biesta proposes three domains of purpose when engaging with the question: “qualification, socialisation and subjectification” (2020, p. 1024). Firstly, education must perform the measurement and safeguarding of qualification, i.e., set a standard for students. Secondly, it must socialise students into the society they are a part of. Thirdly, it must provide an arena for student subjectification. As such, education must be able to support students’ agency of their own life or whether they reproduce social and cultural structures (2020), and, drawing attention to educational systems not only reproducing their cultural context, but also providing tools for the students to feel a sense of agency. Moreover, Biesta points to the risk of education functioning “as an ‘instrument’ that can be put to work for any agenda” (2020, p. 1025), arguing the need for awareness of education having “its own integrity.” The Swedish educational system is based on [The Education Act \(2010: 100\)](#), the [National Curriculum for Upper Secondary School \(2013\)](#), and more general laws, for instance the [Discrimination Act \(2008:567\)](#). They all provide an insight into what the lawmakers view as the fundamental values of Swedish schools:

[They are] based on democratic foundations. [The Education Act \(2010: 800\)](#) stipulates that education in the school system aims at students acquiring and developing knowledge and values. It should promote the development and learning of students, and a lifelong desire to learn. Education should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. The education should be based on scientific grounds and proven experience. Each and everyone working in the school should also encourage respect for the

intrinsic value of each person and the environment we all share (Skolverket, 2013).

The national curriculum further stresses:

[t]he inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people are the values that the education should represent and impart. In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is to be achieved by nurturing in the individual a sense of justice, generosity, tolerance and responsibility (Skolverket, 2013).

which echoes the Discrimination Act (2008:567) intended to combat “discrimination and in other ways promote equal rights and opportunities regardless of sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age” (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen, 2022). These quotes mirror the political agendas of the 2000-early 2020s, which may or may not change as a result of new political constellations. Biesta (2020) firmly accentuates how fluctuating agendas influence education and risk leading to short-sighted, temporary solutions and underlines the importance of continuing to critically reflect on what education actually means, and potential risks of opening up for other actors with other underlying agendas.

The invited commentary for the 2022 special issue “How built spaces influence practices of educators’ work: An examination through practice lens” allows Biesta to explore school as a place and he argues that school in fact is not a learning environment. In addition, he discusses the importance of language as a mediator of underlying assumptions for the study of spaces in educational practices, and that these are “imbued with meaning” (p. 336). These spaces are distinguished by “relationships of power, empowerment, and constraint” between humans (p. 336), indicating that diverse spaces invite openness while other voices are silenced (2020). Biesta thus stresses the need for holistic approaches to teaching and learning in socially sustainable education systems. A definition of socially sustainable education is rarely found. There are, however, several aspects and dimensions addressing the concept, from a global perspective (the United Nations), from an educational research and bildung perspective (Biesta, 2020), to national perspectives expressed in the Swedish educational system, as in our case. In our study we commit to Biesta’s holistic approach to socially sustainable education. Such an approach entails strengthening students’ agency, avoiding the reproduction of social and cultural structures in education, while maintaining a critical perspective on global industries’ interests in education, and consistently and critically questioning our underlying assumptions on the good of education (Biesta, 2020).

## 2.6 Social sustainability

Moving from these slightly more concrete aspects of social sustainability in education and digitalisation respectively, we now attempt to define social sustainability on a more general level. The United Nations Global Compact (2024) primarily defines social sustainability as a focus on business impacts on people directly and

indirectly, either as “employees, workers in the value chain, customers and local communities.” From the UN Global Compact’s perspective, drawing on the “social dimension of corporate sustainability” human rights becomes “the cornerstone” and, as such, the rights of “labour, women’s empowerment and gender equality, children, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, as well as people-centred approaches to business impacts on poverty” are brought to the forefront. They stress that “social sustainability encompasses issues that [affect these groups], for example, education and health.” The World Bank (2020), on the other hand, offers a slightly broader definition of social sustainability and inclusion global practice (GP) leaving the business angle and focusing on “creating more inclusive societies, enhancing the empowerment of citizens, and fostering more resilient and peaceful communities.” Adding a chronological aspect, the World Bank describes how social sustainability “is also about expanding opportunities for all people today and tomorrow. Together with economic and environmental sustainability, it is critical for poverty-reduction and shared prosperity.” Although the above definitions coalesce in several ways, de Fine Licht and Folland (2019) stress the obstacles to a joint definition of social sustainability that is universally accepted (Boström, 2012; Murphy, 2012; Ghahramanpouri et al., 2013), and continue:

The potential negative effects of lacking a clear definition are manifold. Drawing from our experience of working with social sustainability issues in collaboration with municipalities, entrepreneurs, and others for many years, new actors always ask how to define this key term. With no universally accepted answer, gaining trust and confidence in the project is a steep uphill battle. More generally, the lack of a definition seems to make it easier for strong actors to push through their own agendas under the guise of social sustainability (McKenzie 2004: 12–25), which can result in outcomes that are less equitable and advantageous for all (Boström et al., 2012: 136–138). These examples reflect the downside of lacking a universally accepted definition of ‘social sustainability’ (de Fine Licht and Folland, 2019).

Hence, the definition for social sustainability remains slightly unclear, but, for the purpose of this article, we will primarily follow the definition of the World Bank above, focusing on the creation of more inclusive societies, in which citizens are empowered, with the aim to foster more resilient, financially stable, and peaceful communities both for those who are currently living and those who are not yet born.

## 3 Methods

In Autumn 2021, we were approached by two teachers of Swedish and Swedish as a second language at an upper secondary school in southern Sweden, who wondered if we were interested in working with them with the aim to improve literature teaching at their school. Together with these two teachers and their colleagues and with the overarching aim of investigating Swedish upper secondary students’ attitudes and experiences of reading practices, and their relations to linguistic, digital and cultural competences, we designed a survey in Swedish to be taken online (using the tool EsMaker) with statements requiring a response, open-ended question with opportunities for the

students to exemplify and clarify their *lived experiences* (Brinkmann, 2018) and attitudes towards reading. The aim of the questions was primarily how upper secondary teachers could help students with their reading and reading strategies - and whether/how their intentions to support the students benefited their reading. The survey mainly contained questions to which the teachers themselves were eager to find answers. The questions were open-ended questions to invite rich descriptions. In our efforts to encourage all students to contribute and to ensure that topics were addressed in-depth, all students were asked to give their personal views and experiences (Flick, 2022). The students responded frequently with long, informative answers and this was done in classroom settings. Though there is a risk that *excessive use of open questions* (Bryman, 2012) will negatively impact the response rate, the students overall contributed with concrete examples and descriptions covering between 18 and 38 pages/per question on as many as five of the survey questions in the generated EsMaker report, and thus no survey fatigue was found. All questions will not be analysed here, since the survey is broader than the scope of this article. Instead, we focus on the ones directly linked to language variety and those related to the use of digital tools based on our research interest to investigate how the making visible of diverse linguistic, digital and cultural competences can contribute to more sustainable and inclusive classroom contexts and societies.

The next step in our mixed method study involved semi-structured focus group interviews, allowing for follow-up questions, revisiting questions for more elaborate statements, and enabling the interviewee to develop her/his answer, for richer descriptions. The follow-up focus group interview study consisted of six interviews with groups of students, 4–6 in each group, 27 students in total. Their programme specialisation profiles represented law, economy, behavioural science, and humanities (languages). The sampling consisted of available students/classes willing to participate, and access given by the teachers involved in the constructions of the survey questions.

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants. Respondents have been anonymised and, in the responses from the survey, there is no indication of identity, name, or geographical data, as is the case for the focus group interviews, although we have included an indication of in which interview they took part. To get a high confidentiality level, we do not even know the participants' names, since no notes were ever taken of these. Participation in the study has been voluntary, as indicated by us in the information before beginning the survey and as stated at the beginning of the recorded interviews (Swedish Research Council, 2002; Swedish Research Council, 2017) and the respondents have been invited to withdraw from the interview if they have felt uncomfortable in any way either during or after the interviews. Simons (2009) points out that “the first task is to build relationships and establish conditions of trust with the people you are studying” (p. 100), and although there is a logical gap between us as researchers and the participants in the online survey (which was facilitated by teachers they knew) and directly between us and the participants in the focus group interviews. As researchers, and in line with Pleschová et al. (2021), we try to be open with our own vulnerabilities and show our benevolence and integrity, which might allow us to create a positive, albeit temporary, bond with the respondents. In addition,

although we cannot promise anonymity, we can try to reach a high level of confidentiality and professional secrecy (Swedish Research Council, 2011; Swedish Research Council, 2017).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Reading among upper secondary students – online survey

We carried out the survey study in February and March 2022 at an upper secondary school in the southern part of Sweden. The total number of respondents is 712 (broken up by educational profile: 205 students study economy, 176 aesthetic, 21 from the humanities, 10 international baccalaureate, 96 from the natural sciences, and 204 from the social sciences). One hundred and eighty-four of the students define themselves as males, 514 as females, while 11 do not define gender. 90.6% of the students take the course Swedish, while 9.4% are enrolled on the course Swedish as a second language. From this study we are drawing on a selection of questions where the responses have a particular bearing on learning, digitalisation and social sustainability. Among the 99 respondents who answer in the affirmative when asked whether they have another mother tongue/home language(s) other than Swedish, 41 different languages are listed. The question uses the concept of mother tongue (in Swedish), which is problematic since it potentially excludes “father tongues” and also does not take language variation into account, and the concept has not been used by us in the subsequent focus group interviews. The most common languages are Arabic (spoken by 25 respondents), Assyrian (13), English (13), and Spanish (10), followed by Bosnian (8), Somali (6), French (5), German (5), Kurdish (4), Croatian (4), Chaldean (4), Persian (3), Serbian (3), Italian (3), Hungarian (3), Vietnamese (3), Syrian (2), Urdu (2), Greek (2), and Swahili (2). The following languages are spoken by one respondent each: Turkish, Polish, Serbocroatian, Gujarathi, Dari, Ukrainian, Lingala, Cantonese, Albanian, Thai, Hazaragi, Tigrinja, Azerbaijani, Filipino, Danish, Russian, Finnish, Lithuanian, Japanese, Romanian, and Tamil.

Four students list two or more home languages:

- 1 Serbocroatian, Bosnian, Serbian.
- 2 French, English, Lingala.
- 3 Spanish, English, French.
- 4 Persian, Turkish, Azerbaijani.

The question If you read in your spare time, what do you then read? (several alternatives may be selected) provides the following response:

Ninety-nine percent of students (704) respond to this question and it is noteworthy that 85.9% of them read on social media, but more than half of respondents, 52.6%, also read traditional paper books. The latter is by far the most popular way of consuming fiction, while 44.8% state that they never listen to audiobooks, and 66% that they never read e-books. Reading newspapers in paper format is less popular (56.1% state they never do this) than online news (28.4% state that they never do this), but, over all, news consumption on the whole is rather low in this age group, since as many as 38.4% state that they may read paper newspapers a few times a month or even less and 41.7% that they read online news to the same extent. In comparison,

59.3% catch up on social media several times a day and another 24.5% read it every day (Figure 1).

The responses to the question during your time in upper secondary you read many different types of texts. If you do not understand, which strategies/methods do you use then? makes it clear that the majority of students avoid asking the teacher and usually ask someone else first. Here is a sample of typical responses, in which students in the first category try to solve the problem on their own in various ways.

- Translate into my mother tongue.
- Google if I can be bothered.
- Nothing. I just read on.

The second group of answers display a more negative or defensive stance:

- I give up.
- No, do not read that much.
- I look up words or ask the teacher. If the teacher is bad at explaining, it is their fault if I answer incorrectly at a test etc.

A third theme centres around asking someone for help, but also highlights their distance to their teachers:

- I search the net, ask a friend, and write down on a paper to perhaps get a clearer picture. Then I re-read, highlight, look up words, ask my parents, google etc.
- Try to look for other texts or ask siblings and parents. Think it's hard to ask the teacher since it feels as if this affects my grades, unfortunately. Check [a word] in some digital dictionary.
- Honestly, if I do not understand I usually look up synonyms and explanations. If I do not get any relevant hits from Google, I will

ask my parents. If they do not understand either, I have to accept the fact that I will have to ask the teacher what they mean.

While the student strategies are diverse, the most common response demonstrated that asking the teacher is among the least applied approaches to be able to continue their reading. On the contrary, the teacher is avoided as a potential resource for understanding reading, for different reasons.

## 4.2 Reading among upper secondary students – focus group interviews on language usage

Based on the answers we received in the survey, we decide to delve deeper into (a) students' language skills and (b) their use of digital tools. In the six focus group interviews, conducted in May 2022 we meet students from the programme specialisation profiles representing law, economy, behavioural science, and the humanities (languages).

It is evident that there is a close relation between Swedish and English for many students, as a compulsory subject, and that they switch between these for different purposes and in diverse contexts. Time is a factor with an impact on reading in English.

It may take a bit longer if you were to read a book in English, at least for me, since it's not the same as before [when reading Swedish], but easy enough to get through.

Student 6/Interview 3.

There is also a clear connection between the purpose of reading, and how either of the languages are linked to reading as a stimulating activity or to reading a less engaging fact-based assignment.

### Leisure time reading

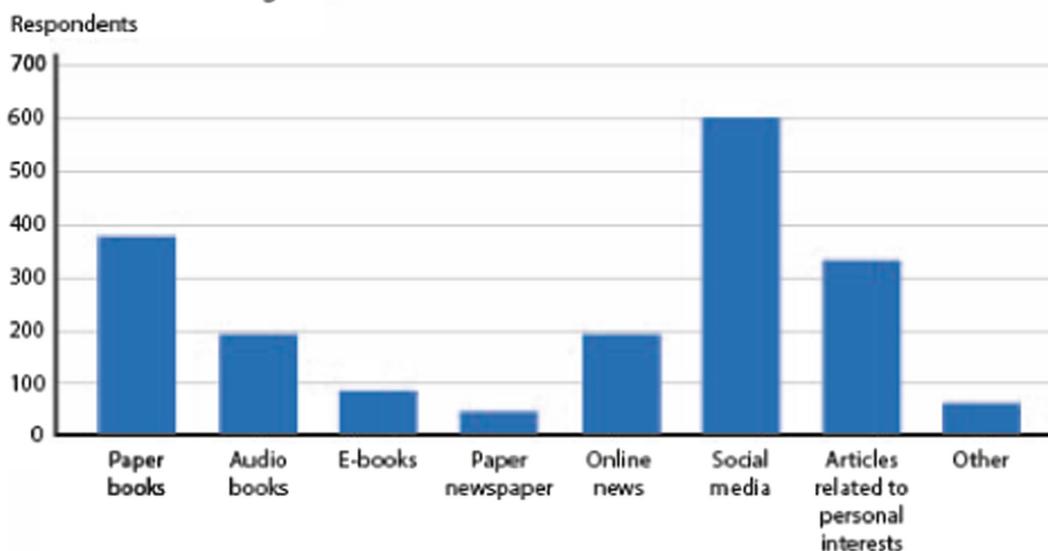


FIGURE 1  
Leisure time reading.

Yeah, if I'm going to read a book of fiction, then I'd rather read in English. I find that more stimulating. But if I'm going to read some boring fact text, then I'd rather do it in Swedish.

Student 5/Interview 3.

Almost everything I do on social media... on Instagram and all. That is in English. It would be extremely boring to only check Swedish things.

Student 6/Interview 3.

Several of them rely on the languages they learn as a foreign language at school, for instance English, Spanish, French, Italian and German, but they highlight the discrepancy between learning as a school subject, learning for use in real situations, and in their spare time.

I think that the way you learn languages in school and the way you learn languages... yes, naturally, it is very different. When we learn languages it is very difficult to apply to reality since most of it... well, it's grammar and those things. We don't learn much... and here you have a normal conversation. It becomes quite difficult.

Student 4/Interview 1.

I often listen to French music and then I usually search for... Yes, if there is something... It may not feel natural, but if there is something in French I try to read and understand.

Student 6/Interview 3.

If I see a Spanish text, then I react... hang on... I recognise that well. Yeah, I don't actively search for texts in French, for instance, but if I see it, then I... know. Yeah... or it is weird... it could be on the back of a cereal package.

Student 5/Interview 3.

I like books in English especially and I have also tried to read German books lately. I take German classes so I develop my language when I read German books. [I also read] Polish now and then, since my mother is Polish and it happens that I come in contact with reading and Polish... not that often, I'd say, but it happens.

Student 7/Interview 4.

The accounts above illustrate the gap between the instructional aspects of learning languages at school, and their implications for learning and using the language in "reality." They also highlight other spaces for language learning, and exemplifies several students' everyday lives in which other languages are present. Recurrently, students' diverse language everyday life surfaces together with personal aims of learning more languages.

Honestly, I hardly read literature since I think it's very time and energy consuming. But the literary books I have read have been in Swedish most of them... In other contexts, I read many more

languages than only Swedish and a bit of English. On the internet, I read more English than Swedish. Language acquisition is of great interest to me and therefore I would say that I spend more time reading word lists than I do reading fictional texts. And there several languages come in, for example French, Italian, and Korean. In other words, I have five languages; two I can speak reasonably well – or then you would have to speak well, fluently or something. French and Italian I can speak reasonably well. Korean I can't speak yet, but it's my aim to get there eventually.

Student 1/Interview 4.

During one of the focus group interviews, one researcher poses a follow-up question regarding news feeds in various languages and whether the students notice if news in different languages communicate almost the same things or not. The follow-up question departs from some students' particular interest in news.

I wanted to check [news] in French. It's good if you wish to check... and then I've seen differences. Are French news... more dramatic when telling things and sort of make news grander [than they really are]? [In] Sweden, they are sort of more neutral and then you have to make up your own mind, but in France it's sort of... They re-formulate stuff and it feels as if they spin things at times... Then they take the news in France and the news from the surrounding world a lot. There is so much from the Middle East and the war there and such things, while in Sweden there is so much Sweden... I don't understand the language a lot, but I understand that they over-dramatise... so, interesting, actually.

Student 8/Interview 5.

Yes, but if one reads news in English or about the U.S. it's primarily about celebrities. I think all of us... It's a lot about celebrities, but here in Sweden, for instance, then it's more like... Yes, but, as you say, it's most about what happens here and little about the surrounding world.

Student 7/Interview 5.

The two accounts above demonstrate students' awareness of the roles language spheres can play when communicating news, and how a language is situated, together with the potential impact this may have. In these accounts it becomes clear that the students' positions represent more global perspectives, and that the Swedish viewpoint represents a restricted view. It is possible to experience these differences even with limited knowledge about the language.

There are several heritage language users among the respondents and they discuss mother tongue/foreign language proficiency in different ways compared to the examples above. Their linguistic knowledge is extensive, but initially they seem to hesitate to reveal the language(s) in question and are often unsure of their level when they compare themselves to speakers who have grown up in a country where the language is the norm. It becomes clear during the interviews that revealing their linguistic competence is sensitive for some of the students, but eventually, approximately 30 min into the 40–45 min interviews, they seem to trust us as researchers enough to tell us more about the languages they know. Students with many languages in their everyday life, beyond those taught at school, seem strongly connected

to spoken languages. Several focus groups share life experiences with explicit connections to other languages, as part of their everyday language life.

I write and read in Swedish, English... but I also speak Chaldean... Assyrian, you could say.

Student 7/Interview 5.

I read English, Swedish, and... Yes, that and then I speak Syrian at home as well.

Student 6/Interview 5.

As a follow-up question, one of the researchers wants clarification as to whether the students have two oral languages, and whether they read in those languages or not.

Yes, I speak Swedish in school. Then, at home, I speak Somali, and English I can also write and speak. It's the same with Somali and Swedish. In Somali there aren't different letters... it's, sort of, Latin characters as the ones used in Sweden. And then I speak a bit of French, too. That's because my family speaks it, so I do it, too, but I can write a bit as well... read... but I don't do it fluently as such.

Student 8/Interview 5.

No, we have never learnt the letters. They look a bit str... diff... It's a bit like Arabic.

Student 6/Interview 5.

And then there are numbers on top of that, too, and that is very, very different.

Student 7/Interview 5.

You can write using Swedish letters also...

Student 6/Interview 5.

One researcher raises a follow-question about the correctness of using Swedish letters, and if this could be seen as an activity similar to using Google translate.

Yes, but many people do this anyway, since it is... I know there are many people who don't know... the Assyrian alphabet, so then you write in Swedish.

Student 6/Interview 5.

Well, my mother tongue is German... So I speak German, Swedish and English. Yes, and I have also, in Germany, Latin, so I can write and translate a little. But it was a long time ago.

Student 5/Interview 5.

Yeah, I can read in my mother tongue as well, but that is used in social media... Yes, I have four [languages] as well, but I can't read [in all of them].

Student 5/Interview 3.

Yeah, it's the same. I can't write or read in my mother tongue. I can only speak. Yes, this is because I haven't learnt it since I was little. Otherwise I can read and write in Swedish and English.

Student 4/Interview 3.

Students with other heritage languages are entitled to study any of these "home language" in Swedish schools as an extracurricular activity. In one of the focus groups this right is brought up concerning whether the students would attend any of those classes, and their reasons. It is evident that there are several students whose family members are multilingual.

I chose not to go since I found it so boring. I stopped.

Student 4/Interview 3.

Yes, I chose to go [to home language teaching] in primary school and a little in junior high. So it's not as if I can read and write in my mother tongue. I have a mother tongue that is prioritised... if we call it that. Then I have a mother tongue that is slightly under that. Yeah, I chose the one that is [prioritised].

Student 5/Interview 3.

Written language as well... yes, yes, and I notice that I lose words when speaking. There are a lot of words that I don't remember, since I'm not speaking the language that often... since I speak Swedish with my parents and they speak that language [this is before the student has chosen to reveal the language in question]. But I respond in Swedish. So the only times I speak that language is with my grandmother and aunt, who don't live in Sweden... Have to speak that language, but grammar is not that good and I have lost words. Yes, but it's possible to communicate... I... that is my parents are from Iraq, but actually we're... we speak Syrian.

Student 4/Interview 3.

I can read in Bosnian and I can talk. I understand, but it is like this that I, I make mistakes, it is... I don't know the grammar that well as they do. Or I can, but I don't think I... better to read in English or Swedish. Yes, is it because it is easier? Yes, and I like more how it's... In Bosnian I have to figure out what they mean.

Student 3/Interview 3.

Yes, I think I sort of lost the language when I started school and learned Swedish on a different level, and I had home language teaching when I was little, but then it wasn't Syrian, since the dialect we speak wasn't available. Instead, my parents decided that I would take home language teaching in Arabic, and that, well...

Student 4/Interview 3.

Yes, Assyrian, sort of, since Chaldean does not exist in home language teaching here. There is only one other type of... and I don't understand it that well since I was little, but now, when I'm

older, I understand a bit more to give... to work on the language, so now I understand what people say. But when I was little, I didn't, which was the reason for my parents to send me to classes in Arabic instead, since they speak it in the family anyway. It was not a huge difference.

Student 4/Interview 3.

A fellow student, a first generation immigrant, is nevertheless impressed by his peers' proficiency in Arabic as becomes evident in the following dialogue:

But these guys... [two of the speaker's friends who are present]. They speak very good Arabic and they were born here, I think. So I'm so astounded. How? How? Yes, how they speak, that is... they speak almost [perfect] Arabic.

Student 8/Interview 3.

But that is because we are born and raised here in Sweden. We have learned the languages in school, Swedish and English that is and then Arabic. Yes, I speak Spanish, too.

Student 5/Interview 3.

... but understands everything when he responds in Arabic ... They live in the same place, too.

Student 8/Interview 3.

I understand Arabic since both of my parents speak it... Since my mother only spoke Arabic when she was younger. Yeah. I sort of have both of them... yes, but I do understand completely, but I can't speak as well. No, I can't do it as well since I spoke only Syrian when I was little.

Student 4/Interview 3.

Aramaic came into the picture too, since it was more about asylum or serious, for instance because there was genocide so they moved to the Middle East, which is why Arabic has been added. It's like... otherwise you don't have a spoken language.

Student 6/Interview 2.

...but also their Arabic. It isn't formal Arabic, really. I was born there and I have read in Arabic my whole life. Their Arabic [is] the everyday variant... but not real Arabic. I know real Arabic better than them... you also need more, 20–30 years to become good at Arabic. This [formal] variant is very hard, but they understand general things.

Student 8/Interview 3.

But I have grown up with both languages, so it's because of school... I learn... English and Swedish. So it has led to me reading without thinking in English and Swedish. I don't think about it. Yes, I don't think in different languages. I just read and understand.

Student 4/Interview 3.

It [has] become difficult and ... one thinks of which language to read [in]... for me. I really enjoy reading in Arabic, but I think about the future... here is my future. I'm not... [in] Syria anymore or I... I don't live in Syria anymore. So one thinks that [one] should read ... in Swedish when I began [here in this school].

Student 8/Interview 3.

In conversations with their teachers, we have learned that they are unaware of the diverse linguistic competencies of their multilingual students and it is also clear that the students hesitate to reveal their language backgrounds to us as researchers, which indicates a pattern of non-disclosure.

### 4.3 Reading among upper secondary students – focus group interviews on the usage of digital tools

All respondents in the focus group interviews use digital media and some of them prefer this:

Yes, I would say so [that I prefer reading digitally]... I can zoom in and out.

Student 5/Interview 2.

One can adjust the lights, too... It is more convenient, yes.

Student 3/Interview 2.

Not all agree, however, and attempt to nuance the picture:

But it depends on the type of text. If the book... I'd rather have the [physical] book than reading the text digitally, so it really depends on where... If it had been a fact text, I would have preferred the digital version, since [the content] would then be available as a list [easily condensed and more accessible].

Student 6/Interview 2.

Some prefer not to read fiction on their phones:

The mobile phone? No, no... Regardless of the type of reading, one knows that something will happen that one will have to check, which makes one lose track.

Student 7/Interview 3.

As such, preferences among the group members are varied. Quite a few of them listen to podcasts on topics they find interesting.

Well, podcasts are very funny. There is a podcast with several different youtubers who talk and ... that I find interesting. Then you can either check out the clip on YouTube or listen to Spotify while on the way to training. When you don't have anything else to do, then you listen to it.

Student 9/Interview 6.

[One student follows] a podcast called.... What is it called? [Juridikpodden]... Two lawyers, in any case, who talk about crime and verdicts and explain why the verdicts are the way they are.

Student 5/Interview 1.

*Juridikpodden* is followed by several of the students, who all study on the law programme specialisation profile. Others follow the news on a regular basis in languages or cultural spheres with which they are familiar, and wish to keep in touch with, or are in the process of learning.

If I know what I'm looking for, I usually search via SVT (Swedish Television). I may also check [the local newspaper] in Swedish, but sometimes I also check German [news]. I grew up there.

Student 5/Interview 5.

Similarly, another student draws on their language proficiency:

I can also read in my mother tongue [not Swedish, and the student's mother tongue has not yet been revealed], and that usually comes up on social media... Facebook... or neutral, of course, in the sense that it's not in my language but in English, since this is spoken all over the world.

Student 5/Interview 2.

Worth noting here is that English is described as "neutral." Yet another student follows news in French:

In France they bring in news from the rest of the world a lot. There is a lot about the Middle East and the war there, while in Sweden there is more about Sweden and then perhaps something about the surrounding world if it is relevant to the Swedish context.

Student 8/Interview 5.

One student is reluctant to read fiction at all, but uses, and learns, several languages when on the internet:

I read in other contexts, of course, in many more languages than just Swedish and English... Language learning is a huge interest for me and therefore I'd say that I spend more time reading vocabulary lists than fictional texts... and then several languages, for instance French, Italian, and Korean, come into play.

Student 1/Interview 4.

Some of the students only draw on Swedish media outlets, but around 75% of the focus group interviewees read or listen to the news in other languages. The responses in this paragraph indicate how linguistic ability and digital media know-how become conflated. Some of them follow media outlets in the countries or regions where they or their ancestors were born, whereas others draw on the international news channels provided by the television service providers.

The vast majority of respondents have accounts and follow people on TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, or other social media platforms, and switch between them regularly. They comment on the migration from one platform to another:

Yes, but if I watch YouTube when I work on something for school or so, I want to find out facts about this.

Student 6/Interview 3.

They also contemplate the similarities and differences between generations.

It could be that when you get older, you don't really think it's fun. But those who were big youtubers before... they don't do anything fun anymore. No, or are they on TikTok now? Everyone is changing platforms.

Student 7/Interview 3.

The consumption of digital media on a daily basis is very high in the focus group respondents, but this use is linked to the private sphere and rarely tapped into in the school setting even if some of them describe a task to create a podcast in class. Primarily, they discuss the use of digital teaching material or e-books used in the classroom. In some subjects, for instance mathematics, the only textbook used is a digital one.

There is one thing, though, that I would prefer to have in the printed version and that is the maths and natural sciences books. We have those in digital form and I find it difficult to read those.

Student 6/Interview 3.

One student offers a differing viewpoint:

With a natural science book and you want to read about mushrooms, you can simply search for 'mushrooms' and easily find the correct page.

Student 7/Interview 3.

To which Student 6/Interview 3 agrees. Several of them link digital reading to textbook reading, whereas analogue books implies reading for leisure or enjoyment unless they are selected by the teachers as part of the curriculum. Many of the students are less happy with what they view as the lack of notation possibilities in the digital textbooks, and describe how they read over and over again to remember the content.

Several of them contemplate the expectations of older generations and their view on young people's use of digital tools:

I think they want to believe that we're really good [at using digital tools], that the only thing we do is to lie in bed and scroll through TikTok twenty hours straight. I understand that digitalisation is so much bigger than it was only twenty years ago. Anyone understands this, but I think it's more like this: They [grown-ups] believe we are far too bound to our phones and that they like to use this against us.

Student 4/Interview 1.

There are those [students] who sit with their phones every day, but then there are others who choose a book or go out instead of playing [games], really. There isn't all or nothing, sort of. It's difficult to generalise.... But this is also something that is viewed as negative... that you're a lot on social media... but it can be a very good learning experience as well. We wouldn't have been able to check the news or see what had happened in other countries without our phones. So there is both good and bad, but one should do it moderately.

#### Student 5/Interview 1.

In some of the focus group interviews, the students discuss what they would do regarding social media when they have children of their own:

I think that it's important to follow the development a little, because if you don't know what is happening... It's not a good place for young people to be.... Is it correct to talk to one's children about how things are... that "THIS is okay? THAT is not okay, then 'this' happens. Come to me in that case." But if you just try to forbid them to do something... "No, you're not allowed to use this app," or so, then they will do it anyway and if anything happens, they will not tell me about it, since I forbade them to use that app.

#### Student 5/Interview 3.

In this manner, the students are well aware of the impacts of new technology, both positive and negative, and are ready to mitigate negative repercussions.

## 5 Analysis/discussion

We will address the various theoretical demarcations with parallels to the empirical material beginning with reading, writing, and fiction literature in Swedish schools; socially sustainable use of digital technology in schools; knowledge in a globalised world; education and trust; and socially sustainable education attempting to provide a holistic overview of learning, digitalisation and sustainability at upper secondary level in Sweden.

### 5.1 Reading, writing, and fiction literature in Swedish schools

The safeguarding of qualification, the measurement aspect, happens constantly in all subjects in all Swedish schools. This is also a major influence on Swedish literature teaching, as [Wintersparv \(2021\)](#) indicates: the focus on international assessment favours measurability and non-measurable aspects remain underdeveloped. Our study focuses on reading in school, and the methods used in the field have confirmed the instrumental conventions, and the disciplinary, cultural and societal norms as well as teacher-centred forms of teaching and assessing. The students indicate that there is less/little focus on aesthetics, and the pleasure of reading. Moreover, among the students "proper reading" is largely defined as "reading fiction." Although all of them read various types of textbooks in many subjects, as many as 59.3% catch up on social media several times a day and another 24.5% read it every day, the interviews indicate that they do not classify these activities as proper reading.

### 5.2 Socially sustainable use of digital technology in schools

Several students mention the learning management systems and the digital textbook solutions used in school when asked about the use of digital usage in schools. When we specifically ask about their social media use, 83.8% of them are active on social media every day

according to our survey, they indicate that these primarily are used in their leisure time and *circa* 75% of the focus group interviewees read or listen to the news in other languages. Linguistic ability and know-how regarding digital media use are conflated. Most respondents follow and switch between social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. These competences are rarely drawn upon in the school context. Instead, the Swedish school draws on a definition of digital literacy which implies the usage of tools implemented by the school, not digital literacy in a more general manner incorporating a wider and more critical digital literacy – students' linguistic, digital and cultural competences, which several of the students have given evidence of representing – which would further explore the benefits and dangers of digitalisation ([Regeringskansliet, 2017](#); [Selwyn et al., 2020](#)) and provide a less fragmented and more socially sustainable approach to cultural diversity and digitalisation, both of which is highly intertwined in the students' responses.

While the user layer of digital literacy is more diversified in students' private use, we learn that datafied or platformised schools are not discussed at all by the students and there is no indication of them being aware of how "data-mined," data can be used to profile, predict, monitor and standardise performance in the service of learning or discipline. None of them mention training or knowledge of how to navigate the more overarching aspects of the school's digital tools nor how to think regarding their social media presences outside of school. From these vantage points, the digitalisation initiatives launched in Sweden have so far failed to lead to an educational re-think incorporating knowledge of digital/data ownership which would contribute to the development of critical digital literacy or *bildung*. In view of this, we argue that a better understanding of where students are regarding digital tools is needed to be able to build enhanced digital literacy. Digital tools must be actively problematised, which might be linked to the manner in which students already use these tools and simultaneously enhance multilingual literacy and, subsequently, become relevant from a democracy and social sustainability perspective.

### 5.3 Knowledge in a globalised world

The roughly 14% of students who respond to our survey indicating a home language(s) other than Swedish list 41 different languages and the five most common are, in falling order, Arabic, Assyrian, English, Spanish, and Bosnian. The students who learn the most common (western) languages at school are mostly preoccupied with the discrepancy between learning as a subject at school and learning for use in authentic situations. They are aware of their self-evident spot in normative societal contexts. They enact the expected roles.

Our study shows that heritage language users discuss their foreign language proficiency in other ways. Although their linguistic knowledge is extensive, they do not seem to wish to reveal the language(s) in question and are unsure of their level, which they often summarise with "I can only speak [a little], not write." These students did not seem to view their non-western language skills as an asset, whereas those learning Western languages such as French, Italian or Spanish mentioned these without hesitating, as such highlighting how the "supremacy and universality of 'our' (Western) ways of seeing" indeed reproduces "unequal relations of dialogue and power"

undervaluing other knowledge systems in a manner that resembles Andreotti's and de Souza's conclusions. The type of teaching sketched above risks reproducing the cultural context it is a part of, and the lack of general cultural socialisation and general digital socialisation risk negatively affecting the way in which students are able to develop agency in a broader context, and beyond the educational contexts as citizens. Since the school does not ask for information about their linguistic background it risks remaining invisible, which in effect constitutes lost opportunities for both globalisation and inclusion.

## 5.4 Education and trust

What our survey and focus group interviews thus show is that cultural socialisation largely reproduces a Swedish, Nordic, and/or Western cultural context and experiences from other cultures or countries are largely left invisible. As indicated in the previous paragraph, several of the multilingual students we encounter, especially those from a non-western origin, are reluctant to talk about qualifications not addressed or asked for by their teachers. In the survey results, a majority of students indicate that they avoid asking the teacher when they get stuck and usually google or ask someone else, a friend or their parents, first. As many of the interview responses indicate, some students do not even wish to name the languages they speak until they have developed a level of trust in us as researchers during the focus group interviews, and neither do they approach their teachers on this matter, as demonstrated in the results from the survey. Trustful relationships, conducive spaces, co-construction practices, and caring attitudes seemed to be lacking, which seem to have led to a decrease in relevance and motivation on the part of the students. As researchers, it took some time to create a context where the students felt comfortable enough to relay what they viewed as sensitive information. We signalled our own willingness to become vulnerable, our benevolence and integrity, however, which seems to have convinced them of our good intentions, allowing us to create a temporary bond which allowed the students to provide glimpses of their everyday lives. A trusting relationship in a teacher-student context requires the ability to act with benevolent integrity to build robust relationships in a socially sustainable educational context, but, as our interviews made obvious, this does not always happen.

## 5.5 Socially sustainable education

With the aim to fulfil the United Nations sustainable development goals, primarily number four – “[e]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (n.d.) – we identify the “goods of education” as means to foster inclusion and equity. For Biesta, one of the important goals of education is to support students' agency as a way to safeguard integrity and reduce the risk of it functioning as an instrument for just any type of political agenda. As educational systems are among the most regulated endeavours in most countries, the legal frameworks become the main conveyor of political or ideological framings. The current legislations in Sweden promote the knowledge and values of a democratic foundation, where the respect for human rights, solidarity, justice, generosity, tolerance, responsibility, equality, equity, and

fundamental democratic values is instilled and teaching is based on scientific grounds and proven experience. However, if a new government does not promote these values and ideals, what happens then?

The governing idea of this article is to promote the tolerance of inclusive and diverse educational contexts with (a) a particular focus on an extended digital *bildung*, know-how, where students are taught about both pros and cons of digitalisation on various levels and (b) from a diversity-oriented angle encourage people drawing on the highly diverse linguistic competences found in most classrooms in Sweden to minimise the constraints between humans and make unequal relationships of power visible – and to empower and let silenced voices become heard. In other words: the aim is to counteract a fluctuating political landscape ready to ignore the knowledge of some students only because they do not speak the languages that are placed hierarchically high in Sweden. We also suggest drawing on the joint knowledge of digital tools to envision a different digital future together that makes better use of the technologies available to us and safeguards students of all ages from the gathering of data done by large corporations.

With this as a backdrop, we argue that a global holistic perspective and a re-thinking of education are needed to create a more socially sustainable future, in which linguistic, digital and cultural *bildung* are taken into account. Following Wintersparv (2021), the potentially negative implications of the failure to notice opportunities that, in themselves, are a result of failing to tap into the students' own “lost” expertise, which risk impacting students' sense of, but also actual, agency and create school situations in which trust is lacking between students and teachers. Following Biesta (2020), teachers as well as students risk being put in a situation when they are forced to ask themselves and each other – and the authorities – what learning is actually for. To view learning more holistically and more culturally inclusive, to develop a critical, but also more encompassing, view on digital practices in the school context, and to link all this to issues of social sustainability may create more sustainable futures and remedy the lost opportunities seen today.

## 6 Conclusion

According to our study, teachers and school leaders do not pay enough attention to students' digital, cultural or linguistic skills, which could salvage some of what currently might constitute lost opportunities for inclusion and socially sustainable education at upper secondary level. Although the study was initiated to gain an understanding of reading habits and perceived hindrances to successful reading strategies among these students, their responses to the survey quickly put the limelight on cultural and linguistic repertoires and digital competences. In line with common (mis) conceptions in society, the students equate proper reading with the reading of fiction in the school context, which the majority of them find less enjoyable. However, the bulk of their reading on an everyday basis is very much linked to their digital, primarily social media contexts, which they carry out in a whole range of languages. Therefore, a holistic understanding of students' use of digital tools and enhanced multilingual practices might provide a segway into both improved reading habits and skills and facilitate inclusion, democracy and social sustainability.

Our study shows that students' cultural and digital competencies and experiences are not acknowledged or taken into account as ethnocentric norms continue to set the agenda in Swedish teaching and learning, which we argue is detrimental from a social sustainability perspective, locally, nationally as well as internationally. It risks reinforcing a sense of us versus them as it perpetuates unequal power relations and undervalues other knowledge systems than the normative one. In addition, this fails to foster a more nuanced and deeper form of critical digital literacy or *bildung*, through which digital tools, media ownership, and their links to democracy, inclusion, and social sustainability are actively problematised. In future studies, we would like to expand the demographic scope to include more diverse educational settings, which may ensure a broader applicability of our findings and hopefully provide practical guidance for educators and policymakers.

In this article, we have attempted to show how seemingly overlooked, diverse linguistic, digital and cultural competences might contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive teaching and learning environment, which may lead to more resilient, inclusive and tolerant societies. Curricular policies open up for this, but school practice shows that opportunities for more nuanced applications often are lost in everyday reality. Student experiences, both in the realm of digitalisation and in multicultural contexts, need to be taken into account to create a more global and holistic approach as we ask questions and articulate what educational learning is supposed to be *about, for, and for whom* (Biesta, 2020) without leaving the definitions to the global educational measurement industry. Curricular policies must regain these lost opportunities as a more global and holistic approach – integrating learning, digitalisation, and social sustainability – is implemented.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## References

- Andreotti, V., and de Souza, L. M. T. M. (2008). Learning to Read the World through Other Eyes: An Open Access Online Study Programme Focusing on Engagements with Indigenous Perceptions of Global Issues. Available at: <https://blogs.ubc.ca/earthcare/files/2018/07/toe.pdf> (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- Bäcke, M. (2022). Resisting commodification: subverting the power of global tech companies. Special issue. Ed: Sangeeta Bagga-Gupta. Special issue. *Bandung J. Glob. South* 9, 49–79. doi: 10.1163/21983534-09010003
- Biesta, G. (2020). What constitutes the good of education? Reflections on the possibility of educational critique. *Educ. Philos. Theory* 52, 1023–1027. doi: 10.1080/00131857.2020.1723468
- Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet (2019). "Om Kampagnen "Digitalisering Med Omtanke Og Udsyn". Available at: <https://www.uvm.dk/publikationer/2019/190313-digitalisering-med-omtanke-og-udsyn>. (Accessed January 01, 2019).
- Boström, M. (2012). A missing pillar? Challenges in theorizing and practicing social sustainability: introduction to the special issue. *Sustaina. Sci. Pract. Policy* 8, 3–14. doi: 10.1080/15487733.2012.11908080
- Brinkmann, S. (2018, 2018). "The interview" in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. eds. N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln. 5th ed (Los Angeles: Sage)
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods (4th)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Cummins, J. (2017). *Flerspråkiga Elever: Effektiv Undervisning i en Utmanande tid*. Stockholm, Sweden: Natur and Kultur.
- de Fine Licht, K., and Folland, A. (2019). Defining "social sustainability": towards a sustainable solution to the conceptual confusion. *Etikk i praksis. Nordic J. Appl. Ethics* 13, 21–39. doi: 10.5324/eip.v13i2.2913
- Department for Education. (2019). *Realising the Potential for Technology in Education: A Strategy for Education Providers and the Technology Industry*. London, UK: Department for Education.
- Digitaliseringsrådet. (2020). "Andra Länders Digitala Strategier." Available at: <https://digitaliseringsradet.se/vaerldens-digitala-agenda/andra-laenders-digitala-strategier/>. (Accessed July 11, 2020).
- Diskrimineringsombudsmannen. (2022). Discrimination Act (2008:567). Available at: <https://www.do.se/choose-language/english/discrimination-act-2008567> (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- Duff, P. A. (2010). Language socialization. In *L. Sociolinguistics and Language Education*. (Eds.) N. H. Hornberger and S. L. McKay. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- European Commission (2020) *Shaping Europe's Digital Future*. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en>
- Ewald A. (2007). *Läskulturer: Lärare, elever och litteraturläsning i grundskolans mellanår*. [Reading cultures: Teachers, students, and reading fiction in the middle years of elementary school]. [Doctoral thesis, Malmö University].
- Facer, K., and Selwyn, N. (2021). *Digital Technology and the Futures of Education: Towards 'Non-Stupid' Optimism*. Paris, France: UNESCO.

## Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants.

## Author contributions

MB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft. SV: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

- Federal Ministry of Communication. (2024) "Nigeria E-Government Master Plan." Available at: <https://fmcide.gov.ng/> (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- Felski R. (2015). *The limits of critique* University of Chicago Press.
- Flick, U. (2022). *Doing Interview Research: The Essential How to Guide*. London: Sage.
- Ghahramanpouri, A., Lamit, H., and Sedaghatnia, S. (2013). Urban social sustainability trends in research literature. *Asian Soc. Sci.* 9:185. doi: 10.5539/ass.v9n4p185
- Johansson M. (2014). "Litterär socialisation i Sverige och Frankrike: En komparativ studie av hur gymnasieelever han-terar en skönlitterär text [Literary socialization in Sweden and France: A comparative study on how upper second-ary students manage a fictive text]" in *Pedagogiskt arbete: Enhet och mångfald*. eds. M. Vinterek and A. Arnqvist (Högskolan Dalarna), 113–128.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kahneman, D., and Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: an analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica* 47, 263–291. doi: 10.2307/1914185
- Kultusministerkonferenz. (2016). *Bildung in der digitalen Welt: Strategie der Kultusministerkonferenz*. Available at: [https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/2018/Digitalstrategie\\_2017\\_mit\\_Weiterbildung.pdf](https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/2018/Digitalstrategie_2017_mit_Weiterbildung.pdf)
- Lankshear, C., and Knobel, M. (2015). Digital literacy and digital literacies: policy, pedagogy and research considerations for education. *Nordic J. Digit. Lit.* 10, 8–20. doi: 10.18261/ISSN1891-943X-2015-Jubileumsnummer-02
- Lindh, M., and Nolin, J. (2016). Information we collect: surveillance and privacy in the implementation of Google apps for education. *Eur. Educ. Res. J.* 15, 644–663. doi: 10.1177/1474904116654917
- Macé M. (2013). Ways of reading, modes of being. *New Literary History* 44, 213–229. doi: 10.1353/nlh.2013.0017
- McKenzie, S. (2004) *Social Sustainability: Towards some Definitions*. Magill, South Australia: University of South Australia.
- Murphy, K. (2012). The social pillar of sustainable development: a literature review and framework for policy analysis. *Sustain. Sci. Pract. Policy* 8, 15–29. doi: 10.1080/15487733.2012.11908081
- National Curriculum for Upper Secondary School (2013). Skolverket. Available at: <https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/gymnasieskolan/laroplan-program-och-amnen-i-gymnasieskolan/laroplan-gyl1-for-gymnasieskolan> (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- Norton, B. (2010). "Language and identity" in *Sociolinguistics and Language Education*. eds. N. H. Hornberger and S. L. McKay (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters)
- Pangrazio, L. (2016). Reconceptualising critical digital literacy. *Discourse Stud. Cult. Polit. Educ.* 37, 163–174. doi: 10.1080/01596306.2014.942836
- Pleschová, G., Roxá, T., Thomson, K. E., and Felten, P. (2021). Conversations that make meaningful change in teaching, teachers, and academic development. *Int. J. Acad. Dev.* 26, 201–209. doi: 10.1080/1360144X.2021.1958446
- Regeringskansliet. (2017). "Regeringen Beslutar Om Nationell Digitaliseringsstrategi för Skolväsendet." Available at: <https://www.regeringen.se/informationsmaterial/2017/10/regeringen-beslutar-om-nationell-digitaliseringsstrategi-for-skolvasendet>. (Accessed July 11, 2020).
- Sandell Ring Anniqa. (2018). Språk, lärande och identitet. *Skolverket*.
- Schiefele U., Schaffner E., Moller J., Wigfield A. (2012). Dimensions of reading motivation and their relation to reading behavior and competence [Academic Journal Report]. *Reading Research Quarterly* 47, 427–463. doi: 10.1002/RRQ.030
- Sefton-Green J., Erstad O. (2017). Researching 'learning lives' – a new agenda for learning, media and technology. *Learning, Media and Technology* 42, 246–250. doi: 10.1080/17439884.2016.1170034
- Selwyn N. (2015). Data entry: Towards the critical study of digital data and education. *Learning, Media and Technology* 40, 64–82. doi: 10.1080/17439884.2014.921628
- Selwyn N. (2018). *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates. 2nd Edition*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Selwyn, N., Pangrazio, L., Nemorin, S., and Perrotta, C. (2020). What might the school of 2030 be like? An exercise in social science fiction. *Learn. Media Technol.* 45, 90–106. doi: 10.1080/17439884.2020.1694944
- Simanowski, R. (2018). *Stumme Medien*. Berlin, Germany: Matthes & Seitz Berlin Verlag.
- Simons, H. (2009). *Case Study Research in Practice*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Skolverket. (2013). Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School. Available at: <https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/gymnasieskolan/laroplan-program-och-amnen-i-gymnasieskolan> (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- Swedish Research Council (2002). *Forskningsetiska Principer Inom Humanistisk-Samhällsvetenskaplig Forskning [Ethical Principles for Research Practice in Humanistic-Social Scientific Research]*. Stockholm, Sweden: Vetenskapsrådet.
- Swedish Research Council (2011). *Good Research Practice*, vol. 2011. Stockholm, Sweden: Vetenskapsrådet.
- Swedish Research Council (2017). *God Forsknings Sed [Good Research Practice]*, vol. 2017. Stockholm, Sweden: Vetenskapsrådet.
- The Education Act (2010:800). Sveriges Riksdag. Available at: [https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/skolag-2010800\\_sfs-2010-800](https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/skolag-2010800_sfs-2010-800) (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- UNESCO. (2021). Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/>
- United Nations (2021). *Pandemic disruption to learning is an opportunity to reimagine, revitalize education*. UN News, Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082792> (Accessed February 24, 2021).
- United Nations. (2024). "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All." Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2017/goal-04/>
- United Nations Global Compact. (2024). Social Sustainability. Available at: <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/our-work/social> (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- Wedin, Å. (2019). Negotiating identities through multilingual writing: local school policy that opens up spaces for students' diverse languages. *Linguist. Educ.* 55:100775. doi: 10.1016/j.linged.2019.100775
- Wennerberg, M. (2023). "Skolministern Varnar: Digital Undervisning kan ha Gått för Långt." TV4. Available at: <https://www.tv4.se/artikel/3cg3EHRVGEqHZ9MuwzWThf/ministern-varnar-digital-undervisning-kan-ha-gatt-foer-langt> (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- Wintersparv, S. (2021). Teaching the Reading Experience: Upper Secondary Teachers' Perspectives on Aesthetic Aspects of Literature Teaching (PhD Dissertation, Umeå University). Available at: <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-182221> (Accessed April 02, 2024).
- Wintersparv, S. (2022). The role of aesthetics in Swedish literature studies: a survey beyond measurability of the teaching of literature. *Scand. J. Educ. Res.* 66, 441–457. doi: 10.1080/00313831.2020.1869088
- World Bank. (2020). Five Things You Need to Know About Social Sustainability and Inclusion. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/09/02/five-things-about-social-sustainability-and-inclusion> (Accessed April 02, 2024).