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Pathways to Aesthetic Education in a World of Profitability

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Abstract

The cultural sector has become an important part of the ‘new economy’ and has affected artistic practices as well as the road to becoming an artist. By discussing two female students’ paths to aesthetic education, the article sheds light on some of the sociopolitical and economic conditions that students in transition between elementary and upper secondary school in Sweden encounter when entering aesthetic education with musical aspirations. The results give insight into the ways in which young people reason when entering a precarious sector that demands a high amount of personal investment and planning. It also shows the ways in which social class still plays a pivotal role in the choice of and reflection on educational goals. Further, the article discusses how creative desires can transcend the economic instrumental expectations that surround the world in which the students live. Thus, it provides a contemporary understanding of how young people navigate a world of profitability.

Keywords

Youth transitions, aesthetic education, school choice, music career, life–history approach

Generally material circumstances are against it. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down. Further, accentuating all these difficulties and making them harder to bear is the world’s notorious indifference. It does not ask people to write poems and novels and histories; it does not need them. (Woolf, 2004, p. 60)

Inversely, the stubborn children of the proletariat look for signs of their vocation for humanity in the heaven of the poets and philosophers. (Rancière, 1983/2004, p. 209)

Introduction

Many of us have probably dreamt of being an artist, but for most of us, this has been an unrealistic fantasy or an amusing thought. Nevertheless, a significant

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share of us actually makes it onto a stage in one way or another. In this article, I will discuss some of the conditions that students in transition between elementary and upper secondary school in Sweden face as they navigate into the future. To do this, I chronicle two female students' paths to an aesthetic education program with a musical profile. Within the field of youth and cultural studies—which also includes the neo-Marxist tradition—the focus has often been on how young people form their identity through cultural expressions, for instance, within the sphere of cultural consumption (see Nayak, 2003, p. 33). Here, I digress from this focus. Instead, the starting point—and contribution—will be to investigate the sphere of production by asking what the material conditions look like for young people in their becoming. Thus, I will discuss some of the conditions that the creative sector is facing in the contemporary economy and its potential implications for social reproduction.

Through a life–history approach, the particular cases of the two students, Yasmine and Nazli, can tell us something more general about the setting and circumstances that today's young generation faces when entering adulthood in a society that mostly fails to reward practices of art and culture. Their different approaches to the same educational program, even the same school, and desire to become song artists shed light on how social class shapes the habitus and ways of envisioning the future. As practices of arts and culture are economically marginalized in society, thereby being limited to those who are able to take risks, class reproduction continues to play an essential role in the aesthetic fields (Bourdieu, 2010, 1996). At the same time, the life history of Yasmine, in particular, portrays a circumstance in which class reproduction related to cultural capital and educational enrolment does *not* occur. In this sociological case study (which can hopefully also contribute to the music education research field), Yasmine challenges the structures and becomes the exception that proves the rule.

Educational Transformations in Sweden

Over the last few decades, Sweden has gained a reputation for its successful music industry. 'The notion of Sweden as the third largest exporter of popular music after the US and the UK became a mantra in the description of the country's music industry success' (Johansson, 2010, p. 134). Several authors have stressed the municipally funded public music school (which is part of what is called *Kulturskolan*¹ in Sweden) as a crucial factor explaining the Swedish pop wonder (Burnett, 2001; Johansson, 2010), which is an extracurricular municipally subsidized cultural activity for children between 6 and 19 years. Even the Swedish Institute (2017)—a public agency that promotes Sweden internationally in the fields of culture, science and business—lists the public music school as the first of eight reasons as to why the Swedish music industry is so successful internationally.

Public music education faced a period of crisis and survival in the 1990s as part of the national austerity measures affecting the welfare system. Almost two-thirds of municipally funded music schools faced the threat of closure. During this time, public music schools took a somewhat new turn characterized by individualization (Persson, 2001). For instance, instead of ensemble classes,

individual singing and studio recording became more popular.² According to Persson (2001, p. 383), the orienting concepts for the continuation of the public music school into the new millennium were reflexivity, flexibility and globalization.

It is worth mentioning that during the same period, the Swedish education system as a whole underwent one of its most radical transformations since its establishment (Allelin, 2020). In 1992, a voucher system was implemented allowing the establishment of profit-seeking privatized schools (though publicly funded). Having been one of the world's leading countries in educational equality, Sweden is now the only country that allows publicly financed elementary schools to make private profits. In order to keep up with global competition and meet the needs of a globalized market, there is a strong consensus within the Swedish political establishment that the educational system must offer more flexible and entrepreneurial services, hence the deregulated voucher system and implementation of free school choice (see Ringarp, 2013).

The marketization and voucher system in Swedish education includes preschool, elementary and upper secondary schools. Therefore, students and their parents have to make several school choices during their educational journeys. Furthermore, between 2011–2022, only non-vocational programs led to students qualifying for higher education (in Sweden, the aesthetic program—which includes the music profile that is at stake in this article—counts as a theoretical program). According to scholars (Allelin, 2020; Ball, 2003; Böhlmark et al., 2016), the educational changes have led to increased segregation among student groups as more informed households have been able to make school choices better than socially marginalized groups. Through a new system of tax deduction, private tuition after school hours has also increased among those who can afford it. Thus, we are witnessing a continued and accentuated social reproduction marked by the stratification inherent in class-based societies.

Educational transformations should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. Instead, it should be understood as part of a more general structural change in the mode of production. As the economy has become more global and financialized, many more previously publicly financed and distributed welfare institutions have undergone what Harvey (2005, p. 159) has called 'accumulation by dispossession', that is, processes of privatization, financialization and economic redistribution through austerity politics. This has affected the way in which welfare institutions are governed and how they operate. In the Swedish context, this has meant a massive restructuring of the public sector (Beach, 2011; Therborn, 2017). From a music and youth perspective, this has also meant that youth recreation centres, which provide rehearsal and concert spaces, have been negatively affected (see Sernhede, 2018).

New Conditions for Being 'Creative': Some Parallels Between Britain and Sweden

As a result of the changing relations of production, the creative fields have been subject to capitalist production and innovation. According to British cultural theorist McRobbie (2016, p. 18), the economic regulation of the cultural sector has undergone

a ‘second wave’, which ‘comes into being as a consequence of the more rapid capitalization of the cultural field as small-scale previously independent micro-economies of culture and the arts find themselves the subject of commercial interest’. In the British context, a de-industrialized landscape, combined with neoliberal restructuring, has resulted in a reduction of funding for co-operatives and community groups in the cultural field (p. 64f). This is not as noticeable in the Swedish context, but as Lindström (2016, p. 47) has pointed out, Sweden has been inspired by the British cultural policy to increase collaboration between business and the cultural sectors. Further, there is an ongoing tendency towards introducing agencies such as the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth and Vinnova in the making of the so-called creative and cultural industries where ‘[a]rtists and creative workers have been targeted as forerunners of a kind of work subjectivity that is understood as entrepreneurial—managing one’s own career progression rather than through employment’ (p. 47).

As we are entering what has been called the information society, that is, where the service sector is becoming more dominant in relation to manufacturing and the industrial sector, the creative business has gotten a renewed, economic meaning. McRobbie (2016, p. 28) has paradoxically noted that ‘[i]t is as though culture were suddenly embraced by New Labour coming into office as an unexpected source of economic regeneration’. The same tendency, that is, the capitalization and political instrumentalization of the cultural field, is also evident within the Swedish context (Makarychev et al., 2020, p. 83). In an opinion piece signed by the former minister of education of the Green Party, the economic value of aesthetic education in elementary school was strongly emphasized:

The [conservative] Alliance seems to look at culture as something of lesser importance, as some kind of entertainment occurring alongside real education and the labour market. Swedish music and design are, however, big export industries. According to Business Sweden, 94,000 people work within the experience industry today, such as music, film, TV production, gaming, design, and fashion. ... Aesthetic knowledge is becoming increasingly important, including outside these branches. ... Many need the skills to present a service or product, to conceptualize one’s company, or to be able to understand different cultural expressions. ... Children who attend music classes early in life often have better language development than those children who do not. Early education in music can have mathematical advantages. (Dagens Nyheter, 2013, translated by the author)

Even if the former minister of education starts by defending cultural activities as valuable, their value seems to rely on their instrumental function in helping children gain skills in mathematics or language. Further, the importance of culture and aesthetic education seems to lie in its ‘exceptional’ ability to favour academic studies and the export industry. Clearly, the argument does not rely on the intrinsic value of the arts, such as practitioners’ own interests or art as purposeless activity or even as an expression of *bildung*. The focus is on what is most profitable for the labour market.

The dismantling of the welfare state and the flexible structure of the labour market have forced individuals to procure their own security and perform their own risk planning. From a youth perspective, Pimlott-Wilson (2017, p. 294) concluded that ‘[t]he pressure to attain traditional markers of adulthood in times of economic

uncertainty impacts on the emotional subjectivities of young people'. Depending on the inner calculations of whether or not young people believe that they will be marginalized or be able to fulfil their dreams based on their efforts and resources, their way of navigating into the future will be affected.

Accentuated by the changing structure of the economy in general, the cultural industry in particular can be understood as innovation-intense in a double sense: economically—the precarious and flexible production and distribution many artists face (and have always faced, even before the restructuring)—and intrinsically—as the profession constantly requires artists to be unique and provide audiences with new work. As previous research has shown, this tendency affects young people's navigation in aesthetic education as it 'points to the increased pressure to define art education as a means to bring participants to a position of paid labour and long-term employment' (Fürst & Nylander, 2020, p. 433).

In conclusion, being a freelance musician involves entrepreneurial abilities such as economic navigation (which is of lesser import if one has economic advantages) and multitasking as few professionals will be able to rely on others to manage or promote their activities (Albinsson, 2018). As a result, 'people increasingly have to become their own micro-structures' (McRobbie, 2016, p. 18). On a societal level, there is an ongoing tendency that can be described as the "marketisation" of culture and the "culturalisation" of the market' as 'high culture is becoming increasingly commercial and, on the other, cultural content increasingly shapes commodity production' (Ellmeier, 2003, p. 5). This development, perhaps more than ever, is reflective of Adorno's (1941/2002) early notion of the standardizing tendencies of popular music as it is subsumed under capital production and distribution.

The Social Stratification of Aesthetic Education Enrolment

Against the backdrop of the precarious conditions of the artistic field—accompanied by an imperative of being creative in the labour market—one might ask the following question: who chooses aesthetic education in Sweden?

The tendency for women to enter the creative and aspirational fields is evident in the enrolment statistics of upper secondary school programs. Another general pattern is that there are major differences when it comes class background when choosing a theoretical or vocational program (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019). Among the theoretical programs, the aesthetic profile tends to be one of the most homogenous. In 2019, 18% of the students who applied for the aesthetic program came from homes characterized by short periods in tertiary education, while 46% of parents had undergone long periods of tertiary education. Barely 3% of the parents had only a compulsory education and 29% had an upper secondary school background. Barely 5% of the student applicants had a foreign parental background and 10% had a foreign background themselves, having been born outside of Sweden. This can be compared with the natural science program where 14% of applicants had a foreign parental background and 22% were born in another country (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019).

Looking at the numbers, the class-analysis of Bourdieu (1993) still holds validity also in a contemporary Swedish context. Historically, middle-class youth

have been characterized by having opportunities to explore their interests, having a meaningful process of *becoming* by taking part in self-fulfilling activities and engaging in 'provisional irresponsibility' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 161), while working-class youth have lacked the experience of adolescence as they have had to help out with chores at home or work in factories. This has also affected the practices of art. According to the German cultural theorist Hartwig (1980/1991), youth of the working class have had a stronger orientation towards less abstract forms of art, such as painting and writing, which also tend to have greater use value than practices such as singing and dancing. For the working class, the developing of useful, practical skills seems to have been of greater importance than for the middle-class artist who, according to Hartwig, aspires for an autonomy free from a priori labour market demands.

Hartwig (p. 182) further noted that an orientation towards the arts means a dissociation from a concrete social room, most often the home, and entering an abstract, unfamiliar space. This implies that the child starts by presenting their work to the family, which becomes the first actual audience. The reactions of this first audience are of great importance as it can support or inhibit the continuation of the artistic work. In this phase, the child learns what is allowed and what is precluded from the symbolic interaction with the family (p. 188).³ It is also during this time that the child learns to give attention to their individuality, 'the obligation to be unique, to differ from others' (p. 182), which, according to Hartwig, stands in contrast to the expectations of a more collectively oriented working-class environment.

Following Bourdieu and Hartwig, German cultural theorist Thomas Ziehe (1991) further discussed the inner conflicts arising when youths in the era of late modernity are put in a position 'to find oneself'. In parallel with the politico-economic distinction and release, which developed during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Ziehe points to the socio-cultural widening of the market that developed with capitalism. As old collective structures, which were once defined as the individual's destiny, have formally eroded under the hegemony of meritocracy, 'the individual's subjective dimensions' have become a sort of compass and new belief. 'Finding oneself' has almost become a decree. Moreover, the process of cultural release is highly ambivalent, according to Ziehe. The reason is that a discrepancy has become evident between what one can imagine and what is actually possible to realize, which is affected by one's material conditions.

It is true that mass education as a widespread activity has prolonged the process of adolescence on a general societal level. Nevertheless, the educational system is still structured in a way that systematically leads to self-elimination among working-class students and, therefore, hinders social mobility (Erikson, 2020). As a consequence, earning money instead of merits has been more alluring, perhaps more so in times of economic crisis. Consequently, Bourdieu's (1996) legacy seems particularly relevant as he states that '[t]he propensity to orient oneself towards the most risky positions, and especially the capacity to hold on to them in the absence of any economic profit in the short term, seems to depend in large part on the possession of significant economic and symbolic capital' (pp. 261–262).

Yet, as I will show in this article, the particular story of Yasmine shows us a divergent side to the suppositions of Bourdieu. For instance, McRobbie (2016)

has found that women generally seem to have a greater ability to overcome this discrepancy. In combination with old gender regimes that relegated women to the social role of pleasing, 'emotional labour', 'passionate work' or even the concepts of 'social skills' and self-evaluative characteristics have become more in tandem with mainstream femininity. McRobbie further observed that there is an influx of young women into the cultural industry sectors 'across boundaries of class' (p. 35), noting that the barriers to enter these middle-class businesses have more to do with overcoming material disadvantages, family and community background as well as everyday prejudices rather than workplace exclusion. Following the legacy of Rancière (1983/2004), who explicitly polemizes against Bourdieu, we cannot be contented by structural conditions if we want to understand concrete life histories:

To conceive more broadly the modes of symbolic violence that lead each to do his 'own business', we need to turn away from the great reproductive machine and look at these small machines whose movements, free within the space of their own necessity, espouse and retrace the configuration of the social field. We need to consider the forms of habitus through which social agents enabled the incorporated past to serve the anticipation of possible futures. (p. 182)

As I do consider the validity of Rancière's theoretical critique, hence the aim of this article, I also want to extend it by arguing that the contemporary material conditions for practicing art, given its neoliberal restructuring, have paradoxically made it possible for working-class students to imagine themselves attending aesthetic education. In other words, while there is an ongoing proletarianization of the cultural production socially—which also means a demystification and reduction of symbolic meaning—it has enabled the proletariat to be included in the practice.

A Life–History Approach

As I am interested in how the two students 'subjectively experience, make sense of, and account for the things that happen to them' (Pat Sikes & Goodson, 2016, p. 61), I depart from a life–history method when approaching the respective stories. More than many other qualitative methods, the life–history approach claims to explore subjective recounting (Bertaux, 1981). By allowing interviewees to tell their stories in a more elaborate way than other interview techniques, a deeper understanding of experiences and the meanings attributed to them can be conceived.

Goodson (2016, p. 31) emphasizes a distinction between life story and life history. While a life story can be described as 'a partial, selective commentary on lived experience', life history adds a second layer and a further interpretation. Life–history as method acknowledges the complexity and interrelationship between people's everyday process and the social structures that surrounds them. Thus, 'without contextual commentary on issues of time and space, life stories remain uncoupled from the conditions of their social construction' (2016, p. 31).

Along with Goodson (2012, p. 5f), then, I want to stress the importance of moving 'from life stories to life histories as stories need to be understood, not just as personal constructions but as expressions of particular historical and cultural opportunities',

as public matters. The life histories told in this article, despite the inductive approach, should, therefore, be understood in relation to economic and political conditions. This requires a dialectic reasoning involving the centrality of a ‘reciprocal synthetic praxis which governs the interaction between an individual and a social system’ (Ferrarotti, 1981, p. 20). This correspondence between theoretical abstraction and empirical observation decreases the risk of both methodological occasionalism and essentialism.

By situating the personal stories in a structural and theoretical context, this study also avoids quantitative criteria for validity and generalization (see Flyvbjerg, 2006). Instead, the empirical material (the personal stories of two young female students) lays the basis for new interpretations. Thus, the overall contribution of this study is to gain new perspectives in an ongoing discussion about young people’s social and economic conditions, rather than verifying or falsifying positivistic claims. By choosing contrasting cases, the relevance of the study lies in its ability to situate the particular stories of Yasmine and Nazli in a contemporary politico-economic context, such as the changing welfare state and the societal role of artistic practices. A youth perspective provides insights into the pivotal moments in which class background becomes class reproduction. As upper secondary school is not mandatory (although, in reality, necessary in order to get a job) and can be seen as the first formal step towards the labour market, it can be regarded as the place where the differentiation of social reproduction is *initially* formalized, even if informal structures have been leading this way. How students navigate their choices and reflect on their actions and future prospects is important in helping us better understand their strategies and hopefully make the pathways more inclusive for future generations. As Pimlott-Wilson (2017, p. 293) puts it, ‘[e]motions are not just experienced in the present; they are predicted, influencing courses of action as young people prepare themselves for potential future emotional angst and devise coping strategies’.

The Data Material

The data consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015 with ninth-grade students in the city of Gothenburg, Sweden. The two interviews comprised part of a mass of ethnographic data material produced as part of the work on my doctoral thesis, which involved field work at two contrasting schools (Allelin, 2020). While Yasmine attended a municipal school in a suburb, which is characterized as a socially vulnerable area, with low-grade statistics, Nazli attended an inner-city charter school that attracted students from all over the city, with grade statistics corresponding to the national average.

During my field work, the ninth graders were about to make their upper secondary school choices, which meant them doing research on what program and what school would fit them and their future ambitions. It also meant visiting upper secondary schools on their open days and evenings after regular school hours (which I attended) and, not so surprisingly, spending many hours talking about the choice with friends. During this intense period, I observed that the stories of both Yasmine and Nazli stood out as contrasting cases. To quote Bertaux (1981), a good interview in relation to the life–history approach ‘is one in which the interviewee *takes over*

the control of the interview situation and talks freely' (p. 39, italics in original). This was what happened to me during my field work. During six months of observation and interviewing, the stories of Yasmine and Nazli stood out and evolved as a sub-study that could not be given the place it deserved in relation to the aim of the thesis. Both stories wanted to be told; thus, Yasmine and Nazli were both keen on including me in their individual processes.

In order for the interviewees to share their thoughts and experiences in as comfortable a way as possible, a reciprocal relationship of trust between the interviewee and interviewer is essential. The researcher must have trust in the informant's story, which includes a certain ontological and epistemological belief that something more general can be understood when analysing the particular life situation. At the same time, the interviewee must trust the researcher's approach and motifs. Thus, life-history methods inevitably generate intimate field relations. As the interviews were conducted after a long period of ethnographic fieldwork, including observations in the students' respective classrooms, informal conversation, semi-structured interviews etc.—as I had heard about their high school choices long before and in many settings (at open-house events, during lunch breaks, in the corridors, etc.)—I asked them to elaborate on their already ongoing process and/or recall recent events, thereby reducing the risk of the two students arranging their stories to fit my purpose. As Woods (1985, p. 13) claims, life histories

are a natural extension to ethnography, for they offer historical and subjective depth to an approach which tends to suffer from rootedness to situation and, as practised, large measure of inference about people's constructions of meanings. They are best used, I would argue, as an adjunct to ethnography, rather than as an alternative to it.

It is important to stress that the informants reconstruct narratives through their present construct system (Tagg, 1985, p. 166). Moreover, this reconstruction occurs in a particular meeting with the researcher. As a fairly young female researcher and a migrant background similar to theirs, I did sense a feeling of affinity from the two students. I was asked all sorts of questions about the future and what my path had looked like from high school to my current position as a researcher. However, their different class positions affected the way in which they approached me, how they wanted to present themselves in front of me. My reflection is that Nazli wanted to present herself more as an equal, while Yasmine positioned me as some sort of mentor. While Nazli was more confident and eager to tell me about her 'perfect plan', while Yasmine came to me for advice and confidential talks.

In total, I spent about 15 hours with Nazli and Yasmine on this subject matter. This involved me listening to their discussions with their friends, following them to different high schools, joining their meetings with the student counsellor, having informal talks and doing formal interviews. I asked them several questions, including whether they had already made up their minds about high school, what motifs had guided them, what future goals they had and how they were planning on reaching them. As Harrison (2009, p. xxxvii) has noted, interviews that seek to obtain life histories often involve 'a second and sometimes further interviews, where the researcher takes up particular aspects of the life to pursue in more detail'. As I was already doing fieldwork at their schools, it was easy for me to follow up on their stories continuously.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically along with the observations. One main theme was the practical preparations and initial process of the educational choice. The second main theme was to understand the ways in which the informants reasoned about their educational choice in order to come to a decision. The focus was on how the students discussed their choices in relation to their previous, current and imagined life situations.

The recorded interviews are presented according to the clean verbatim transcription style, with a distinct conversation format using smaller font size, while informal conversations—which were not recorded—are referred to in the body text.

Yasmine's Dilemma and the Dream of Singing

Yasmine lives in a marginalized area in Gothenburg with her mother, who works as a cleaner, and her younger brother, in a small townhouse. Over the course of the many weeks that I spent in the field, Yasmine and I had long talks about what upper secondary school could mean for her. We discussed how the different programs could affect her life chances in society in general and more specifically in relation to the labour market and on a more personal level. She asked me about my experience when I was about to choose upper secondary school, and I told her about my path to the social science program. I was well aware that I should not romanticize any program and, instead, encourage open-mindedness to all programs and focus on her exploratory approach.

One day, while we were out walking in the park next to the school building, she took long pauses during her passages, and I could observe that she was choosing her words with great care, as if she was preparing herself for what she was about to say. She told me that she wanted to get away from this place and be part of something new. She repeatedly remarked that she was feeling too old for her age. Suddenly, she let go of my arm, stopped walking and looked at me. With a smile, yet a serious look, she exclaimed: 'I mean when I sing... I get an OUTLET FOR MY EMOTIONS!' We continued walking, and she told me that her mother had asked her to sing for her in order to understand what it is that she, Yasmine, was so passionate about. She told me she was nervous about her mother's request since her mother's opinion and support meant a great deal to her. After her performance, her mother remarked: 'Yasmine, I knew you were good at singing, even if you've sometimes sung out of tune, but this time, it was flawless. You've got talent, and I get that you want to do it.' Yasmine looked at me as her face lit up: 'To get that recognition from your own mother, you know... it was... I finally felt as if I could do what I'm really passionate about.' She started laughing and continued: 'I was like, dammit, you couldn't have told me earlier?'

Yasmine described the natural science program as 'more serious', 'tougher' and 'a secure investment for the future'. Conversely, she believed that the aesthetic program could offer her a chance to *live out* her youth, let her do something she is passionate about. She was convinced that it was a chance she would never have again, even if the aesthetic practice environment seemed foreign to her. 'I only live once', she said to the student counsellor (when I accompanied her). Her process did, however, take time, and it was a choice she needed to know more about and mentally get used to. It was a reflexive process in which I was involved.

Majsa: Let's talk about the whole process; how did you make up your mind concerning the high school choice?

Yasmine: Yeah, well it was such that I, when I was little, we lived in a church, you know, it was when we didn't have a residence permit, I think, and after that, we used to spend a lot of time there, and there were some doctors there as well. And at one time, I got to play with his, what's it called, you know when you listen to the heart?

Majsa: Stethoscope, I think...

Yasmine: Yeah, well anyway, my mom saw me with it, and from that day on, her dream was that I should become a doctor, you know. And I liked it too, so it wasn't anything my mom forced on me; it was something that I could imagine myself doing. I like to work with other people and especially children, so when my mom said I would really fit as a pediatrician, I followed on that idea or way of seeing it... and... yeah, so it was that all the time, a pediatrician, pediatrician, I kept thinking. And then, it was ninth grade and time to make a choice, and I've always had my own dream to become a singer, to become an actress, ever since I was little.

Majsa: When did it [the dream] start?

Yasmine: Ever since I can remember, I've always loved singing. I don't know but since a young age... you go through stuff in life, and it's... I built a wall around myself. And that means that my emotions, they were kind of like... I clearly show it when I'm bothered with something, but when it comes to my soft emotions, or the vulnerable side of me, the really sensitive stuff, I find it harder to release them. So, when, for instance, I hear a song or listen to the lyrics and it hits me, that makes me.... I just feel good then (small laughter). ... The interest in acting began when I was seven years old. I used to watch a lot of Disney and stuff like that. I don't know, but it inspired me to play in front of the camera and all. And then... I found out there was a possibility, you know. Before that, I haven't even thought of other possibilities. And to become a pedestrian, you have to choose natural science, and that has always been a given, but then I went to this casting, and it made me realize, made me open my eyes, that there were possibilities.

Drawing on Pimlott-Wilson (2017), it is evident that Yasmine's emotions function as a navigation tool 'influencing courses of action'. This is expressed through an independent experience with the surrounding world, a subjectivation process that makes her realize what *she* wants. Referencing Ziehe (1991) and Hartwig (1980/1991), she is in a process of cultural release and dissociation from her home as she is entering an unfamiliar and autonomous space, with the transmission from her mother diminishing. Furthermore, the release—which is also includes the dilemma of what is really achievable—was made possible both through her mother's supportive reaction (see Hartwig, 1980/1991, p. 188; McPherson 2009) and the public school system, which can be understood as a public venue where information that would not otherwise have entered households could be communicated:

Majsa: How did you find out about the casting?

Yasmine: The school. The teacher had put up a notice in the classroom, and she told us that there was a chance for us if we wanted to participate. As soon as I heard about it, I was sure that I wanted to be picked for the role. And so, I went to the casting, and yeah... I'm still waiting to hear from them. Anyway, it was that occasion that made me realize like, 'Shit,

there are chances, there are things one can do to fulfill one's dreams.' It was like that, but then, it's also become a dilemma... I've had a dilemma as to whether I should pick natural science or the aesthetic program. At the beginning, I didn't even know what it meant to choose the aesthetic program; I didn't. Then, I don't recall if it was you who explained it to me, but it was like 'Shit, I can!' It became a possibility and all. Yeah, it took time before I made up my mind. I had to sit and think. I could sit and think for hours about what I wanted to do with my life, you know, trying to get a full picture of my future in 10, 20 years from now, what I want to do, how I want to be, and... yeah, but I decided to follow my heart and choose the aesthetic program. Music. (Smile).

Majsa: But what did you think of the aesthetic program before you'd gotten an understanding of what it was?

Yasmine: I mean, naah, it wasn't even something I had thought about, spent any time thinking about. I just knew that there was an aesthetic program, but what it actually meant, no nothing. It was so obvious for me to pick natural science.

Majsa: Considering you were so oriented toward natural science, what did you think of your interest in singing and such? Was it included in your life in some way?

Yasmine: Yes, yes, of course, but I thought I might apply to *Idol* [the show] or something like that, you know. I didn't think of going to a school with music classes; I hadn't thought of it that much.

Initially, musical practice was something more abstract and associated with popular entertainment (such as Disney and *Idol*), that is, the sphere of private consumption. Through the public school system, Yasmine started getting broader and more realistic insights, a sort of 'behind the scenes' to the production of music as education and skill. Here, the public school system becomes a sort of mediator to the capitalistic music industry.

Majsa: Do you want to tell me about the pretty intense period starting from when you first heard about the aesthetic program and later went to the student councilor and finally made up your mind?

Yasmine: Yeah, well it was such that... I got to know *what* the aesthetic program actually meant, and I read more about it, and I talked to *you* about it, and there were some more people just, you know, to hear their thoughts about it. I also went to the student councilor and talked to him, too... and yeah, he didn't say anything special about it. He asked like, well, from my perspective, what I wanted to do, always me, me, me. He never gave me any advice or anything like that; he just asked questions, questions. And the first time I went to talk to him, we discussed the fact that I have pretty good grades, and I told him that I wanted to apply for natural science, and he believed me. His thoughts were like, yeah, you should do it. After that, I visited that high school with you and, for the first time, the aesthetic program. Yeah, and I had spoken to the student councilor and wanted to change my application because I wasn't sure that I no longer wanted natural science. Then, when we went to visit the school, I became more enlightened about the schedule, about how it can be to attend aesthetics. And that made me realize that music is something that I love, something I want to do my whole life. Being in that studio... I was like, it pulled me even closer. I got this vision of me standing there and recording my own music. It felt like home. So that's when I knew, I want it, I really want it. And I know it won't come for free or be easy, but I'm ready to fight for it. Then, after that, I went back to the student councilor after the Easter break. That is when I changed my application, and he asked me if I was sure,

if I had thought it through thoroughly, and all that. He made me think some more since I had told him that I was so sure that I was choosing natural science the first time. So, it was a big change, which was why he really wanted to know what it was that made me change my mind.

Majsa: Ah yeah, of course, and what kind of answers did you give?

Yasmine: Just like... simply that I followed my heart. Music has pulled me ever since I was little.

Majsa: And when you spoke to others, I mean, besides me and the student councilor, what did they say?

Yasmine: I spoke to my mom, among others, and she told me that I should do whatever I wanted to. I mean, she wanted me to pick natural science, since it's a broad program, gives you a lot of possibilities to get a good education and all, but... she still believes in me when it comes to this. I think she's seen it in me, that I have what it takes. So, she told me, do what you feel like, what you're passionate about. So, my mom's recognition was a huge confirmation for me as well.

Majsa: How does it feel now that you've chosen?

Yasmine: It feels good, since this is the end of elementary school, and you know, it's the real deal now, life's starting in a way. The adult life is starting, and it feels right. It's good that I've followed my heart because I know that as long as I have music, I will be happy.

Nazli's Strategic Approach to the Precarious Singing Career

Nazli lives in the central parts of Gothenburg, which is considered an attractive residential neighbourhood. Her father has his own company and often travels abroad for business. Her mother has her own hair salon and 'only does yoga all the time'. Her sister is an artistic painter, and her brother has a PhD in business and his own company in industrial design. Thus, Nazli's home environment is one where small business ownership is central. At home, music plays a vital role. They have different instruments, such as a piano and guitars, and during her spare time, Nazli writes her own songs. She told me that her mother was impressed by her ability to write lyrics. As such, Nazli has only spoken about the aesthetic program since I first met her, and she has never broached hesitations about it. She has, however, been unsure about which school to pick. The interview will deal partly with this decision.

Majsa: Tell me about your high school choice, the whole process!

Nazli: When I began eighth grade, I thought that the economics program would be the best option for me, and I had thought of an elite school. But I didn't have the grades for it, but I could have gotten it, I mean, I got it now, so... but then, I don't know, I felt like high school wasn't that important, you know, that's not what you end up with. It's the university that one should really put all efforts into. So I thought that I might as well do something I like. At the beginning, I was very much against the idea of music, aesthetics. I mean, look, the

grades are so low there, the people are not academically smart at all, and I thought like I was gonna waste my time. But then, after all, I want to become a musician but won't attend any higher education in music, so that's why I'll do it in high school instead. And then, I can do the academic education later. And so, I thought that I wouldn't lose anything by choosing the aesthetic program because I'll take all the social science courses on the side. In that way, I'll be studying the exact same thing as Clara [friend of Nazli], who's attending the economics program, but she'll have economics as a profile, and I'll have music. But besides that, we'll both read math cycle three, English cycle seven, and all that. So, I've really looked it up before jumping into the pool, so to say (laughter).

Majsa: Was it your own decision, or did you confide in anyone about it?

Nazli: It was my own... I think that there were some people that were surprised about my choice, after all, because, as I said, it's not many people that have such high merits that choose aesthetics. I mean, it was 145 points to get in, and I had 262... so I mean, I'm doing my own thing you know.

Majsa: So how does it feel?

Nazli: It feels good. I mean, I think I've become confident enough to make these kinds of decisions. I mean, if you're attending music, aesthetics, but also want an academic future, for instance, a lawyer or something like that, you've got to think like: 'ah too bad, gotta work hard,' you know. You've got to be prepared, too, and know that you will have to read all the supplementary courses and put more effort into your education than you normally would have to do. But I'm ready to do that because I'll get a music education for free now, and then I could attend law school afterwards, you know.

Majsa: What did your parents say about your choice?

Nazli: No, but they were like, 'if you have something to lose, you should think it through. But if you'll have the same opportunities as if you had chosen the economics program, or something like that, then it's fine.' The thing is, they trust me because they know I'll make a good decision. They know that I'm thinking it through, that I know what to do.

Even if the interest in music stems from lust, Nazli's approach to music is both demystified and pragmatic. She navigates towards aesthetic education so that it can fit into a future livelihood. Her parents seem to have the same attitude: unless you lose something, do as you please. Nazli also shows that she is well aware of how the educational system works, how high school with music profile and upper education relate to each other and a potential future career. This becomes even more evident in the following explanation.

Majsa: And when you started looking up the aesthetic program, were there different schools to choose from?

Nazli: Mm, there were three schools—the three most popular, one could say. The first one I looked up had a kind of singer-songwriter course. At that time, I hadn't started to write my own lyrics, so I thought, 'perfect, this is something for me.' And then, I went to their open-house day about a year ago and realized that the school wasn't very academically or musically very wow, you know. They had very simple courses; I already knew all that. So, I thought, 'okay, if I'm gonna find a more academic music environment, then the second school should be perfect.' And so, I went there, too, which turned out to be the complete opposite, actually. They focused more on the academic studies but much less on music; it was all like 'yeah, you're very much welcome here; if you want to read the social science courses but still like to do music on the side, then the aesthetic program would fit you

good.' And I was very close to choosing that school; it was my first priority on the application list, and I also got in even if the grades were at 275 [310 is the maximum], and I had 262 uhm, but I still felt that this wasn't really my school. I felt like it wasn't really for me.

Majsa: In what way?

Nazli: The way they studied, the music, the people... it wasn't really for me. I mean, it was really theoretical, but I didn't get the feeling that you could express yourself. And so, there was only one school left, and that was the third. And when I went to their open house, I sensed something else, that it was possible to express yourself the way you want. And they have a good education both in music and theoretical classes. You know, I go to this private music teacher, so I've learned three instruments from her and she knows a lot of the teachers who work there. When I asked her questions about it, she told me that they're really experienced, that they know what they're doing, and that they've studied together and all, so I really got the feeling that they knew their stuff. So, I felt like... I mean, I've never felt 'yeah this is 100% my school,' but I was like 50% sure about this school, that it could actually be something for me.

Majsa: For how long have you been going to this music teacher?

Nazli: Since I was about eight.

Majsa: So, you've been interested in music for a long time?

Nazli: Well, it was a bit forced. My sister went to piano classes with her. And so, my parents were like 'Nazli, you should start too, it's good for you.' So, I've never... some people can sing really beautifully, like this [snaps her fingers]. I've never had that. I've been working hard since... yeah ever since some years ago. Worked all the time to get better, that's the kind of process I have. I can't just go from starting to learn something and then know it all, like being a natural talent. I have to work on it.

Based on Nazli's story, music practice is not just about passion and self-fulfilment, it is also an *investment* and fostering, 'it's good for you', hence the private education. In Bourdieu's (1996) terminology, this could be understood as gaining cultural capital as she is accumulating a demystified and pragmatic relationship with music practice, both technically and socially. The fact that she relates to music practice as hard work is further reflected by her distinguishing herself from other peers in the music class, the 'hipsters', which also sheds light on the distinction between the social environment and the actual practice.

Majsa: How much musical practice do you do during the day?

Nazli: I started to write my own songs this year, so usually, I write, work on my lyrics about three times a week. Either I write new ones, or I rewrite old ones. And then, I usually play a bit of the piano because that's how I create music. But the other stuff, like base or maybe guitar, happens about once a month when I'm focusing on a certain song. Before that, I used to play an instrument in order to play covers, but now, I do my own thing. So now, I have to find my own way and how to do it. The thing is that I've always had these two sides of me. The academic and the musical. And I feel that, you know, people in the aesthetic classes aren't my type of crowd. I mean, they're really not. They're often hipsters, and everyone's supposed to act unique, even though they're all the same (laughs a little); uhm and I mean, I actually do think that I would have so much more fun or feel closer to more people if I'd chosen the economics program or something like that. But for now, I'll just have to suck it up because, as I said, I want the aesthetic program because I

want... I mean I don't consider myself a fully learned musician. I need more education in order to call myself that. And that's what I'll get here.

A Dialogue Between Yasmine and Nazli and the Future for Social Reproduction

The transformation of the global economy must be understood as a societal change that gives new meaning to the practice of culture. This should further be understood in tandem with existing class divisions and gender structures that condition the way in which working- and middle-class youth imagine themselves when following their dreams and visions of the future. The creative labour market dovetails well with the present economy as it appeals to the individual subject—its assumed uniqueness and self-sufficient character—with the entrepreneur being the ideal type (see McRobbie, 2016, p. 161). The relative autonomy of the artistic field—which despite its increasing subsumption under capital relations still stands in contrast to the regular labour market—is an arrangement that has made it possible for the field to be associated with and be in favour of the middle class, which becomes evident when comparing the habitus and pathways of Yasmine and Nazli. I will, however, start this synthezation by discussing some of the similarities expressed in their stories.

In contrast to the aesthetic program, both Yasmine and Nazli described the natural science and economics programs as tougher and that they demand more work. They were also described as a safer investment for the future, providing qualifications for all courses in higher education and laying the foundation for a profitable and premiered labour market. Similarly, the aesthetic program was described as a pathway to realizing one's personal dreams and passion, a chance to do what would not have otherwise been possible. 'I only live once', Yasmine exclaimed to the student councillor. This line of argument shows an awareness of the societal hierarchization of the fields and the precarious conditions of establishing a music carrier, which they are going to have to face (cf. McPherson, 2009, p. 101). Additionally, both were aiming to become solo artists, not joining a band or being part of an orchestra, which follows the overall tendency of the individualization of the public music school (Persson, 2001).

Following from this, both Yasmine and Nazli stressed the importance of hard work if they were to succeed in the music business, which corresponds with participants' views in previous research (Fürst & Nylander, 2020, p. 427). This could perhaps also be the reason why Nazli was so provoked by hipsters, as they did not seem to have any issues with the social division she was facing—she identified herself more with the students in the economics program—nor did they, according to Nazli, have to calculate which choices would secure future material conditions. According to McRobbie (2016, p. 50), 'Urban hipsters can be seen as a composite of various historical and mostly male subcultural figures each associated with an "ineffable" sense of style, a degree of aloofness and "cool" disdain, a dandyism and a self-conscious sense of being a *flâneur*'. This was not the case for Nazli and Yasmine, as their paths towards aesthetic education demonstrate a highly reflexive process and lack of indifference. On the contrary, both seemed to carefully plan their pathways.

Even if Yasmine and Nazli shared the awareness of the status and risks of following the dream of music, and ranked the upper secondary school programs

accordingly, their approaches and strategies differed significantly. While Yasmine was not aware of what it meant to choose the aesthetic program—it was not an option until the last minute—Nazli was already doing research on which school offered the best music education: ‘I’ve really looked it up before jumping into the pool, so to say.’ Furthermore, while Yasmine had the dream but not the resources or experiences, Nazli was already taking private lessons with a tutor outside of the public music school, who was also a peer to the teachers at the school they both eventually chose. For Nazli, in contrast to Yasmine, musical practice was not something abstract, something that could only happen in popular culture; it was already a private practice within the household.

Nazli seemed to be aware of the totality of the educational infrastructure and, therefore, seemed to have a more confident approach as she relied on the fact that she would be qualified to enter higher education later on. This can be read in contrast to Yasmine, who described the journey with a lack of information about the potentials that the aesthetic high school program could offer (such as qualifications to higher education): ‘I had to sit and think; I could sit and think for hours about what I wanted to do with my life, you know, trying to get a full picture of my future in 10, 20 years from now.’ Conversely, Nazli had adapted her approach to the requirements of the new economy. Her reasoning fit well into what has been described as ‘the attributes, skills and behaviour typical of entrepreneurs’, which ‘include initiative, self-confidence, opportunity recognition, experimenting, tolerating uncertainty, decision making under uncertainty, creativity, perseverance, engagement, responsibility, ownership’ etc. (Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2021, p. 445).

Thus, in this article, I have used a life-history approach to show how class positions form individual strategies and how these, within the particular intersection of education, artistic aspirations and the cultural industry, are conditioned by contemporary material circumstances. After all, what has made it imaginable for Yasmine and Nazli to choose aesthetic education is that it allows them to apply for higher education, in contrast to the vocational programs that did not provide eligibility for higher education during this time.

As the educational system has undergone radical changes and now rests on students’ accountability to a higher degree, the high school choice has become a real factor in the life planning process. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that students such as Nazli and Yasmine try to balance future material security on one hand and a self-fulfilling lifestyle on the other. Therefore, youth do not move from dependence to independence as some would frame it; rather, they go from dependence in the reproductive sphere to dependence in the productive sphere. To reformulate my critique, the mainstream understanding of independence (adulthood) should instead be thought of as a process of becoming dependent on the future labour market. The choices of Yasmine and Nazli need to be perceived in relation to this social fact.

The fact that Yasmine and Nazli came from different home environments—Nazli grew up in a household where all family members lived and worked through creative and small-scale businesses—as such, there was already a do-it-yourself culture and attention towards personal expressions. Furthermore, Nazli was living in a musically interested home environment and mother had already recognized her ability to write lyrics. Yasmine had a working mother and, during her upbringing, depended on

help from others (referring to the paediatric scene) as they came as refugees—can partly also explain the different levels of consideration the two students expressed towards their parents. According to Yasmine, ‘To get that recognition from your own mother, you know... it was... I finally felt as if I could do what I’m really passionate about’. The more Yasmine reflected on her choice, it became evident that she did not really share her mother’s dream, that it might just have been a dream transmitted due to their close relationship (cf. McPherson, 2009), and perhaps significant for the more collectively oriented working-class environment she grew up in (see Hartwig 1980/1991, p. 182). Here one can recall McRobbie (2016, p. 35) concerning the female overcoming of family background and community expectations.

‘Among the economic conditions of the propensity to sacrifice immediate satisfactions to expected satisfactions one must include the probability of these future satisfactions which is inscribed in the present condition’, Bourdieu (1996, p. 180) states. While this might correspond with Nazli’s story, who demonstrates a more strategic approach, the same cannot be said about Yasmine. Contrary to Bourdieu’s analysis, the life–history of Yasmine thus stands out as she lets her emotions guide her into the unknown future. This becomes evident when Yasmine decides to ‘follow my heart’. For her, this heartfelt feeling was pivotal in order to even consider and change her future path into a more precarious one. Nazli, in contrast, seemed to have a more distant, hobby-like relationship with music, although she still seemed to value her creative expression in trying to figure out what school to choose, for instance, in the case of the second alternative: ‘It was really theoretical, but I didn’t get the feeling that you could express yourself.’ The stories of Nazli and Yasmine stand as two contemporary examples of how non-instrumental aspirations are realized in a world of profitability.

Lamont (2011, p. 381) has claimed that ‘Research suggests that motivation, resilience and passion lie at the heart of this robust musical identity, but to date the process by which such an identity might be formed and shaped in music remains less well understood.’ In this article, I have contributed to give in-depth insights to ways of reasoning and identity constructions when aspiring to become a music artist. The life histories have provided a contemporary understanding of young people’s navigation and calculations in a societal order that includes precarious conditions and demands high amounts of personal investment and planning. The results also show the ways in which social class still plays a pivotal role in the choice of and reflection on educational goals.

In a deregulated welfare country like Sweden, social mobility is still possible, but it is not given. The capitalist economy includes an ambivalent relationship to the aesthetic fields which affects the way individual (as in the case of Yasmine and Nazli) relate to its practice, as well as how the political economy is being organized around it. If we are interested in breaking the process of social reproduction within the educational system in general and aesthetic education and practices in particular, we would need to advocate for the concerned institutions to repeal the overall class divisions. This demands a dialectical process as it is not enough for the surrounding environment to change in order to fit the arts. The arts themselves need to become more open to diversity and alternative traditions that do not have a canonized recognition (MacDonald, 2014). This would by necessity imply increasing autonomy from the capitalist mode of production and its standardizing tendencies (Adorno,

1941/2002), though not an autonomy that would turn its back on its potential multitude represented by a range of subject positions. This would involve continued demystification and popularization in a practical sense, which would need to be integrated in the public school system. Only then can we, hopefully, welcome and reach out to the otherwise hesitant and hidden dreamers.

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Notes

1. Di Lorenzo Tillborg (2021) translated the Swedish concept of *Kulturskolor* into Swedish art and music schools and engages in a thorough discussion about the possible ways of translating the term into English (see pp. 32–36).
2. In 2019, approximately 55% children between 6 and 19 attended individual song or instrument classes, while 16.5% attended ensemble classes (Swedish Arts Council, 2021, p. 16).
3. For an elaborated discussion on the parental influence and impact on children's social identity and development of motivation for practicing music, see McPherson (2009).

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