

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in formal education: Covert and overt

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Abstract

This article reframes the debate on the validation of non-formal and informal learning by connecting it to the sociology of education and curriculum studies literatures. Building on these literatures, the article differentiates between four types of validation: (a) covert and implicit, (b) covert but embedded, (c) overt and functional and (d) overt and institutional. Based on this classification, I problematise the widespread view that there is little validation in formal education. Instead, I argue, much validation takes place in formal education, but it is mostly covert and goes unnoticed. Validation is a common practice when it contributes to the performance metrics of formal education institutions, when it enables institutions to take credit for learning that occurs outside of them, when the non-formal and informal learning that is validated aligns with their established curricula and when it does not require changes in pedagogy or assessment practices. Validation in formal education is not so much characterised by rejection or disregard as by selectivity and instrumentality.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Non-formal and informal learning are strange concepts. Not only are these forms of learning defined with reference to what they are not (formal learning) but their denotation does not refer to the nature of what is learnt, or the depth of the learning process. This alerts us that these concepts are, in a sense, artificial ways to think about

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learning. They echo “a tendency in current discourse to expand what was once considered singular” (Sefton-Green, 2012, pp. 15–16). While a wide range of criteria have been used to differentiate between non-formal learning and informal learning (Colley et al., 2003; Straka, 2004), the definition of these terms chiefly derives from institutional and intentional considerations. The definition of non-formal and informal learning based on what they are *not* is striking given that these types of learning predate formal learning and most learning is non-formal or informal (Eraut, 2000; Lee et al., 2019). Formal learning seems to have won the conceptual battle, using the visibility of schools and universities, places primarily designed for teaching and learning, as its sling and qualifications as its stones. Validation of non-formal and informal learning aims to redress this situation and give non-formal and informal learning visibility (Bjørnåvold, 2000).

This article reframes the debate on validation, first, by reflecting on the relationship between formal and non-formal learning/informal learning (sometimes I refer to these as *non-formal learning* in this article for brevity). To do so, it connects the debate on validation with the sociology of education and curriculum literatures, from which discussions on validation are largely absent, to generate new insights. A reinterpretation of these literatures under the lenses of validation questions the widespread view that there is little validation in formal education (Guimaraes & Mikulec, 2020; Talbot, 2015). Even in discussions of well-developed validation systems such as the French, validation is often referred to as a marginal activity, because the annual share of diplomas obtained through validation is comparatively small (Eurydice, 2018). By contrast, I argue that validation is pervasive in formal education, but much of it is covert. This observation is linked to a reflection on the existence of different types of validation, identified and discussed in this article: (a) covert and implicit; (b) covert but embedded; (c) overt functional; and (d) overt institutional. This typology of validation in formal education highlights the need to reconsider the (lack of) visibility of the validation process itself, in addition to the visibility of the learning that is validated. Covert validation often goes unnoticed or is associated with academic and policy debates detached from validation—for example debates around the hidden curriculum or social inequalities in formal education. In this respect, the article is an effort in *making validation visible*. The analysis presented reveals important insights into assumed norms, social justice and social change considerations, introducing an axiological perspective into discussions on validation, a topic seldom conceptualised from such a point of view.¹ This could, in turn, facilitate further critical analysis of both validation practices and obstacles to validation.

This article is organised as follows. First, the definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning are reviewed and discussed. Next, a definition of validation and its elements is provided, before presenting four types of validation, articulated by two main categories: covert and overt. Many of the reflections in the article apply across levels of formal education, but examples mainly from school and higher education are used to illustrate the discussion. Section four presents the conclusions.

2 | FORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

2.1 | Definition and tensions

The definition of formal, non-formal and informal learning is highly contested (Colley et al., 2003; Sefton-Green, 2012). What these concepts have in common is their reference to learning. Illeris (2007, p. 3) defines learning as “any process that in living organisms leads to permanent capacity change and which is not solely due to biological maturation or ageing.” Illeris identifies three key dimensions of learning: (a) a *content* dimension including knowledge, skills, understanding that result in durable capacity change; (b) a *social* dimension related to the interaction with the social environment within which learning takes place; and (c) an *emotional* dimension including feelings, motivation, volition (Illeris, 2002, 2007).

Various international organisations (UNESCO, OECD, Cedefop) have contributed to the conceptual debate on the (non)formality of learning. These definitions incorporate more explicitly the social and the emotional

dimensions of learning than its content dimension. Cedefop (2014) articulates the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning as follows:

[Formal learning] occurs in an organised and structured environment (such as in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to certification. (Cedefop, 2014)

[Non-formal learning] is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification. (Cedefop, 2014)

[Informal learning results] from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective". (Cedefop, 2014)

Informal learning can also be referred to as incidental or random learning.

For the OECD, a high degree of organisation, the identification of learning objectives and intentionality are the key characteristics of formal learning (OECD, 2008). Informal learning lacks these elements, whereas non-formal learning, the OECD argues, may be organised but not designed or designated as learning and may have learning objectives, but these tend to be broader than those in formal learning (Werquin, 2008). In addition, the OECD notes that formal learning is always subject to *registration* (Werquin, 2008, p. 44).

UNESCO's *ISCED* definition is somewhat different. It also emphasises *institutionalisation*—implication of education and training organisations recognised by relevant national authorities, student-teacher relations, issuing of qualifications recognised by national authorities (UNESCO, 2012)—, *intentionality and planning*. UNESCO, additionally, characterises non-formal learning as *supplementary* (noting that this is its definition characteristics, but without outlining its exact meaning), *short in duration* “typically provided in the form of short courses, workshops and seminars” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 11) and *lacking recognition in the formal education system* (qualifications obtained through non-formal education are often not recognised by relevant authorities as equivalent to formal qualifications and usually do not give access to a higher level of education).

In summary, whether learning is formal or non-formal is judged with reference to three main parameters: (a) the setting for learning, (b) intentions and planning to facilitate learning, and (c) formal recognition—in particular, recognition associated with certifications approved by public regulations. It is important to note that the reference to learning taking place in an education or training *institution* does not necessarily imply continued exposure to teaching and learning activities. Rather, it refers to enrolment and the entitlement to be examined. For example in Europe, attendance policies vary widely in higher education, and in many countries attendance is not monitored. English actor and writer, Stephen Fry, noted that during his degree at Cambridge University he “went to three [lectures] in three years [...]”. His fellow student Hugh Laurie apparently went to only one (Taylor, 2017).

The boundaries between the concepts formal, non-formal and informal learning are not always clear. These different forms of learning could be seen as occurring on a continuum ranging from various degrees of formality to informality. The degree of planning and preparation within formal learning can vary substantially. It is also possible for an individual to decide to learn something and create an organised environment with learning activities linked to specific objectives, learning resources and time. However, this is not considered *formal learning* because it is not carried out in the context of an educational institution or company and it does not lead to a certification. Regarding certification, non-formal and informal learning can lead to it through validation. On their own, none of the three parameters associated with *setting*, *planning* and *recognition*, determine the type of learning: it is their

combination that does. Yet, not all three parameters need to always be present. For example, formal learning may not lead to a credential when a student fails or drops out. In recent times, Information and Communication Technologies have provided new spaces for learning that further blur the distinction between formal and non-formal education (Witthaus et al., 2016). Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), for example, seem to meet the non-formal education requirements of the ISCED 2011 definition (Music & Vincent-Lancrin, 2016), however they also seem to meet the three parameters for formal education in the Cedefop definition, at least in some cases.

A striking feature of the differentiation between types of learning in the above definitions, and as already noted, is the little attention given to the *content* dimension of learning mentioned by Illeris, or to pedagogy, although both are at the heart of learning. An exception is the ISCED 2011 definition of non-formal programmes as “[...] frequently directed to acquiring practical knowledge, skills or competencies in a concrete context and are therefore often focused less on theoretical learning” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 77). This does not mean that non-formal learning always has to be practical. Meyer (1977, p. 66) argued that “education functions in society as a legitimating theory of knowledge defining certain types of knowledge as extant and as authoritative”. The notion of *academic drift* entails “valuing and greater uptake of academic practices at the expense of vocational qualifications and practices” (Edwards & Miller, 2008, p. 123), which are seen as closer to *experience*. From a sociology of knowledge perspective, Young has proposed the concept of *powerful knowledge* to defend subject-based abstract knowledge as the core of the curriculum in formal education. He argues that

[...] the curriculum cannot be based on everyday practical experience [...]. It is important to be cautious about replacing a curriculum based on specialist research and pedagogic communities with one based on the immediate practical concerns of employers or general criteria for employability such as key skills. (Young, 2008, p. 89)

However, it should be stressed that there is no a priori reason why validation cannot be used in relation to *powerful knowledge*, as non-formal and informal learning are not necessarily circumscribed to specific types of knowledge—somehow in tension with the implications of the UNESCO definition.

Recently, discussions on a *vocational drift* have also emerged, driven by changes in occupational structures and learner and employer demands. The vocational drift has several ramifications (Horta et al., 2008). These include the expansion of VET provision to higher levels of education and an increasing take-up of vocational courses in many countries where these types of studies have not traditionally been popular. There is also a surge in *professional education* added to the curriculum of universities, increased permeability between VET and academic education pathways or increasing responsiveness to employer engagement.

The academic and vocational drift can co-exist (Markowitsch & Hefler, 2019) as high regard for academic degrees are not incompatible with the incorporation of vocational elements in their curricula. The popularity of internships within traditional university programmes exemplifies the rediscovery of work-based experiences as a mode of learning. The way in which learning outcomes from placements are defined varies substantially between institutions but can be strongly linked to *experience* without reference to the sort of powerful knowledge that Young discusses. In their analysis of internships as part of academic courses, Reinagel and Gerlach (2015, p. 73) note that “the relationship between coursework and internship experiences has historically been weak”. Nevertheless, such experiences are part of the qualification. Attempts to enhance the links between formal education and the practical aspects of work and experience do not seem congruent with resistance towards validation of non-formal and informal learning in formal education.

This section has discussed several difficulties in the differentiation between formal, non-formal and informal learning and argued that there is no clear a-priori intrinsic difference between them in terms of learning content. The latter is reflected in most mainstream definitions of the terms. Moreover, these forms of learning seem to be converging in at least some respects, for example through a vocational drift. These commonalities frame the

TABLE 1 Covert and overt types of validation in formal education

	Is validation the main purpose of the process and visible?	Are knowledge, skills and competences validated reflected in the qualification?	Beneficiaries
Covert validation			
Covert and implicit	No	No (validation of certain knowledge, skills and competences takes place implicitly, as they are <i>assumed</i> in a formal education credential but are not explicitly articulated in it)	Learners already registered in formal education programmes
Covert but embedded	No	Yes (knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside of formal education are validated explicitly in a formal education credential, as they are directly assessed and are an integral part of that qualification)	Learners already registered in formal education programmes
Overt Validation			
Overt functional	Yes	No (validation provides access to a formal education programme rather than a formal education credential)	Learners seeking registration in formal education programmes
Overt institutionalised	Yes	Yes (validation leads to the award of a formal education credential)	Learners may not be registered in the formal education programme in which they seek validation

Source: Author.

following discussions on the ways in which non-formal and informal learning are validated in formal education, and the extent to which different forms of validation are used and visible.

3 | COVERT AND OVERT VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Validation of non-formal and informal learning refers to a process whereby knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning are given visibility. Validation consists of four distinct stages (see Villalba-Garcia et al., 2014):

- Identification of specific individual experiences (resulting in knowledge, skills and competences).
- Documentation of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired.
- Assessment of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired.
- Certification of the results of the assessment (which may lead to a partial or full qualification).

Validation within formal education often entails the assessment of certain learning outcomes against pre-defined criteria and standards included in recognised qualifications (Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). It can lead to access to further studies (to obtain a formal qualification) or to the award of a part or full qualification approved by public regulations. But validation can also be *embedded* in a certification, as explained below.

Typologies of validation processes tend to be based on technical judgments linked to the methodology used or stages covered (Souto-Otero, 2016). A distinction can also be made between formative and summative validation, based on its purpose (Colardyn & Bjørnåvold, 2004; Pfeffer & Skrivaneck, 2018). These distinctions remain relevant. However, I adopt a different focus and discuss two main types, and four sub-types, of validation in formal education, according to the conceptualisation and visibility of validation—whether the practice is intentionally conceptualised, planned and designed as validation of non-formal and informal learning and whether the knowledge, skills and competences validated are included explicitly as part of a qualification (see Table 1).

In covert validation, validation is not the main purpose, it is largely invisible, not seen as a separate process and not thought of. In overt validation, the validation activity has a stipulated and predefined process, and it is conceptualised as a validation practice. Both can lead to a certification, partly or wholly based on validation in the overt type, but only partly supported by validation in the covert type. This is because covert validation is complementary to ongoing formal education experiences in a way that overt validation does not have to be. While covert validation is largely invisible in validation debates, it is pervasive in the formal education system. By contrast, overt validation is visible but much less frequent. The beneficiaries of these various forms of validation are also different: learners who are already registered in the formal education programme in which validation takes place are the main beneficiaries of covert validation, whereas this is not necessarily the case in overt validation.

3.1 | Covert validation

Covert validation is a largely invisible and unnoticed type of validation, not thought of and not designed as such. It can be further divided into implicit and embedded. In the first type, the knowledge, skills or competences validated are not directly reflected in the credential. In embedded validation the knowledge, skills or competences validated are reflected in the credential, in particular through marks. Assessment and certification are integral parts of covert but embedded validation only.

3.1.1 | Covert and implicit validation

The curriculum can be understood as the structure and content of a unit, subject or programme of study (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). The curriculum is put together by subject experts, and is characterised by planning, internal coherence and consideration for the development of specific foundations for further learning (sequencing). Formal education is based on curricula, but it teaches more than what the curriculum says “The belief that schooling can be defined as the sum of its official course offerings is a naïve one” (Giroux & Penna, 1979, p. 21). Formal education is *expected* to teach more than the curriculum says and more than is explicitly articulated in formal education credentials.

Those other *valuable aspects* are not specified in the credential. They refer to certain soft skills, individual characteristics, inclinations and traits that are developed in learners through formal education, and that yield returns socially and in the labour market (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020; Heckman et al., 2006). They include an appreciation of the value of scientific enquiry, critical thinking, camaraderie and respect for others, politeness, punctuality and the like. Those characteristics are not part of the explicit curriculum, and students rarely get marked on them. Yet, they are taken for granted, they are implicitly enshrined in the credential, although they may also be validated (captured and made explicit) in narrative reports, such as reference letters written by academic staff.

This is, partly, why credentials based on validation are sometimes considered to have a different value than credentials obtained through formal education. Validation is based on learning experiences that may not be seen to imprint those other valuable aspects of education on learners—a *deficit* view of credentials obtained through non-formal and informal learning. Credential value and *physical attendance* at the educational institution that issues it often go hand in hand in the *social imaginary*—the common understandings that help us make sense of social practices (Taylor, 2004). Much of this is captured, from a critical standpoint, in the notion of the “hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968). The hidden curriculum refers to the values, dispositions, behaviours and norms that students are socialised into, and expected to intuitively work from, in school contexts. These include learning quietly, exercising restraint, completing assigned tasks, getting along with teachers and peers, being punctual, and having good manners (Kentli, 2009). Conformity with such values is rewarded in schools with opportunities for further progression within the system. The hidden curriculum takes place in the organised and structured environment of educational institutions, but it is most often only implicitly designated as learning. It may not be learnt intentionally by the learner, and the learner is most often not specifically assessed in relation to its elements, even though they may be consequential for the achievement of a credential. The learning of the hidden curriculum, as such, is not formal learning. But the mastery of the hidden curriculum is conducive to school success, and its mastery is implicitly validated in education credentials (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Jackson, 1968; Zhang & Luo, 2016, p. 218).

Discussions on the hidden curriculum extend to higher education. Exposure to *university life* and webs of repeated interaction with colleagues and staff are meant to inculcate certain values through higher education experiences. Yet, it is questionable whether the socialisation function of higher education into the *graduate* culture continues to have the same meaning as in the past, when small groups of full-time students were the core of the student population. The massification of higher education, which makes frequent contact with staff challenging, is only part of the story. Today, in a substantial number of European countries large shares of the student population are engaged in paid employment (Brooks, 2018), and many students regularly do more than 30 hr of paid work per week (Masevičiūtė et al., 2018). Increasing numbers of students in countries like the UK devote little time to their studies. The 2019 UK Engagement Survey (UKES), which included around 30,000 responses, found that fewer than half of students reported to spend more than 10 hr a week in taught classes (a decline of 7% since 2015), and also documented decreases in time spent in independent learning (Neves, 2019, p. 20).

More students are also living at home, rather than with other students. The proportion of stay-at-home undergraduate students in the UK rose from less than 10% in the late 1980s (Maguire & Morris, 2018) to over 20% of full-time students in 2018–19 (HESA, 2020). Today, they make up for over 90% of students in some institutions. Students who commute do not participate to the same extent in university life as other students (Emblen-Perry

et al., 2020; Holdsworth, 2006). COVID-19 has brought about further changes to group face-to-face experiences in education around the world, with much study being transferred to remote learning, often without much thought being given to the creation of spaces for socialisation (Aboagye et al., 2021; Colao et al., 2020).

Higher education experiences have thus changed dramatically in the last four decades, and covert implicit validation in this sector is losing part of its currency, as immersive socialisation experiences into higher education values become more elusive and the credential is seen to convey less information than in the past about the kind of person its owner is. Yet, credentials continue to be seen as artifacts that say something about what you know and can do, which is explicit in the certification, and also about how you behave and who you are, which is implicit in the certification: in its level, track, place of study or the subject. What exactly the credential implicitly says depends on the specific credential and the context in which it is interpreted.

3.1.2 | Covert but embedded validation

Covert but embedded validation is tightly related to the assessment and certification of the knowledge, skills and competences that are incorporated in a formal certification. The education and skills legitimised by formal education are not only developed within formal learning. What covert but embedded validation does is incorporate knowledge, skills and competences developed outside of formal education into the output of formal education: its credentials. There is a well-known effect of covert but embedded validation on grade performance. Debates on the inequalities in educational achievement resulting from non-formal learning are far from new in policy making and in research in the sociology of education. Over 130 years ago, the 1888 *Cross report*, which looked at the state of elementary education in England and Wales, noted that "One of the chief difficulties connected with reading is said to be that the language of the reading books is not the language of the children's home" (Cross Report, 1888). The closer the match between the language at school and the language at home, the easier the learning at school. With regards to the sociology of education literature, Bourdieu (1984) differentiated between three forms of cultural capital: (a) *objectified*, such as cultural goods in the form of books and works of art; (b) *embodied*, for example language, preferences, knowledge and mannerisms; and (c) *institutionalised*, notably in the form of qualifications and education credentials. Covert but embedded validation can be conceived, to a large extent, as the transformation of embodied cultural capital into institutionalised cultural capital.

Bourdieu, and many other sociologists of education, have documented how associations between social background and formal educational achievement are influenced by various forms of non-formal and informal learning. These include, for example, participation in activities related to the fine arts, reading and conversational patterns at home, which develop knowledge and skills that are valued in school contexts (Mikus et al., 2020). Reading is particularly important, as it is a core element in formal education from an early age and affects performance across a range of subjects. Lareau's (2003) concept of *concerted cultivation* further explains the mechanisms through which embodied cultural capital is developed by middle class parents, with a view to its institutionalisation by the education system. She documents a range of upper- and middle-class parental strategies to promote their children's hard and soft skills, which are largely based on non-formal and informal learning. These strategies revolve around participation in the *right* organised leisure activities (sports, music academies, library memberships, etc.) and parents' cognitive stimulation of the child at home (e.g., reading to or with the child, engaging in frequent conversations with them) (Cabane et al., 2016). These activities do not have to take place in structured learning environments and may not lead to recognised forms of certification. The learner (child) may not conceptualise those activities as learning, even though the providers of those activities may try to associate them to learning and cognitive development to capture the middle-class market. They are non-formal education activities, although they may resemble classroom settings in terms of rules, structure and adult guidance.

The cultural capital developed through these activities is valued in formal education and reflected in school grades. The formal education system validates in a covert manner knowledge, skills and competences developed

through non-formal and informal learning, because those align with their curriculum and are automatically picked up in assessments. The non-formal learning that children from the middle classes undertake is thus recognised in the formal education system in the form of higher grades and becomes embedded in their qualifications.

From this follows that, contrary to what is commonly suggested, validation of non-formal learning in formal education is not only frequent, but is in fact pervasive, with regards to certain forms of knowledge, skills and competences. But it is also largely covert, implicit and embedded. Teachers' task is to institutionalise the embodied cultural capital of learners, regardless of how that capital has been acquired. In fact, they would be unable to unbundle embodied cultural capital developed through formal, non-formal or informal learning even if they were asked to.

Whereas covert and implicit validation is on the decline, covert but embedded validation is frequent, as reflected by the booming industry of various enhancement activities and edutainment businesses. Covert validation, contrary to the objectives of overt validation, often accentuates social inequalities, and is not necessarily intentionally enacted by institutions and educators, but *happens*. Covert but embedded validation contributes to enhance the performance of formal education institutions on their metrics (e.g., grades, student progression) and for this reason is beneficial for these institutions. The legitimisation and survival of formal education institutions derives from their acceptance as the root sources of human and cultural capital (Meyer et al., 2007). Through the enhancement of their measured performance, covert validation contributes to their legitimisation.

3.2 | Overt validation

Overt forms of validation can be divided into functional validation and institutionalised validation. Functional validation provides access to formal education programmes. Institutionalised validation leads to the achievement of institutional cultural capital—in Bourdieu's term—such as credits, or the award of a part or full qualification. Overt validation has been in the European agenda for over 20 years (Souto-Otero et al., 2008). Progress in the introduction of policy initiatives to develop overt validation has been mapped during much of this period through the European Inventory project (Cedefop, European Commission, & ICF, 2017, 2019; European Commission, Cedefop, & ICF International, 2014; Hawley et al., 2010; Souto-Otero et al., 2005, 2008) in over 30 European countries. While the acceptance and take-up of this type of validation are still work in progress, there have been advances in the adoption of policies to support overt forms of validation, in particular in recent years. Whereas the 2014 Inventory documented that the results of validation could be used in around one third of the countries it covered to access formal education and/or acquire at least a module or a part of a qualification or credit in formal education recognised by the National Qualifications Framework, this was possible in over three quarter of countries by 2018.

3.2.1 | Overt functional validation

Functional validation refers to validation initiatives that provide access to formal education courses on the basis of non-formal and informal learning. It is an overt form of validation, which normally requires careful design and action by educational institutions or a public authority. The outcome that this type of validation provides is a *functional equivalent* to the achievement of a qualification, in the sense that it confers progression rights within the education system, but without the award of a qualification to the individual.

Initiatives that provide access to levels of education for which an individual does not meet the required formal education prerequisites are the core of this type of validation. The Inventory project documents examples of this type of validation since the 1990s in countries such as France, Germany or the UK (Colardyn & Bjørnåvold, 2004; Souto-Otero et al., 2005), but this type of validation is not yet available for all types of programmes in all European countries today; far from it. However, there has certainly been a degree of policy exchange, benchmarking

(Souto-Otero, Hawley, et al., 2008). The popularity of functional validation has been increasing, particularly for access to higher education (Cedefop et al., 2017). Data gathered for the European Inventory (Cedefop et al., 2019) shows that access through validation to some formal education programmes is possible, at least in theory, in the large majority of European countries. However, take-up and implementation can be limited and there can be some restrictions in terms of the courses that can be accessed or the number of individuals who can be guaranteed a place in formal education courses through those routes. In general, this practice is subject to less controversy than institutionalised validation, as it does not result in the awarding of a formal education credential.

3.2.2 | Overt institutionalised validation

Institutionalised validation refers to practices that are explicitly designed as validation and aim to transform embodied cultural capital (knowledge, skills and competences) acquired through non-formal and informal learning into institutionalised cultural capital (credentials and certifications, including part-qualifications, modules or credits that have currency in the formal education sector). For this process to take place, the embodied cultural capital acquired through non-formal and informal learning needs to be related to the learning outcomes required for the qualification, at the specified standards of performance. Here, institutionalisation through validation is an openly recognised aim, rather than a by-product.

The infrastructure in terms of laws and regulations, for the implementation of institutionalised validation has increased substantially in Europe in recent times (Cedefop et al., 2019). That is, systems have been approved to enable the institutionalised recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This includes national qualifications frameworks and output-oriented qualifications defined in terms of learning outcomes. Often, however, individuals cannot meet all of the learning outcomes required to obtain a full qualification through non-formal and informal learning, but only parts of it—which may result in the award of modules or credits. Fry et al. (2002, p. 86) have argued that modularisation “of the curriculum is perhaps the more remarkable change in UK higher education and course design in the 20th Century”. This has aided institutionalised validation. Modularisation is not without its critics. It is frequently presented as the *deconstruction* of subjects, which radically changes their identity (Bridges, 2000) and challenges the integrative character of *whole programme* learning through its reliance on discrete components (see French, 2015 for a review).

The self-contained character of modules has also been identified as a challenge for feedback dialogue to encourage learners' progress (Hughes et al., 2015). Brecher (2005) goes further to describe modularisation as a neoliberal tool associated with the commodification of higher education. In this perspective, students are seen as clients and consumers. More positive accounts of modularisation are available (Rich & Scott, 1997); in particular, when some guidance is provided to learners (Mikalayeva et al., 2020). Modularisation, viewed under a positive light, can lead to flexibility, relevance for learners, greater motivation and learner empowerment as learners can structure their degrees according to their interests and goals. It aims to “provide a more open model than traditional sequential course structures, encouraging students to arrange and develop their own degrees” (French, 2015, p. 4).

Modularisation is not the only trend affecting *curricular self-management*: see for example the case of stackable micro-credentials (Gedeon, 2020) and other alternative credentials (Katos et al., 2020). “Do it yourself” (DIY) curricula are increasingly popular in higher education and lifelong learning. Trends towards modularisation, micro-credentials and self-management may be appreciated or criticised, but it is clear that they further expand possibilities for institutionalised validation. Choice and flexibility are, for sure, a double-edge sword: they require learners to be well informed when designing their own learning pathways to arrive to meaningful outcomes and avoid fragmented and incoherent degrees; they require employers to know what the individualised credential is about (UNESCO, 2018). Judging the (in)coherence of programmes, or the need for a specific sequence in learning (Pfeffer & Skrivanek, 2018), is not always a straightforward task. What may look incoherent to some eyes, may

present an opportunity for valuable cross-fertilisation between fields to others or meet the intellectual or labour market needs of a learner. One size may not fit all. Moreover, higher education institutions will have difficulties reconciling a pull in both directions: embracing curricular self-management by learners—to be attractive to individuals with different needs and objectives—and at the same time claim that learners cannot coherently direct their learning trajectories. In any case, choices in the context of institutionalised validation are made within already existing curricular parameters and the incoherent and coherent possibilities they allow for—including those enabled by the inclusion of micro-credentials within macro-credentials. Validation helps to map embodied cultural capital into institutionalised requirements; it does not alter those requirements.

An important question here is why validation cannot take place in formal education institutions, beyond the formal education curriculum that they deliver. Few social institutions have the level of curricular and assessment related knowledge that formal education institutions have. Their credentials are trusted. But the organisation and delivery of courses is resource intensive. As a result, teaching staff may have subject knowledge in areas they do not teach, for example because the institution does not offer a course with which that knowledge fits. Cultural capital embodied in their staff, and the institutional cultural capital on offer may not correspond (Francis, 2020). Educational institutions could take steps towards the validation of knowledge, skills and competences in which their staff has expertise, but that has not been institutionalised through the offering of credentials at that institution. Naturally, assessment and certification of new credentials are also time consuming tasks and there are limits to what institutions can do, as well as financial implications that require working out—notably for institutions to have incentives to unbundle teaching from assessment (Pfeffer & Skrivaneck, 2018; Souto-Otero, Hawley, et al., 2008). This move would require a discussion on central concepts, such as what it means to be an educational institution. Yet, the need to consider new models for institutionalised validation is particularly relevant at a time, like the present, when accessibility to knowledge has expanded exponentially, and when institutions are narrowing down their traditional degree offer in the context of marketisation of higher education (Hewitt-Dundas & Roper, 2018). The expansion of digital learning records coupled with developments in natural language processing—for analysing occupation and job requirements as well as data on training and curricula—and skills taxonomies can aid in the mapping of descriptors from educational institutions, work and leisure. These developments have the potential to support new initiatives around competence and qualification testing in formal education (Kitto et al., 2020).

4 | CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to reframe the debate on validation of non-formal and informal learning, by connecting it with the sociology of education and curriculum studies literatures and by offering a fourfold typology of validation in formal education. In relation to the first point, a reinterpretation of validation under the lenses of the sociology of education literature facilitates a reflection on four different types of validation: (a) covert and implicit; (b) covert and embedded; (c) overt and functional; and (d) overt and institutional. This typology of validation in the formal education sector provides a more nuanced account of validation, one that reflects on the visibility of the validation process itself and its outcomes. In this respect, the article contributes to *making validation visible* beyond its more explicit forms.

Analysis following this typology questions the widespread view that there is little validation in formal education and reveals the existence of pervasive validation practices in formal education. Most of the policy discourse and the (limited) academic literature on validation focuses on overt forms of validation. But much validation that takes place in formal education is covert, and benefits learners that are already registered in a formal education programme. While the currency of covert and implicit validation is decreasing, covert and embedded validation remains popular. Overt validation, on the other hand, has advanced over the last 30 years, but whilst systems for overt validation are in place, this form of validation continues to be seldom publicised and take-up by institutions and by individuals is uneven.

The pervasiveness of validation practices in formal education suggests that validation in formal education is not so much characterised by rejection or disregard as it is by selectivity and instrumentality. Validation is a common practice in ways that contribute to the performance metrics of formal education institutions and enable these to take credit for learning that occurs outside them because that learning aligns with their curricula. Covert validation enables institutions to claim credit for learning that occurs outside formal education but maintains their control over the definition and certification. Moreover, such validation practices do not require changes in pedagogy or assessment practices. Validation is less widely accepted when these conditions are not met, as is often the case with overt forms of validation, both functional and institutional. These forms of validation have the potential to require the re-organisation of formal education or to challenge the position of its institutions. This conclusion highlights the importance of self-legitimation and survival in the relation between formal education institutions and validation of non-formal and informal learning. In this sense, formal education tries to both have its cake and eat it with regards to validation: widely using it when it contributes to self-legitimation but restricting its use when it may challenge some of its functions.

ENDNOTE

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