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Twelve years of upper-secondary education in Sweden: the beginnings of a neo-liberal policy hegemony?

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In this article we discuss data produced about learning practices and learner identities during the past 12 years of upper-secondary school development in Sweden based on ethnographic fieldwork that has examined these issues with respect to two sets of pupils from these schools: one successful, one unsuccessful. Two things are considered in particular. One is how these pupils and their school activities are described and positioned by teachers. Another is how pupils describe their own activities and position themselves. Some policy changes have been noted across the researched period. Questions relating to participation are considered in relation to them and there is also an attempt to make a connection to a possible social-class relationship. Our main concern however, is for how recent policy changes have been enacted in schools and classrooms and what effects this enactment seems to have had on learner subjectivity and learner identities.

Keywords: social reproduction; social class; learner identities; policy changes

Introduction

In his recent article, The Capitalist State and Education: The Case of Restructuring the Nordic Model, Ari Antikainen (2010) discusses neo-liberal transformations in Nordic capitalist welfare states and their education systems, which he describes as having undergone significant changes in recent years in attempts to re-organize to meet new economic conditions (Torfing 1999; Rolland 2008). In education these changes have been described as moving education away from systems of collective negotiation, inclusion and equality to ones based on and defined in terms of competition, individual responsibility, entrepreneurialism and freedom of choice (Lundahl 2002; Dovemark 2004; Arnesen and Lundahl 2006; Antikainen 2010; Beach 2010). This is identifiable also in official policies (Englund 2004; Lpo 94; Lpf 94, Skolverket 2007a, 2007b; Government Proposition 2008/2009, 50, 2009/2010, 75; SOU 2008a, 27, 2008b, 109). However, Antikainen shows that although the education systems in the Nordic countries have evolved in terms of these global characteristics at general policy levels, changes such as the ones identified are also locally negotiated and at times redefined in respect of the processes, purposes and roles of social, cultural, and political institutions and the individuals within them (see also Clarke 2008).[1]

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In the present article we look at aspects of the transformation of and in Nordic education "on the ground" and in detail by using data from over 12 years of ethnographic research in three Swedish upper-secondary schools, complimented by conversation data with pupils from a fourth school. These data extracts and analyses are considered in order to try to describe outcomes from the local redefinition and negotiation of policy changes (Clarke 2008) and map the eventual emergence of potentially new cultures and social relations of learning in today's schools (Beach and Dovemark 2007, 2009; Dahlsted 2009). Such developments have been identified in relation to the personalisation of learning in the UK (Hartley 2007, 2008) as a new *sine qua non* for increasing the skills base of the population in the interests of economic and social development and as new governmental techniques that have emerged and that may encourage teachers and pupils to change their values regarding desirable educational practices, pedagogies and identities (also Lundahl 2002; Lund 2008; Sjöberg 2011).

Three research projects have informed the article directly. The first project was a policy ethnography carried out between 1998 and 2000 after the 1994 Upper-Secondary Reform Act (Government Proposition 1990/1991, 18). The main thrust of this reform involved the creation of choice systems between and within 17 national academic and vocational education programmes and numerous specially designed local programmes across the country for the upper-secondary sector. To a high degree this helped to maintain social class based selection and social reproduction in and through education, because of correlations between social class background and educational choices (Svensson 2006). However, at the same time, the act also extended all vocational and specialist educations to three years and introduced a minimum academic subject requirement in all programmes that could provide university matriculation possibilities to all pupils in an effort to temper the long-term effects of this reproductive tendency (SOU 1996a, 1; 1996b, 22; 1997, 1). The school where the majority of the research was carried out was a large provincial upper-secondary school with a broad range of programmes. The other two schools were city schools with primarily academic programmes. Data from all three schools is used in the article.

The second project was a Socrates project called CLASP (Jeffrey 2006). This project involved nine European partners and targeted pupil learning, teaching organisation and teacher and pupil experience in relation to policies of creativity and the personalisation of learning (Dovemark 2004). The Swedish research was conducted in the above three schools and two secondary schools. Only data from the upper-secondary schools is included in the present article.

The third project is an ongoing project examining implicit theories of learning in upper-secondary schools and their consequences for pupil performances and motivation (*Stereotypes, naïve theories, cultural norms and their effects on school performance:* VR Reg. no. 721-2006-2554). This project combines ethnographic and questionnaire data. The questionnaire data includes over 800 upper-secondary school pupils from three urban upper-secondary schools. Some data has also been developed through open conversations with eight pupils from one of these schools. This conversation data is included in the article.

Data and analysis

A main body of data focused on in the present article has been constructed around interview comments and transcription field-notes from pupils who were identified

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through the ongoing research as either highly successful or highly unsuccessful learners. The reasons for this are that this polarisation of data enables an important juxtaposition of successful and unsuccessful students and strategies that permit an identification of what may under-gird school success and its opposite in our schools. This is potentially quite important given continued social class reproduction in upper-secondary schools on the one hand and Sweden's relatively weak showing on recent international PISA investigations on the other hand.

As stated earlier the Swedish upper-secondary school has a programme structure comprising 17 national academic and vocational programmes, numerous specially designed local programmes and a programme called the Individual programme. The programmes are, with the exception of the latter, generally studied for three years and the pupils attending them are usually between 16 and 19 years old. It is possible for pupils to move between programmes and this is not uncommon amongst first-year pupils.

The identity "highly successful" pupil is related to pupils who obtained "the best grades on tests and various school assignments" (Ken, teacher). They were often referred to as "the school swots" (Julie, successful pupil) and were generally (but not exclusively) enrolled on academic programmes. The identity "unsuccessful pupil" is related to the pupils "who got the worst grades" (Ken) and often spent a lot of time outside of the nationally regulated upper-secondary school programmes, in the Individual programme mentioned already. Unsuccessful pupils were found more often in the vocational programmes and the Individual programme than in the academic. No pupils in the present study attended a specialist programme. Not all schools across the country offer specially designed local programmes. None of the schools in the present sample did so.

Because of the relatively high number of pupils from the Individual programme in our sample, the characteristics of this programme are important to recognize. It is generally used as a temporary programme by pupils, who normally stay on it for one year or even less, and it includes a broad range of pupils. This is so not the least in the schools in question in our sample. Here the Individual programmes incorporated, on the one hand, refugees with highly academically educated parents (including medical practitioners, lawyers, engineers and accountants). These pupils used the programme to develop their knowledge of the Swedish language and Swedish society before establishing a successful school career. On the other hand, they included pupils from various other backgrounds who were for some reason moving between national and/or national and specialist programmes. However, generally, the programme is understood and works in the broad majority of cases as a temporary "holding programme" for pupils who left lower-secondary school with an incomplete set of grades in core subjects and were therefore not eligible for a national or specialist programme. These pupils were often described as having had learning difficulties and/or social problems during their earlier school careers and they regularly finished up as ineligible for higher education after upper-secondary school, due again to insufficient or incomplete grades in key subjects.

Two broad general questions have guided the analysis of the coded material. They were (i) what different aims, involvement activities and experiences each set of pupils described in relation to their education and (ii) what different characteristics teachers attributed to these different sets of pupil, their learning, activities, values and attitudes, and the demands of teaching them. Together these questions

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have allowed an analysis of school success and failure in terms of student strategy as outlined earlier and analyses according to the biological sex of the pupil and the school s/he attended were also possible. However, the qualitative differences noted in the data at these levels are far less profound compared to those relating to the category of success. This does not mean that gender or school differences were absent, but rather that these differences seem to be significantly secondary in relation to performance categories and programme choices (vocational or academic). There were indications of a social class relationship because of this through the previously mentioned correlations between social background and programme choice, but this indication would need to be examined by statistical means to be fully confirmed. This is currently being attended to in ongoing research.

Results

In the presentation of results comments by highly successful pupils and their teachers is focused on first and several issues have been identified as important in this data. One of these is the value recognized in being smart and making the right choices, engaging in competitive behaviour and exploiting teacher time and resources to improve one's school grades. However, the need of hard-work is also stressed, as is the value of showing interest and motivation. These points have almost always been stressed by successful and compliant pupils almost everywhere if we read for instance Ball (1981) and Hamilton (1989). However, suggesting something of a link to current investment ideology in society more broadly, an element of *return thinking* has crept into successful pupil accounts of their own actions in recent years according to our data. This notion of return thinking was less emphatic in the beginning of our research period (e.g. Beach 1999; Dovemark 2004). It has emerged in later investigations and now seems to be a dominant factor, particularly in academic programmes (Beach and Dovemark 2007, 2009), such that there seems to have been a shift there from "working hard in order to get on", as described in for instance Beach (1999) to "investing time smartly to get a good return on one's efforts and abilities", as suggested in Beach and Dovemark (2009). As one of the teachers put it, "nowadays … you have to recognize that it is necessary to compete (and) do as well as you can … based on interests, abilities and motivation … You have to make the most of your opportunities. If you don't you only have yourself to blame" (Brian). Pupils said:

> "You have to put in time and effort" (Tim) and "use what's available to get on (and) get the grades you need" (Jens). "Competitive behaviour is necessary to do well … Making the right choices of what to do, when (and) how is important" (Joanna) … "as is … learning to use teachers as a resource in your own learning" (Magnus). "Making the right choices is important (and) competitive behaviour is … needed if you are to get on and do well … It helps if you have a good attitude and show initiative (but) what we need (most) is a good return on our effort and interests" (Kaj). "Hard work helps (but) regardless of whether or not commitments are genuine … making them seem so … helps in getting good grades … You have to seem to want to put something into your education and to care about it" (Kim). "Intelligence isn't so important (but) making the right choices and showing an interest and willingness to work is" (Carl) … "You try to create an image … and reap the rewards of your investments" (Jens). (Transcription field-notes from academic programme pupils: compiled March 2007)

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As also Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) wrote, comments like these suggest that education success is implicated not only through demonstrations of formalised intelligence but also by showing a behaviour that corresponds to what is ideologically understood as an appropriate way of managing choices to promote the right kind of image to obtain a good return from an input of work and effort in a competitive situation (Walkerdine et al. 2001, 142). Moreover, in the eyes of most of the successful pupils we have spoken with there is an obvious logic to this:

> "School is for getting a qualification and (later) a good job (so) you have to be careful to manage choices well . . . and find the right balance in workload and effort to get the grades you need. Teachers recognise this and help you with it" (Toby). "The aim is for . . . getting good grades so you can get into the education you desire later on . . . It's about . . . managing choices to get a good return (from) what you do . . . Showing interest is also important" (Anna). "The image you project is . . . important" (Pete). "It's important to do good work . . . But you have to be seen to want to get on" (Jane). "You have to show responsibility (and) initiative" (Jens) . . . "That's what counts these days" (Helen). (Transcription field-notes from successful academic programme pupils: compiled March 2007)

Managing choices in order to get "a good return . . . on what you do" (Anna) is broadly considered by the successful pupils as "being smart" (Carl) and can be said to have been described by them as part of a quest for positional advantage over others and high status. This suggests that "a culture of self-interest" (Ball 2006, 82) may be a characteristic of the school/learning-culture of successful pupils. Moreover, even the unsuccessful pupils sometimes expressed similar things at times. What was different there though was that they described themselves as Reay (2006) suggests, as "less able (and/or) less interested in obtaining high grades and teacher support" (Jon). However, this was not all they said. They also spoke of having been "belittled by teachers (and) wanting to get back at them" (Angela) and, as in other studies (e.g. Willis 1977; Woods 1979; Ball 1981; Hamilton 1989), also common amongst their comments were statements about ritualism, recalcitrance and an absence of a clear sense of purpose with their schooling (Dovemark 2004; Reay 2006).

The comments given later come from unsuccessful pupils from the vocational programmes or the Individual programme from the different schools in our sample. They show that where the successful pupils tend to describe school as necessary "for identifying and selecting the right people for valuable university places and positions" (Simon) and talk about "obtaining good . . . grades (that can be exchanged) for a good education in the future and a good job or career" (e.g. Anna), the unsuccessful ones talk about being belittled and insulted and either not being clear about why they were in school or being clear that they were there for other reasons than educational success (Skelton and Francis 2009):

> "School is boring ... I hate some of the lessons like hell . . . The teachers nag at you and some even . . . humiliate you" (Sven). "It's an insulting place (and) we would rather die than be like (the swots) . . . It's not what we want" (Aida). "We (often) meet in the Café, listen to music . . . play pool or just hang out . . . Lessons are (no) fun" (Frank). "We all have our faults but school has thousands . . . I don't know why I'm here" (Tea). "I only come when I feel like it . . . I used to try but it didn't help and I never had a real picture of the purpose of it all" (Eric). "The teachers made me feel stupid . . . I truanted . . . I couldn't care less now" (Alan). "I don't have an interest or

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> time to do school work (and) rarely read even for tests and examinations" (Dick). "I go to lessons if I feel like it (but) usually do other things there than we are supposed to" (Gail). (Transcription field-notes from low-performing vocational and individual programme pupils: compiled March 2007)

Other researchers have identified similar things amongst non-academic school sub-cultures in Sweden's schools (e.g. Ambjörnsson 2004; Johansson 2009). But what we want to point to that others have not is that when we compare the comments from successful and unsuccessful pupils, we not only see a number of distinct differences concerning their attitudes and behaviour, but also that these comments rarely relate to common stereotypes like intelligence that are often used for describing such differences. Comments like being able to "recognise and appropriate available resources profitably ... in one's own interests" (Jens) are common amongst successful academic pupils. But also important for successful pupils is an acceptance of and accommodation towards competition and a commitment to identify and use "whatever resources are available to do well" (Wayne).

Using resources "profitably"

Various forms of resources are involved in the efforts pupils put in to be competitive and successful. Some of these are obvious. Teachers are seen as one obvious resource by successful pupils and in two different ways:

> "(They) on the one hand facilitate pupils ... in the process of hard work" (Jane) "and in their efforts to do as well as possible in their learning ... particularly in difficult subjects when the going gets tough" (Jens). But "they (also) give the right marks to help (us) get on" (Jill). They "monitor student work ... in ways that describe and form positive pupil identities and future schooling" (Ken, teacher).

Moreover, unsuccessful pupils can even be seen as a kind of resource to successful pupils. However, not so much in terms of them being exploited directly by these pupils but more through the ways they are defined by teachers and incorporated into the ecology of production of the classroom.

This sounds like a strange idea but it has its basis in the fact that often unsuccessful pupils "no-longer care ... about school success" (Dick) and feel they "have other things they are more interested in" (Gail). They "don't go to school to compete with each other" (Mira) "or with others" (David). They go there "to meet friends, eat lunch and have a laugh" (Flippa). And this is one of the ways in which they become a potential resource. By *stepping aside in the competition over time and attention* others can consume more of these things than they do "and get on better because of it" (Jens). Quite simply, by not actively consuming education "in the usual way" unsuccessful pupils are used symbolically and are spoken of and treated as less worthy "low performers" (Ken) who suffer from "not trying" (Brian), "not being interested" (Carole) or just "not being capable" (Gunnar): i.e. they are seen as "weaker learners" (Ken) and are used to show "a lack of qualities (that) good learners have" (Gunnar). Similarly to Willis' lads (1977) their resistant agency has come to work against them by contributing to a negative valuation by teachers and a subsequent negative treatment and outcome in the production ecology of the school (Woods 1979).

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Brian, Carole, Gunnar and Ken (earlier) are all teachers who have openly promoted the value of responsibility and enterprise expressed in recent policies according to our data and they have all expressed that "good pupils adapt to and operate in line with these ideas" (Brian). However, things can actually be read differently to this. Because what our analysis also suggests is that this idea is looped in the sense of Hacking (1995) in that it actually directs teachers to see pupil behaviour in certain specific ways, regardless of what may really lie behind the behaviour in question. That is, a kind of pedagogical fiction forms discursively by means of which differences like *trying to get a good return on what you do* (Magnus) by *being smart* (Carl) or *obtaining positional advantage over others and high status* (Jens) – i.e. the things that successful pupils say about their performances and their motives – are actually seen in other terms (Rancière 1991). A fieldwork diary extract put things as follows:

> What successful pupils talk about ... is a *desire to consume and exploit resources for personal gain* to improve their qualifications and education chances compared to others ... But this is (interpreted) as an expression of "ability, interest [in a subject] and motivation ... that low-performers lack" (Gunnar) ... As one teacher put it, "it's almost like the [different] pupils are from different worlds" (Liz) ...

Rancière (1991) has discussed these kinds of misrepresentations and how they serve a purpose in the differentiation of pupils by attributing a relative psychological status to overt behaviour. Based only on overt behaviour and ideological understandings of what this behaviour signifies, pupils can quite simply become spoken of as "quick and bright" (Carole), "slow and dull" (Ken) and "advanced or backward" (Brian).

What we feel Rancière (1991) meant by his comment – and also what we feel is illustrated in teacher comments such as those in the earlier extract – is firstly that through a form of discursive interpellation simple differences in things like overt behaviour and performances become associated with concepts such as intelligence and maturity, and are seen as examples of "an earliness (versus) delay" of development (Carole), or "a quite normal (and anticipated) variation" (Ken) in pupil characteristics, that is easy to equate with "ability, interest, effort and hard work" (Brian). Moreover, secondly, and as discussed earlier in the article, successful pupils can also play off this misrepresentation. As suggested in previous data extracts, by "showing good attitudes and trying to seem hard-working" (Jane) they can easily be seen and described by their teachers as "highly committed ... clever pupils" (Carole) and who "should be rewarded ... appropriately" (Gunnar).

The misrecognition of competitive accumulation and return thinking

We have suggested three main things in the article thus far. The first is that comments on schooling by successful and unsuccessful pupils can be separated for critical analysis and that when they are they can be seen to consistently contain significant differences. The second is that these comments often refer to actual practices and the third is that these practices are often misrecognised and misrepresented *in* common school discourse *and* by teachers (Rancière 1991). We feel we can say this for three simple reasons. These are firstly what pupils refer to directly in relation to education success as:

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- competitive behaviour
- the exploitation of time and resources
- the value of return thinking

They are secondly what is often expressed as important by teachers and not this form of *competitive behaviour* and *return thinking*, but rather things like:

- formal intelligence
- interest in school subjects
- hard work, creativity and industriousness

They are thirdly the conventional markers that are hardly ever mentioned by pupils themselves, except by unsuccessful ones who take them over from teachers to mark their relative failure and shortcomings. However, these are not the only things these pupils say, as some of them also talk about "not wanting to seem too clever … or better than their friends" (Amira) and "not wanting to do well at their expense" (Jocke). This is a well-known phenomenon in relation to both masculine, feminine and racial constructions of identity that has been documented over many years in relation to the performativity dimensions of traditional and new (neo-liberal) politics of schooling (see e.g. Willis 1977; Reay 2006; Darmody, Smyth, and McCoy 2008; Beach and Dovemark 2009; Skelton and Francis 2009; Schwartz 2010; Beach and Sernhede 2011). For instance:

> "The image you project is important … You have to be able to survive inside and outside of school and as far as I'm concerned outside is more important … I might not be all that clever [but] what teachers think is less important" (Darius). "It is important not to be seen as too interested in school work" (Martina). "School doesn't give … much to us 'thickos'… but what you say to your own by the way you are … is what is most important" (Tea). "Of course we want to get on but not at any costs" (Amir).[2]

In Beach and Dovemark (2009) the way some pupils invest their time and effort to be successful was called *competitive consumerism*[3] and was particularly obvious when the aim was to get higher marks than others "for getting into university [and] getting good jobs for a good future" (Magnus). Moreover, this competitive attitude in relation to school work and accomplishment was found to be lacking in unsuccessful pupils and in Beach and Dovemark (2009) it was suggested to relate to educational success more than anything else did. This is quite challenging toward school politics. Because what it says is that *educational attainment* in the upper-secondary school *is not about what it is often assumed to be*, which is things like "having a thirst for knowledge … and a lot of natural learning ability" (Brian) or "interest in subjects … and for ones knowledge development" (Gunnar). *It is instead about*:

- exploiting the good student label profitably by showing a competitive self-interest;
- disguising a desire for status-acquisition at all costs;
- getting a "good return on one's effort" (Magnus) by "safeguarding [ones private] chances of success … better than others do" (Jens).

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This is also expressed by successful pupils and their teachers:

> "We need good grades to get into good university education and to get a good job with good pay and high status" (Magnus). "Working hard is important [but] teachers show you and help you get on if you convince them that you are interested and committed" (Jens). "Good grades are important ... They are given to pupils who ... show initiative, willingness ... and high levels of knowledge and application" (Carole). "You simply have to be prepared to be competitive [in order] to get access to the things you need" (Jan) and "to develop rewards for yourself" (Linn). "Our job is to help those who show initiative ... We grade them on their effort ... ability [and] performances" (Gunnar, teacher).

Moreover there is again a clear logic to all of this. *Competitive self-interest and status acquisition* mix classical liberalism's selfish-individual and competitive and self-governing citizen (Ball 2007, 175–6) and they are resonant with recent education policy formulations (Dahlsted 2009), such that two further important analytical points can be made:

- Education success is often understood as being based on things like application, subject interest, ability, intelligence and motivation.
- But whilst there is some support for this when we look at what teachers and pupils actually do in classrooms and talk about when they describe these activities, school success seems generally to rely on other things, such as status desire, competitive consumption and return thinking.

There is a transformation going on in other words where behaviour that is aimed at finding and exploiting ways to consume time and other resources for personal gain (i.e. an aggressively competitive investment logic) becomes seen and acted towards as something more palatable: e.g. (a) "as showing intelligence [and] ability [and] performing at a level that less gifted pupils cannot reach" (Siv) or (b) as an aspect of "maturity ... interest and giftedness" (Carole). *Both* desires to be competitive and acquire status *and* their associated practices have become, if not confused with hard-work, interest, individual development and an inner-ability, certainly conflated with these issues. Moreover this transformation is not only incidental. It is on the contrary extremely important as it makes it clear that it is specifically by not seeing the performances of pupils as *examples of resource exploitation, investment thinking and status accumulation at the expense of others* that teachers are (emotionally, ethically and professionally) able to support successful pupils in their activities, as they have to be first misrecognised or transformed in order to be *acceptable in practice* let alone *accepted as* the *common praxis* that they seem to have become.

Even comments from the lowest performing pupils on the Individual programme in their respective schools can be used to support this idea about the importance of misrecognition. This, in that what these unsuccessful pupils talk about when they talk about their difficulties with schooling is *the problems they have when trying to consume education goods* (materials, resources), which is again very different to what their teachers often suggest to be the problem: i.e. "a weak background" (Carole) and a "lack of effort ... ability ... interest, or all three together" (Siv). Unsuccessful pupils say:

> "I couldn't see the meaning in it [and] didn't want to stick out too much from my friends" (Pat). "A pass is enough" (Tony). "It's not that I was never interested ... I

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> was … But I didn't do well … It just didn't work out as well for me [so] I stopped really trying and was happy enough to just pass if I could … but I usually didn't" (Viv). "In school I accept the performance grades I get … A pass is enough (for) most of us" (Andy). "I haven't always … got the grades [but] I don't like to take up too much of the teacher's time and I have other interests' (Sandra). "School's not where I try to be somebody" (Tom).

The pupils were, like those from vocational programmes, more likely to come from lower socio-economic groups than other pupils. However, their comments can be used in two analytically different ways. They can be used (a) hegemonically in order to confirm common understandings of "self-investment, enterprise and creativity in school as positive qualities" (Gunnar) that are linked to "effort and ability [and] are lacking in unsuccessful pupils" (Brian) "from weaker backgrounds" (Carole). Or (b) they can be used in another way, to describe an *absence of selfish interests* and needs of academic *status* and *recognition* at all costs as under-girding a lack of educational success for these pupils.

Which choice of interpretations is made is important. Because what the second reading says is that the economic thinking and competition that otherwise characterises school success and that hinges on *working for naked self-interest, status attainment and private return* (i.e. an investment logic and competitive consumerism) are absent in the failing group, and that this group lacks success not because of their lack of intellectual abilities, but because of an absence of *exaggerated self-interest and exaggerated personal demands for private return* at any (or anyone's) cost (Beach and Dovemark 2009; Johansson 2009).[4]

Discussion

The present article is based on research in Swedish upper-secondary schools over the past 12 years. Comments on schooling experiences, aims and practices by pupils who are assessed and graded as amongst the most successful and unsuccessful learners in their respective schools have been compared. These comparisons suggest three things quite clearly.

(1) That particular practice choices exist with respect to classroom behaviour.
(2) That as an aspect of their exercised social agency in these situations of choice, and aided by teachers, some pupils have been able to encourage a winner-takes-all competition to develop in their quest to be successful.
(3) That the processes of accumulation (of e.g. grades, qualifications and status) that result from this are misrecognised and re-labelled in schools in ways that normalize competitive consumption and private accumulation as ideal and beneficial activities that all pupils should aspire toward and be assessed in terms of.

Similar arguments to the earlier mentioned have been made previously in Sweden by for instance Lundahl (2002), Lund (2008) and Johansson (2009) in respect of point one and Beach and Dovemark (2007, 2009) and Beach and Sernhede (2011) in respect to points two and three. However, two further points can also be made. The first is that if education success is based on competitive investment and accumulation in the earlier ways, education policies can never work equally well for all pupils at the same time, they can only ever work well for some of them (Beach and Sernhede 2011). The second is that this "some" may at least in part come from the

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same social categories as those advantaged previously. This has been the case elsewhere if we read for instance Echolls and Willms (1995), Taylor and Woollard (2003), Ball (2006), Hartley (2007), Hartley (2008) and Dahlsted (2009). Bunar (2008) also lends support to these ideas as do Ball, Bowe, and Gerwitz (1996).

Four things can be suggested we think on the basis of the materials we have presented in respect of these points. The first is that practices of *individual enterprise and selfish accumulation* may have become key features of practice in education culture in upper-secondary schools today and that this, alongside ideologies of "return thinking", has encouraged personal investments in particular projections of the self and consumerist performances in a drive for educational success. The third is that these things are not generally understood and named in these ways. A transformation has taken place. The fourth is that, as we have argued previously, it may be predominantly the business fraction of the middle- and upper-middle classes whose values are favoured in education at the present time, in both theory and in practice (Beach and Dovemark 2009).

These points, not the least the latter of them, need some further discussion. Two questions need to be particularly considered. Firstly does the manifest set of practices we have described emanate from and mediate the dominant values of the middle- and upper-middle classes? Secondly, are individuals from these classes able to capitalize on their inherited social and cultural capital more effectively than others?

We feel the answer to both these questions is yes. It is broadly recognised that the kind of values manifested conform with neo-liberal tenets and that neo-liberalism both reflects, operates in the interests of these classes and is most actively supported by them as well (Giroux 2005; Harvey 2006; Turner 2008). This applies not the least in relation to the neo-liberal transformation of the welfare state in the Nordic countries (Torfing 1999; Rolland 2008). Further, previous empirical examinations have been conclusive in saying that it is still the children of parents at the top of the socio-economic ladder who end up constituted as ideal pupils at the top of the ladder of educational success (Svensson 2001, 2006; Dovemark 2004; Beach and Dovemark 2009; Beach and Sernhede 2011) and that this is based on their possibilities to valorise their class-cultural capital as educational capital in schools more easily and naturally than others do, with support from active social networks when needed (Ball 2003; Beach and Dovemark 2009). These points are important. They mean that even though the pathways of school choice and learning may have changed somewhat in recent years (Lund 2008) the differentiation patterns that result from these choices are not new (Bunar 2008). They constitute instead processes of social reproduction that maintain existing (class) inequality (Darmody et al. 2008).

These points are very important and refute a common claim made by the advocates of recent policy changes. This claim is that by freeing individuals from the interference of the state and a state owned and controlled education, individualised (or personalised) school choice will allow each person to realize their autonomy as rational actors who will not be discriminated against based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, or any other identity. But as for instance Bunar (2008), Beach and Sernhede (2011) and Dahlsted (2009) suggest, in Sweden (at least) this is simply not the case. Because what we can see is that the rationality of the education choice system is a materialization of the ideology of a specific class fraction that operates in the interests of this class fraction (Harvey 2006), both in an abstract way, and in the ways specifically described in the present article and that success in school is also dependent on a fundamental misrecognition of what is actually at play.

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Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Althusser (1971) and Poulantzas (1974) have all made similar statements to these about schools within the capitalist social order (even in earlier economic periods), which they describe as offering nothing more than hegemonic social myths to subordinate classes. However, these philosophers also collectively added two further points that we are trying to make. These points are firstly that education subjects are active rather than passive agents in all of this in that secondly, as also Ball (2003, 2008) suggests, the things we are describing are not flatly imposed on schools and the people in them, but are instead driven forward as ideological discourses that obtain popular support from key groups in everyday practices. They are quite simply issues of hegemony.

Conclusions

The further development of democracy in society, in, through, and on the basis of a broad, inclusive and comprehensive education, was once the fundamental policy basis of the education system in the Nordic countries in general (Antikainen 2010), including Sweden, according to National Education Acts and the national curricula for the different parts of the Swedish school system (National Education Act 1985, 1100, chapter 1, §2 and §9; Lpo 94; Lpf 94). These documents all stipulated that education should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values and respect for people and their environment and that neither education access nor educational success should depend on social background, gender, ethnic belonging, religion, personal beliefs, sexual orientation or disability of the pupils.

These basic values are still voiced in formal policies. However, the present article has suggested that recent developments that have led to an emphasis on individual choice, personal responsibility, performativity and competition have led to these original values being severely challenged, as one group (the group of formally successful pupils) is being normalised by being talked about and positioned as a group of individually responsible (neo-liberal) subjects and creative and enterprising learners, whilst the rest are described in respect of a lack of these attributes to greater or lesser degrees (Beach and Dovemark 2009; Beach and Sernhede 2011). They become “others” that need to acquire desired skills and attitudes for success in the knowledge society. A discursive re-constitution and form of (hegemonic) interpellation then comes into play. The first group become described as “bright”, “clever”, “intelligent” and “mature” whilst the others are described as at best ordinary and at worst “dull”, “slow”, “backward” and “immature”, and a risk to both themselves, their schools, society at large, and even European prosperity (also Sjöberg 2011).

Thus what we have described, we feel, is a new chapter in an ongoing story about how dominant cultures gain their purchase on life by reaching into and reshaping attitudes, orientations and behaviour through associations of overt practices with values and ideologies which, whilst they do not rob subordinate groups of their own cultural identity and its values, they do reshuffle these things on a specific ideological terrain. We have described in other words, as Althusser (1971) once did, how the ideology of the ruling classes does not become the ruling ideology by the grace of God or the seizure of state power, but through the work of installations such as the school, in which this ideology can be (and is) materialised and mediated. Perhaps we have described the workings of a new policy hegemony, or at least the beginnings of one.

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Notes

1. These developments have some strongly European and global trends (Echolls and Willms 1995; Sjöberg 2011). However, they may be felt (and perhaps resisted) particularly heavily in Sweden. As Antikainen suggests (2010), in the Nordic countries restructuring processes towards the competition state are proceeding on both policy and institutional levels at the same time as the basic structures of public education and the comprehensive school are left intact. Quoting Schubert and Martens he points to the continued outstanding performance of the Nordic countries in terms of social welfare indicators in comparison to other countries as an aspect of this and to the fact that educational inclusion, pupil influence and parity between social classes, regions and generations have been maintained to a higher degree than elsewhere. Nevertheless recent policies may still have undermined these developments as aims for increased individual responsibility and freedom of choice replace the common "comprehensiveness" of the educational foundation of schooling (Lundahl 2002; Dovemark 2004; Englund 2004; Lund 2008; Beach and Dovemark 2009). The present article considers and examines this possibility.
2. As well as describing their lust for learning differently the unsuccessful pupils also described teachers and subjects differently. For these pupils teachers and subjects were less often described as a positive resource. *Rather than creating opportunities* teachers *set restrictions* and subjects are often described as *meaningless boring torture*.
3. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) have considered the impact of consumerism in higher education. They noted its uneven impact on student identity, teaching, curriculum assessment and learning outcomes. Hartley (2007) described a culture of consumerism as we do as a market-based regime of governance associated with new public management and a functional relationship to new capitalism as a new work order (Hartley 2008).
4. This means that almost all we can say about unsuccessful pupils and their school performances is that some of them fail to recognise the value of competitive consumerism whilst some may even actually resist it. And almost all we can say about successful ones is the opposite: they recognise the value of such consumerism, succumb to it, and practice it avidly.

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