

Boys' Anti School Culture? Narratives and School Practices

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The issue of young men's academic achievement — described along the lines of boys as the new losers in a so-called feminized school — has for a long time now been the subject of various public debates. These debates are further fuelled by national and international surveys that indicate a gender difference in academic success, according to which girls and women appear to be winners throughout the educational system. As noted by several gender scholars, the relation drawn between gender and school achievement is often portrayed as constituting a crisis in education, and critical voices have underlined the risk of a moral panic as well as a feminist backlash hidden in these debates (c.f. Epstein et al 1998; Francis, 2006; Griffin, 2000). One theory widely used in both academia and the Swedish popular media to explain boys' underachievement posits the existence of an anti-school culture, well known from Willis' (1977) pioneering work. According to the idea of an anti-school culture, to make a serious effort to do well at school is simply not consistent with performing “cool” or other normative forms of masculinities. Moreover, the category of “rowdy boys” is often taken for granted in Swedish public discourses on the subject: the category is used to explain rule breaking activities and disciplinary problems in classrooms. Yet, it is precisely this category that needs to be deconstructed. In light of the above, this paper takes as its point of departure Judith Butler's (1990) call for reversing the relation between deeds and identity in order to critically discuss both the category of “rowdy boys” and dominant conceptions of the crisis of boys in school.

Drawing on a) Swedish public reports on gender and school achievement, and b) ethnographic data from two fieldworks in Swedish secondary schools, the paper discusses how the theory of an anti-school culture, has in many respects during the last decade taken on a life of its own, serving as the unquestioned backdrop against which the issue is discussed in Swedish

policy reports. I argue that it is possible to investigate the theory as a master narrative which provides explanations and meaning, as well as resources with which to construct identities and to make sense of experiences. Following Bamberg's call (2006:140) for "small stories" in narrative research, I consider storytelling as an activity that takes place between people, with the narrative emerging at the very point of its telling. This perspective is harnessed in order to grasp the co-constructiveness of narratives in local school contexts, and moreover to understand how stories about failing boys in school can be seen as the results of processes of negotiation among students and school staff, engaged in everyday conversations. Within this perspective, the anti-school culture theory shall not be seen solely as a way to explain attitudes and school experiences that students express, it also constitutes a narrative that precedes identities, and that is available to use — or to contradict — when students and teachers make sense of their everyday school lives.

Furthermore, my narrative perspective includes an interest in what conversational actions people accomplish in storytelling (Stokoe and Edwards 2006:57). In the paper, I pay specific attention to one such aspect of narrative action, namely the practice of giving accounts. According to Buttny (1993), an account can be viewed as "the use of language to interactionally construct preferred meanings of problematic events" (1993:21). An accusation, a blame or other forms of criticism call for the addressee to offer an account, that is, an explanation "designed to recast the pejorative significance of action and an individual's responsibility of it" (ibid:1). A teacher's criticism of a student's behavior in the class room, to take an example presented in the paper, call for the student to offer an account. I argue that some situations of protest in classrooms are not always expressions of "cool masculinities" or boys' anti-school culture, but could also be used by students to escape the accusation of being labeled a failing student. For further research on boys and schooling, I call for an analysis that considers various expressions of opposition as linguistic resources, and their availability to some students, as part of their complex and on-going performances of gender and pupil positions.

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