

Exploring the discourse of 'failing boys' in VET

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## Exploring the discourse of 'failing boys' in VET

1. The policy context of the 'failing boys' discourse in Denmark - some critical remarks
2. Three theoretical approaches to failure in school:
  - A. Educational reproduction of social and cultural inequalities
  - B. Boys anti-school culture and resistance to schooling
  - C. Differentiation - polarisation in relation to streaming of students
3. Conclusion & discussion?

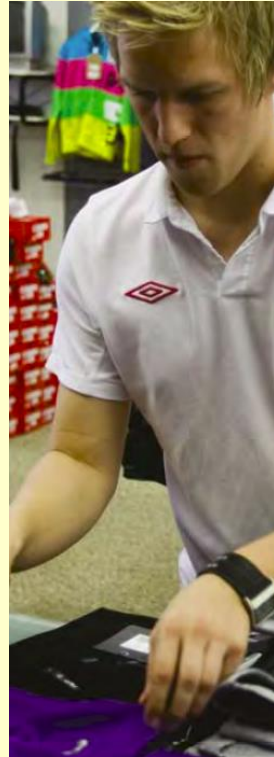
## The new policy discourse of 'failing boys'

- Head of Centre for Basic School Research (2010): "The Danish comprehensive school has become a girls school."
- Government White Paper: "*feminized 'schools make boys loose engagement* "
- The government give boys special attention in draft for reform of basic school and reserve funding for special initiatives for boys.
- Former liberalist Prime Minister *Lars Løkke* has established the Løkke-foundation for 'boys on the edge'.



## Arguments of the 'failing boys' discourse

- Boys' attainment in school is lower than girls'.
- Women now in majority in higher education - even in political science, medicine and law.
- Boys are assessed by teachers as less mature and more 'problematic'
- Less boys than girls complete higher secondary education (VET/Gymnasium)



## Explanations given by the 'failing boys' discourse

- 'Masculine needs' (for individual competition, performance, physical activity) are inhibited in schools.
- 'Talk based', 'soft pedagogic' and group based teaching favor girls over boys.
- Boys don't meet role models in schools (male teachers).

### In addition

- The 'failing boys' discourse linked to wider neoliberal attack on 'feminine' welfare state.
- And a 'moral panic' of Denmark's mediocre position in international ratings (PISA, PIRLS).



# Problematizing the political discourse of 'failing boys'

- Some claims of 'failing boys' discourse is a statistical construction
- Different pathways for boys and girls in education: more boys in VET, more girls in higher education ('*welfare professions*')
- Even though less men complete post-compulsory education, they are not more unemployed than women.
- Earnings of men in the labour market are still 20% higher than earnings of women.
- Men still dominate in managerial positions



# General critique of discourse of 'failing boys'

- Binary and stereotyped logic
- Essentialist concept of gender:  
*biological determinism*
- Opposed concepts of boys and girls.  
*"What is good for girls, is not good for boys "*
- General problems are made into 'boys problems'  
*dropout and well-being in school*



# Exploring 'failing boys' in VET

Why do some students fail in VET - and why do some boys/men fail?

Inspired by three different theoretical approaches

1. Theories of social and cultural reproduction in education
2. Theories of boys' anti-school sub-cultures
3. The differentiation-polarisation theory of educational tracking/streaming





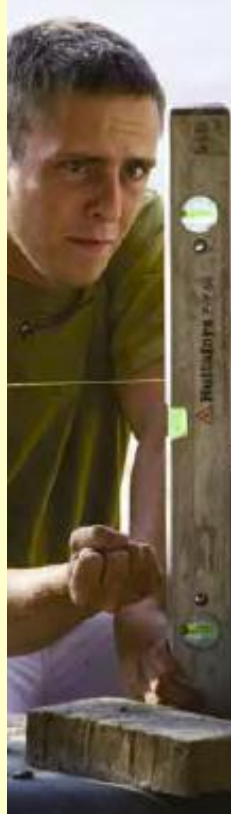
## Empirical data

- Observations of and interviews with 106 pupils
- From eight different vocational schools
- Half of the pupils were interviewed again after six months
- Two thirds of the pupils were boys
- In addition: new longitudinal study of 36 students over 2½ years



# 1. Theories of social and cultural reproduction

- Educational system tends to reproduce structural inequalities in wider society.
- Reproduction of the existing *gender order*.
  - gender segregated labour market reproduced by gender segregated educational system
- Nordic societies are strongly gender-segregated - mainly in the horizontal level.
- VET strongly gender segregated: half of the programmes are uni-sex (<10% minority gender)



## Structural reproduction in our study:

- Male jobs in manufacturing are heavier hit by crisis and outsourcing than female job in the public sector
- Early tracking increase risk of stereotyped gender coding of educational choices
- Technical VET programmes have male coding and lowest esteem
- Dual VET involve increased risks compared to Gymnasium:
  - Multiple transitions between work and education
  - Competition for training placements
  - Diverts students away from higher education
- Male dominated VET have lower formal credential, but have equal or higher value on the labour market.



## 2. Theories of boys' anti-school subculture

- Young people's cultural production of educational identities (instead of social reproduction)
- The culture of working-class boys involve resistance to the school's middle class values (Willis 1978)
- Rejection of the 'performance ideology' of schools
- Boys anti-school subculture is based on a sexist and racist form of masculinity



## Anti-school subculture in our study?

- Students are divided in informal groupings: gender, ethnicity, social background, etc.
- A student in a motor mechanic course: "Our class is split up a bit into groups, with some who are not really interested in school. They are only there because they have to have something to do. And then there are those who keep up and try to do everything and do things on time."
- Students from skilled workers families are often more dedicated.
- No clear signs of an explicit anti-school subculture
- But many students are tired of school and have low engagement.

## Anti-school subculture in our study?

- Vocational education appear as a positive alternative to 'school'
- A male electronics technician's student: "Primary school, it was more like you had to sit there for a while and do exercises, you had to sit and write all day and sit still etc. When you come out here, then you could stand and work with all sorts of things and get to walk around a little more, and it wasn't just about sitting still and staring into thin air"
- For some boys (and girls) VET represent a 'counter-culture' to the academic culture in general education.
- Indicates some advantages of a diversity of educational pathways.



### 3. The differentiation-polarization theory

- School's categorization and segregation of student can produce a polarization in a pro-school and an anti-school culture
- Institutional division (high/low streams) give students different experiences of the school.
  - Students in low-stream classes tend to become alienated.
  - Students in high-stream classes tend to become more engaged.
- School's categorization can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- School can produce its own 'failures'.



## Differentiation-polarization in our study?

- Students were divided in different basic courses based on APEL
  - 'Weaker' students in extended courses.
  - 'Stronger' students in fast courses (sometimes with additional skills)
- Indications of negative effects in low-stream classes:
  - less recognition - lower self esteem
  - less ambitious teaching/teachers
  - Negative peer learning
  - Stigmatisation in school
- Indications that boys are more often placed in low streams.





## 'Failing boys' in VET?

- Technical VET programmes with low status has a masculine coding
- VET programmes with male coding exposed to additional risks:
  - *early choice,*
  - *lack of training placements,*
  - *multiple transitions.*
- But boys and girls have equal dropout rates in VET

## 'Failing boys' in VET?

- The division of students in high/low classes involves risk of polarisation and disengagement - and boys have higher risk of being placed in low tracks.
- VET can provide a 'counter-culture' to the academic culture and offer boys and girls a 'second chance' not afforded by comprehensive school systems.
- Ambiguous role of VET for boys: at the same time seen as
  - ✓ An appropriate 'second choice' for non-academic boys
  - ✓ A diversion of boys away from higher education

Thank you for your attention!

