Collective Actions, Alliances and Resistance of Young People in Vocational Upper Secondary Education: A Cross-cultural Perspective

Sirpa Lappalainen
Department of Education, University of Helsinki
Per-Åke Rosvall
School of Education and Behavioural Sciences, University of Borås
Carina Hjelmér
Dept. of Child and Youth Education, Special Education and Counselling, Umeå University

Abstract
The transition from secondary to upper secondary school often means a higher level of responsibility for the student. Moreover, the concept desirable citizenship is even more important today in the era of educational restructuring and neo-liberal orientation that emphasises individualised responsibility. In this paper, we explore how young people deal with the new expectations they meet on their route to adulthood and labour market citizenship, which is considered as a desired form of citizenship in the era of educational restructuring. The presentation is based on ethnographic studies in the context of vocational education; two in Sweden and one in Finland. The Swedish data are generated both in the Vehicle and Child and Recreation Programmes; the Finnish in the sector of social and health care. We analyse how and if young people in the three programmes and two national educational contexts make collective actions, alliances and resistance when negotiating their space in school. In that sense, our perspective is cross-cultural. We argue that even though Sweden has been successful in promoting equality, in the sense that a larger number of students with vocational background attend and can imagine themselves in higher education, divisions between students and categorisations still exist in everyday school life.

Education, Responsibility and Citizenship

Upper secondary education is supposed to prepare young people to take place as future citizens of the state. Education is meant not only to reproduce the conceptualisation of the good citizen as an active member of the society but also to promote social change towards equality (Gordon et al., 2008). In education, there are official documents and tacit rules of what to expect of a good citizen. Today, even in so-called social democrat welfare states like Sweden and Finland, the idea of the 'proper citizen' is influenced by neoliberal and neoconservative ideals (Beach, 2005). Policy texts and politics emphasise the 'lifelong learner', who is continuously willing and capable to upgrade her/his knowledge and skills necessary for employment (e.g. Fejes 2008). To prepare for being an adult citizen, pupils are educated to be entrepreneurs for themselves (Båth, 2006; Komulainen, 2006). To be an entrepreneur for oneself includes being democratically involved in the education processes. According to Arnot (2006), this means a unique and problematic coupling involving, on one hand, the market-oriented modes with individualisation in the class-room, and, on the other, political discourses which exploit the language developed by egalitarian critiques of such markets.
In policy texts, student influence and responsibility are promoted (Sjöberg, 2009). Students are often promoted to influence and to be or made responsible of space and time. During the late 1990s in Sweden, there were discussions of time spent in school due to the National Timetable try-out (NTT), which was proposed by the Public School Committee 1999 (Sundberg, 2003). The try-out was meant to loosen up the strong framing of the school day to stimulate thematic work, enable individualisation and respond to the diversity of students. The try-out never became a reform but it received much attention and influenced schools to work more thematic and make more individual schedules for the students. Dovemark has noted that teachers in the individualisation of time and work that not only depended on the NTT try-out but considered it one factor among many took a step back and made students responsible of time and work (2004). How flexible and negotiable rules considering time and space are they still exist in every educational institution as embedded in pedagogy (see Giddens 1984). Moreover, they are considered as relevant when students’ abilities in terms of responsible labour market citizenship are judged (Lappalainen submitted).

In the conception of a Nordic democratic state lies the implication of the stately resources as fairly equally distributed, so as the space/room in school would belong to everyone. Nevertheless, you see students using different spaces and rooms in school in different ways. Investigating time and space gives you an opportunity to discuss hierarchical relations and differentiation. It also questions power and resistance in school (Gordon et al., 2000 p. 143). Giddens (1984) argues that:

> The classroom, like the school, is a ‘power container’. But it is not one that merely churns out ‘docile bodies’. Contexts of co-presence […] can be described as settings, and settings have to be reflexively activated by authority figures in the course of making that authority count. Discipline through the surveillance is a potent medium of generating power, but it none the less depends upon the more or less continuous compliance of those who are its ‘subjects’. (p. 136)

In this paper, we will show some examples of how students from different vocational programmes in Finland and Sweden make (collective) actions, alliances and resistance when negotiating their space in school, especially depending on time and room.

**The Education Systems**

The Swedish education system starts with pre-school, followed by pre-school class and compulsory school. Not until after compulsory school when the children are 15-16 years of age are they separated due to choice of programmes in upper secondary school. There they can choose from 17 course-based national programmes (three year)\(^1\), several special and local programmes (three year) and individual programmes (of varying length)\(^2\). Since the reform in the mid 1990s, when it became easier to start independent schools, the variety of local programmes has increased (Lundahl, 2002, 2006). In 1995/96, 91 percent of Swedish students studied at a national programme, but in 2006/07 the number was down to 67 percent (Skolverket, 2007 p. 63). All three-year programmes have the same core subjects (Swedish, English, maths, religion, natural science, social sciences, artistic activities and physics), which

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\(^1\) 4 academic programmes (Arts, Natural Science, Social Sciences and Technology) and 13 vocational programmes (Child and Recreation, Construction, Electricity, Energy, ,Vehicle, Business and Administration, Handicraft, Hotel and Restaurant, Industry, Food, Media, Natural Resources Use, Health Care).

\(^2\) The Individual Programme is to prepare students for education in a national programme. The programme is for students who have not passed the subjects Swedish/Swedish as second language, English or mathematics.
gives eligibility to higher education. The vocational programmes should include instructions at places of work for at least fifteen percent of the scheduled time.

This means that the differences between academic and vocational upper secondary education are reduced and the division of students is postponed. Young people’s right to upper secondary education is also stated by the law, and the municipalities are obliged to offer all 16 to 19-year-olds education in one of the national programmes or in an individual programme. However, the present non-socialist government in Sweden has proposed a new reform for upper secondary education (SOU, 2008) that constitutes a major break with the previously dominant integration trend during the last forty years. In the proposed reform, students are divided into three different categories: study-oriented, vocation-oriented, and apprenticeship education and training (Lundahl, 2008). Even if this has been a consistent policy of the political rights during the last decades, it has not yet been realised. According to Lundahl, this reform is more selective in its character than previous reforms. It aims to manage students “at risk”, and particularly the apprenticeship alternative targets at this group.

Compared to the Swedish system, the Finnish educational structure of upper secondary education is more strictly divided into general (gymnasium) and vocational (upper secondary) institutions. The former is an academic, all-round education that prepares students for the matriculation examination. In general, vocational upper secondary education consists of three years of schooling in one of the seven vocational sectors\(^3\). Studies in the health and social services sector contain core subjects (20 credits), common vocational studies of the qualification (50 credits), specialist vocational studies (40 credits) and free-choice studies (10 credits). Basically, this means that after their first two years of studies, the students choose one out of the nine specialist vocational studies programmes\(^4\). The duration of studies is one year shorter for those who have completed the general upper secondary school syllabus.

In Finland, deconstruction of barriers between academic and vocational education has existed and are still on the Social Democratic agenda. An educational reform towards a ‘youth school’ was planned to take place in the 1990s (Jauhiainen, 2001 p. 92). The reform fell through due to National Coalition party resistance (ibid.). Even though raising the appreciation of vocational education has been on the political agenda for the last few years, symbolic value of general upper secondary education is still strong (e.g. Jauhiainen, 2003). More often than the middle class youth, young people from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds tend to take the vocational route (Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2000; Kuisma, 2001). In a post-war perspective, the political will has been more favourable for aims as to deconstruct social divisions in Sweden, and different actions have been made in order to try to make programmes gender and class equal (Lundahl, 2008). However, some programmes are still more boy or girl intense. Programmes such as Natural Science attract more students with parents with experience of higher education, and vocational programmes attract students with parents with little or no experience of higher education (Ekman, 2007 p. 121). In 2006, approximately 4 percent started the Child and Recreation Programme with over 70 percent female students. Same year 4 percent started the Vehicle Programme with less than 10 percent female students (Skolverket, 2007). In Finland, the most segregated of the sectors are the

\(^3\) Natural Resources Sector; Technology and Transport Sector; Business and Administration Sector; Tourism, Catering and Home Economics Sector; Health and Social Services Sector; Culture Sector; Leisure and Physical Education Sector. (http://www.oph.fi/page.asp?path=1,17627,1561,5098,11087)

\(^4\) Programmes are Emergency Care, Rehabilitation, Children’s and Youth Care and Education, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Welfare Work, Nursing and Care, Oral and Dental Care, Care for the Disabled, Care for the Elderly, Customer Services and Information Management.
Social and Health sector with more than 90 percent of students female, and the Technology and Transport sector with 15 per cent of students female. (e. g. Statistics Finland 2007; see also Lahelma et al. 2008.) The most popular programmes in Sweden are the Social Sciences and Natural Science programmes (Skolverket, 2007 p. 67). For those who finished vocational programmes in 2005 in Sweden, 14.4 percent started a university education within three years. In theory, Finnish three-year vocational upper secondary qualifications give general eligibility for higher education in polytechnics and universities as well as for general upper secondary education. In practice, however, this option is seldom used. In 2007, only 2 percent of the university students started their studies without matriculation examination (NBE 2008).

**Research Material and Analytical Strategies**

In our analysis, we draw on a cross-cultural perspective (Gordon & Lahelma, 2004). The transition from comprehensive school to post-compulsory education are explored by analysing ethnographic data generated at vocational programmes in one institute in Finland (Social and Health Care) and two schools in Sweden (Child and Recreation; the Vehicle Programme). In this joint work, we have utilised an analysis through discussion as a methodological principle (Gordon et al., 2006). We have brought together pieces of our data concerning a chosen theme to the discussion and read it together while paying attention to the similarities and differences in the cultural processes between these two Nordic countries.

All three schools are relatively big with 1500-2100 students and 150-200 teachers. Another common feature for all three programmes is that the requirements of average marks are relatively low. However, the Finnish institute selects its students through entrance tests in which the applicant’s learning abilities and suitability for the field of the social and health care are evaluated. In all three research sites, the students (except for two students in Finland and six in the Child and Recreation programme in Sweden) were 16 to 17 years old and started their upper secondary education after finishing their compulsory schooling. The programme of Child and Recreation (in Sweden) and the Institute of Social and Health Care (in Finland) are both female-dominated fields. In the Child and Recreation class, there were 17 girls and 4 boys. The group we followed in the Institute of Social and Health Care originally consisted of 24 students, only two of them male. Also, most of the teachers were female. Having met the qualifications, the students from both educational fields will be qualified to basic level works in the social and health care sector. The Vehicle Programme (in Sweden) is a traditionally male-dominated programme. The class consisted of 16 boys at the beginning of the school year and 13 at the end. Some boys switched programmes. A total of 19 were followed, but 3 of them only for a short period of time (a few days or a few weeks). All teachers were male, except for one.

The data from all three schools consists of field notes generated through participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004), interviews of students and teachers (in Finland also interviews with student counselors and in Sweden with headmasters), and material produced by the institutions, for example student guides, leaflets, and teaching materials. In the Finnish school, the participant observation was mainly focused on subjects where questions of citizenship are assumed to be on the agenda (e.g. health education, civic education, social services), compared to almost all subjects during the first school year in the Swedish schools. Moreover, celebrations, theme days and entrance

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5 This was the number of students in the beginning of the school year. Dropping out is relatively common and during the year some of the students will have left while others have come. Some students drop out for a while and later they might come back with an individual study plan.
examinations were observed. In the Finnish investigation, five students were studied in their on-the-job training periods as well.

**Counteractive Collective Actions to Minimise Time Spent in School**

According to Anthony Giddens (1984 p. 135), educational institutions as disciplinary organisations operate with a precise economy of time. Individuals’ positioning and movements are regulated by the school timetable, which is fundamental to the mobilisation of space as co-ordinated *time-space paths* (ibid; see also Gordon et al., 2000). People are supposed to be in the right place at the right time. Breaking the rules considering time might be sanctioned in one way or another. We also use Giddens (1984) concepts, *resources* and *rules*, to interpret and understand the students’ attempts to make actions, alliances and resistance when they negotiate in school. Giddens emphasises that it is inherent in human interaction to recreate, modify and change structures. With resources, Giddens means capacity to change the material and social environment (p.33). In school, resources can include “access to teachers, or control over classroom events and discourse” (Davies, 1994 cited in Öhrn, 2005). Rules concern not merely the formal outspoken ones but the silent ditto used in relations between people.

In the Finnish Institute of Social and Health Care, the school year is divided into five periods when specific subjects are studied. For example, study module (one credit unit) Sports and Health Education starts in the middle of September and ends in the early October. In practice, this means that all students study the same subject several times a week and for several hours every day. For example, when the module Sports and Health Education started (week 38), it was scheduled Mondays 8.30-12.30, Tuesdays 1.30-3.45, and Fridays 10.15-12.30. Lunch breaks were eleven o’clock, which was the only break on the schedule. However, there existed some unwritten break rules. For example, lessons that according to the timetable were supposed to start at a quarter past one did not start until half past one, at least for teachers who had been a long time in the institute. During the first month, there was turmoil about the timetable among the students as well as the newcomers or part-time teachers. Moreover, breaks were continuously a topic of discussion, sometimes even a quarrel, between students who smoked and those who did not. The smokers preferred to have a break and the non-smokers preferred to study without breaks in order to minimise their time spent in school. In interviews, the students were asked to describe their feelings about their first weeks of education. Most of the students described the school start as exhausting. They described how the hard work started immediately with Swedish and social politics, how long school days they had had and how they found it hard to sit in the class-room all day long. This was something they were not prepared for. One of the girls told that she expected some kind of ‘slow start’ in the beginning, i.e. time to get to know people and school days that are not very long.

In the Child and Recreation class in Sweden, the school year was divided into four periods with lessons, scheduled 8.20-3.40 at the most. The schedule consists of rather long lessons, some of them about 1.5-2 hours long. Also, the programme-specific subjects had two subsequent lessons with different subjects without any breaks scheduled in between. This would mean that if you do not take a break in spite of this, you would have a lesson for as long as 2.5 hours without a break. In reality, this would mean that every time this happens, which would be about 2-3 times a week, they would take at least 10 minutes off from lesson

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6 In Finland, Finnish-speaking students are supposed to study Swedish, which the second official language.
time. Also, when the lessons in other subjects lasts for more than 70 minutes, which happens almost daily, there is an unwritten rule to have a break in the middle of the lesson. The teachers talk about this as ‘not good at all’ and think that the best would be to have no more than 60 minutes in a row if the students’ concentration is to be top.

Both the Swedish and Finnish group had a ‘drop in’ time almost daily when only a few students came on time and the rest dropped in during the next 20 minutes. In Sweden, the students’ school attendances were controlled by web based system. When the students arrived late, played truant or when their parents had phoned them in sick, the teachers were supposed to enter a special form on the Internet. The parents could check their absence on the Internet page at any time. If a student had too much unapproved absence, their study grant could be withdrawn. In Finland, lessons started by a roll call as well. Non-attendances were kept an eye on by the tutoring teacher. Too many non-attendances, especially in particular subjects, prevented them to get attendances on the job-learning period.

From the very first day, the boys at the Vehicle Programme were told that their schedule was not valid in the vehicle hall where they had most of their lessons. In the building there were three vehicle halls, one for each year. Since there were two classes each year, the time spent in the vehicle hall was shared and the class in this research were in the hall Mondays, Tuesdays and half Wednesdays. After lunch on Wednesdays they swapped places with the other class and during the rest of the week they had theoretical lessons. In the vehicle hall they worked as if it would have been a ‘real’ vehicle hall and followed a schedule with breakfast break, lunch and afternoon coffee break. Depending on how many customer cars they had, some boys worked with practical tasks and others with theoretical. In one corner of the hall, they had places to sit on and a whiteboard where the teacher held his briefings. Most of the theoretical lessons, Swedish, English and Maths, were held in classrooms on the other side of the corridor that led to the vehicle hall. The school year was divided into three periods, during one of which they had lessons in the main building. Some of the boys did not go to those lessons but waited for the next period with all lessons in the vehicle hall building. There was a relaxed atmosphere there and some of the boys walked in and out of lessons, a little bit as they felt like it. Sometimes they got reprimands for this but that was seldom paid attention to.

Studying in the female-dominated Finnish Institute of Social and Health Care and the Swedish Child and Recreation Programme was organised through a timetable associated with the school, whereas in the male-dominated vehicle programme, time was disciplined in a way that simulated discipline of the working life.

However, in all the three schools the students were effective in negotiating to minimise their time spent in school. Sometimes the students asked for when the next break was already when the lesson started. They could ask in turns: “When is the next break?” “When does this lesson end?” “Please, can we finish earlier today?” as if in a kind of unspoken tactic to tire the teacher to say: “OK, you are free to leave.” In the following extract, however, the negotiation actually goes smoothly without an atmosphere of confrontation:

During the break Veeti\textsuperscript{7} came to chat with Jenna and Pilvi\textsuperscript{8} ‘We’ll all go home a quarter to three today’. (Lesson was supposed to continue to 3.30). Before the break it was discussed with Meeri (the teacher) that, ‘Let’s end the lesson at three o’clock’. When the lesson continued Veeti said to Meeri that he had

\textsuperscript{7} Male name.
\textsuperscript{8} Jenna and Pilvi are female names.
Veeti was definitely not the leader of the group. However, on this occasion he acts in very performative and focused way. He came to talk with Jenna and Pilvi like an agitator. He had a plan and he mobilised himself and the girls sitting on the back seats to work for it. Still, the atmosphere during the discussion stayed comfortable without any shouts or disturbances, and the result of the negotiation was exactly as desired. The teacher’s action is worth interest as well. She gives in to Veeti’s wishes. However, she states the reason for getting home earlier by using a moral statement, “We have earned this”. She also constructs a sense of being on same side by using the pronoun ‘we’ instead of ‘you’. As a result of the negotiation between the students and the teacher, the students were actually conceptualised as responsible citizens. Moreover, confrontations, which usually were in the air on such occasions, did not exist.

There are similar examples from the Child and Recreation class when students seem to have an agreement to shorten down the lessons. Sometimes some of them talked about it during breaks, and others seem to agree in a sort of silent and unspoken way. Usually one of the three girls, Moa, Iris and Sofia – often very successful with negotiating with the teachers – would speak first. One of them would make a suggestion and the others would support. The following example shows how their agreements with the teachers about shortening the lessons hold for everyone in the class, even when there are students who have not fulfilled the agreement:

Lesson in Maths (Tuesday morning 8.20-9.25). /…/ 9.00 Moa, Sofia and Iris talk to Hanna (the teacher) about when a lesson is as long as this one, they get tired and hungry. Moa: “We should be allowed to quit earlier, ten past or something” … Hanna: “Um, no…, you were a little slow in the start, but certainly you have worked better now … Not ten past but maybe a quarter past”… The three girls: “Okay.” /…/ 9.10 Frida still sits with earphones on and seems to listen at music, gazing with a vacant look. She looks very tired and I have not seen her doing any tasks at all this lesson. /…/ 9.14 Hanna (speaks to everyone): “I have made an agreement with the girls in the corner; they have worked on so well, so those of you who want to leave now can do so.” Frida (in a glad voice): “Can we?” Hanna: “But I don’t know if you deserved it, Frida.” Frida sniffs little, smiles, gets up and walks out of the room. Hanna does not say anything more. The other students get up and walk out. (Field notes, C-class).

There is a collective dimension in the attempts to influence the use of time in the examples above, with similarities but not exactly alike the representative democratic model (see Öhrn (1997). Veeti, Jenna and Pilvi as well as Moa, Iris and Sofia have a base in the small group and it seems important that they be the support of each other. It is also obvious that these students, not outspoken but in a sort of silent way, represent most of the others in the class. The three girls Moa, Iris and Sofia’s great knowledge about how to speak with and get to teachers seems to be an important resource (Giddens, 1984) when the students in the Child and Recreation class want to have influence on time at school. In the interview with the three girls they talk about the importance to “talk kindly but firmly” and to say constructive arguments that can explain their needs of getting a break or ending the lesson earlier. They can also begin with a suggestion of a 20 minute break (more than needed) and then negotiate down to ten. They almost always talk in a kindly way, a sort of reasoning between friends. Almost daily, the teachers listen to their suggestions and change plans and indirectly the whole class have in this way influence on time and schedule.

The girls laugh and talk about nagging as one option.
C: You´re nagging? Is that usually effective?
Moa: No (the others agree).
C: How would you do it, then?
Sofia: We talk to the teacher, take her away and talk seriously.
Moa: Yes, and maybe not yell in front of the whole class (laugh).
Iris: No, it’s much better to take the teacher aside and talk; because I think she’ll take it more seriously than if you speak to her in front of the others.
Sofia: Yes, it will be more of a serious thing if you speak to her alone about why, our reasons to why we think like we do …
Moa: Yes, and if we talk about it in front of everyone, then maybe others also want to switch groups ...
(Group interview, C-class).

We also talked about situations when there could be some disagreement among the students in the class, even if such situations are unusual.

C: But how do you come to an agreement then?
Moa: You be the first to speak and louder than the others.
Sofia: Yes and firmly. You must be definite.   (Group interview, C-class)

One resource (Giddens, 1984) that seems important when the students in the Child and Recreation class want to have influence over the time at school are the three girls Moa, Iris and Sofia’s great knowledge about how speaking to the teachers. They talk “kindly but firmly” with constructive arguments that can explain their needs of getting a break or ending lessons earlier. Also, they can start suggesting a twenty-minute break (more than needed) and negotiate it down to ten. They often talk in a kind way, as a sort of reasoning between friends. Often, almost daily, the teachers listened to their suggestions and changed plans and in this way, the students have influence over time and schedule.

Even if many of the pupils in the Child and Recreation class seem to agree about shortening lessons, a few of the girls, about five, who in many subjects are rather high-achieving, are very quiet during these discussions and lessons. It is a sort of unwritten rule in this class that it is not considered high status to try being a high-achieving student in school. There have for example been situations when students talked about high grades (very unusual), and then others answered “a swot!” These girls have never complained in front of their classmates, what so ever, but in the interview with Malin, Viktoria and Lina they told me in some ways another and more complex story.

We talk about their influence in time and schedule etc.
Malin: We have a little influence, but that’s because our teachers are so easy to run over. And our class is very good at nagging until they give up.
Lina: Yes.
Malin: That makes five minutes earlier or so. Yes, “now we have worked very well for a whole quarter, can we leave, please”?
C: Okay, do you think that’s alright then?
Viktoria: In a way it’s good, if you really have worked well and everything is finished. In that case I think it’s good, why should we only sit and wait?
Malin: But sometimes it could be like stressing the others too, so that they must go also. It’s like a sort of peer pressure when you have to leave even if your work isn’t finished.
Viktoria: Yes, so it’s both good and bad.   (Groupinterview, C-class).

There are other similar examples from the interviews in the Vehicle class, but now with rather low-achieving students, that show more of this complex and in some ways contradictory picture about shortening lessons. At lessons, some of the boys often asked for the next break, and the negotiations were sometimes relatively noisy. Some of the students complained that it was hard to concentrate on studying. Even some of them who often asked for the next break, quite contradictory to how they acted, expressed during the interviews that they wanted more regulated time in school. One example is Magnus, who so far have had a difficult time in school. The year before upper secondary school, he spent only one day a
week in school. The rest was practicing at a local company. This arrangement was made since he had problems concentrating and then acted aggressively against his classmates. In the observations he had more often problems to concentrate during the theoretical lessons, especially maths.

PÅ: You said you got a lot of help with maths when you were in the 9th grade. What’s it been like since you got here?
M: It’s a lot harder here, I think. I failed both tests we’ve had so far. Or rather: Maths is much harder when you don’t get help or when you don’t understand, or whatever you call it. I mean, since there’s only one teacher and sixteen students, like, seven of them need constant help. So you have to wait all the time, and if the class is not that long, you don’t have time for much else unless you’re good at school.

PÅ: Do you find it hard concentrating in class?
M: Yeah, I guess sometimes it is. Like, when you’re with your friends it’s easy to start talking if you don’t get help. So you just sit around and chat instead.

PÅ: Do you wish it was like 9th grade?
M: Yeah, that would’ve been good. Well, it’s kinda boring to sit with a teacher all the time. ’Cause then you have to work, like, all the time. But it’s good for your grades. You get grades. So, yeah. (Interview Magnus, V-class)

In contradiction to how he acts, Magnus says that unless the lessons are long and you are a good achiever, you will not get very far. He expresses a conflict between the boring and the good things, i.e. to spend time with a teacher all the time, and get grades. In the interview, he chooses the second, to get grades, with the notion, “so, yeah” but in class he never manages to split from his class mates and go to the support down in the main building. Another boy, Jörgen, never asks to leave earlier but during the interview he expresses that he thinks the teachers are too kind. Jörgen comments on why he does not act to change it:

PÅ: Do you think you get a chance to influence on things in class?
J: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think our teachers do too much of what we tell them to.

PÅ: Too much?
J: Like, we, or yeah, there’s a bus to [the city] at two, three and four. And we take that bus. But at two and four, it goes all the way to [city further away] so there’s a few of us who take that bus, Magnus and Emanuel. And sometimes Nils. And we’re in maths and they say, we’re gonna take bus at two and it leaves from the store. Well, it leaves like five or ten past but they say they have to leave at twenty to and the teacher lets them go and she says it’s OK ’cause she doesn’t wanna a lot of trouble about it ’cause she knows they’ll scream and shout and stuff. So I think we decide a bit too much. I think we might as well just sit there. “It takes five minutes to walk down to the store”, that’s what I’d have said. “So you can sit here”, I’d say, “and you can leave five past instead”. So I guess some teachers are too nice.

[...]

PÅ: How does this affect you who’s not a loudmouth?
J: No, I don’t see myself as a loudmouth who makes a lot of noise. I think I do what I’m here for. I’m here voluntarily anyways. But of course I get this label, vehicle boy and a loudmouth and a flunker. And I definitely don’t flunk classes. At least I try and I haven’t flunked anything so far. So it’s not that fun to get this label when you just try to go to school to become something. So that way, it’s kinda boring.

PÅ: And in what way do you think it would affect things if you’re class president and go talk to him [the headmaster]? How do you think it would affect you?
J: Well, the thing is if I go to the headmaster and tell him about really messed-up kids and damage and stuff, and I guess he’ll do something about it. But then, I don’t care ’cause I’m tired of them running around and screaming and stuff, but you’d end up being labelled as a blabbermouth and stuff. I’ve been thinking about talking to Ola [the mentor] and after a while they might calm down when they’ve been told to. (Interview Jörgen, V-class)

Both boys at the vehicle programme agreed that they thought it was ‘messy’ during lessons. Magnus complained that the teacher had too little time to help him, “since it is only one teacher and sixteen students”, and that it is hard to concentrate. Jörgen thought that the teacher was unable to maintain order in the classroom. Jörgen and Magnus do not have access to the resources, such as access to the teacher and control over classroom events. Jörgen used his
resource to talk to his mentor and hope for a change. Jörgen did not want to go to the principal in fear of being called a blabbermouth. During one math lesson in the beginning of the term, Magnus talked to his friends about going to the math support but he never used this resource since it was located in the main building. Some of the high-achieving students in Finnish institute of social and health care mentioned in interviews that they found the class room too noisy to concentrate on their tasks. They tried to do their tasks as efficiently and fast as possible and spent time at school as little as possible.

In Giddens (1984) terms, you can discuss the boys’ actions according to the distribution of resources and use of tacit rules. In some ways it would appear like the students in those vocational classes are the lucky ones with a lot of influence over their time and pace of learning in school. It seems like knowledge about how to get to teachers, that for example some of the girls in the Child and Recreation class manage, is an important recourse for almost everyone in the class in that matter. It seems as the resources must be understood in connection with the tacit rules in these situations.

Some of the students from the Vehicle and the Child and Recreation programme also talked about the contradictory and unsatisfying in this mode of procedure. However, unspoken rules (Giddens, 1984) in a “double way” - as well between students as between students and teachers - makes it difficult for students at vocational programmes to speak out loud in the classroom in these kinds of questions. On one hand, if they speak to the teachers or contradict during lessons in these kinds of situations, amongst their classmates the boys in the V-class run the risk of being looked at as a blabbermouth or sap and the girls in the Child and Recreation class and in institute of social and health care as a swot. On the other hand, the students meet teachers that seem to have low expectations on their possibilities to achieve good results at school. For example some of the teachers in the Vehicle class talk about students as “It is hard for those students to work with theoretical tasks for so long time in a row”, “It is hard to motivate them [the students] for theoretical tasks”, “They rather work with practical tasks”, and in the Child and Recreation class teachers talked about the students as those who have lack self-confidence, are tired and not so healthy. Expectations of these students as those who intend to be workers perhaps makes it easier to allowing slow pace and low difficulty levels in school and you can be “kind” and pity them. The teachers can also think this is a way of being a teacher who listens to students, who tries to understand them and their needs and who has a will to promote students possibilities to influence. To understand these questions we argue it’s important to consider how marginalising depending on class and gender intersects here. Otherwise can measures as apparently look like democracy in school instead lead to increasing gaps between pupils in different programmes.

At the three research sites, we can see that the school pacing rules carry invisible social class assumptions and, as Bernstein writes, “which act selectively on those who can acquire the dominant pedagogic code of the school through the distributive consequences of the visible pedagogy’s strong pacing and its regulation of the deep structure of sociolinguistic competences.” (2003 p. 78f) In the examples above, we can see that the students are not challenged by the school system to acquire sociolinguistic competence or resources (Giddens, 1984), and in fear of being called a blabbermouth or a sap they do not consume learning time in school. For several reasons they do not acquire the dominant pedagogic code, and teachers and students act so that the distributive consequences end up in less time spent in class. The system fails to back up students not to feel as blabbermouths or saps, and the students are not challenged to think critically about their situation.
However, even if there are lots of examples when students negotiate away education time in school, in another and opposite way there are outspoken and very clear rules about time that strongly disciplines the students in all three programmes. For example, the teachers in the Child and Recreation class have put a lot of attention to the “absence-account” for each student, and seriously speaking with some of them about if the worst comes this could lead to study grants taken away. This means that in the same day it is strongly forbidden to come 15 minutes late in the morning because of tiredness, but totally okay to speak with the same teachers about ending the lesson or taking a break for at least 15 minutes because of tiredness, often more. To be a proper citizen it seems to be important to be in time, to follow the institutions rules and to do some work before you “earn” to feel tired. But when it comes to time for studies and education for these students in vocational programmes, it seems not so important to follow the schedule.

The girls and boys are effective in negotiating minimised time spent in school. As described in the introduction, compared to other students they have lower grades when they start upper secondary school. The fact that they effectively minimise their time spent in lessons means that they have even less time to learn, and the gap to those who are study-motivated and have higher grades in academic programmes broadens even more. Here, teachers and their acceptance to shorten down lessons play an important role.

A Cross-Cultural Gender Perspective

In Connell’s terms, some of the boys in the vehicle programme use working-class masculinity to distance themselves from school. They use different strategies to minimise their time spent in school, for example not to be on time. Not wanting to minimise time in school and working with books was considered ‘sissy’. When this section in the field notes was analysed, our thoughts drifted to how the boys acted in Willis’s study Learning to Labour (1977). Willis means that it is always a power relation between the student and the teacher in such situations. He writes that it is a symbolic violence from the teachers acted out on the boys. It is a symbolic violence that the boys look through and therefore, working-class masculinity tradition raises the opposite as status among boys. In other words, it gives status to openly demonstrate different strategies to minimise time in school, since it manifests a revolt against the school system. Trondman (1999) calls this behaviour self-deceptive, “to lose and at the same time earn honour and dignity” (p. 78 [P-ÅR: s translation]). If someone protests against the actions to minimise time spent in school, Jörgen said that there is a risk to be seen as a blabbermouth. Negotiating about time gives the opportunity for some of the boys to demonstrate an anti-school working-class boy masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1999) that comes from their social background (Willis, 1977).

After Willis book Learning to Labour, lads almost became a research term to describe the working-class man who does not fit into the school system. However, Willis was not the first to describe such a man. Delamont (2000) describes that he has been noticed since the 1690s as the ‘hooligan’ or in Willis’s words, the working-class hero. As a response to this the term, ‘ladettes’ was invented as a label for the girl who does not fit into the school system. Jackson and Tinkler (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007) describe ladettes from the beginning of the 1900s and write that they are, “seen either as successful exploiting contemporary opportunities or as at risk” (p 251). One can see the girls as earning honour and dignity the same way as boys do or in the same way risk being working-class heroes or hooligans. In that sense, there are no specific ways for girls or boys as a collective group to act out agency, as they sort of act in the same way. However, the response might be different since women to a larger extent than men
has society’s pressure to be respectable (Skegg, 1999). As a response to girls’ actions, it is also more common that their actions are sexualised than for boys (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007), whose actions rather tend to be discussed in terms of underachievement (Weiner & Öhrn, 2009).

In the practice of becoming adult citizens, the girls and boys in the vocational programmes are encouraged to act like citizens but are not challenged to reflect on their own acts or collective rights:

Neo-liberal politics of education emphasize individual rights and the need for rational individual responsibility at the expense of collective social justice and equality (Beach et al., 2003). Rights of students to exercise agency and to act citizenship are curtailed, whilst the need for their individual responsibility is stressed.[…] The lure of the individual success is increasingly emphasized, whilst available resources that are available to students have dwindled (Gordon 2006 p. 12).

From the Nordic point of view concepts of lads and ladettes originated from British literature maybe work more as a Weberian kind of ideal types than descriptions of existing young people (see Weber 1904 e.g in Calhoun et al 2007) However the girls and boys in our observations made anti school actions, successful in exploiting contemporary opportunities or that might put them at risk of failing in school courses.

**Garage for Boys, Classroom for Girls**

As explained earlier, young people in vocational programmes are divided according to traditional gender norms. Boys attend the Vehicle, Construction or Industry Programmes and the girls Child and Recreation or the Health Care Sector. It is also a fact that it is more common for young people with parents with short educational backgrounds to attend vocational programmes. Many of them have been told that they are useless at theoretical tasks and would be better off at a practical programme. In Giddens (1984 p. 132) terms, we can follow these young people’s contextuality of social life, social institutions and their time-space paths in school as an institution. School as an institutions divide young people in different time-space paths, due to gender and their parents’ educational background. In terms of theoretical and practical work in their education, this could mean different things. The studied programmes are all vocational/practical programmes, but the lessons in the specific subjects vary in terms of how they are carried out in the boy-intense programme and the girl-intense dittoes. The boys spent two and a half day a week in the vehicle hall, mostly with theoretical tasks, while in many of the practical tasks in the girl-intense programmes were theorised and could be learnt without any practical training. It is more difficult for the girls to see themselves in their upcoming professions when they read about its practice rather than perform it.

**Making a Nest**

In this part of the paper, we will explore how space is organised in vocational institutes and the students’ reflections. We draw on Anthony Gidden’s (1984) idea of regionalisation. Regionalisation refers to the localisation in space as well as to the zoning of time-space in relation to routinised social activities (Giddens, 1984 p. 119). The ‘making a nest’ metaphor is used to describe the observed behaviour of students who at occasions do not seem to want to leave their home classroom. This is an attempt to describe some effects of young working-class girls’ and boys’ time-space paths that lead up to the fact they end up in the nest.
The Finnish institute operates in a three-floor building from the 1980s. A cafeteria with big windows, a gym hall and an auditorium are located in first (i.e. entrance) floor. Daylight flowed in from the glass walls of entrance floor. The entrance hall was furnished with light wooden benches; the walls were white with pastel blue and green decorations. One of the students described the interior as, “it looks like a hospital”. However, another found the space ‘lovely’ and said she loved to do group work in the cafeteria. Most of the classrooms were located on the second and third floor along rather dark corridors. In ordinary ‘theory classrooms’, the seats were organised in lines, with a blackboard, overhead projector and the teacher’s desk in the front part of the classroom. A computer was usually placed in the left corner of the classroom or near the teacher’s desk. There were extra-equipped classrooms for subjects like nursery, care work, domestic sciences and art. Computer class was on the second floor and the library on the third. Computer usage was relatively strictly regulated and controlled and the students were not allowed to use them for anything else than school work. Students who broke the rule might lose her/his computer access. The first-year students had a ‘home classroom’, which means that most of their theory lessons take place in the same classroom. The air conditioning in the classroom was noisy and not very effective. In spite of this, some students spent a lot of time in the classroom during breaks. They were reluctant to leaving classroom if asked, and they wanted to leave their personal belongings during lunch breaks.

The school with the Child and Recreation class is located in a major upper secondary school with all programmes in the same building. The building consists of long corridors. The vocational programmes are in some of the corridors and the academic in others. Every class has its own home classroom where most of the lessons are held. The students’ closets are in open spaces close to the corridors with their home classrooms. Many of the students in the C class stay in their home classroom during breaks. They often sit in front of the computer playing games, watching videos on YouTube or writing in communities, for example MSN or Facebook. It is often very quiet and only a few of the students talk silently to their friends. Many of the students talk about the dull and boring environment in school with few cozy places where small groups can sit, but since the school will be rebuilt during the next year they think they will have to wait. In the following extract from the interview with Linda and Jasmin, Linda describes some of these uncomfortable feelings and lack of self-confidence that many of the students talk about when being together with other students at school.

Linda: Yes, and it’s also really boring to walk around, you just see the same things all the time. And personally I’m pretty shy, and then you see all people directly when you walk into the corridor, everybody’s looking at you. And there’s nothing strange about it, you look at others too, it’s just a reaction. But when you feel that everyone is staring at you when you’re walk in the corridor, you just want to be in a smaller place…

In the interview with some of the teachers, they told me that they never see any of the students from the C class in the open corridor outside the assembly hall, which in vernacular speech is referred to as ‘the catwalk’. If you want to show yourself for others, this is the place to go. The teachers say that it is common that students from the Child and Recreation programme do not want to go to ‘the catwalk’, because, “they don’t have as nice clothes as some of the others and they don’t feel so beautiful”. In this specific class, they also think the computers are another reason for the students to sit in the classroom during breaks.

The vehicle lessons for boys are held in the vehicle hall, both the theoretical and the practical classes. Often the boys work parallel on theoretical and practical tasks. The vehicle programme is situated in a building of its own some five hundred meters from the main
building. The ‘vehicle’ building also contains three classrooms where they usually have Swedish, maths and English. All in all, it is quite an ordinary working place with changing room with lockers. Also, they have their own cafeteria. The atmosphere is relaxed and seems familiar for the boys. All who drink coffee have their own cups with name tags, hanging on the cafeteria wall. One boy even keeps his breakfast in the fridge because, as he expressed it: “It’s more convenient and I can sleep longer in the mornings.” The boys often complain about them having to go down to the dining hall in the main building or when the lessons take place there, they complain about the long walk. It is often fewer boys at lessons in the main building, and fewer of them bring their books, paper and pencils.

Jörgen mentions that it feels strange to have classes in the main building. Now, during this new period, some classes have taken place in the main building and this is the first week they have had classes here. Jörgen says he feels observed when he is here: "Look, there are the vehicle students.” I ask him if they feel observed on other occasions as well and Sladjan starts telling me about an episode in the dining hall last week but Jörgen takes over: "Yeah, last week, a few of us were about to eat but it was really crowded in there so they had to sit at places where there were trays that others hadn’t put away. When they had finished eating, they only removed their own trays and left those that already were there. Then our teacher, Ola, had to put them away. And they said that we’d be expelled from the dining hall if happens again. And we didn’t do it in the first place. It’s always us vehicle students. And it’s always been unfair.” (Field note 31, V-class)

In the Swedish classes, there is a pattern of students staying in their home classroom or on the programme’s premises when there was a break. In the relation class–school, one can use Gidden’s terms ‘back regions, front regions’ (1984 p. 122), which he borrows from Goffman. For the students in the observed classes, their home classroom or programme premises were their back regions and the rest of the school where they met other students was their front regions. The observed students talk about other students gazing, that they felt uncomfortable with other students and that they were falsely accused of things they have not done, sensing it was just because they attend to the ‘wrong’ programme—as if this was a reason to stay in their back regions and not leaving the classroom or programme premises. In the Child and Recreation context, the students’ own computers functioned as an excuse not to share other students’ front regions. The computers individualise experiences and collective actions are more seldom visible.

The students in the front regions were in the centre and the observed students who stayed in their nests were in the periphery:

Centre/periphery distinctions tend frequently to be associated with endurance over time. Those who occupy centres ‘establish’ themselves as having control over resources which allow them to maintain differentiations between themselves and those in peripheral regions. The established may employ a variety of forms of social closure to sustain distance from others who are effectively treated as inferiors or outsiders. (Giddens p. 131)

According to the observed students, the social closure to sustain distance was by gazing, using own computers and so on. Interesting is that gazes or feeling uncomfortable was not mentioned by the Finnish students. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that is was only vocational programmes in the Finnish context but both academic and vocational programmes in the Swedish dito. This raises the question of presence (Giddens, 1984 p. 64) and “the other”:

9 Individualise in relation to classmates in the classroom. Actions made “on the screen” might be collective, such as participating in chat rooms or blogs.
The other is necessary in order for the truth about oneself to be recognized. To be a free citizen obliges us to not only to tell the truth, but also requires us to engage in practices that reveal certain truths about ourselves. Truth-telling is crucial to citizenship because it is what enables one to produce specific truths about oneself. (White & Hunt, 2000 p. 95)

From interviews and statistics, we know that the students in the research material are more likely to come from families with low income and short academic education. ‘The other’ in school is more likely to come from families with higher income and longer academic background. Since the students are “placed” differently in terms of local context, social class and gender time-space paths, they are confronted with ‘the other’ in different ways. In the Finnish context, the students in the general programmes and vocational programmes are separated. ‘The other’ is not there to reveal the truth, which can explain why the Finnish students did not talk about gazes or feeling uncomfortable. The boys in the Swedish Vehicle Programme felt comfortable in their own building (the vehicle hall building) but when they had lessons in the main building, i.e. in the presence of ‘the other’, some of them did not show up and others talked about feeling uncomfortable and being gazed at. In the Child and Recreation Programme, students even talk about the ‘catwalk’ in a way that reveals a feeling of subordination in socioeconomic terms, “don’t have as nice clothes”, which could explain the usage of the classroom as a nest.

In the two different contexts ‘the other’ is dealt with differently. In Finland, the students are divided into general programme schools and vocational programmes schools, and, to paraphrase White/Hunt, the truth about the socioeconomic differences between students is not revealed. In Sweden, both the general and vocational programmes are placed in the same schools and all students study the same core subject. This means that in Sweden, the truth of the student’s socioeconomic background is revealed. Students meet students with other socioeconomic backgrounds, and this make them feel gazed at and uncomfortable. This is not visibly dealt with by the teachers or the local curriculum.

But still, we have to problematise the fact that some of the Finnish students are ‘nesting up’, even if the other is not present. Giddens (1984) discuss this in terms of power relations.

Power relations are often most profoundly embedded in modes of conduct which are taken for granted by those who follow them, most especially in routinized behaviour, which is only diffusely motivated. (p. 176)

It is possible that power relations are socialised in comprehensive school into routinised behaviour, in other words that the diffusely motivated behaviour of nesting up is routinised by the student’s experiences of school. Such an analysis could be motivated by using Gidden’s chain of constraints, material constraints, negative sanctions and structural constraints. Transferred to the contexts discussed in this paper, this means material constraint. Students enter school with different material backgrounds (parents with low income and/or short academic background). Negative sanctions mean punitive responses on the part of an agent towards others (here visible by gazes and talk). Structural constraint is derived from the contextuality of action, i.e., from the ‘given’ character of structural properties vis-à-vis situated actors (here visible through the students’ routinized behaviour vis-à-vis school and other actors, present or not present, within the school).
If we look at the collective as to some extent\textsuperscript{10} determined to follow a particular time-space path in a social reproduction process from a gender perspective, we can see that the observed vocational programmes are divided in terms of the gender tradition that Connell (2009) describes: boys in engineering and mechanical trades and girls in art-based and human service vocation rather than theoretical programmes such as social or natural sciences (Skolverket, 2007). The vocational programmes attract more young people from the working-class. In other words, they seem to be determined to end up in a particular nest. The division into gendered programmes make the young working class boys and girls more affected of the gender accumulation process and, as a collective, more at risk to be socialised into traditional gender roles. In the vehicle programme, you could often hear homophobic utterances or notions about not being man enough: “that’s sissy work”, “I have to watch my arse when we shower later”, “Hey fag, let me help you with that nut” or “Use those protective goggles – Real men don’t have to”. The teachers rarely commented on this, and if they did, it was often in a manner of trying to be friends with the boys:

Peter: It’s like home. It’s always someone who has the last word – your mom.
Teacher: Or your wife. (Field note 23, V-class)

At times, the language in the ‘boys’ nest’ was quite rough, especially in the beginning of the school year. It seemed that the boys positioned themselves through utterances that matched them the heteronormative standards, i.e. not gay, not sissy. In the Institute of Social and Health Care, some students (mainly girls) occasionally used relatively rough language as well. However, teachers rarely left without intervening rude language. The students were supposed to learn a ‘professional way of using language’ which meant polite and correct ways to express oneself. Moreover, heteronormativity was actively challenged in pedagogical practices as well. In interview one student mentioned that educators from sexual equality organisation were invited to have a lecture for the group. As a non-heterosexual student she found it as meaningful experience and appreciated the athmosphere in the institute as supportive. Educational institutions are forums where young people learn how to negotiate gender order (see Connell 2009, p. 100). In the vehicle programme students and teachers established a gender order in which heterosexuality is the only proper mode of sexuality. Asko Kauppinen (2008) has made similar interpretations in Finland when analysing constructions of masculinity in vocational sector of construction, which is one of the most male dominated sectors. In the institute of Social and health care in Finland heteronormativity was actively challenged in pedagogical practices.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have explored how students in different vocational educational systems and institutions make collective actions, alliances and resistance in a cross-cultural perspective with a special focus on space and time. The picture that arises is complex and contradictory. If we compare the Swedish and Finnish time-space paths due to gender and class, we can see that both school systems fail to map out the differences. For example, girls with parents with low academic experience are more likely to end up in a programme in upper secondary school that is vocational and girl-intense. The difference between the Swedish and the Finnish school system occurs in comparison to the transit from upper secondary school to higher education. Here, Sweden has been successful in promoting equality in the sense that a larger number of students with vocational background attend and can imagine themselves in higher education.

\textsuperscript{10} For example, girls are overrepresented in some programmes, and both girls and boys with parents with short academic background are overrepresented in vocational programmes.
However, our data shows that in the Swedish context, divisions between students and categorisations still exist in the everyday school life.

The boys, girls and teachers are involved in the reproduction of class positions according to their possibilities to challenge the functions of the system. This is an automatic outcome due to the dysfunctional system, which means that dysfunctional resources and possibilities to challenge the functions of the system consume school time and schools front regions, whereas dysfunctional democratic fostering places a focus on the individual instead of collective achievement. Or, as Connell et al (1981) states:

\[\text{The “reproduction” of class relations and class positions is no automatic outcome of the functioning of a system. It is not a process, it is an achievement – in fact a political achievement. (p. 115)}\]

What we have seen in the three contexts is that there are few collective actions by students to make a difference in school. Some actions are made by individuals so often that they almost can be seen as collective, such as the negotiations to end lessons earlier. We have also seen the ‘nesting up’ process is a common action by individuals, which tend to result in collective consequences.

We have looked at similarities and differences in two countries and three different vocational contexts. Some of the features maybe draw on structural differences between educational systems. Some of them probably mirror cultural features of the working life. For example, in contexts of vocational education students learn to know what kind of gender performances are acceptable in particular fields of working life.
References:


