



What counts as success? Constructions of achievement in prestigious higher education programmes

Anne-Sofie Nyström, Carolyn Jackson & Minna Salminen Karlsson

To cite this article: Anne-Sofie Nyström, Carolyn Jackson & Minna Salminen Karlsson (2018): What counts as success? Constructions of achievement in prestigious higher education programmes, Research Papers in Education, DOI: [10.1080/02671522.2018.1452964](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2018.1452964)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2018.1452964>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 30 Mar 2018.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 26



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

What counts as success? Constructions of achievement in prestigious higher education programmes

Anne-Sofie Nyström^a, Carolyn Jackson^b and Minna Salminen Karlsson^a

^aCentre for Gender Research, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

ABSTRACT

Academic achievement is regarded an indicator of the success of individuals, schools, universities and countries. 'Success' is typically measured using performance indicators such as test results, completion rates and other objective measures. By contrast, in this article we explore students' subjective understandings and constructions of success, and discourses about 'successful' students in higher education contexts that are renowned for being demanding and pressured. We draw on data from 87 semi-structured interviews with students and staff on law, medicine and engineering physics programmes in a prestigious university in Sweden. We focus particularly upon academic expectations, effort levels, and programme structures and cultures. Achieving top grades while undertaking a range of extracurricular activities was valorised in all contexts. Top grades were especially impressive if they were attained without much effort (especially in engineering physics) or stress (especially in law and medicine); we introduce a new concept of 'stress-less achievement' in relation to the latter. Furthermore, being sociable as well as a high academic achiever signified living a 'good life' and, in law and medicine, professional competence. We discuss the implications of the dominant constructions of success, concluding that (upper) middle-class men are most likely to be read as 'successful students', especially in engineering physics.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 September 2017
Accepted 4 March 2018

KEYWORDS

Success; higher education; stress-less achievement; effort-less achievement; medicine; law; engineering physics

Introduction

Success is something that, as a concept, remains universal in its appeal and motivation for attainment, whilst seeming consistently to lack definition (Hannon, Smith, and Lã 2017, 257)

There is a vast body of research on success in higher education (H.E.): a Google Scholar search using the words 'student success in higher education' generated over three million results. It focuses mainly upon exploring how to increase retention and improve success rates; a sizeable proportion considers student engagement, and there is often a focus on particular groups of students (overwhelmingly those defined as 'non-traditional') and specific disciplines. Almost all of the research works with 'objective' measures of success; Kahu and Nelson's

CONTACT Anne-Sofie Nyström  anne-sofie.nystrom@gender.uu.se

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

(2017, 1) comment typifies this: 'Student success, whether measured by grades, retention statistics or qualification completion rates, continues to be a concern of governments, higher education policy-makers, leaders and practitioners.' However, as Wood and Breyer (2017, 8) argue: 'Although equating success with completion and employment is straightforward and relatively easy to measure, it offers limited insight into the complexities of student success.'

Our paper explores these complexities by analysing students' subjective understandings and constructions of success and discourses about 'successful' students. More specifically, we explore how undergraduates conceptualise success and construct and manage learner identities in contexts that are renowned for being particularly demanding: three undergraduate programmes – law, medicine and engineering physics – in a prestigious (elite) Swedish university. Our focus is both novel and important.

It is novel in that, as flagged above, there is a dearth of research exploring students' conceptions of success in H.E. contexts, despite calls for work in this sphere (Zepke, Leach, and Butler 2011; Cloete and Duncan 2016). There are a few studies that touch upon and inform the issues we explore in this paper. For example, Hannon, Smith, and Lã (2017) provide a brief discussion of Australian students' perspectives on success based on short interviews with students at Macquarie University. They note that their interviewees often found it difficult to articulate what it means to be successful, but in general most students related success to passing their degree, graduating and securing a good job. Brown et al. (2016) explored discourses of 'talent' through interviews with 20 (upper) middle-class students at each of two very elite universities (University of Oxford, UK and Sciences Po, France). However, rather than undertaking an indepth analysis of perceptions of what constitutes success as we do here, they focussed predominantly on explanations for success, and explored discourses about merit, talent and credential competition drawing heavily on the work of Bourdieu.

Although work exploring subjective understandings of success and constructions of 'successful' learner identities is scant in H.E., there are studies in school contexts which offer useful insights for our research. For example, there is a relatively small but important body of research that illustrates the intense pressures that some middle-class young people feel to be 'successful', where success for them means being outstanding academically, socially and in extracurricular activities (e.g. Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001; Clegg, Stevenson, and Willott 2009; Brown et al. 2016). Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001, 167) highlight the importance of understanding and interrogating subjective understandings of success and 'what is invested in its production.' Their work illustrates very powerfully the ways in which exceptionally high academic performance can be understood as 'ordinary' and 'expected' by many middle-class parents and children, and anything less than excellence is regarded as failure. They delineate numerous deleterious consequences for young people of such conceptualisations of success, including anxiety, stress, never feeling good enough and profound fears of failure (see also Power et al. 1998, 2003).

However, even in school research a focus on middle-class students is rare: the vast majority has focussed on the experiences and position of working-class students and disadvantaged groups. While we acknowledge the importance of such research there are strong arguments for also rendering visible the experiences of middle-class and upper-class students. First, as Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) argue, if we wish to explore the ways in which systems of stratification are produced, reproduced and transformed we need to explore all

aspects of the ‘class continuum’; to analyse the production of privilege as well as the production of disadvantage. Second, as Power et al. (2003) point out, the middle-class tend to be the normalised background against which working-class experiences are contrasted. This leads to unresearched assumptions and also tends to homogenise the middle-class. Furthermore, although middle-class students may have many privileges relative to their working-class counterparts, it is unreasonable to assume that educational achievement is simply a celebratory success story for middle-class young people (Allan 2010). For example, although the (predominantly middle-class) students in our study were identified as being successful by dint of gaining entry to prestigious programmes in an elite university, within those programmes they were formally and informally assessed and ranked as ‘outstanding’, ‘average’ or ‘inferior’. Thus, we explore the ways in which these students understand and construct identities as ‘successful’ students within their communities.

Like Jenkins (2004, 75), we see identity as a relational ‘trajectory of *being* and *becoming*’, and a cumulative process of embodied, interactional accomplishments. A student’s self-image, ability-beliefs and sense of belonging within the particular institution and programme can be seen as a trajectory which is directed by, *inter alia*, her/his participation in teaching–learning activities, interaction with peers, the identities peers ascribe to them and discourses about success. Lecturers’ assessments of students’ educational abilities are also important in this process. In professional programmes students are also involved in a process of developing a professional identity, including particular competences and attitudes. As Costello (2005, 23) suggests ‘[a] certified professional school graduate who cannot “walk the walk and talk the talk” will not seem like a true professional to others and will not be successful’. Through encounters with others, students learn what it means to *be* and *become*, for example, a law student and lawyer. Also, they come to understand the extent to which they fulfil or deviate from the required standards, and experience belonging or disconnection from the ‘law community’ (Costello 2005). Like Burke (2006, 731) we argue that ‘aspirations are not constructed exclusively at the individual level but are tied in with complex structural, cultural and discursive relations and practices’. Hence, we also consider ways in which the programmes’ structural, cultural and professional differences relate to constructions of success, as well as other social category differences, most notably gender.

Understanding subjective understandings of success is extremely important for multiple reasons. For example, as noted earlier, the ways in which exceptionally high academic performance are normalised among some groups and anything other than excellence is regarded as failure can lead to stress, anxiety, fears of failure, shame and low self-worth (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). Additionally, constructions of success and success discourses shape, among other things: perceptions about who is most likely to be read by others as successful; students’ approaches to learning and university life; feelings of belonging; career prospects; and wellbeing (Anderson, Kraus, and Keltner 2011; Jackson and Nyström 2015; Hailikari, Korhonen-Freudinger, and Postareff 2016). In this particular paper, there is not space to consider in any detail the *implications* of students’ perceptions of success. Instead, the importance of our contribution comes from our exploration of what shapes perceptions of success, and our examination of who is most easily ascribed the status of successful student. Such explorations are crucial as they make visible and therefore enable us to challenge discourses that privilege some categories of students over others.

Research context and methods

This research was undertaken in one university in Sweden; however, numerous factors suggest that the findings are not specific to this university or country. First, in general the findings parallel those emerging from the English data from the same project (in progress). Second, research about conceptualisations of ‘success’ in Sweden in other sectors of education, most notably compulsory education, is congruent with that conducted in numerous other countries (e.g. Holfve-Sabel 2011; Jackson and Nyström 2015; Nyström 2014; Öhrn and Holm 2014). Third, the H.E. system in Sweden shares many similarities with numerous countries, especially those elsewhere in Europe and the global north. Sweden, like many other countries, has witnessed a rapid expansion of higher education over the last 5 decades or so; it has moved from an ‘elite’ to a ‘mass’ system (Osborne, Rimmer, and Houston 2015). In 2014, 42% of men and 58% of women (aged 30–34) had completed tertiary education in Sweden. Undergraduates have free education and financial support for six years (Thunborg and Bron 2012). Although Sweden is a relatively egalitarian country, the expansion of H.E. means that increasing importance is placed on ‘*what* degree and from *which* educational institution’ (Börjesson et al. 2016, 30).

We draw on data from a large, ongoing, cross-national comparative project about learning and social processes in higher education elite programmes, with a particular focus on gender and especially masculinities. This paper is based on data from 87 semi-structured interviews (individual and focus groups) with students ($N = 78$) and staff ($N = 26$) in a Master of Law Programme (4.5 years) ($N = 25$ students; $N = 9$ staff), Medicine Programme (5.5 years) ($N = 21$ students; $N = 8$ staff) and Engineering Physics Programme (5 years) ($N = 32$ students; $N = 9$ staff). These professional programmes are in one of Sweden’s traditional, top-ranked universities; undertaking one of these degrees is an indicator of social distinction, and they prepare young people for prestigious careers (Börjesson et al. 2016). As in Swedish H.E. in general, students gain access, principally, either via upper-secondary school diplomas or the voluntary SweSAT test (Orr and Hovdhaugen 2014). The latter provides a second chance for students who have insufficient diplomas, and is most frequently used by upper-middle-class men (Berggren 2007). It is very difficult to secure a place on these programmes: only 14% of applicants to medicine and 16% to law gain entry. The master of engineering programmes generally admit about 40% of applicants (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2014b). However, as engineering physics is the most prestigious of all engineering programmes these applicants face more competition than those on other engineering programmes, and also a greater proportion of them have well-educated parents. H.E. institutions in Sweden predominantly recruit students with well-educated parents: 66% of medical students have parents with (3 years or more) university education, and for law and engineering the figures are 58 and 56%, respectively (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2014c). Proportions of women and men on the programmes are in line with national patterns; data for Sweden suggest approximately equal proportions of men and women in medicine (48% men), law is female dominated (37% men) and engineering physics is heavily male dominated (82% men) (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2014a).

All three programmes are recognised as prestigious and demanding. However, they have profoundly different pedagogical structures. Physics engineering uses a mainly traditional teacher-centred pedagogy of lectures, labs and optional practical courses, whereas the two other programmes have a problem-based learning design (PBL). The medical curriculum encompasses 2–4 modules per semester with both written and practical examinations; clinic

work commences in year 3. The schedule sometimes exceeds forty hours per week, particularly during the clinic semesters (cf. Lindgren et al. 2011). Law students, on the other hand, typically have eight to ten hours of scheduled time per week, and outside of those times are expected to work alone or in unscheduled groups. The programme entails one-semester courses and exams. The engineering physics schedule comprises about 30 hours per week; students study three four-week courses in parallel and are examined after each four-week block.

Our argument is based on data from in-depth interviews with first-year students and senior students (including 14 student reps), and programme staff (directors of studies; lecturers and study advisors). Staff were recruited using theoretical sampling (approaching people with key positions) and by snowball sampling. All but three of the staff interviewees had been teaching or conducting research for many years in the departments, and several had masters or doctoral degrees from the same department. Various methods were used to approach students: information about the project and calls for interview participation were undertaken in lectures and via email and posters. The study was guided by the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines. All participation was voluntary and written consent was obtained from the institutions and participants. Interviewees' names are pseudonyms and organisational positions are omitted for anonymity.

The semi-structured interviews explored five major themes: (1) learning/teaching contexts and cultures; (2) patterns of academic achievement and advice-seeking; (3) assessments and social comparisons; (4) self-worth protection strategies and (5) gender formations and men's identities. Interviewees were, for example, asked about successful students, popularity and academic goals. In contrast to Hannon, Smith, and Lã's (2017) interviewees, ours seemed to find it easy to engage in these topics; many highlighted intragroup differences but were often careful not to make generalisations about gender, class etc. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes (most just over an hour) and were conducted in Swedish by the two Swedish authors. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded in the qualitative software program Atlas.ti. Analyses for this paper were carried out with a particular focus on the codes: academic success, academic failure and educational culture.

What constitutes a successful student?

There are two guys in our class who have 5s [top grades] in everything ... who have like 96% on all courses that we've taken ... they're super nice, social, sporty, they're like ... two Mr. Perfects. And I just think it's cool (Emma, Engineering Physics student).

There's a guy and a girl who are very talented. Both have a girlfriend or boyfriend and revise perfectly. They know everything; masses. They talk, are friendly, laugh a lot, are well-liked, and exercise a lot. He's done the Ironman, and still has a girlfriend and studies ... And they're, of course, very popular; everybody likes them. Then you can think 'F**K, we ought to be as great as she is! How does she manage to juggle that many balls?' Both are working alongside their studies as well (Anja, Medical student).

Discourses of what constitutes success on the three programmes were complex and nuanced. Our data support the assertion of Hannon, Smith, and Lã (2017) – based on interviews with 57 students in Australia – that individuals' definitions of success vary depending on their background, discipline, previous achievements and personal benchmarks for performance. So success is, in many ways, subjective: a bare pass may be regarded as success for one person, while only top grades will constitute success for another. Nevertheless, while

there are individual variations in what students think constitutes success for them personally, our research suggests there are dominant discourses about 'success' in university. These discourses vary between institutions and disciplines, and we explore the disciplinary differences shortly. But first, we explore common themes.

As articulated in the opening quotations to this section, being perceived as a very successful or possibly 'ideal' student involved much more than simply undertaking an elite programme, getting good grades and demonstrating cleverness in class. Emma's and Anja's comments both convey the valorisation of high achievement, but also emphasise the importance of being able to attain first-rate grades while also excelling in a range of other ways: being 'super nice' 'popular' and 'friendly'; 'sporty'; able to hold down a relationship, and to have fun and be happy ('laugh a lot'). These hyper-successful students are presented as 'having it all'; in Emma's terms, they are 'Mr. Perfects'. This accords with a growing body of research which suggests that to be marked as a successful graduate by employers, a degree is no longer enough; students need to demonstrate their participation in a range of extra-curricular activities to enhance their future social and economic positioning (Bathmaker et al. 2016). As we illustrate later, demands of the labour market and professions play pivotal roles in shaping discourses of success in H.E.

Interviewees' narratives about success were permeated with references to time and effort. For example, time is writ large in Anja's question: how does she (the extremely admired, hyper-successful student) manage to 'juggle that many balls?'. In other words, how does she manage to do so many things at once successfully? How does she have time? Although time has been theorised in Sociology, most notably by Barbara Adam (1995, 2004), the application of this work in educational spheres, especially H.E., is still limited. Burke et al.'s (2017) recent work on the impact of time for students in H.E. provides a notable exception. They argue that the timescapes of higher education 'serve to render invisible important aspects of student experience and need that require urgent and close attention' (41). Time and effort emerged as important themes in students' narratives about success; as such, in our analyses we are attentive to both, and the ways they intersect.

Amanda's (medical student) comment that 'it feels like it's [high] status to get a high result based on little study-time' reflected the views of the majority of our interviewees. This accords with previous research suggesting that 'effortless' academic achievement is equated with intelligence or talent in many western societies, and being intelligent or talented is highly valued in and outside of educational contexts (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Power et al. 1998; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001; Jackson and Nyström 2015; Nyström 2014; Brown et al. 2016). It is important to note that the term 'effortless achievement' is a little misleading. Indeed, there is always implicit acknowledgement that effort has been expended in achievements: in our research it was recognised that hard work was essential in order to achieve on the law and medicine programmes, and for the 'average' (intelligent) physics student. Indeed, the medicine and law programmes were associated with long working hours. In some senses then, our findings chime with Brown et al.'s (2016, 201; cf. Schleaf 2006) claim that 'being pushed to work hard in pursuit of their goals was viewed as the essence of an elite education' and considered as a moral obligation by some students. Yet, the picture seems more complex: as Amanda's comment above conveys, contrary to Brown et al.'s suggestion, 'effortless achievement' was valorised among our interviewees (for an indepth discussion of the contradictory discourses about effort and attainment see Jackson and Nyström 2015). We suggest that while in many ways effortless achievement

may be seen as the pinnacle of success, in the contexts of these programmes – especially law and medicine – it is seen as largely unattainable. What was possible, however, and what was also valorised, is what we have identified and termed ‘stress-less’ achievement. Stress-less achievement is a new concept and is characterised by high ability-beliefs, absence of ‘unproductive worrying’, and an apparent *relative* lack of tension. In Martha’s (law staff) words, an ability to seemingly ‘cruise through’: a number of students ‘at least manage to look as though they cruise through ... I had a classmate, an amazing girl who never seemed stressed or nervous; one of those incredibly successful people.’

The valorisation of high achievement with relatively little (apparent) effort or stress extends the findings of Jackson and Nyström (2015) whose work was based in schools in England and Sweden (see also Power et al. 1998; Jackson and Dempster 2009; Francis, Skelton, and Read 2012). In their school contexts, as in H.E. in this project, interviewees identified multiple attractions of achieving seemingly without much exertion, most notably, being regarded as a genius and being seen as cool and laidback (see also Epstein 1998). To be read as successful in our H.E. contexts, students had to be seen to be doing more than just studying; as noted earlier, they had to socialise, have fun and undertake ECA. Mikaela (law student) explains:

It’s a bit uncool to study only ‘cos then you get ‘yeah, God, people need to ease off a bit’. So it’s not really accepted to get so serious about your studies that you only study ... it’s not socially accepted. You have to keep up with everything else and do it [study] when you’re by yourself, and not sleep, kind of. So, well, if you have time for everything else that’s included in the socially-accepted life [then] it’s safe to admit [to others] that you’ve spent twelve hours in the library.

Time is again central to this narrative: it is okay to admit to spending 12 hours in the library *only* if you are relaxed, and seen spending time socialising, having fun and undertaking ECAs. It is better to give up sleep than to fall short of social expectations: you need to be seen having ‘a (good) life’. Many students were very explicit about the need to balance time (cf. Jackson and Dempster 2009):

I think a successful strategy is to be able to divide your time between things ... I’ve got time when I’m studying and spend these few hours studying, but then I’m seen in other contexts: I run this karaoke eve at [name of bar] ... You’ve got your little project that ... kinda displays that you’re a cool dude as well. And these are the ones you look up to, the success symbol, the guys that are able to divide their stuff and have time when you’re studying. (Thomas, law student)

As Bennett and Burke (2017; Burke et al. 2017) note, time is not neutral; timescapes are shaped by both structure and agency. Timescapes may be in tension – for example, meeting family expectations, university requirements and paid work commitments – and the tensions are not evenly distributed. For example, those who are well-informed about H.E. and especially the specific programmes – most often because other family members have experience of them – and who can adapt easily to the academic and social expectations, are more able to manage the time demands necessary for presenting as a ‘cool’ and successful student. As noted earlier, in Sweden undergraduates have free education and financial support for six years, so in many ways they are under fewer financial pressures than students in many other countries, for example the UK. Nevertheless, cultural and financial constraints still impact on the social activities that students choose and can afford to participate in (Bathmaker et al. 2016). Thus, some students find it easier to manage the demands of presenting as a successful student than others. Indeed, research suggests that the particular construction of the good university student is almost impossible for some to achieve, while being easiest for

young, white, middle-class men (Leathwood and Read 2009). Leathwood and Read (2009) argue convincingly that this remains the case despite claims, which they counter, that H.E. is increasingly feminised.

Success discourses in this research may also be read as gendered. For example, discourses relating to effortless achievement in schools and H.E. are associated more readily with boys/men and particular forms of masculinities than with girls/women and femininities (Jackson and Dempster 2009; Jackson, Dempster, and Pollard 2014; Jackson and Nyström 2015) and these gendered associations have a long history (Cohen 1998). Martha's example of the 'cruise though' student is atypical in that the student is a woman. Nils (medical student), and interviewees in general, associated an orientation towards (apparent) effortless, high ability-beliefs and a relaxed attitude with cool masculinity:

Nils: Many guys see some kinda sport in like refraining from studying for as long as possible and then run some sort of smash sprint at the end. You know like 'I did 72 hours in a row and just ...'

Interviewer: Kinda 'I've been up for 48 hours now'?

Nils: ... you can't really generalize, but still I get the feeling that ... there's probably more cred for girls in claiming that they've studied a long time, while guys ... it's not cool to say you've studied all of the time but rather 'I'm doing nothing and still doing great'.

The emphasis here is on intelligence ('I'm doing nothing and still doing great') and risk-taking which has very strong associations with masculinity. Indeed, Kimmel (2008) argues that being 'daring' and 'showing no fear' are part of the 'guycode' (the 'rules' of masculinity) among US college males. Again, time is core. Working at the 'last minute' is described as a 'sport': to dare to leave it and still succeed despite little or no sleep. This echoes the small amount of other research conducted in this area in the UK, which suggests that the associations of effortless achievement with masculinity are explicit in certain H.E. contexts (Jackson and Dempster 2009; Francis, Burke, and Read 2014), especially among middle-class students. There are many parallels between Nils' comments and those of Dave who was interviewed by Steve Dempster in England (Jackson and Dempster 2009):

[It was] due in on the Friday morning at 10 o'clock, and I started at 5 o'clock on a Thursday night. I sat back on my computer, just typing away with a bottle of whisky next to me, and by half past ten I've done the work, emptied the bottle of whisky, and I'm in the pub for last orders.

Nils and Dave convey a sense of risk (leaving it until the last minute), stamina (smash sprint, not sleeping), remaining calm under pressure, being efficient with time (started at 5 pm and finished by 10.30 pm) and being sociable (I'm in the pub for last orders). This narrative differs markedly from the ways in which girls and women were depicted by men; they were frequently presented as spending a lot of time on work, being diligent and more anxious than men (Jackson and Dempster 2009).

In this section, time and effort have been foregrounded. We have identified and introduced the new concept of stress-less achievement which, in addition to effortless achievement, was valorised and associated with 'talent' and 'coolness' across the programmes. Gender discourses were evident here: risk-taking in studying – i.e. minimal or postponed effort – and high ability beliefs were associated with men and masculinity in all three programmes. While so far we have explored aspects that are similar across the programmes, how success is defined varied between them, and it is to these differences that we now turn.

Programme structures and cultures

How academic success is conceptualised by students is influenced by pedagogical structures and cultures. In our research contexts these conceptualisations were particularly related to career goals and different constructions of professional identity in the fields of law, engineering physics and medicine (Costello 2005; Börjesson et al. 2016). We discuss each of these disciplines in turn.

Law

The culture in law was very (top) grade oriented, much more so than in the other programmes, despite the fact that entry requirements for the law programme were slightly lower than for medicine (but higher than for Engineering Physics). The law students had only one exam per semester and achieving anything less than a top score was generally seen as closing themselves out of the labour market. Overall, the pressure to secure high grades was described as immense (see also Bergin and Pakenham 2015). The culture was very competitive and students were acutely aware of which students had excelled on essays and exams. Such news spread very quickly via informal channels of communication, including across year groups. For example, Alfred (law student) told us:

I know who got the best grades on essays. I don't know if everyone knows, but these things travels 'cos if you get good grades then you talk about it. Not to brag, but if anyone asks and you got a good grade, then you're not ashamed to tell ... A good grade here is only the highest grade. It's the only thing people are interested in, and those who only, in quotes, get a pass-grade ... you don't talk about it but you notice anyway, or notice them the week after as they've become slightly different people.

In law, grades are seen to mark and define the person: if someone gets only a pass grade they become, according to Alfred (and other students), 'different people'. The requirement to secure top grades was largely driven by the profession: competition to secure a career in law is fierce, and top grades are a necessary, but not sufficient, qualifier. Most law students regarded becoming a barrister or working in a prestigious law firm as a successful career; this was deeply entrenched. Staff and students gave numerous examples of strategies used by the Law Student Association and the Department to attempt to reduce the competitive culture (e.g. PBL and activities in Freshers' week) and to broaden students' career goals (e.g. counselling and career days). Still, wealthy law firms and TV shows (e.g. Suits) were regarded as powerful forces in maintaining the equation of success with a law career. Indeed, most students had chosen the programme to compete for a prestigious law career, and to be/come successful they had to achieve top grades.

However, as we have already noted, although top grades were a key signifier of success among law students, in themselves they were insufficient to mark a student as successful. There were also other important success markers; namely, to be sociable and engaged in extracurricular activities (e.g. politics and fraternity clubs). Representations of successful students were gendered: in general, women were depicted as well-versed but restrained by 'perfectionism' and self-doubt, in contrast to 'uncool' assertive men or 'cool' (i.e. laidback), independent men. Many students experienced the law culture as too elitist, forced and 'polished'. Annie (law student) explained:

[S]uccess for law students is working in a flashy firm, to have had a part-time job while studying, and then you should show good academic results of course, and do notary service, work with that. There's a few stated roadmaps ... I told a friend a few weeks ago that 'the law programme buses out thousands of these uniformed, identical people in some way, you learn to think the same' ... it must breathe prestige in everything somehow ... a great deal is about the surface and prestige.

The profession, and especially successful lawyers, were associated with self-confidence, emotion-detached analytical reasoning, good verbal skills, being well-versed in societal matters, being well-dressed (i.e. wearing a suit and expensive brands), being able to connect with people and handle long workhours and large amounts of information (cf. Costello 2005; Schleef 2006; Mertz 2007). In the competition for future work, social networking with professionals and societal engagement were considered very important (in addition to academic credentials). Networks and engagement were considered as especially pronounced for the students oriented towards business law and lucrative firms (Malatesta 2010).

Unsurprisingly, the markers of success described by the students above map very clearly onto those sought by law firms in Sweden and elsewhere. Based on research with elite law and accountancy firms in the UK, Ashley et al. (2015, 11) argue that elite firms seek a range of 'non-educational skills and attributes', including 'the capacity to present a 'polished' appearance, display strong debating skills, and act in a confident manner at interview.' As Ashley et al. note, these skills and attributes combined with markers of intelligence constitute a specific notion of 'talent' which advantages candidates from middle-class backgrounds. These markers of 'talent' are also much more closely associated with masculinity than with femininity (Leathwood and Read 2009).

Engineering physics

The two engineering physics students who Emma described as 'Mr. Perfects' (see previous section) had top grades in everything and were described as 'super nice, social, [and] sporty'. While these might be seen as hyper-successful students, perceptions of what constitutes success on this programme were generally more modest. Indeed, a striking difference between engineering physics and law was the relationship to grades: simply passing exams was considered success in engineering physics, and to fail them was not considered particularly extraordinary. As Stina (engineering physics student) told us: 'It is very prestigious to have good grades, but it isn't that bad to have bad grades ... because there are so many people who have to re-take exams'. The differing emphases on grades in law and engineering physics relate to the professions and to the structure and ethos of the programmes.

For physics engineers, grades played a minor role in the eyes of future employers and completion of the degree was not necessary to secure a good career (Thunborg and Bron 2012). The abundance of future employment options, combined with the organisation of the programme, meant there were diverse conceptions of success. Typically, three student categories were recognised: high achieving and competitive 'nerds' (research oriented), business people (expected to go into finance companies) and 'ordinary' engineering students. In the words of Linn (engineering physics student):

We had those who were like nerds that didn't dare talk to girls, who wore slightly too short jeans and comfortable shoes and sort of fulfilled the stereotype of an engineering physicist.

Then we had another group of guys that went under many different names ... one of the names we gave them was 'the strong guard'. Our perception of them was that they always completed all exams with 5s [top-grade], they studied super orderly and they were a bit excluding too ... they were more career-driven, had stylish clothes, were well-combed, had washed their hair and all that. And then there were those who hung out with us girls, and they were about the rest.

Generally, academic prowess and good grades were valued, particularly if these were achieved without considerable effort. Students who were 'smart' enough to get top grades without (apparently) studying much were revered, and even more so if they engaged in ECA and helped peers who were struggling. However, 'effortless' high achievers who were regarded as competitive or socially inept were perceived as 'odd' by most in the community. Employers were said to hold a similar view: 'If you've not done extracurricular [activities] but only have good grades then they [employers] think "there's something odd about this person"' (Magnus, engineering physics student).

Typically, whether a grade was considered as a success related to the effort expended to achieve it. Students learned from their peers to be strategic with their effort and to study 'smart'. For example, they often deliberately limited their effort on a course, either because they did not perceive it as (personally or professionally) important, and/or to concentrate on other parallel courses. In addition to employers not requiring high grades, the overall programme ethos contributed to this strategic approach to effortless and stress-less achievement. The generally relaxed culture of the programme had a gendered aspect: men students were seen as understanding the culture, and taking advantage of it, more than women students: '[T]here can be a certain tendency for girls to be "oh, why did I not get a four or a five for this?"; kind of unnecessary, burdening themselves with unnecessary demands' (Martin, Engineering Physics staff). This 'unnecessary burdening' may relate to women feeling a need to 'prove' themselves in a field in which they are marginalised and which is very strongly associated with masculinity.

The association of engineering physics with masculinity is longstanding, as is its related designation as a particularly difficult science. Women in our study spoke about being welcomed as 'one of the guys' but also about the importance of women's networks to combat marginalisation (Powell, Bagilhole, and Dainty 2007). The associations noted earlier between masculinity and 'talent' and femininity and hard work are arguably even stronger in the 'hard' sciences and mathematics than they are in many other disciplines. Gonsalves, Danielsson, and Pettersson (2016, 7) note how 'women science and mathematics students are often constructed as diligent, neat, and rule-following as well as hard working, rather than talented.' Whereas a large proportion of our interviewees (men and women) identified themselves as hard working, they also talked about male peers who were (apparently) clever enough to succeed by instantaneous comprehension and last-minute cramming. So successful women still had more to prove than successful men, and according to women interviewees, their capacities were not recognised in the same way as men's.

In general, 'successful' engineering physics students were described as those who had top grades because they were either (exceptionally) intelligent or worked hard due to certain ambitions, such as those who undertook dual exams to prepare for careers (i.e. CEOs) in the financial sector. Top grades were therefore typically associated with extraordinary talent or specific goals and ambitions.

Medical education

As we have seen, the culture in law is characterised by a competitive, top-grade orientation while engineering physics is predominantly about passing. The situation in medicine is influenced strongly by the grading system employed: students are graded in terms of pass or fail only (although percentage grades are often awarded, these are translated into pass or fail). This pass-fail grading system operates in all medical schools across Sweden as a result of a national policy implemented in 1977. According to interviewees, the system was introduced to reduce competition among very high achieving medical students who were used to competing for top grades at school. Overall, interviewees expressed solid support for the system which was recognised to reduce stress, de-emphasise a performance-culture and encourage collaboration. Tina (medical student) summed this up:

I think that if they [students] were chasing grades too, then it would be tough. I'm thinking of the law programme which has such an extreme chasing-grades focus ... it's almost sad that you can't work with each other, that it's a competition among friends. That's super sad. So I'm very, very happy that there are no grades in that way, and I think most people are happy as long as you pass.

It is noteworthy that Tina chose the law programme to illustrate her point about the deleterious effects of competition. This was not unusual, law students and the programme culture were widely regarded as extremely competitive. Per (Medical staff) described a competitive spirit among medical students as: 'they are a bunch of young lawyers, although they are not lawyers.' Thus, although the pass/fail system reduced competition in medicine, it did not eradicate it: students still knew their percentage scores for exams and the culture fostered high ambitions for 'all' arenas of life.

After the two pre-clinical years students' desires to strive for top percentages on written exams was said to diminish. However, this shift was not explained primarily by lowered expectations regarding success, but rather a broadening of the ways success was conceptualised. Unlike the other two programmes, the curriculum in medicine involves professional practice: practicing *as* a doctor and undertaking practical assessments. These aspects were described as having tremendous influence on developing a professional identity, making students accountable in relation to patients and confirming whether they had made the right educational choice. While students were said to be less concerned about high achievement in practical exams than they had been in written exams in the early years of the programme, it was still very important to pass them, and very shameful to fail.

Aside from developing and demonstrating medical knowledge, the combination of theoretical and clinical elements also tested the students' aptitude for, and commitment to, a profession 'known for its long hours and heavy workload' (Diderichsen et al. 2011, 143). Thus, being able to manage successfully the time demands – often more than 40 scheduled hours per week – without distress was an important part of being a successful student. Indeed, the 'marathon' characteristic of the programme – the long workdays and long programme – was described as one the most demanding aspects. It was also a taken-for-granted aspect, and regarded as preparation for the even more demanding professional life that follows.

Medical students also had to demonstrate that they could work cooperatively (e.g. engage in study groups), and have good communication and socio-emotional skills. Thus, supporting peers' well-being and learning, as well as being involved in medical student associations,

was vital for being recognised as successful. As noted earlier, such skills tend to be associated much more with femininity than masculinity, and historically have not been accorded nearly as much status as intellect. However, in some areas, and medicine is one of those, the importance of ‘people skills’, empathy and caring are increasingly emphasised; this occurs both during the programme and in some selection processes for entry to medical school. Drawing on Leathwood and Read’s (2009) work, Burke (2017, 432) explains this shift in terms of:

[T]he entanglement of patriarchies with new forms of neoliberal subjectivities in which the subject of HE should also perform themselves in relation to the discourses of the market, which might at times privilege dispositions associated with femininity, including displaying appropriate affective skills (such as particular forms of ‘caring’ and ‘empathy’) and competencies that signify the ‘successful’ neoliberal person (such as being organized, disciplined and managing time and juggling multiple responsibilities).

Interestingly, in our research as in previous work (Bleakley 2013) some interviewees considered women to be ‘more concerned with the psychosocial and communicative sides of medicine’ and better prepared to become ‘good doctors’. However, most interviewees did not ascribe women medical students greater socio-emotional aptitudes than the men, but instead considered male students, with a few exceptions, to hold feminist views and be more caring and tender than men in general. Overall, demonstrating good morals and ‘people’ skills were, like top grades in law, a prerequisite for being considered ‘successful’ in medicine.

Conclusion

Pressures to be successful academically are intense in a climate where very high value is attached to credentials, and competition for graduate-level jobs is fierce. Yet as we have demonstrated in this article, what constitutes ‘success’ in H.E. is neither uniform nor absolute. As in Brown et al.’s (2016) study, success involved more than just ‘hard’ academic credentials (i.e. high test results); in particular, it involved demonstrating high ability-beliefs, being relaxed and being able to manage ECAs. As we have argued, students’ perceptions of success are established through interactions within particular contexts (Nyström 2014), and are strongly influenced by the structures and cultures of the programmes, as well as the demands of the profession (Costello 2005; Börjesson et al. 2016). For example, although students who excelled on tests were admired, this was not seen as crucial for success among medical or engineering physics students, and for the latter simply passing was a sign of prowess. Conversely, in law, top grades were a prerequisite for being recognised as successful, but excelling academically was in itself not enough. Furthermore, ‘soft’ skills were valued differently across the programmes. Socio-emotional skills were required to be seen as successful among medical students; a successful law student was expected to be verbally adept and outgoing, while calmness and stoicism were rated highly among the engineers. Whereas smart clothing was emphasised in law, sartorial style was less important in medicine and engineering, although a ‘tidy’ appearance was valued (Börjesson et al. 2016). Again, the demands of the respective professions were influential in imputing differential value. Thus, constructions of success, and the qualities associated with successful students, vary considerably between disciplines.

While disciplines were important in shaping constructions of success, so too were long-standing discourses about effort and intelligence. Those students who were able to excel

academically, undertake a range of ECAs, and still maintain a social-life without seeming unduly stressed or exhausted were heralded as hyper-successful. Our findings support Jackson and Nyström's (2015) argument about the valorisation of effortless achievement in school and H.E., particularly among male students; and that the effortless achievement discourse tends to construct middle-class male students as successful, and women as hard-working (high) achievers. In all three programme contexts effortless achievement was associated with masculinity. However, succeeding 'effortlessly' was held in particularly high regard, and seen as most possible, in the strongly masculine discipline of engineering physics. In law and medicine it was acknowledged that top results required effort, regardless of intellectual ability. Hence, our findings align, in part, also with Brown et al.'s (2016, 207) who argue that persistence and passion more than 'cultural or intellectual superiority' were qualities associated with academic and professional success among elite undergraduates. But they do not align entirely: the relationship between effort and success is important and nuanced. Overall, successful students in our research were described as those who were not (apparently) stressed or burdened by effort, but managed their academic work so that they also had energy and time for socialising, ECAs and other interests. Thus, we have introduced a new concept: stress-less achievement. While being a cool, proficient student in school was particularly associated with not having to study ('effortless achievement' – although even here there is recognition that some work was necessary), in these prestigious H.E. contexts success was associated with being relaxed and able to juggle study and other activities connected to the student community or future professional life. Both effortless achievement and stress-less achievement valorise intellectual ability. However, stress-less achievement is broader in that successful students are those who have: emotion-regulation and time-management skills, intellectual ability, academic perseverance, and they often enjoy learning. Many, predominantly male, students might be seen as having shifted from constructing an identity as an effortless achiever to a similarly valorised identity as a stress-less achiever, and also developing an identity as a member of a prestigious profession.

Contrary to neoliberal discourses that attribute successes and failures squarely on the shoulders of individuals, we argued that structural factors mean that some students are more easily able than others to be ascribed an identity as a hyper-successful student. For example, longstanding discourses associating masculinity with rationality, intelligence, logical thinking, competition and self-confidence mean that men are more easily ascribed such an identity than women (Leathwood and Hey 2009), and especially in natural science disciplines. Furthermore, we touched upon some of the ways in which H.E. timescapes favoured well-resourced, middle-class students with no or few family commitments.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to consider in any depth the implications of students' perceptions of success, other research has demonstrated that the extent to which students see themselves as successful has substantial implications for their wellbeing (e.g. stress, anxiety, feelings of worth), retention, approaches to study and university life, and future career prospects (Costello 2005; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Hailikari, Kordts-Freudinger, and Postareff 2016). Thus, it is crucial to explore what shapes perceptions of success (both self-perceptions and perceptions of others), and to critically examine which categories of students are most easily ascribed the identity of successful student. Only by doing this are we able to make visible and challenge discourses that privilege some social categories over others (Stuber 2011; Burke 2017). Challenges – to support disadvantaged groups or change the dominant culture – can come from a range of groups. It behoves us as

teachers and programme leaders to reflect on the models of success that are promoted by our programme structures and cultures, to consider which students are disadvantaged by such models, and how they might be changed to make them more socially just. Similarly, employers – especially in elite professions – should reflect on their definitions of success and ‘talent’, as current definitions have led to the dominance of people from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds becoming even more pronounced over recent years (Ashley et al. 2015). We need to recognise and acknowledge that ‘success’ and ‘talent’ are not objective concepts but are rooted in systems of values that are permeated by assumptions about gender, social class, ethnicity (Ashley et al. 2015) and other social categories which reinforce rather than challenge privilege.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council.

Notes on contributors

Anne-Sofie Nyström, PhD in Sociology, is a researcher at the Centre for Gender Research and a lecturer in Child and Youth Studies, University of Uppsala, Sweden. She has researched and published on ‘effortless achievement’, middle-class masculinities and gender inequality in schooling and higher education. Currently, she is leading the project ‘Staging the Successful Student in Higher Education’.

Carolyn Jackson is professor of Gender and Education in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, UK, where she is also Co-Director of the Centre for Social Justice and Wellbeing in Education. She has researched and published on various aspects of gender and education. Much of her work has focused on ‘lad cultures’ in secondary schools and higher education, including a monograph *Lads and ladettes in school: Gender and a fear of failure* published by Open University Press.

Minna Salminen Karlsson, PhD in Education, is an associate professor in Sociology at the Centre of Gender Research, Uppsala University, Sweden. She has researched and published on gender in engineering education, gender in technical education in other contexts, as well as on women’s careers in academic organisations and technology companies.

References

- Adam, Barbara. 1995. *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time*. London: Polity.
- Adam, Barbara. 2004. *Time*. Key Concepts. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Allan, Alexandra. 2010. “Picturing Success: Young Femininities and the (Im)Possibilities of Academic Achievement in Selective, Single-Sex Education.” *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 20 (1): 39–54.
- Anderson, Cameron, Michael W. Kraus, and Dacher Keltner. 2011. “The Local Ladder Effect: Social Status and Subjective Well-Being”. *Institute for Research on Labor and Employment*, October. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2x39c3kp>.
- Ashley, Louise, Jo Duberley, Hilary Sommerlad, and Dora Scholarios. 2015. *A Qualitative Evaluation of Non-Educational Barriers to the Elite Professions*. London: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/23163/1/A_qualitative_evaluation_of_non-educational_barriers_to_the_elite_professions.pdf.

- Bathmaker, Ann-Marie, Nicola Ingram, Jessie Abrahams, Anthony Hoare, Richard Waller, and Harriet Bradley. 2016. *Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility: The Degree Generation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bennett, Anna, and Penny Jane Burke. 2017. "Re/Conceptualising Time and Temporality: An Exploration of Time in Higher Education." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 1–13. doi:10.1080/01596306.2017.1312285.
- Berggren, Caroline. 2007. "Broadening Recruitment to Higher Education through the Admission System: Gender and Class Perspectives." *Studies in Higher Education* 32 (1): 97–116.
- Bergin, Adele, and Kenneth Pakenham. 2015. "Law Student Stress: Relationships between Academic Demands, Social Isolation, Career Pressure, Study/Life Imbalance and Adjustment Outcomes in Law Students." *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 22 (3): 388–406. doi:10.1080/13218719.2014.960026.
- Bleakley, Alan. 2013. "Gender Matters in Medical Education." *Medical Education* 47 (1): 59–70.
- Börjesson, Mikael, Donald Broady, Brigitte Le Roux, Ida Lidegran, and Mikael Palme. 2016. "Cultural Capital in the Elite Subfield of Swedish Higher Education." *Poetics* 56 (June): 15–34. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2016.02.004.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1979. *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Brown, Phillip, Sally Power, Gerbrand Tholen, and Annabelle Allouch. 2016. "Credentials, Talent and Cultural Capital: A Comparative Study of Educational Elites in England and France." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37 (2): 191–211. doi:10.1080/01425692.2014.920247.
- Burke, Penny Jane. 2006. "Men Accessing Education: Gendered Aspirations." *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (5): 719–733. doi:10.1080/01411920600895759.
- Burke, Penny Jane. 2017. "Difference in Higher Education Pedagogies: Gender, Emotion and Shame." *Gender and Education* 29 (4): 430–444. doi:10.1080/09540253.2017.1308471.
- Burke, Penny Jane, Anna Bennett, Jacqueline Stevenson, and Sue Clegg. 2017. *It's about Time: Working towards More Equitable Understandings of the Impact of Time for Students in Higher Education*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). Perth: Curtin University. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/its-about-time-working-towards-more-equitable-understandings-of-the-impact-of-time-for-students-in-higher-education/>.
- Clegg, Sue, Jacqueline Stevenson, and John Willott. 2009. "Staff Conceptions of Curricular and Extracurricular Activities in Higher Education." *Higher Education* 59 (5): 615–626. doi:10.1007/s10734-009-9269-y.
- Cloete, Nicola, and Catherine Duncan. 2016. "Shifting from Disorientation to Orientation: Reading Student Discourses of Success." *Perspectives in Education* 34 (2): 33–42. <https://doi.org/10.18820/0258-2236/pie.v34i2.3>.
- Cohen, Michèle. 1998. "A Habit of Healthy Idleness: Boys' Underachievement in Historical Perspective." In *Failing Boys?: Issues in Gender and Achievement*, edited by Debbie Epstein, Jannette Elwood, Valerie Hey and Janet Maw, 19–34. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Costello, Carrie Yang. 2005. *Professional Identity Crisis: Race, Class, Gender, and Success at Professional Schools*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Diderichsen, Saima, Jenny Andersson, Eva E. Johansson, Petra Verdonk, Antoine Lagro-Janssen, and Katarina Hamberg. 2011. "Swedish Medical Students' Expectations of Their Future Life." *International Journal of Medical Education* 2 (November): 140–146. doi:10.5116/ijme.4ec5.92b8.
- Epstein, Debbie. 1998. "Real Boys Don't Work: 'Underachievement', Masculinity, and the Harassment of 'Sissies'." In *Failing Boys?: Issues in Gender and Achievement*, edited by Debbie Epstein, Jannette Elwood, Valerie Hey and Janet Maw, 96–108. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Francis, Becky, Penny Jane Burke, and Barbara Read. 2014. "The Submergence and Re-Emergence of Gender in Undergraduate Accounts of University Experience." *Gender & Education* 26 (1): 1–17. doi:10.1080/09540253.2013.860433.
- Francis, Becky, Christine Skelton, and Barbara Read. 2012. *The Identities and Practices of High-Achieving Pupils: Negotiating Achievement and Peer Cultures*. New York: Continuum.
- Gonsalves, Allison J., Anna Danielsson, and Helena Pettersson. 2016. "Masculinities and Experimental Practices in Physics: The View from Three Case Studies." *Physical Review Physics Education Research* 12 (2): 47. doi:10.1103/PhysRevPhysEducRes.12.020120.

- Hailikari, Telle, Robert Kordts-Freudinger, and Liisa Postareff. 2016. "Feel the Progress: Second-Year Students' Reflections on Their First-Year Experience." *International Journal of Higher Education* 5 (3): 79–90. doi:10.5430/ijhe.v5n3p79.
- Hannon, Oliver, Lisa Roisin Smith, and Giang Lă. 2017. "Success at University: The Student Perspective". In *Success in Higher Education – Transitions to, within and from university*, edited by Lisa Wood and Yvonne Brever, 257–268. Singapore: Springer. <http://www.springer.com/us/book/9789811027895>.
- Holfve-Sabel, Mary-Anne. 2011. "Gender Attitudes in School Have Changed Mainly in Peer Relational Factors over a Period of 35 Years." *Gender and Education* 23 (1): 73–86. doi:10.1080/09540251003675466.
- Jackson, Carolyn, and Steven Dempster. 2009. "I Sat Back on My Computer ... with a Bottle of Whisky next to Me': Constructing 'Cool' Masculinity through 'Effortless' Achievement in Secondary and Higher Education". *Journal of Gender Studies* 18 (4), 341–356.
- Jackson, Carolyn, Steve Dempster, and Lucie Pollard. 2014. "'They Just Don't Seem to Really Care, They Just Think It's Cool to Sit There and Talk': Laddism in University Teaching-Learning Contexts". *Educational Review*, April 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2014.910178>.
- Jackson, Carolyn, and Anne-Sofie Nyström. 2015. "'Smart Students Get Perfect Scores in Tests without Studying Much': Why is an Effortless Achiever Identity Attractive, and for Whom is It Possible?" *Research Papers in Education* 30 (4), 393–410. doi:10.1080/02671522.2014.970226.
- Jenkins, Richard. 2004. *Social Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Kahu, Ella R., and Karen Nelson. 2017. "Student Engagement in the Educational Interface: Understanding the Mechanisms of Student Success." *Higher Education Research & Development* 1–14. doi:10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197.
- Kimmel, Michael S. 2008. *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Leathwood, Carole, and Valerie Hey. 2009. "Gender/Ed Discourses and Emotional Sub-Texts: Theorising Emotion in UK Higher Education." *Teaching in Higher Education* 14 (4): 429–440. doi:10.1080/13562510903050194.
- Leathwood, Carole, and Barbara Read. 2009. *A Feminized Future?: Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education: A Feminized Future?*. London: SRHE & Open University Press.
- Lindgren, Stefan, Thomas Brännström, Eric Hanse, Torbjörn Ledin, Gunnar Nilsson, Stellan Sandler, Ulf Tidefelt, and Jakob Donnér. 2011. "Medical Education in Sweden." *Medical Teacher* 33 (10): 798–803. doi:10.3109/0142159X.2011.570816.
- Malatesta, Maria. 2010. *Professional Men, Professional Women: The European Professions from the 19th Century until Today*. Translated by Adrian Belton. Sage: Los Angeles, CA.
- Mertz, Elizabeth. 2007. *The Language of Law School: Learning to 'Think Like a Lawyer'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nyström, Anne-Sofie. 2014. "Negotiating Achievement: Students' Gendered and Classed Constructions of (Un)Equal Ability." In *Educational Inequalities: Difference and Diversity in Schools and Higher Education*, edited by Kalwant Bhopal and Uvanney Maylor, 87–101. New York: Routledge.
- Öhrn, Elisabet, and Ann-Sofie Holm. 2014. *Att lyckas i skolan. Om skolprestationer och kön i olika undervisningspraktiker*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Orr, Dominic, and Elisabeth Hovdhaugen. 2014. "'Second Chance' Routes into Higher Education: Sweden, Norway and Germany Compared." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 33 (1): 45–61. doi:10.1080/02601370.2013.873212.
- Osborne, Michael, Russel Rimmer, and Muir Houston. 2015. "Adult Access to Higher Education: An International Overview." In *The Role of Higher Education in Promoting Lifelong Learning*, edited by Jin Yang, Chripa Schneller and Stephen Roche, 17–39. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
- Powell, Abigail, Barbara Bagilhole, and Andrew Dainty. 2007. "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Women Engineering Students' Experiences of UK Higher Education". In *Women and Minorities in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics: Upping the Numbers*, edited by Ronald J. Burke and Mary C. Mattis, 47–70. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

- Power, Sally, Tony Edwards, Geoff Witty, and Valerie Wigfall. 2003. *Education and the Middle Class*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Power, Sally, Geoff Whitty, Tony Edwards, and Valerie Wigfall. 1998. "Schoolboys and Schoolwork: Gender Identification and Academic Achievement." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 2 (2): 135–153. doi:10.1080/1360311980020204.
- Reay, Diane, Gill Crozier, and John Clayton. 2009. "Strangers in Paradise? Working-Class Students in Elite Universities." *Sociology* 43 (6): 1103–1121.
- Schleef, Debra J. 2006. *Managing Elites: Professional Socialization in Law and Business Schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Statistiska Centralbyrån. 2014a. "Universitet Och Högskolor, Högskolenybörjare 2013/14 Och Doktorandnybörjare 2012/13 Efter Föräldrarnas Utbildningsnivå [Higher Education. Level of Parental Education among University Entrants 2013/14 and New Doctoral Students 2012/13]." Statistiska meddelanden/Sveriges officiella statistik UF 20 SM 1403. <http://www.scb.se>.
- Statistiska Centralbyrån. 2014b. "Universitet Och Högskolor: Sökande Och Antagna till Högskoleutbildning På Grundnivå Och Avancerad Nivå Höstterminen 2015. [Higher Education. Applicants and Admissions to Higher Education at First and Second Cycle Studies Autumn Term 2015]." Utbildning och forskning UF 46 SM 1501. http://www.scb.se/Statistik/UF/UF0206/2015T02T/UF0206_2015T02T_SM_UF46SM1501.pdf.
- Statistiska Centralbyrån. 2014c. "Universitet Och Högskolor, Studenter Och Examinerade På Grundnivå Och Avancerad Nivå 2012/13 [Higher Education. Students and Graduates at First and Second Cycle Studies 2012/13]." Statistiska meddelanden/Sveriges officiella statistik UF 20 SM 1401. <http://www.scb.se>.
- Stuber, Jenny M. 2011. *Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.
- Thunborg, Camilla, and Agnieszka Bron. 2012. "Higher Education and Lifelong Learning in Sweden." In *Global Perspectives on Higher Education and Lifelong Learners*, edited by Maria Slowey and Hans G. Schuetze, 97–111. London: Routledge. <https://www-dawsonera-com.ezproxy.its.uu.se/abstract/9780203122495>.
- Walkerdine, Valerie, Helen Lucey, and June Melody. 2001. *Growing up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Wood, Leigh N., and Yvonne A. Breyer. 2017. "Success in Higher Education." In *Success in Higher Education*, 1–19. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2791-8_1.
- Zepke, Nick, Linda Leach, and Philippa Butler. 2011. "Non-Institutional Influences and Student Perceptions of Success." *Studies in Higher Education* 36 (2): 227–242. doi:10.1080/03075070903545074.