



Classroom bodies: affect, body language, and discourse when schoolchildren encounter national tests in mathematics

Eva Silfver, Maritha Jacobsson, Linda Arnell, Hanna Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, Maria Härgestam, Magdalena Sjöberg & Ulrika Widding

To cite this article: Eva Silfver, Maritha Jacobsson, Linda Arnell, Hanna Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, Maria Härgestam, Magdalena Sjöberg & Ulrika Widding (2020) Classroom bodies: affect, body language, and discourse when schoolchildren encounter national tests in mathematics, *Gender and Education*, 32:5, 682-696, DOI: [10.1080/09540253.2018.1473557](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1473557)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1473557>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 16 May 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3267



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

Classroom bodies: affect, body language, and discourse when schoolchildren encounter national tests in mathematics

Eva Silfver^a, Maritha Jacobsson^b, Linda Arnell^b, Hanna Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist^b, Maria Härgestam^c, Magdalena Sjöberg^d and Ulrika Widding^a

^aDepartment of Education, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Social Work, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; ^cDepartment of Nursing, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; ^dDepartment of Sociology, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse how Swedish grade three children are discursively positioned as pupils when they are taking national tests in mathematics and when they reflect on the testing situation afterwards. With support from theories about affective-discursive assemblages, we explore children's body language, emotions, and talk in light of the two overarching discourses that we believe frame the classroom: the 'testing discourse' and the 'development discourse'. Through the disciplinary power of these main discourses children struggle to conduct themselves in order to become recognized as intelligible subjects and 'ideal pupils'. The analysis, when taking into account how affects and discourses intertwine, shows that children can be in 'untroubled', 'troubled', or ambivalent subject positions.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 February 2017
Accepted 29 April 2018

KEYWORDS

Affective-discursive assemblages; grade three children; 'ideal' pupils; mathematics tests; power

Introduction

Over the past few decades and in the wake of a rapidly changing global economy and labour markets, educational achievement in most western countries has been linked to massive restructuring of education systems (Giddens 1998). For example, high-stakes, standardized testing has become the central tool for education reform and regulation. In British schools, where the drive to 'improve standards' seems to be more accentuated than in Sweden, this has meant an increased emphasis on exam results and measurable school improvement (Ringrose 2007; Bailey 2013). However, this 'obsession with testing' has also reached Sweden (cf. Bergh 2011; Bergh, Pettersson, and Skott 2015). For example, Swedish students' declining scores on international tests like PISA¹ and TIMSS² fuelled the former Minister of Education's argument that the poor international test results were putting the Swedish economy at risk. As a way to overcome this 'failure', the minister decided to reintroduce national tests in mathematics and Swedish for younger children (grades three: 9–10 years old, and five: 11–12 years old). The 'new' tests, implemented in 2009, can therefore be read as an effect of a changing Swedish edu-

CONTACT Eva Silfver  eva.silfver@umu.se

© 2020 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.

cation policy, influenced by the rise of international assessment programmes and by discourses that make education central to national economic competitiveness. These tests are now increasingly influencing everyday school life in Sweden.

Exploring the reintroduction of national testing of grade three children in Sweden is specifically interesting since children in Sweden are discursively produced as holders of their own competences and skills (Halldén 2007). For example, it is argued that children need to be respected on their own terms, and as active subjects, competent and with power and willingness to learn (Korpi 2006). In comparison with other Western countries Swedish children begin the nine-year compulsory school rather late (at about the age of seven). From the time they are a year old they voluntarily attend preschool, and at six, they can attend preschool class. The preschool is a separate school form where children should have the opportunity of learning through playing, creating and exploring (Skolverket 2017a). The majority of six-year-olds in Sweden attend preschool class, which is a voluntary school form with a large element of creative work and play (Skolverket 2017b). The Swedish take on children and childhood with emphasis on play rather than formal schooling, is sometimes called the 'Educare model' or the 'Nordic model', as Norway and Finland have rather similar systems (Rantala 2016). This approach has garnered international praise; for example, the OECD lauded Swedish early childhood education and care for the way it is 'putting the child and play at the centre of the curriculum' (Taguma, Litjens, and Makowiecki 2013, 8). The notion of play as beneficial for children more generally is also a strong discourse in the Swedish context, heard through sayings like: 'let kid be kids' in, for example, daily newspapers chronicles (e.g. Blom 2015; Dahlström 2015) and popular journal blogs (e.g. <http://blogg.amelia.se/sannabradning/2017/07/27/snalla-lat-barn-fa-vara-barn/>).³

So, even though there is a shift, even in Sweden, from care and education to learning (Broady 2007), we join Halldén (2007) in arguing that the realization of assessment discourses takes time to establish at the classroom level. We thus argue that the tension (and even struggle) between the Swedish childhood discourse (involving 'let kids be kids') and the 'new' assessment discourses makes it highly relevant to explore the Swedish case of 'new' national tests on children.

From the year 2010 all pupils in grade three take the national test in mathematics (Utbildningsdepartementet 2008). It consists of several part tests connected to different, but not covering all, parts of the curriculum. Tasks often consist of open-ended questions where the pupil is supposed to answer by wording, symbols or pictures. In addition to this there is a self-evaluation part initially and a cooperation part test at the end of the approximately one to two months period of testing. Teacher instructions admit children to use as much time needed to complete the tests (Skolverket 2010, 2012). The tests are administered, corrected and given by the class-teacher.

One of the Swedish government's main arguments for implementing national tests in mathematics is said to be the need for early identification of children at risk of falling behind, thereby reversing the trend of students leaving school with incomplete rating data in mathematics (Sjöberg, Silfver, and Bagger 2015). However, there is wide support for the assumption that standardized testing can lead to increased test anxiety (Zeidner 1998; Pekrun et al. 2002), and several researchers point out its strong negative correlation with achievement (Birenbaum and Gutvirtz 1993; Schwarzer and Buchwald 2003). Korpi (2006), for example, highlights that national testing in mathematics both underpins and

hides social reproduction of power. Earlier research exploring national tests in Swedish in grade five (11–10 years old) shows how the tests impact the daily work of teachers and regulate classroom discourse and behaviours of teachers and students (Lunneblad and Carlsson 2012). Likewise, researchers in Finland show that young children start referring to individual performance criteria such as quality, speed, and correctness when comparative information is available to them in the school context (Räty, Snellman, and Kasanen 1999). It is also well known that children's experiences and achievements in different school subjects shape their perceptions of themselves (e.g. Kärkkäinen, Räty, and Kasanen 2008). Another Finnish study showed that children were either optimistic or pessimistic about their ability in mathematics. Optimistic children (mostly boys) believed in the power of practice and effort and described their ability as something they could develop, whereas pessimistic children (mostly girls) had a static view on ability and did not think it possible to improve their performance (Räty et al. 2004).

In this article we will draw on empirical data collected within an earlier project focusing on the implementation of national testing in mathematics in grade three in Sweden (Silfver, Sjöberg, and Bagger 2013, 2016; Sjöberg, Silfver, and Bagger 2015). Silfver, Sjöberg, and Bagger show how the tests' focus on individual performance stressed a feeling of competition that affected children at the level of the body. Children's affects and emotions highlighted a stereotypical gendered pattern – or at least the researchers noticed stronger reactions among boys than girls. Here, we set out to combine children's expressions of body language, emotions, and talk in our analysis more thoroughly than before. The aim is to explore and analyse how grade three children are discursively positioned as pupils and how notions of gender impact on these processes. Our research questions are:

- How do children's bodies express affects?
- What kinds of affects do children express through their talk?
- How do children talk about themselves as test takers?

Theoretical underpinnings

Our theoretical starting point is Foucault's (1980, 39) concept of disciplinary power and how it functions on the level of the body:

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.

Disciplinary power during tests in school work through discursive practices that constitute the testing situation. These discursive practices, henceforward called the 'testing discourse', are the many rituals around the test such as moving desks apart, teachers reading the test instructions aloud, children working silently and on their own, and teachers hushing and whispering (Sjöberg, Silfver, and Bagger 2015). Earlier research shows that even though testing is new to children in grade three, many of the testing practices, for example, the rearrangement of desks, are taken for granted and children quickly pick them up (Silfver, Sjöberg, and Bagger 2016). This rearrangement emphasizes

individual performance and thereby has power to produce the individual subject (Kasanen and Rätty 2008). But disciplinary power in classrooms also works through notions about child development, which in turn emanate from developmental psychological theory. This 'development discourse' has a strong impact on how practices in school inscribe dimensions in children's bodies and teach the children implicitly (and sometimes very explicitly) how to become 'successful children' (Hultqvist and Dahlberg 2001). For example, children need to develop competence to regulate their emotions in order to fit in properly and become academically successful (Denham 2007; Denham et al. 2012).

However, development discourses are also gendered. For example, girls are often expected to sit still, while it seems natural if boys do not. Boys are often expected to be playful and act out their feelings while girls are encouraged to do the opposite – to restrain their feelings and act responsibly (Walkerdine 1993). Also Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma (2000) highlight that girls in school are expected to be more still than boys, their bodies more contained and their voices quieter. While the movement of males is seen as natural, girls who use space are more likely to be seen as behaving inappropriately: '[A girl's] movement is noticed more quickly, and commented on and controlled much more often' (Gordon 2006, 6). A Swedish, and more recent, study about school performances also shows that gendered (and classed and racialized) expectations in Swedish schools and classrooms still exist, for example, that girls, more than boys, are expected to study (Öhrn and Holm 2014). Notwithstanding, being a high-performing girl is also an ambivalent position which does not give status in school practice:

It is important to note that the ideal of the effortless performance thus not only implies boys' positioning and relationship with the studies. It also characterizes the understanding of girls' achievements and higher grades, and demarcates them through the dissociation of talent. (Öhrn 2014, 185) (Our translation)

Boys' 'laddishness' is also central to the current discourse on boys' 'underachievement'. Jackson (2002, 48) discusses how the laddishness construct helps to re-focus from boys' lack of ability to lack of effort:

'[L]addishness' acts as a self-worth protection strategy protecting self-worth from the implications of lack of ability, but also from the implications of being seen to be 'feminine'. From a self-worth perspective, adhering to 'laddish' anti-school cultures provides an inbuilt excuse for boys who are not achieving academically, as the focus for academic failure is shifted from a lack of ability to a lack of effort. The notion that boys are able to achieve is pervasive in the 'underachieving' boys discourse.

In the testing situations, which we want to explore, we find it necessary to bring these wider and, as it seems, dominating discourses of testing, development and gender into our analyses. While we also agree with Wetherell's (2015a, 160) argument that 'we cannot create a split between a semi-conscious, automaton-like, reactive body and the reflexive, discursive, interpreting, meaning-making, communicating social actor', we try to see embodiment and discourse as entangled and interpret children's expressions of body language, emotions, and talk together. Wetherell (2013) points out that many affect studies (for example, Massumi 2002; Thrift 2004, 2008), disconnect affect and discourse and emphasize processes beyond, below, and past discourse, and formulate human affect as 'a kind of "extra-discursive" event' (Wetherell 2013, 350). Instead of turning away from discourse studies, we draw on Wetherell's (2013, 351) concept of

'affective-discursive assemblages', which can be used exploring 'how talk, body actions, affect, material contexts and social relations assemble in *suito*' (351). According to Wetherell (2015a, 2015b), affect is embedded in situated practices where affect and discourse are understood as intertwined, in 'affective-discursive assemblages', or 'affective practices'. Or differently expressed, affective and discursive practices are 'articulating in tandem with each other' (Wetherell et al. 2015, 58).

Methods

The data for this article was produced within an earlier research project where the researchers visited eight different schools and 22 grade three classrooms over a three-year period using video-assisted classroom observations followed by video-stimulated recall interviews (Morgan 2007) with children. All children who wanted to participate were interviewed about the test situation and their experiences and feelings about it. The video cameras helped to capture critical incidents such as expressions through body language or gazes during the testing situation, a situation when children are otherwise expected to be quiet (for more information about the data production see Silfver, Sjöberg, and Bagger 2013).

For this article we draw on data from one of the classrooms. The data consists of:

- Video-data from five tests, in total around three hours, from which the first author has chosen four video clips to be analysed by the research group
- Nine transcribed interviews with children (between 8 and 26 min long)

The video clips were selected based on their richness in content and variability. That is, we excluded many sequences where children worked sedentary with the tests in favour of movements, talk, and events that broke the 'ordinary' test work. Children who were in focus for longer sequences and also participated in the interview process became our informants.

The analysis was done through group writing that we will refer to as co-analytical work. This means that all the work with the paper was led by the first and second authors, with support in particular areas from the third author, but all authors were involved in outlining the paper, conducting the analysis, and writing the paper.

Analytically, we operationalized Wetherell's 'affective-discursive assemblages' concept (see also [2012] 2014) by including verbal (both from the testing situation and interviews), bodily (movements, gestures, facial expressions and so on), and emotional (for example crying, laughing, sighing) expressions. Henceforth we refer to the use of these various expressions as 'affective practices'. To gain insight into what children's affective practices accomplish, we used Wetherell's (1998) notions of 'troubled' and 'untroubled' subject positions. When acting in or talking about a situation, we are either able or unable to take a certain position within the action or conversation (Edley 2001). In a particular testing situation and also an interview situation, a young pupil might show emotions or talk about his/her managing of the test situation and, for example, only be able to access a (troubled) pupil position that feels uncomfortable and challenges the normative perceptions of a good pupil in that context. Another pupil might access an (untroubled) pupil position

that feels comfortable because s/he fits into normative perceptions of what is regarded as good pupil ship in that context.

In practice, our analytical process first focused on the testing situation (the video sequences), which we divided in two parallel events:

- 'normal routines', that is, children sitting at their desks, writing the test, and
- 'special incidents', that is, children doing things not expected of them

We coded these events based on the following scheme:

- Normal routines: gaze, hands, legs (body language)
- Special incidents: laughing, crying, talking aloud, walking around (emotions and talk)

Our decision to code gaze, hands, and legs draws on earlier research arguing that eyes, hands, and the use of different gestures are regarded as important when it comes to expressing meaning (Krauss, Chen, and Chawla 1996; Allwood 2002). Besides gestures, the face and especially the eyes are considered by some researchers to be highly important in communication (Hjortsjö 1969; Allwood 2002). The way we direct our eyes can show interest or disinterest. By seeking eye contact, people can ask for attention or search for reactions among others, and looking back is a way to show attention and interest (Kendon 1990; Knapp and Hall 2002).

Thus, the extent to which the children either restlessly glanced around or focused on the assignment, and the extent to which they moved their legs and hands without 'purpose' or were still, moving only as much as needed to complete the assignment, indicated how comfortable or uncomfortable they felt during the tests. If children started to cry, laugh, or act out other negative or positive emotions, this also pointed towards troubled or untroubled subject positions.

After this first analytical step we turned to the transcribed interviews and focused on the parts where the children talked about the testing situation – what they felt about it and how they were thinking of themselves as test takers. Here our focus was on how children positioned themselves in talk. Here we do not mean that they make active decisions but rather how their talk discursively produces them as troubled/untroubled and that wider gendered discourses have an impact on how they can talk about (and act) themselves. The third step in our analytical process was to combine children's affective practices from the testing context with the interview context. We investigated whether or not their positioning in the different contexts was congruent, and whether how they positioned themselves in their talk was consistent with what was observed in the testing situation.

Findings and analysis

Our conclusion is that the young pupils within the rhetorical context of the interview and the testing context either are positioned/position themselves as untroubled, troubled, or ambivalent subjects. By an 'ambivalent subject position' we mean that the pupil is 'moving' between troubled and untroubled subject positions. In the following we explore the production of the untroubled/normative pupil position in relation to the

troubled/problematic pupil position in our data. We have analysed in more depth nine pupils' positioning in the classroom during the tests: Alzira, Alex, and Oliver (overall untroubled); Corinna, Ajko, and Lotten (overall troubled); John, Alice, and Saman (both troubled and untroubled). Although the children have been divided into different subject positions, the analysis shows that their positioning was not always static.

An untroubled subject position

In the recordings from the test situation the pupils used a variety of expressions, such as talk and bodily and emotional re/actions. For example, pupils like Alzira, Alex, and Oliver, who can be described as untroubled pupils, expressed concentration and a focus on the tasks by looking at the test, holding the pencil, and using the pencil only to write in the test manual. Since the test situation also requires order, quiet, and calm, and it is mainly the hands (and the brain) that are encouraged to move, the movement of legs is another important affective practice. One way to express distress can be to fidget and move the legs. Pupils like Alzira, Alex, and Oliver, whose eyes and hands had been relatively still, also kept their legs still. Their affective practices are in line with the testing and development discourses that emphasize the idea that controlled and well-behaved pupils are those who learn best. Alzira, Alex, and Oliver expressed concentration, focus on the tasks at hand, and bodily calmness and thus we interpret them as untroubled pupils. Oliver also showed joy during the test situation. For instance, at the beginning of one of the tests he checked the test sheet, smiled, and ticked off the tasks while whispering: 'yes, yes, yes!'

In the interviews they all expressed certainty regarding their performance in the test situation; they were satisfied with their own performance and that they were calm in the situation. Through their talk they positioned themselves as untroubled as they stressed that they were good at maths, were positive about the tests, and worked well and effectively during the tests.

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>Alzira</i> | I'm good when it comes to stuff like this (...) I concentrated on the task only (...) I worked as well as I usually do. |
| <i>Alex</i> | You know, I feel like maths (...) I'm doing great so ... I feel like ... it takes no time for me (...) I had nearly finished the test already. Before I got the ruler. So ... when she [the teacher] passed my desk and put a ruler on it ... that actually disturbed me more than it helped. |
| <i>Interviewer</i> | So, what did you think when you saw the test sheet and all the maths problems? |
| <i>Oliver</i> | Ding, ding, ding – easy, easy, easy! I was sure to complete all the tasks (...) It was fun! |

Alzira, Alex, and Oliver, thus, not only showed that they were able to successfully manage the situation of being assessed (pass the test), but also that they could govern their affective practices in relation to assumptions of normative development (behave properly during the test situation).

Notwithstanding, the way Oliver expressed joy and playfulness during one of the test situations can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand it can be seen as an indication that he is talented in maths and that he wants to show it, that is, he is performing a 'math talented student'. This might not be a problem for him, since talent in math (and natural sciences) is discursively regarded more 'natural' for boys than for girls (see e.g. Nyström

2009). However, another possible interpretation is that Oliver tries to downplay his supposed math skills by, although he might find the math easy, portraying himself as an 'effortless achiever' (cf. Jackson and Nyström 2015). If the latter is the case, he rather tries to avoid another kind of 'troubled' position – being seen as studious by his school mates. This shows that wider gendered discourses play an important role for what kind of positions that are available for pupils to take.

A more troubled subject position

While pupils like Alzira, Alex, and Oliver (more or less) positioned themselves as untroubled pupils, there were other pupils whose affective practices didn't fit into the normative expectations of the test situation. For example, Corinna, Ajko, and Lotten deviated from the untroubled position by demonstrating an unwillingness or inability to focus on the tests. Instead, they exhibited restlessness, sometimes just looking at the other pupils and sometimes trying to get their friends' attention, which positioned them as troubled pupils (but at the same time as possibly untroubled and socially popular children). There were also wrinkled eyebrows, as if the pupils found it difficult to perform the tasks. They used their bodies in an expressive way, which can be interpreted as showing frustration but can also be a helpful strategy for getting attention (Denham 2007).

Corinna, Ajko, and Lotten made hand gestures that signalled an unwillingness or inability to concentrate on the tasks by placing their pencils at/in their mouths, using the rubber a lot, resting their heads in their hands, placing their hands in their hair, or placing their hands on their eyes and rubbing their faces. These hand gestures expressed uncertainty (the need to think instead of using the pencil to write with, erasing the answers), tiredness (resting the head), frustration (hands in the hair, 'tossing the hair'), and resistance (closing eyes to show lack of interest in the test). Altogether, the different affective practices position them as troubled subjects, as unable to successfully manage the situation of being assessed, and failing to govern their affective practices in relation to notions of normative development (behaving properly during the testing situation).

These troubling affective practices will be illustrated with examples from the interviews with the three girls. In their interview talk, Corinna, Lotten, and Ajko expressed that they were not very good at maths and they said that the tests were difficult and that they felt stressed and anxious during them. Others also expressed their fear of being disappointed if they failed the tests and worried that they would not be able to reach the stated learning goals.

Corinna Difficult (...) The first page was hard. I could do almost nothing (...) If I'm too stressed out, I will probably not make it (...) I have to make it! I must, must must ...

Lotten was mostly quiet during the interview, but she did shrug her shoulders and explain that the tests were 'boring'. When Ajko talked about the tests she expressed anxiety about whether or not she would be able to pass:

Ajko I hope I'll make it (...) [Smiles] I don't know but I'll probably not make it but I hope for the best! (...) [Smiles] No, you know, it, it was ... then, then it was a

- bit nerve-racking and (...) [shakes her body] Ohhh, I hope I will make it and ... and I was also so let down when the teacher couldn't help at all.
- Interviewer* Yes. It was frustrating?
- Ajko* Yes. Yes it felt like just a frustration that 'No, now I have failed in this but' (...) [Smiles] Yes (...) I will not keep up with everyone else!
- Interviewer* Yes.
- Ajko* It felt like that. But then I got somewhat relieved when the teacher told me that I would be allowed to continue. Then it felt a little bit better but still it felt like 'Oh then I will miss that and that and that'.

In the first example, Corinna stated that the tests were difficult but that it is up to her to regulate her stress if she wants to succeed. She also underlined the importance of passing the tests when she said: 'I have to make it! I must, must must ...' by which we can understand that she feels that passing the tests is her responsibility. That is, despite her rather troubled position regarding passing the tests, she positioned herself as responsible and thereby as an untroubled girl within the testing and development discourses – mature enough to be able to govern her own emotions during a stressful situation.

Lotten and Ajko display another kind of troubled pupil by resisting the ideal of the self-controlling pupil who is hardworking, responsible, and eager to show off by passing the tests in accordance with the testing discourse. Lotten described the tests as 'boring' and seemed unwilling to say more about them in the interview. This could be interpreted as a silent resistance to the tests as well as to the interview situation and the interviewer, which positions her both as a troubled pupil and a troubled girl who has not reached the expected abilities (including gendered expectations of being a nice and friendly girl in the interview situation) of a girl of her age. However, her unwillingness to talk with the interviewer can also be understood as an inability to express her thoughts and feelings about the tests, which also positions her as troubled.

During the interview, Ajko positioned herself as somewhat passive, help-seeking, relying on the responsibility of others, resigned, and uncertain. She said that she would probably not pass the tests on her own efforts and knowledge, but instead 'hope for the best'. Our interpretation is that Ajko can (or perhaps feels she has to) present herself in this way, that is, making no fuss but only hoping it works out, because such a position makes her intelligible as a girl (passive and uncertain), and in that way she becomes untroubled. However, Ajko also argued that it should have been possible for the teachers to help her out in the testing situation and in that way she resisted the idea of the individual, self-achieving, and responsible subject that comes with the testing discourse. Her untroubled girl position also puts her in trouble within the development discourse; by explaining – in line with a (emotionally) sensitive (untroubled) girl position – that she was anxious, jittery, frustrated, and cross in relation to the test, she becomes a troubled and insufficiently mature pupil in relation to the development discourse. This is also illustrated when she describes her fear that she 'will not keep up with everyone else', not following the 'natural development' of moving on to the next grade.

A troubled (incongruent/ambivalent) subject position

There were also pupils who showed incongruent affective practices. They alternated between hand gestures that represent the troubled as well as the untroubled pupil.

Also, while untroubled pupils sat with their legs still and troubled pupils moved their legs around, jiggled them, or bent a leg to put a foot on the chair, again, the ambivalent pupils shifted between keeping their legs still and moving them around. Some pupils, for example John, Alice, and Saman, shifted between being focused on the test manual and looking around and about. While this placed them in an ambivalent pupil position, it can also be understood as a way of managing a position as a pupil who is untroubled and popular (avoiding being seen as too focused on academic achievement).

John, Alice, and Saman seemed able to govern some aspects of their affective practices, but not all the time as they also showed resistance and frustration. John, for example, seemed mostly focused on the test, but on one occasion he started rubbing his face with his open hands for several minutes and more and more intensely. He sighed and banged his hand on his desk, and after a while he cried out loud that he did not know how to do one of the tasks. Also, when the teacher told the class that those who wanted more time to complete the test were allowed to continue after the weekend, John started to cry loudly.

The incongruity also comes through in the interview talk. On the one hand, John, Alice, and Saman talked about their shortcomings and their sense of performing poorly on the tests. On the other hand, they stressed that they had passed the tests:

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>John</i> | They were very simple questions (...) Actually, I actually did really badly on the tests, and probably I did the worst of all (...) It's so fun to see how badly I work [laughs] (...) |
| <i>Interviewer</i> | Do you think so? |
| <i>John</i> | Yes 'cause I ... lagged quite a lot. |
| <i>Interviewer</i> | Mmm. What do you think about that? |
| <i>John</i> | [Silence] I'm thinking that I did it anyhow. |
| <i>Alice</i> | [I was] trying to be as good as possible (...) I did it (...) I'm lousy at math (...) Ah, I thought it felt like fun ... but ... fun in, in a way, but sad in a way 'cause I'm lousy at math [smiles] (...) I'm not so good at math but I did it! |
| <i>Alice</i> | I thought most of the (...) [chuckles] it will be quite a hassle! I suck at math! That's what I was thinking about [smiles]. |
| <i>Saman</i> | The questions were fairly easy ... it was easy and fun (...) but now [in a testing situation] we cannot look at each other. Now you just have to focus on what you've learnt in school (...) and then you started to understand that ... the seriousness and that you do these tests 'cause you're now in grade three (...) But if you are positive, it will be a little bit easier. Then I thought, well, then maybe I can do it then. |
| <i>Saman</i> | Then it just became pretty easy. |

John said that the tests included 'really simple tasks' yet that he probably had the worst results of all. On the one hand this positions him as a troubled pupil (doing poorly on the test), yet on the other hand, as an untroubled (carefree, possibly easily achieving if he would care to perform at his best) boy. His laughter when he talked about his weak work challenges the seriousness that is expected of an untroubled pupil in relation to both the testing and development discourses, at the same time as it strengthens his position as an untroubled carefree boy. However, our interpretation is that the development discourse helps to strengthen this untroubled boy position even more through its expectations that boys (of a certain age) are likely to be playful and unable to take work seriously. John declared that he 'lagged', but after being asked by the interviewer to

reflect upon this he rather quietly concluded that he 'still passed', thereby positioning himself as a pupil who might achieve easily if he cared enough to perform at his very best.

Alice, on the other hand, said that she tried to be clever and that the tests were rather fun but also sad. She stated that she is bad at maths and that she thought the tests were boring and hard to do. Alice also talked about her feelings concerning handing in the test when everyone else already finished it:

Alice You know, you feel that ... You feel a bit depressed if the others say like: 'Oh, I finished first' and 'I won the competition!' But it's not a competition and then you feel like: 'I'm here – the last one because I don't know how to solve this maths problem!'

But although she represented herself as a troubled, uncertain pupil who is bad at maths, she also exclaimed 'I did it!' and thereby repositioned herself as an able/certain and untroubled pupil, but also as an untroubled socially secure (popular) girl. Alice smiled when she talked, which positions her as an untroubled nice and friendly girl in the interview situation.

Unlike John, Saman did not position himself as a pupil who achieves easily, although he stressed that the tasks at hand were rather simple and that the tests were easy and fun. Instead, he reflected on the seriousness mediated in the test situation. We therefore interpret Saman as ambivalent in the sense that he found it easy to pass the tests (untroubled position) but took a troubled position in relation to future pressure to individually perform at one's very best.

Conclusions

Similarly to Burman's (2005) paper on childhood, neo-liberalism and the feminization of education, our paper started to discuss representations of current economic policies (the testing discourse), childhood (the development discourse), and how notions of gender frame classrooms. We interpret the pupils' different ways to position themselves as a disciplining and regulating effect of stereotypical gendered norms from within the development discourse, which still seems to have an impact on everyday classrooms and produce different gendered possibilities for children to resist. But we also see ruptures and cracks in the stereotypical doing of gender, such as crying boys and self-confident girls. The way we have tried to see children's repertoires as bodily, emotionally, and discursively entangled has resulted, we think, in a more nuanced analysis than would otherwise be possible. For instance, we could analyse how children took up different positions and were differently positioned depending on different 'micro situations' in the same context. Also, we could analyse the impact a child's behaviour (or the teacher) can have on others, for example, how one pupil's 'hurray' over finding the test tasks easy can put another pupil under pressure. These are just small incidents and not always easy to see, or interpret, but we believe that, when many things come together they 'do' things to schoolchildren's self-confidence as learners, for the worse, although sometimes also for the better.

The way we have worked as a co-analytical group of teachers has been both helpful and thought provoking since we come from different academic disciplines and are used to different theories and ways of working with data. Notwithstanding, a common goal for this article was to try out and develop ways to work with not only talk repertoires but

also body and affective repertoires to make use of more 'hidden' data. At the same time, it is a way for us to show resistance against neo-liberal ideas of performing 'ideal' researchers. Developing new understandings takes a long time – and things need to move quickly due to the marketization of academia (cf. Hasselberg 2013). Likewise, from a performativity perspective, it is not a good career choice to be seven authors of an article.

Notes

1. PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) is a triennial international survey that aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students.
2. TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) measures trends in mathematics and science achievement at grades 4 and 8.
3. [Please, let children be children!!!]

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by The Swedish Research Council - Vetenskapsrådet [grant number Dnr 721-2008-4646].

Notes on contributors

Eva Silfver (Ph.D. 2007, Umeå University), is an Associate Professor at the Department of Education, Umeå University, Sweden. Dr Silfver's research interests concern gender studies within the field of science and maths education, and she is currently engaged in a research project focusing knowledge and identity in engineering education.

Maritha Jacobsson (Ph.D. 2006, Umeå University) is a researcher with special interest in discourse analysis and power relations in legal contexts. Dr Jacobsson is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Social Work, Umeå University, Sweden.

Linda Arnell is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Social Work, Umeå University, Sweden. She is currently working on her thesis about girlhood and specifically young women's violence. Her analysis draws on critical discursive psychology.

Hanna Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist (Ph.D. 2007, Umeå University), is an Associate Professor in Sociology and currently a senior Lecturer at the Department of Social Work, Umeå University, Sweden. Her recent research is around autism, identity politics, and sexual, gendered and age normativity.

Maria Härgestam (Ph.D. 2015, Umeå University) is a senior lecturer at the Department of Nursing, Umeå University, Sweden. Her research interest concerns communication in inter-professional health care teams.

Magdalena Sjöberg is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Sociology, Umeå University, Sweden. She and is currently working on a thesis studying discourses of good motherhood, identity work of young mothers and digital parenting support.

Ulrika Widding (Ph.D. 2006, Umeå University) is a researcher with a special interest in critical discursive psychology and topics like norms and ideals associated to parenthood and parenting support. Dr Widding is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Education at Umeå University, Sweden.

References

- Allwood, J. 2002. "Bodily Communication Dimensions of Expression and Content." In *Multimodality in Language and Speech Systems*, edited by B. Granström, D. House, and I. Karlsson, 7–26. Boston: Kluwer Academic.
- Bailey, P. L. J. 2013. "The Policy Dispositif: Historical Formation and Method." *Journal of Education Policy* 28 (6): 807–827. doi:10.1080/02680939.2013.782512.
- Bergh, A. 2011. "Why Quality in Education – and What Quality? A Linguistic Analysis of the Concept of Quality in Swedish Government Texts." *Education Inquiry* 2 (4): 709–723.
- Bergh, A., D. Pettersson, and P. Skott. 2015. "Kunskapsmätningar." [Knowledge Assessments.] In *Utbildning – Makt och Politik* [Education – Power and Politics], edited by S. Lindblad, and L. Lundahl, 163–180. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Birenbaum, M., and Y. Gutvirtz. 1993. "The Relationship between Test Anxiety and Seriousness of Errors in Algebra." *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* 11 (1): 12–19.
- Blom, P. 2015. "Krönika: Barn måste få vara barn." [Chronicle: Children must be Children.] *Närkes Allehanda*, April 18.
- Broady, D. 2007. "Trettio år efteråt – ett återbesök hos den dolda läroplanen." *Kritisk utbildningstidskrift* 127 (3): 5–10.
- Burman, E. 2005. "Childhood, Neo-liberalism and the Feminization of Education." *Gender and Education* 17 (4): 351–367.
- Dahlström, S. 2015. "Barn måste få vara barn." [Children must be Children.] *Expressen*, September 5.
- Denham, S. 2007. "Dealing with Feelings: How Children Negotiate the Worlds of Emotions and Social Relationships." *Cognition, Brain, Behavior* 11 (1): 1–48.
- Denham, S. A., H. H. Bassett, E. Way, M. Mincic, K. Zinsler, and K. Graling. 2012. "Preschoolers' Emotion Knowledge: Self-regulatory Foundations, and Predictions of Early School Success." *Cognition and Emotion* 26 (4): 667–679. doi:10.1080/02699931.2011.602049.
- Edley, N. 2001. "Analysing Masculinity: Interpretative Repertoires, Ideological Dilemmas and Subject Positions." In *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis*, edited by M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, and S. J. Yates, 189–228. London: Sage.
- Foucault, M. 1980. "Prison Talk." In *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited by C. Gordon, 109–133. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Giddens, A. 1998. *The Third Way: Renewal of Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gordon, T. 2006. "Girls in Education: Citizenship, Agency and Emotions." *Gender and Education* 18 (1): 1–15. doi:10.1080/09540250500194880.
- Gordon, T., J. Holland, and E. Lahelma. 2000. *Making Spaces: Citizenship and Difference in Schools*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Halldén, G. 2007. *Den moderna barndomen och barns vardagsliv* [The Modern Childhood and the Everyday Lives of Children]. Stockholm: Carlsson bokförlag.
- Hasselberg, Y. 2013. "Drowning by Numbers: On Reading, Writing and Bibliometrics." *Confero Essays on Education Philosophy and Politics* 1 (1): 19–44. doi:10.3384/confero13v1121207a.
- Hjortsjö, C.-H. 1969. *Människans ansikte och mimiska språket* [Man's Face and Mimic Language]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Hultqvist, K., and G. Dahlberg. 2001. *Governing the Child in the New Millennium*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Jackson, C. 2002. "'Laddishness' as a Self-worth Protection Strategy." *Gender and Education* 14 (1): 37–50. doi:10.1080/09540250120098870.
- Jackson, C., and A.-S. 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.
- Kärkkäinen, R., H. Rätty, and K. Kasanen. 2008. "Children's Notions of the Malleability of Their Academic Competencies." *Social Psychology of Education* 11 (4): 445–458. doi:10.1007/s11218-008-9062-2.
- Kasanen, K., and H. Rätty. 2008. "'Do the Very Best You Can': The Third-grade Class Test." *Social Psychology of Education* 11 (2): 193–208. doi:10.1007/s11218-007-9045-8.

- Kendon, A. 1990. *Conducting Interaction: Patterns of Behavior in Focused Encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knapp, M. L., and J. A. Hall. 2002. *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*. 5th ed. South Melbourne: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Korp, H. 2006. *Kunskapsbedömning – vad, hur och varför?* [Knowledge Assessment – What, How and Why?] Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Korpi, B. M. 2006. *Förskolan i politiken: om intentioner och beslut bakom den svenska förskolans framväxt* [Preschool in Policy: Intentions and Decisions Behind the Swedish Preschool Emergence]. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.
- Krauss, R. M., Y. Chen, and P. Chawla. 1996. "Nonverbal Behavior and Nonverbal Communication: What Do Conversational Hand Gestures Tell Us?" In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. 28 vols, edited by P. Z. Mark, 389–450. New York: Academic Press.
- Lunneblad, J., and M. Asplund Carlsson. 2012. "Performativity as Pretence: A Study of Testing Practices in a Compulsory School in Sweden." *Ethnography and Education* 7 (3): 297–309. doi:10.1080/17457823.2012.717198.
- Massumi, B. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movements, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Morgan, A. 2007. "Using Video-stimulated Recall to Understand Young Children's Perceptions of Learning in Classroom Settings." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 15 (2): 213–226. doi:10.1080/13502930701320933.
- Nyström, E. 2009. "Teacher Talk: Producing, Resisting and Challenging Discourses about the Science Classroom." *Gender and Education* 21 (6): 735–751. doi:10.1080/09540250903119146.
- Öhrn, E. 2014. "Framställningar av utbildning, prestationer och kön." In *Att lyckas i skolan. Om skolprestationer och kön i olika undervisningspraktiker* [To Succeed at School: About School Achievements and Gender in Different Teaching Practices], edited by E. Öhrn, and A.-S. Holm, 177–185. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet. Gothenburg Studies in Educational Sciences 363.
- Öhrn, E., and A.-S. Holm, eds. 2014. *Att lyckas i skolan. Om skolprestationer och kön i olika undervisningspraktiker* [To Succeed at School: About School Achievements and Gender in Different Teaching Practices]. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet. Gothenburg Studies in Educational Sciences 363.
- Pekrun, R., T. Goetz, T. Wolfram, and R. P. Perry. 2002. "Academic Emotions in Students' Self-regulated Learning and Achievement: A Program of Quality and Quantitative Research." *Educational Psychologist* 37 (2): 91–105.
- Rantala, A. 2016. "Snälla kan du sätta dig?": Om vägledning i förskolan." ['Please Can You Sit Down?' About Guidance in Kindergarten.] *PhD diss.*, Umeå University.
- Räty, H., K. Kasanen, J. Kiiskinen, M. Nyky, and P. Atjonen. 2004. "Children's Notions of the Malleability of their Academic Ability in the Mother Tongue and Mathematics." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 48 (4): 413–426. doi:10.1080/0031383042000245807.
- Räty, H., L. Snellman, and K. Kasanen. 1999. "Children's Representations of Ability and their Changes during the First School Year." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 43 (3): 249–258. doi:10.1080/0031383990430302.
- Ringrose, J. 2007. "Successful Girls? Complicating Postfeminist, Neoliberal Discourses of Educational Achievement and Gender Equality." *Gender and Education* 19 (4): 471–489. doi:10.1080/09540250701442666.
- Schwarzer, C., and P. Buchwald. 2003. "Examination Stress: Measurement and Coping." *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping* 16 (3): 247–249. doi:10.1080/1061580031000095407.
- Silfver, E., G. Sjöberg, and A. Bagger. 2013. "Changing Our Methods and Disrupting the Power Dynamics: National Tests in Third-grade Classrooms." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 12: 39–51.
- Silfver, E., G. Sjöberg, and A. Bagger. 2016. "An 'Appropriate' Test Taker: The Everyday Classroom during the National Testing Period in School Year Three in Sweden." *Ethnography and Education* 11 (3): 237–252. doi:10.1080/17457823.2015.1085323.
- Sjöberg, G., E. Silfver, and A. Bagger. 2015. "Disciplined by Tests." *NOMAD* 20 (1): 55–75.
- Skolverket. 2012. http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/in_english.

- Skolverket. 2017a. <https://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/andra-sprak/in-english/the-swedish-education-system/preschool>.
- Skolverket. 2017b. <https://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/andra-sprak/in-english/the-swedish-education-system/preschool-class>.
- Skolverket [SwedishNationalAgencyforEducation]. 2010. <http://www.skolverket.se/bedomning/nationella-prov/bedomning-av-nationella-prov>.
- Taguma, M., I. Litjens, and K. Makowiecki. 2013. *Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care. Sweden 2013*. Paris: OECD.
- Thrift, N. 2004. "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect." *Geografiska Annaler* 86 B (1): 57–78.
- Thrift, N. 2008. *Non-Representational Theory: Space Politics and Affect*. London: Routledge.
- Utbildningsdepartementet [Ministry of Education]. 2008. "Fler nationella prov i vår." [More National Tests this Spring.] *Press Release*, October 30.
- Walkerdine, V. 1993. "Beyond Developmentalism?" *Theory & Psychology* 3 (4): 451–469.
- Wetherell, M. 1998. "Positioning and Interpretive Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-structuralism in Dialogue." *Discourse and Society* 9 (3): 387–412. doi:10.1177/0957926598009003005.
- Wetherell, M. 2013. "Affect and Discourse – What's the Problem? From Affect as Excess to Affective/Discursive Practice." *Subjectivity* 6 (4): 349–368. doi:10.1057/sub.2013.1.
- Wetherell, M. 2015a. "Trends in the Turn to Affect: A Social-psychological Critique." *Body & Society* 21 (2): 139–166. doi:10.1177/1357034X14539020.
- Wetherell, M. 2015b. "Tears, Bubbles and Disappointment – New Approaches for the Analysis of Affective-discursive Practices: A Commentary on 'Researching the Psychosocial.'" *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 12: 83–90. doi:10.1080/14780887.2014.958399.
- Wetherell, M. [2012] 2014. *Affect and Emotion. A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage.
- Wetherell, M., T. McCreanor, A. McConville, H. Moewaka Barnes, and J. le Grice. 2015. "Settling Space and Covering the Nation: Some Conceptual Considerations in Analysing Affect and Discourse." *Emotion, Space and Society* 16: 56–64. doi:10.1016/j.emospa.2015.07.005.
- Zeidner, M. 1998. *Test Anxiety: The State of the Art*. New York: Kluwer Academic.