Discourses We Live By

Narratives of Educational and Social Endeavour

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15. Navigating Grades *and* Learning in the Swedish Upper Secondary School Where Neoliberal Values Prevail

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Patric Wallin's research in a Swedish secondary school context explores the problem that conflicting paradigms (neoliberalism and student-centred learning) cause students. They need guidance as they want high grades for university entrance but avoid asking teachers for help for fear that they may appear less competent. Paradoxically, students develop mutual support strategies that counterbalance the competitive individualism engendered by neoliberal practices.

This chapter examines the practices through which a cohort of Swedish upper-secondary pupils manage their learning processes to avoid the possibility of their teachers doubting their study abilities. It explains how, in contemporary Sweden, a country where the outlook is increasingly neoliberal, university places are competitively awarded, creating concern among students that asking for support might mark them as unsuitable for university entrance. The research uses in-class observations and focus-group interviews to establish how two classes of students actually manage this dilemma and finds an interesting paradox — that the student practices potentially create both negative and positive consequences for their success. By seeking teacher approval rather than teacher assistance they cut themselves off

from an established effective form of academic support, but by turning to their own resources and discussing their studies with their fellow students, they improve their capacity to learn independently and work in a group of peers, important skills for higher-level study and for working life. Thus, the competitive practices common in neoliberal economies actually encourage the students to work cooperatively even as they strive to attain the high levels of success needed to guarantee a place in a prestigious university, at least in the context of natural science education, when carrying out laboratory work within the discipline of chemistry. This study is limited in scope in terms of subject coverage, but this context was chosen because the more practical format of such work offers opportunities to observe students learning though action rather than see them being taught didactically and thereby makes student-teacher interaction an option rather than a prerequisite.

The Broader Context of the Research

In response to a rise in neoliberal ideology and practices, educational landscapes all over the world have changed in profound ways during the last few decades (Connell, 2013). The influence of markets and businesses on education has greatly changed the language used in education, and as Giroux (2002, p. 426) pointed out 'one consequence is that civic discourse has given way to the language of commercialism, privatization, and deregulation.' It is through the emphasis on the free market and market-driven agendas that neoliberalism reshapes education, with the aim to increase its efficiency and promote individualism, competition, and consumption in society (Harvey, 2005). In Scandinavia, these changes are particularly present in upper-secondary and higher education. As in other western cultures, examples of this in the higher-education sector include the conceptualization of students as consumers (Molesworth et al, 2009), the increasing importance of rankings (Hazelkorn, 2011) and the emphasis on university branding (Chapleo, 2011). These changes, together with the high number of students applying for higher education, have strongly affected university admission processes.

In order to be admitted to a higher-education institution in Sweden, one first needs to fulfil the general requirements by completing

upper-secondary school with a certain number of pass grades, and secondly to go through a selection process (Universitets- och högskolerådet, 2017). The selection process matches the fixed number of places for undergraduate study in Sweden to the applying students. There are two main selection criteria: grade point average (GPA) from upper secondary school and the results from the Swedish Scholastic Assessment Test (sweSAT) (Löfgren, 2005). The GPA is calculated from all grades in upper-secondary school (three years) and ranges from one to twenty; in addition, up to two point five merit points can be earned by reading qualifying courses (Universitets- och högskolerådet, 2017). The sweSAT, on the other hand, is a standardized multiple-choice test given twice a year to allow people to improve their chances to be admitted to the university programme of their choice. The number of places assigned through each selection criteria differs from university to university, but at least a third should be distributed by GPA and a third by sweSAT. The remaining places can be distributed through selection criteria designed by each institution, or by extending the places for GPA- and sweSAT-based selection (Universitets- och högskolerådet, 2017).

In 2016, fifty-seven per cent of all undergraduate programs in Sweden had more than one application per available place. However, there are large variations in popularity and number of applications among different disciplines, programmes, and universities. This leads to large differences in the results applicants need in their GPA or sweSAT scores in order to be accepted. Certain universities are much more prestigious than others and have much higher entry requirements, even though the formal degree that students receive at the end is the same. University admission has become a double-sided competition where students compete to be accepted into prestigious universities, and universities compete for the 'best' students (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Neoliberalism also has a large impact on upper-secondary education in Sweden (Symeonidis, 2014). From the strong tradition of a welfare state with a centralized education built on democratic and egalitarian values, Swedish education has since the late '90s become one of the most decentralized and market-orientated education systems in the world (Lundahl et al, 2013). The stronger emphasis on the ability to choose freely between schools, in combination with a simultaneous intensification of testing, has created a situation where the student

population has become increasingly segregated and the importance of a school's status is rising. At the same time, reforms have tried to promote student-centred education at all levels, with the aim to encourage students to actively define problems and approaches and thus engage in self-regulated and lifelong learning (Ambrose et al, 2010), rather than trying to find the right answer (Sjöberg, 2011). The literature strongly supports the view that teaching approaches that focus on encouraging students to ask their own questions and develop their own inquiries help students to couple theory and practice, as well as build deeper and more holistic conceptual models of the subject area (English & Kitsantas, 2013; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Madhuri et al., 2012; Zacharia, 2003). Students become curious, independent and motivated learners through less directed teaching processes, not through the default position where students fear to ask their teacher questions.

The Disciplinary Context for the Research

The study focuses on student engagement in laboratory exercises in natural science as these are practical classes that are often seen to provide opportunities for independent learning (Elliott et al, 2008). Despite this claim, laboratory exercises are often reduced to expository lessons that require the students only to follow a specific set of instructions without much reflection and independent inquiry: students' and teachers' time for meaningful, conceptually driven inquiry is often seriously limited, because the technical and inflexible details of the task consume most of their time and energy (Hofstein & Lunetta, 2004).

Recent reforms of upper-secondary education in Sweden aim to overcome this problem and highlight the importance of student-driven inquiry (Skolverket, 2016). For chemistry education, this reform means changes to the curriculum, as well as the way chemistry is taught and assessed in schools. The aim is to create a stronger alignment between the students' laboratory and theoretical work, as well as to promote student-centred inquiries during the laboratory work. To achieve this aim, it is emphasized that chemistry education should provide students with opportunities to acquire five key competences: knowledge of concepts, models, theories and practices in chemistry and understanding of how these evolve; the ability to analyse and answer questions related

to the subject as well as to identify, formulate and solve problems, and to reflect on and evaluate their chosen strategies, methods and results; the ability to plan, implement, interpret and present experiments and observations, and to handle chemicals and equipment; knowledge of the importance of chemistry for the individual and society; and the ability to use knowledge in chemistry to communicate with society rather than just internally within the sector.

How this reform will be perceived by students and teachers, and how it will impact on classroom practices in an educational landscape that focuses strongly on grades and assessment is not yet known. However, in light of these changes, it is interesting to take a closer look at how young adults prepare for the transition between upper-secondary school and higher education. Although the departure point for this study is the chemistry laboratory, this context enables us to start to see glimpses of more general and fundamental aspects of the educational system that influence students. In observing and interviewing students in upper secondary schools in Sweden, I explore what factors influence young adults' approaches to learning, what role university admission policies play, and how neoliberal discourses in education influence what happens in practice.

The Local Context of the Research

T he research contexts for this study are two municipal upper-secondary schools in the Gothenburg area of Sweden. Both schools have relatively high minimum entry qualification requirements in the form of grades due to a competitive demand for places, and similar student populations, with a majority of students aiming to continue their education at universities afterwards.

The departure points for this study are the practices within the chemistry laboratory and to make these more visible it was decided to introduce a new technique, a change in instructional design. Pictorial instructions were prepared for eight different chemistry laboratory exercises (Rundberg & Sandström, 2016), originally to explore how these instructions would influence students' collaborative approaches. It quickly became clear that the change itself had very little immediate effect on students' interactions and working approaches. However, the

pictorial instructions served as a trigger to stimulate students to evaluate, access, and think about their own actions and approaches, thereby making deeper beliefs and values more accessible in the interviews.

Empirical data was collected through classroom observations (six classes) and focus-group interviews (twelve groups). For the observations, a qualitative unstructured approach was used that focused on the whole class, the overall impression of the students' work in the laboratory, and their social interactions. The aim was to better understand and interpret students' cultural behaviour and their everyday routines during the laboratory exercises as they occur by focusing on emerging patterns within the students' actions (Mulhall, 2003). All the individual notes from the observations were written as a storyline soon after the event, to fully profit from the immersive experience of observing the students in action.

Using the observations as a starting point to define areas of interest, the focus-group interviews were used to gain more in-depth information about students' experiences and viewpoints regarding the emerging topics (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The aim of the interviews was to better understand why different types of phenomena occur, to explore the students' reasoning, and to see school life from their perspective (Legard et al, 2003). Through the use of focus-group interviews, it was possible to capitalize on communication between students in order to stimulate memories and reflections on experiences, as well as to explore cultural values and procedures that are shared by the members of the group (Mack et al, 2005). All students participating in the interviews gave their written informed consent to be part of the research study. Interviews lasted between forty-five and seventy minutes, and all were audio recorded and transcribed soon after the event.

All material was analysed together using an inductive data analysis approach to capture emergent categories (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In the first step, the data was read and listened to multiple times before it was deconstructed into units of meaning by pulling out quotes and passages of interest. Afterwards, units of meaning were used to construct categories that captured emergent topics of importance in the data. At later stages of this iterative process of deconstruction and construction, literature was used to provide an additional perspective and departure point for analysis of the data. The aim was to let the data speak for itself

and explore the situation from the students' perspective. In this way, it was possible to discover underlying reasons and actual effects, not only anticipated ones.

The Findings of the Research

T he initial classroom observations make it possible to see how students act and interact in class during their chemistry laboratory exercises. It is through these observations that one can better understand and interpret the students' cultural behaviour and their everyday routines.

The Centrality of Tests

F rom the observations, it became clear that the students' actions, interactions, and foci are not bounded by the chemistry laboratory exercises but extend to other areas. One group (group three) recurrently discussed an upcoming test in another course and tried to prepare and rehearse for that test at the same time as undertaking their chemistry laboratory work, as below.

Observation in Class One: Group Three Activity

Time: 25 min. Group three worries about a test that they will have later today and talk about it for a long time. They look into their books — not their chemistry books, but the book needed for the test later.

Time: 45 min. After working a little bit more on their chemistry laboratory exercise, group three has returned to talking about the upcoming test.

Time: 60 min. Group three is revising and trying to prepare as well as possible for the test.

Commentary: This shows how the students constantly need to adjust and manage their priorities and seem to have developed strategies to use their time most efficiently. At the same time, this means that they divert their attention from engaging in and learning from the class they are in right now, and instead think ahead to the next test that they need to take.

Observation in Class Five: Group Four Activity

Time: 35 min. Group four starts to talk about a biology exam, which they will have later today. They involve some other groups and soon the discussion is about oral and written exams in more general terms.

Commentary: Here, the prominent role of tests and exams is further illustrated by the way students not only talk about the content of a test and what they need to know but engage in more general discussions about exams and testing practices.

Using these observations as a starting point, issues around grades and tests were explored in more detail during the focus-group interviews in order to better understand the students' perspectives. I was keen to take a closer look at why grades play a central role in how these young adults approach different learning situations and education as a whole, and what consequences this might have. When asked directly about the importance of grades, the single most important factor that students talk about is their importance in enabling them free choice of university and study programme after school.

Interviewer:Why do you think you are focusing so much on the exams?

Anders:One wants to have good grades or so…

Maria:Yes, that's the way it is.

Interviewer:Why do you want to have good grades?

Maria:Because… because we want to come in [at the university] where we want and… and there is a lot of pressure in our class as well…

It is not necessarily that the students know exactly what they want to do after school, but they want to have high grades in order to be able to choose without restrictions. They do not want to be the only ones who are unable to choose.

Uncertainty About Assessment Practices

While grades play a central role for the students, they are not really sure about how they are formed. The students know that tests

have a big influence on their grades, but also that their performance in class plays an important role. It is this second aspect that students are most unsure about. This uncertainty on how their work in class is assessed influences the students and shapes the strategies that they use when interacting with the teacher.

The students say that they constantly feel they are being observed and assessed by their teacher, and this makes them afraid to do something wrong. They actually try to minimize their contact with the teacher. They try to draw as little attention as possible to themselves and avoid any interactions with the teacher that might suggest that they do not understand:

> I do not really know how we are assessed on the laboratory work. [...] You do not want to ask too much because then you might show that you do not understand [...]. You do not want to do the wrong thing because the practical work is being assessed as well. (Peter)

The students focus on doing things correctly and executing all their experimental work according to the instructions that they have. They feel that this makes them less vulnerable and gives the teacher fewer opportunities to be critical about their work, for they feel that assessment is omnipresent, and that they are watched continuously:

> I know that the teacher assesses this, the laboratory work is still a part of the grade. [...] [For] me it's important that the execution is right because that's what I know the teacher is assessing. I also think that it is important for me to do the right thing and to think right because I know the teacher might not tell you 'Now I'm assessing you' but I know they still do it. (Clara)

Through such strategies the students try to minimize the risk of an unfavourable assessment, even though they do not know how they are assessed. This uncertainty is challenging for the students and leaves them in doubt about what they are supposed to learn and what they should know already.

Hiding Among Peers

This avoidance of the teacher establishes a learning vacuum, and incidentally deprives the students of a formal 'more experienced'

other from whom they could potentially learn a great deal. An interesting topic that emerged from the interviews is how the students try to fill this void. To whom do the students pose their questions? How do they learn to conceptualize their questions? To what extent do they know what they need to ask about?

Their fears foreground reputation over learning. First and foremost, the students are cautious about asking the teacher questions. They carefully consider if they should ask and what impression that will give the teacher:

> I get a little bit like this: 'should I ask the teacher, will he think that it is good that I ask or will he just, oh she really does not understand'. (Anna)

The students do not want to risk the teacher finding out that they do not know something that they should be familiar with already by asking a wrong question. Being *viewed* as knowledgeable takes priority over *being* knowledgeable.

Yet the students feel the need to ask someone and one approach that they use is to ask the other students instead of asking the teacher. In this way, they can discuss their thoughts and ideas with each other and avoid being assessed by the teacher. The students also experience this as being much easier and more practical, as they sit around large tables with other students:

> [When we work at the same table as other groups,] one can always discuss fairly easily with each other without having to run around the room in order to find someone who knows what you want to know. (Julia)

It is by helping each other that the students try to reduce the need to ask the teacher. There is, perhaps, an irony here that neoliberal practices that foster competition and individualism lead to a situation where students work collectively in order to protect their academic reputations. Their need to show their teacher that they are competent causes them to turn to their peers when they need help and support. This can be a useful learning strategy, fostering discussion and debate, but could also go wrong. It seems that to risk making the *same* mistakes is less threatening than standing out from the crowd or drawing attention to any personal gaps in knowledge or understanding.

Dissatisfaction with Their Own Approaches

It becomes clear from the interviews that, despite developing a range of protective and coping strategies, the students are not necessarily satisfied with the situation they find themselves in when asked to reflect upon it. Some students expressed dissatisfaction, recognizing that their approaches are focusing only on grades and tests, and that they are actively choosing these strategies over the ones that they believe would help them to learn better, and this is a source of regret:

> It is a bit sad that all our focus is on what we need to learn for the test, but that is what always happens. We have to [learn it], not because it is part of the course or the topic that we are exploring at the moment but because 'we have to know this exercise because it will be on the test'. (Tim)

Other students talk about their expectations and how disappointed they are by the discrepancy between how things *should* and *do* work at school. One of the students explained that she had looked forward to gaining a greater understanding of things when she started upper-secondary school, but finds not much has changed from her previous school experience:

> Before I started upper secondary school, I thought 'once I am in high school, I will work in the chemistry laboratory and run experiments, but I will not only see and do stuff, but I will understand why'. However now that I am here, it feels like I still do not understand why; I still just do it without really understanding what really happens when I do it, but that would be the interesting part. (Isabella)

Going beyond their own strategies and expectations, some students also expressed more general dissatisfaction with the constant assessment during classes and explain they are struggling to find a balance between focusing on grades and focusing on learning. This is demanding for the students and often limits their desire to engage in exciting challenges. The opportunities for learning that the chemistry laboratory work offers for the students are quickly transformed into stressful situations once the students consider how their performances might affect their grades:

> On one hand you think that it is a little bit fun. At least I think that problems are fun to solve. So, in that regard it can be fun but on the other

hand you get really stressed by the situation. Maybe not by the laboratory
work by itself but by everything thing around it, like if a teacher walks
past and thinks 'what ARE you doing?'. (Daniel)

Although the students describe their dissatisfaction with their own
approaches in the interviews and explain how they are aware of the
problems their strategies have for their own learning, they do not
propose any alternatives or know how they can change the situation.

Linking the Findings to the Broader Context

Both interviews and observations provide insights into how
students approach school and what shapes their learning
experiences. To reiterate, there is a strong focus on grades amongst
the students in this study, a shared belief that grades are important
to be able to choose a university freely, and a desire to be prepared,
at the level of formal requirements, for the transition from school to
university. At the same time however, the students do not really know
how they are assessed and evaluated, which leads to missed learning
opportunities as they are afraid to make mistakes or ask for help from
the teacher. Furthermore, they describe their dissatisfaction with the
situation they find themselves in and criticize their own strategies
and approaches to learning. By observing the students and listening
to them, it becomes possible to unveil the side effects of the current
system of university entry requirements and admission processes, as
well as the paradox that neoliberal ideology has created in education,
as I will discuss below.

The Neoliberal Educational Discourse

The importance of grades, test scores, and merit in society and in the
university admission process is a strong influence on young adults
(Alon & Tienda, 2007), especially on the population of high-performing
students that were part of this study. With the increasing interest in and
focus on education and the contemporary theme of lifelong learning
(Fejes, 2009), university admission policies, amongst other things, play
an increasingly important role in the educational discourse as they
regulate the entry into higher education.

It is in the transition phase between upper-secondary and higher education that university admission policies become a central element in students' lives, as they restrict their possibilities on a formal level. Education becomes instrumentalized as a 'tool for keeping career paths open' (Låftman et al, 2013, p. 933) and contributes to young adults conceptualizing their lives as projects that they actively build and evaluate with the aim of having a successful career (Wyn et al, 2015).

At the same time, there is a desire to change teaching approaches and put a stronger emphasis on student-centred learning. The recent reform of upper secondary chemistry education (Skolverket, 2016) highlights the importance of student-driven inquiry and self-regulated learning. Student-centred learning aims to help students to grow through meaningful interactions with other people (Shor, 1996) and become self-regulated learners who value learning and education (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Clark, 2012). However, neoliberal ideology overshadows this process of self-development and growth by focusing on the isolated individual and enforcing tests and control mechanisms upon students and teachers. The focus on individualism in neoliberal discourses means that everyone is responsible for their own success, but also that the ones that do not succeed are failures and this is their own fault (Harvey, 2005; Symeonidis, 2014). Eventually, this leads to the problem that 'students are learning how to pass exams and not how to work together or how to appreciate learning in itself' (Symeonidis, 2014, p. 34). Instead of framing self-regulated and lifelong learning as a personal and intellectual growth, it is often reduced to its importance and value for future careers (Fejes, 2009; Jarvis, 1999).

Contributing to the Discourse

There is an irony that, through the learning strategies and approaches they adopt, the students I worked with actually contribute to the neoliberal discourse and uphold the importance of grades, as they themselves constantly relate to and emphasize them. Rather than opposing these pressures, the students develop strategies that are adapted to the system and that enable them to manage being in their current position. This appears similar to findings from other studies that

have looked at students' approaches to learning in different contexts and situations after Marton's and Säljö's (1976a; 1976b) seminal work in this area. Students are conforming to what Connell (2013, p. 110) described as a key feature in the neoliberal education landscape:

> Under neoliberal rule, education is displaced by competitive training, competition for privilege, social conformity, fear and corruption, while protest and rational alternatives are marginalized.

It is the students' desires for social conformity and to fit in with their peers that influence their discourse about learning and education. Due to the emphasis on conformity, the focus shifts from the experienced to the desired or anticipated. It is not only previous experiences on a local and personal level that shape students' strategies for learning and their educational decisions, but the way society and institutions describe, communicate, and incentivize learning on a more systematic and societal level. As Giroux (2002, p. 426) pointed out:

> Market forces have radically altered the language we use in both representing and evaluating human behaviour and action. [...] No longer defined as a form of self-development, individuality is reduced to the endless pursuit of mass-mediated interests, pleasures, and commercially produced lifestyles.

The students live in a world where they are constantly exposed to advertisements that shapes their imagination of what a happy or successful life looks like (Jhally, 1987, 2003) and strive to achieve this. However, the picture might be more nuanced, at least among the students in this study.

Contradictory Discourses

We have seen that the students are dissatisfied with their current situation even as they contribute to a neoliberal educational discourse. They express the sadness and helplessness they associate with their own focus on grades and assessment, but see no opportunity to change anything. They feel a desire to focus on learning and understanding and would like their education to challenge their thinking, but recognize, realistically, that they need good grades to get into university. They describe their wish to work around the current

neoliberal educational discourse and bring back the joy of learning by engaging with the topics in their courses but daren't risk breaching current practices. In other words, the students wish for a revitalization of education as a place for intellectual growth (Magolda, 2007; Olssen & Peters, 2005), where they can engage in critical discussions, develop independent thinking, and experience learning as an activity worth pursuing for its own sake.

Arguably, the education system should facilitate young adults' transition from looking to authority figures, like teachers, to provide relevant knowledge and information towards a desire to take responsibility for their own and society's future development by engaging in critical discussions and democracy (King & Kitchener, 1994; Magolda, 1992). Young adults need to have the opportunity to develop a self-authoring mindset: 'the internal capacity of a student to define his/her own belief system, identity, and relationships' (Magolda, 2007, p. 69).

From the interviews, it is clear that students would like their education to be different but seem to lack the necessary tools to critique the system and boundary conditions that create the situation that they are in. Neoliberal ideology has led to an educational system where students only know how to conform. It has reduced the ability of students to critique the system itself by isolating individuals and minimizing critical discussions (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal discourse maintains, as Fischman (2009, p. 5) pointed out, that 'schools should be apolitical institutions, implementing scientifically verified "best practices" which will be assessed through standardized testing'. Instead of educating to create critical and democratic citizens, the focus has shifted towards educating consumers that function in the workplace (Giroux, 2002).

In emphasizing the qualification function of education, neoliberal discourses focus on the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that qualify students to *do* something (Biesta, 2009), leading students to miss important parts of their educational experience (Olssen & Peters, 2005), and the students in this study sensed that this was the case. Whether they fully grasped the socio-political framework lay beyond the boundaries of my research, but they are situated in a context where core skills and a strong emphasis on individualism, competition, and

assessment are publicly valued over the socializing function of education that helps students to become part of a socio-cultural context and grow as people (Giroux, 2002; Harvey, 2005).

For teachers, it is difficult to challenge this situation as 'the problems of the education system have been laid at the door of teachers while their capacity for finding solutions has been taken away' (Gunter, 2001, p. 144). Like their students, teachers are pulled in opposing directions. They are expected to create meaningful learning environments, at the same time as their professional autonomy is constantly reduced by standardization, testing, and surveillance in a neoliberal educational landscape (Connell, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Current university admission policies further complicate the situation, as schoolteachers cannot deny the importance of grades, but still want to encourage students to learn in order to gain a deeper understanding. While this creates tensions for teachers (Sjöberg, 2011), the young adults are also left alone to figure out how to best navigate through this system, and what priorities to choose (Symeonidis, 2014) and it is in this 'space' that the students find their own ways of working.

Circumventing the Discourse

Where the neoliberal values clash with educational ones the students have to find a means of resolution, and they do so, albeit in an unpredictable fashion. We have seen that the students have a strong focus on grades and a desire to be prepared for the transition from school to university but at the same time they do not really know how they are assessed and feel constantly observed by the teacher. While the students contribute to the neoliberal discourse themselves in their desire to achieve high grades, they also describe their dissatisfaction with the situation they find themselves in and criticize their own strategies and approaches to learning. Yet, in their desire not to appear 'needy' to the teachers, the students are developing collaborative ways of working together that, in part, undermine the isolation and competitive nature of a neoliberal educational system; an interesting paradox and a reminder that these cooperative practices could be shaped to support an alternative learning style if the teachers were part of the process rather than bypassed.

Final Remarks

If students and teachers were to engage in dialogues they might, together, find ways to work around the dominant neoliberal discourse on education. Student dissatisfaction presents an opportunity for change. Listening to the young adults in this study and understanding their struggles in the educational system in more detail is an important step to be able to better help future students in the transition from schools to universities and to provide them with the tools to look beyond the current way that education works. It is in the students' struggles that learning opportunities are lost and the joy for learning is damaged, at a time when lifelong learning, critical citizenship, and democratic values are needed more than ever. There is a need for further research, particularly to examine the learning processes within other disciplines and contexts, in order to better understand how this life phase is influenced by predominant neoliberal discourses.

The voices of young adults, as well as teachers, need to be heard and listened to. Education is an integral part of any democratic society and more research is needed to document how the educational landscape is currently undermined by neoliberalism and how students and teachers manage the situation to find ways forward, to mobilize their resistance to the negative consequences of current neoliberal education discourses.

Acknowledgments

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