

## "Did you end up on the loser team?"

Exploring failing boys in VET

Jørgensen, Christian Helms

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Christian Helms Jørgensen  
Roskilde University, Denmark



## Exploring 'failing boys' in VET

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

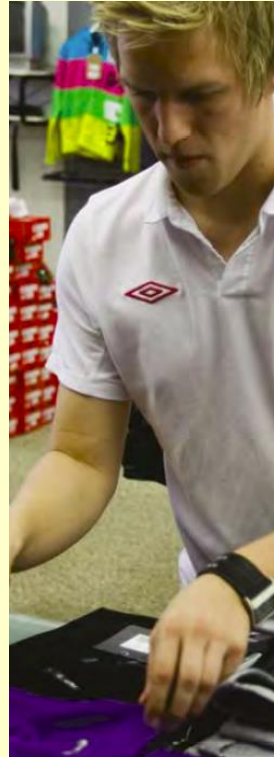
## The new policy discourse of 'failing boys'

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



## Arguments of the 'failing boys' discourse

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



## Explanations in the 'failing boys' discourse

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

### In addition

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



# Problematizing the political problem of 'failing boys'

- 'failing boys' is a statistical construction
- Men still privileged in society and the labour market (remuneration, managerial positions)

## General critique of discourse of 'failing boys'

- Binary and stereotyped logic
- Essentialist concept of gender
- Opposed concepts of boys and girls
- General problems are made into 'boys problems' (*dropout*)



# Exploring 'failing boys' in VET

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

Inspired by three different theoretical approaches

1. Structuralist theories of social and cultural reproduction
2. Cultural studies of boys' anti-school sub-cultures
3. The differentiation-polarisation theory of educational tracking/streaming



## Empirical data

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





# 1. Theories of social and cultural reproduction

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



## Structural reproduction in our study:

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



## 2. Cultural studies in educational ethnography (CCCS)

- Paul Willis' critique of reproduction theory: Emphasized young people's active cultural production of educational identities
- Reproduction is a dynamic, contingent and contested process
- Boys working-class culture linked to resistance to the school's middle class values (Willis 1978)
- Rejection of the 'performance ideology'
- 'The lad's' anti-school subculture was based on a sexist and racist masculinity



## Anti-school subculture in our study?

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



## Anti-school subculture in our study?

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

### 3. The differentiation polarization theory

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



## Differentiation-polarization in our study?

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



## 'Failing boys' in VET?

- Technical VET with low status has a masculine coding
- But boys and girls have same dropout rate in VET
- VET programmes with male coding exposed to additional risks: *early choice, training placements, multiple transitions.*
- VET can provide a 'counter-culture' to the academic culture and offer boys and girls a 'second chance' not afforded by comprehensive school systems.
- Division of students in high/low classes involve risk of polarisation and disengagement - and boys have higher risk of being placed in low tracks.

Thank you for your attention!

