

## **Some boys' problems in education**

– what is the role of VET?

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## **Some boys' problems in education – what is the role of VET?**

The last two decades have seen an increasing political concern in the high dropout rates and low performance in education of boys compared to girls – at times in the form of a 'moral panic' (Smith 2010). This has also been the case in Denmark where 'the boy problem' in education now is placed high on the agenda of education policy. The purpose of this article is to examine this 'boy problem' in relation to the dual system of VET in Denmark. By considering the gender divisions and the value of the VET programmes on the labour market, it explores what kind of problems boys have in VET. Secondly it explores the role of VET for students at risk of dropping out based on individual qualitative interviews with 106 students, two thirds male, attending vocational schools in Denmark. The analyses show that most students experience the dual system of VET as a valuable alternative to general education, but social and institutional processes of differentiation in the vocational schools places a significant group of students in a position where they have little chance of completing the programme. In the conclusion some reflections are made on the effect of a recent reform of VET in relation to these problems.

Keywords: failing boys, gender, dual system, vocational education, gender.

### **[Introduction]**

The Danish Minister of Education nominated 'the boy problem' to be a special challenge in the strategic programme for basic schools, called New Nordic School, and earmarked a special fund to support the retention of boys in education (MBU 2012). The policy discourse on the 'boy problem' has particularly focused on vocational education and training (VET), where boys constitute the majority of the students and the drop-out rates are highest. At the same time VET is often seen as a 'second chance' especially for boys, who don't achieve well in general education. International research has emphasised dual systems of VET to be efficient and high-quality routes to skilled employment for young people not opting for higher education (Saar, Unt and Kogan 2008; Breen 2005; Walther 2006).

The Danish VET system is based on the dual system of apprenticeship, and it has many similarities to the German dual system (Juul and Jørgensen 2011). Around two thirds of the programmes are work-based training where the apprentices have a contract and receive a wage. Most of the programmes offer students a combination of a vocational identity and a gender identity as they have a strong occupational profile and

at the same time are strongly gendered. Estevez-Abe (2000) has shown that vocational programmes, and especially those based on apprenticeship, are more gender-biased than school based programmes and general education. Two years after leaving compulsory education in Denmark 43% of the boys and 25% of the girls have taken up a vocational programme. In some of the male dominated programmes, like car mechanic, transport and construction, almost half of the students (45-7 %) are very low achievers (Jensen and Larsen 2011:35). But most of them actually complete a vocational education and gain skilled employment.

For young people VET represents a highly institutionalised transition to work that is quite efficient at giving young people who complete an apprenticeship access to employment at a relevant level (Saar, Unt and Kogan 2008). In addition people completing a VET programme are known to have accumulated incomes over the life course that are comparable with graduates from Bachelor programmes (Dalskov 2009), and they have a high degree of professional autonomy at work (Gallie 2009). Consequently the dual system of VET in Denmark has been recognised as an attractive pathway to employment for non-academic youth (Müller 2005).

But the VET programmes suffer from falling esteem and falling enrolment because of two unresolved problems in the VET system. One is the almost permanent shortage of training placements. Young people have free access to most of the basic courses of VET (6-12 month), but in 2013 one third of the students had difficulties continuing on the main course (typically 3 years) because they could not find a training placement. The other problem is a result of the organisation of the VET system as a distinct track on the basis of an 'employment logic' (Ianelli and Raffe 2007) separate from general education (Gymnasium). The dual system has weak connections to higher education and VET increasingly appears to be a 'dead end' in the education system (Jørgensen 2013). As a consequence, the VET programmes and especially the male-dominated technical programmes appear to be on the bottom rung of the status hierarchy of higher secondary programmes (Andersen 2005). At the same time men have become a minority in higher education, even in some of the most prestigious professions. VET is considered to be part of the 'boy problem' as it diverts male students away from higher education. This purpose of this article is to examine critically this so-called 'boy problem' in relation to the Danish dual system of VET. The empirical study is based on interviews with 106 students (of these two thirds were boys) in the school based basic courses of the dual system of VET. In addition the paper will draw on quantitative studies to explore the gendered pathways in Danish VET.

In this article I will first question the discourse of a 'boy problem', since earlier studies have shown that the political construction of gender problems can be quite disconnected from the actual development of gendered transition patterns in education across countries (Moreau 2011). This calls for a critical examination of the nature of the 'boy problem' in education. It is clear, though, that some remarkable changes have taken place in boys and girls relative achievement in schools and their choices and pathways in the Danish educational system. In the 1980s, girls dominated the group of early school leavers (Hansen 1980), and focus was on girls as a vulnerable group in the education system (Ørum 1981). Today men make up the majority of early school leavers not completing any post-compulsory education.

Secondly, the article will explore male students' experiences of and relations to vocational education, with a special focus on the value and meaning they ascribe to their vocational programme. In connection with this it will discuss earlier studies of boys' anti-school sub-cultures and their experiences of vocational education (Willis 1977; Mac an Gaill 1994; Bathmaker 2005). The relevance of these studies is discussed in relation to the current situation in Denmark in order to assess the role of the Danish dual system for non-academic boys.

## Methods and data

The empirical data for this article consists of 106 individual interviews with students from eight different vocational schools, supplemented by ethnographic observations in the schools. Two thirds of those interviewed were male and half of the students were interviewed again after six months. The interviews were produced in 2009-10 as part of a large mixed methods research project (2009-2012) funded by the Danish research council with the purpose of explaining the high dropout rates in Danish vocational education. In addition to the interviews, the study included a number of register-based studies of the students' backgrounds and the schools' results and interviews with 36 teachers in the vocational schools where the students were interviewed.

The selection of schools and students was based on two initial register-based studies. One study included all Danish vocational schools and ranked the schools in relation to their performance in retaining students. This was used to select four well-performing and four low-performing schools for the qualitative examination. The other study included all vocational students in 2004-5 and identified social background factors that increased the risk of dropping out from VET; this was then used to select students for the interviews and observations. Three quarters of the students were selected among at-risk students and one quarter among the remaining students.

The students participated in the interviews in accordance with the principles of confidentiality and voluntary informed consent and the students were informed in writing of the purpose of the research project. The questions in the interviews concerned factors that earlier research has found to be influential in the retention of students. The students were asked about their social background and earlier school experience, their experiences of the vocational school, the teaching and training and about their plans for the future. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety and coded in Nvivo using a combination of themes from the interview guide and empirically generated themes. The quotations used in the article illustrate general findings from the interpretation of data, and all names used are pseudonyms.

## Crisis of the gender order

Earlier studies of gender and education have emphasised men's dominant position in the skilled occupations and professions and the responsibility of men as the main provider for the family (Walby 1997). The education system was seen as reproducing not only the class-based inequalities, but also the patriarchal gender divisions in the labour market. The subordinate position of women in the labour market was mirrored in their inferior position in education. But this traditional social order has been undergoing major changes in the last decades with the shift from manufacture to service and knowledge work (McDowell 2003).

In research on masculinities the problems of (some) boys in education are related to a wider structural and systemic 'crisis of masculinity' (Kimmel 2010) or a crisis of the traditional 'gender order' and its patriarchal power relations (Connell 2000). This crisis is among other things brought about by structural transformations of the economic basis of capitalism and changes in the work force that erode traditional forms of "hegemonic masculinity" associated with the male breadwinner. These changes favour female employment in service and knowledge-based occupations and encourage the women's participation in higher education. At the same time these changes have degraded the traditional male virtues of physical strength and technical skills and reduced predominantly male employment in manufacturing and the crafts connected with the traditional VET programmes. This theoretical framework explains the 'boy problem' to be a consequence of structural changes that marginalise and reduce the esteem of the VET programmes

and make them an option only for the weakest learners and students from social strata with the least cultural resources. In the following I will explore the explanatory power of such a structurally oriented approach for the situation of boys in the Danish dual system of VET. The education system in Denmark is in many ways similar to the systems in the other Nordic countries, with a strong tradition of policies pursuing equal access to education, regardless of gender and social background, and with public and unsegregated schools (Antikainen 2006). Nevertheless, it is a classical paradox that the Nordic societies are strongly gender-segregated, despite the highly profiled policies of gender equality. Inequality is not strong in the vertical dimension, but women and men are educated and employed in different jobs and sectors (horizontally), with a strong segregation into male and female professions (Bloksgaard 2011; Jarman, Blackburn and Racko 2012). This segregation is especially strong in the VET-system, where half of all the 109 programmes are dominated by either men or women (more than 90% of the students are one sex). This segregation is primarily a result of the large welfare state that employs around one third of the workforce, mainly women. More than three quarters of the employees in the municipalities and regions in Denmark are women. This segregation means that the transformation to a service and knowledge society has a different impact on men and women. Men work more often within traditional industries and crafts, which are disappearing due to the financial crisis and the outsourcing and automation of manufacturing jobs. Women are more likely to work within the public sector, which is less severely impacted by the financial crisis. So, for the first time in 25 years, the unemployment rate of men in 2008 exceeded that of women. In addition, women have become a majority among the students in Danish higher education, even in medicine, political science and law – former strongholds of masculine power.

Concurrently, men have come to be in majority in the group of young people who never complete any post-compulsory education. The majority of this group of young people are drop-outs from vocational schools (Jensen and Larsen 2011). In sum, these figures seem to support the political discourse claiming that we have a serious ‘boy problem’ in education – and that VET is contributing to this. But this is not the whole story.

### **Men leave school early – but get jobs**

The research project on retention in VET, which this article draws on, surprisingly found that the drop-out rate of boys was not higher, but similar to the drop-out rates of girls (Larsen and Jensen 2010), and this has been confirmed by other studies (Henningsen 2007; Humlum and Jensen 2010). The general pattern is that social background is the main risk factor for dropping out of VET, and that minorities, gender, ethnic or other, have higher drop-out rates than majorities in education. This does not support the idea of a general ‘boy problem’. The lower unemployment of women did not last long, because cuts in the public sector since 2008 have made it very difficult for new graduated nurses, teachers and social workers, mainly women, to get access to the labour market. As a result unemployment rates for men and women have been equal since 2011 (Danmarks Statistik 2013), and future job growth is expected to take place mainly in the private sector benefitting men more than women.

The influx of women into higher education implies that women formally attain higher levels of education than men. But this is mainly a consequence of gender segregation in the labour market and the academic upgrading over the last 20 years of the female welfare professions to Bachelor level. But female graduates at Bachelor level are mainly employed in the public sector, and they have not been able to close the wage gap in relation to men in the private sector, who most often have completed a VET programme (Deding and Holt 2010; Lønkommissionen 2010). Studies of accumulated incomes over the life course show that many (male) VET occupations, like electrician and car mechanic, have higher incomes than (female)

graduates at Bachelor level like nurses and primary school teachers (Dalskov 2009). We can conclude that the success of women in the education system hasn't yet had much effect on the position of women in the labour market.

But it is new that men make up a majority of the early school leavers who never complete any post-compulsory education. Yet, men don't have higher unemployment rates than women. This is surprising, as a low level of education is a main determinant factor for unemployment. Quite the reverse, men without any post-compulsory education more often have jobs with managerial responsibilities than women who have completed a VET programme (Holt et al. 2006).

To sum up, women have succeeded in the education system and their average attainment has exceeded the attainment of men in many areas. This is partly a reflection of the strong gender divisions in the labour market, which means that boys more often choose VET programmes at higher secondary level leading to male occupations in the private sector, while women choose Bachelor programmes connected to the public welfare professions. But the higher formal attainment of women hasn't (yet?) resulted in any significant changes in the inferior position of women in the labour market. In addition, men and women have the same risk of dropping out of VET. It is young people from disadvantaged social background and especially men from ethnic minorities who are the ones most at risk of dropping out. This is a key to explain the high dropout rates in VET. Students in the vocational schools are generally recruited from social backgrounds with less educational resources in comparison with students in the Gymnasiums. Compared to the vocational schools, there are four times as many students in the Gymnasiums with parents who have graduated from higher education (Jensen and Larsen 2011). Another reason for the high drop-out rates in VET is the serious lack of training placements, which limits the chances of the students completing their education. We can conclude that social inequalities and shortage of training placements, rather than gender, are the keys to explain the drop out problems in the dual system of VET in Denmark. In the next section, I will examine further why more men than women end up without any post-compulsory education, most often after dropping out of vocational education, because this represents a significant shift compared to the situation 25 years ago, when women dominated the group of early school leavers.

### **Resisting, reluctant or reflexive boys**

The concepts of resistance to education and anti-school culture have been central to understanding some boys' problematic relationship to education, dating back to Hargreaves study of two separate subcultures in a boys' secondary modern school (1967). Paul Willis (1977) later studied a group of traditional working-class boys' ("*the lads*") resistance to the school system in a mixed-gender class in a British industrial area. Much relevant critique of these earlier studies of boys' anti-school subculture has been put forward (Whelen 2011; Griffin 2011; Bennett 2011). The studies are less relevant today as the well-defined industrial workers' culture of the 1960s and 1970s has eroded, and it was never strong in Denmark, where skilled workers and craft-based forms of production have been more predominant.

Also boys from the middle class and girls can develop anti-school cultures and an anti-school culture is not necessarily associated with hyper-masculinity and sexism (Aggleton 1987; Abraham 1989; Öhrn 1998). More generally, Lyng (2007) and Kelly (2009) has criticised the simplistic binary categories of pro-school and anti-school cultures that can be found in a number of studies of school culture. They point out that these categories do not cover the majority of students, either boys or girls, who are located in various intermediate positions.

A somewhat different explanation for some boys' poor performance in school is the norm among some boys who make the idea of being a "swot" or "model student" at school into something effeminate

and incompatible with being a real boy - an "anti-swot culture". Boys present their masculinity by distancing themselves from the school's standards of rewarding effort and diligence, because school ambitions are assigned a feminine code (Connell 2000). This can be done by contrasting the boys' efforts in school with their efforts in football and other sports, which represent a measure of their masculinity. However, Frosh and Phoenix and Pattman (2002) also present a more nuanced picture, where boys can gain recognition as proficient in school and get good grades without appearing as "unmanly" among the group of boys. The condition is that they distance themselves from the school norm of being diligent and doing homework, and instead appear to be successful in school without working at it, as described by Nordberg (2005) and Nygren (2009).

While these studies relate to compulsory schooling a somewhat different picture is drawn when looking at research in vocational education. Here masculinity can be demonstrated, not through resistance to school, but by students distancing themselves from 'theory' and by demonstrating mastery of the practical skills of the male occupations, (Atkins 2009; Grønberg 2013; Niemi and Rosvall 2013). The cultural association of masculinity with being 'street smart', as opposed to 'book smart', could explain some boys problems in a VET system that is becoming increasingly 'theoretical' (Korp 2011). An ethnographic study of a Danish car mechanic VET programme has described how demonstration of masculinity is connected to manual skills, workwear, physical strength, oily fingers, craftsmen's tools and smart cars (Hansen 2010). The male students constructed their occupational and masculine identities in a way that tended to reproduce a dichotomy between manual and intellectual skills, which could be seen as critical for their position in a future 'knowledge society'.

Earlier research has found that students in the dual system of VET generally have a strong orientation towards work in their occupation (Heinz 1995). Unlike the students in the school based vocational programmes studied by Atkins (2009) students in the dual system have clear ideas about how they can get access to the favoured occupation. In contrast, Ann-Marie Bathmaker (2001; 2005) in her studies of pre-vocational and foundation-level programmes found that most students had rather vague ideas about their future after the programme. They emphasised being accepted by peers and be recognised by the teachers and having good relations with them. These 'reluctant learners', as Bathmaker denotes them, resemble many of the new students entering the basic courses of the Danish VET programmes, as I will describe in the next section.

In the research project, Learning Cultures in Further Education (Avis 2006; Hodkinson, Biesta and James 2007), most of the students were pursuing vocational qualifications. The students displayed a variety of dispositions to learning, but most of them projected their hopes for future employment into the programmes – though some programmes had weak links with employment. The students' learning in the vocational programmes was seen as a process of 'becoming' and of developing a vocational identity (Colley, et al. 2003). As these identities were highly gendered, the learning in the programmes tended to reproduce the gender divisions in the labour market. This is relevant to the Danish VET system where the programmes have a strong occupational orientation and an equally strong gender labelling.

The thesis of individualisation has had strong impact on youth research in Denmark, and this has also influenced policy in the area of vocational education. Inspired by among others Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and postmodern theory it is claimed that a strong process of individualisation has taken place, which make traditional notions of standard biographies of class and gender obsolete. The cultural modernisation is held to have eroded earlier structural constraints and led to a growing indeterminacy and fluidity of the life course. Young people are seen as pursuing more individualised and reflexive life projects and to be exposed to conditions of individual choices and growing uncertainty (Illeris a.o. 2002).

In VET educational policy this theoretical orientation in connection with neo-liberal policy inspirations resulted in a reform that was intended to radically individualise the programmes. Each student was to formulate a personal education plan based on individual choice and an assessment of prior learning. The drop-out rates continued to rise after the reform because the individualisation tended to erode the social learning environment in the vocational schools. As a consequence, the Government rolled back part of the reform in 2007 by requiring the vocational schools to offer more structured basic courses and to divide the students into classes at different levels and of different duration. This was the situation that applied when our empirical work took place in eight vocational schools in 2009-10. In the next section I will describe some of the results.

### **Vocational education as a counter-culture**

The accounts given by many of the male students indicated that they perceived of the vocational schools as a learning culture that contrasted their experiences of compulsory school and their conception of the academic track (Gymnasium). Many of the students interviewed mentioned negative experiences of primary school, especially in their final years: the teachers had given up on them, the teaching was boring and without challenges. Often they blamed themselves for the fact that they didn't learn anything: they had "school fatigue", played truant and couldn't be bothered about doing their homework. In contrast, many male students describe the vocational school as a positive counterpart. They highlight the meaningfulness of the practical tasks, the relevance of the teaching, the attitude of the teachers and the learning environment. One boy, Ivan, on the basic course for electronics technicians, highlighted the difference in relation to primary school:

"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"

It is the physically active learning and the varied tasks that are highlighted by several students - both boys and girls. The practical assignments are perceived as exciting and interesting. The practical skills are often contrasted with "theory", which has no clear relevance for the solution of the vocational assignments.

Many students highlight the usefulness of the teaching and emphasised how the teachers can laugh and joke, something they found was different from the teachers in primary school. Their relation to the vocational teachers was different from their relation to teachers in compulsory school, as the students' respect was based more on the teachers' occupational skills than on the teachers' formal position as teachers (similar to Bathmaker 2001 and Hodkinson, Biesta and James 2007).

For many of the students, vocational training provides an alternative opportunity for education after they have experienced failure at compulsory school - and possibly also at the Gymnasium level. The vocational programmes were perceived as a counter-culture to the academic culture in the general programmes preparing for higher education. It was not a counter-culture in the streets, but *within* the framework of the education system. The strong tracking in Danish higher secondary education (in vocational and general tracks) differs from the other Nordic countries, which have more comprehensive programmes that do not offer clear alternatives to the non-academically oriented adolescents, and especially to the many boys who do not thrive in a traditional form of school education. As a consequence, the Danish dual system of VET must be seen part of the solution to some boys problems in education. The dual system of VET in Denmark generally offer an attractive learning environment and a smooth transition to work, but only for students



who get access to a training placement (Juul and Jørgensen 2011). This is where the weaknesses of the VET system become striking.

### **Informal social groupings in VET**

Among teachers in the vocational schools we found a strong sense of shift in the recruitment patterns so having resulted in the share of 'weak learners' increasing in recent years (A4 2012). This shift is an effect of the 'academic drift' where more and more young people pursue general education and the rest enrolling VET has still weaker qualifications. Some schools explained that they had established new types of extended courses to adjust to the more demanding students, and most of the schools had started to separate the students into different classes according to their achievement in an initial assessment. The alarm over the 'unmotivated students' in VET has even led to a reform in February 2014 that imposes restrictions on entry to VET, based on students' achievement at the final exams in basic school. At the same time, we found strong indications of the ability of the VET system to provide a new start for young people, mainly male, who have failed compulsory school. Register-based research in our project revealed that one third of all the students who actually completed a VET programme were performing at the lowest level or even below it in the PISA test in basic school (Jensen and Larsen 2011).

These contradictory images of VET and the students in VET were mirrored in our qualitative studies in the vocational schools. Our observations of and interviews with students attending the basic courses at the vocational schools clearly showed that many classes were characterised by a division of the students into informal groupings.

It is significant that what many students highlight as the most positive aspect of the education programme, is the social community among the students, being accepted, having many friends who help each other, being able to laugh and have fun together. But at the same time, other students describe the formation of cliques, enmities and the distribution of students on a "popularity scale".

We found that the most significant groupings are those formed on the basis of the students' commitment to study. There are many accounts of divisions between, on the one hand, the focused and motivated students, including those who have access to a training placement, and on the other hand, the "*indolent*" or "*showmen*", as they are sometimes called by the other students. These are students who are less mature and motivated and who primarily attend the basic course to discover "*whether this is something for me*".

One boy, Allan, on a motor mechanic course said: "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." He also explained that he and the other ambitious students rejected the teacher's request for them to work with some of the unmotivated students in the class, because they didn't want to be slowed down by the unmotivated students.

Another boy, Frank, from the class explained: "I think that the way we look at each other is that if someone works well, you want to join their group. But then they also expect to see that you work well. I had a lot of absence to begin with, so I wasn't part of any group, so then you can't really be bothered being in school."

Other students explain that the teachers prioritise their teaching on students who show commitment for learning the occupation, while the less focused and less committed students must compete for the

teachers' attention. This indicates that some self-reinforcing social dynamics in these classes can lead to a polarisation of students.

The students' accounts describe divisions among the students, which may resemble the pro-school and anti-school cultures described by earlier research. But there are significant differences. In the interviews, none of the 'unmotivated' students express any explicit rejection of education as being relevant and necessary. There is also no evidence that the 'unmotivated' students police and sanction other students who are committed or who strive to learn the practice of the occupation. On the contrary, the committed and hard-working students had the highest status also among the less motivated students. The 'unmotivated' students seemed to be positioned more in a role of immature 'pupils' similar to pupil roles in basic school. They had more in common with the 'reluctant learners' in Bathmaker's (2001) study than with Willis' anti-school 'lads' or the image of individualised strivers for their reflexive life project (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In contrast, the 'motivated' students more often had an orientation towards the labour market and the requirements of a being in a training placement. They were often critical of learning 'theory' that was not clearly connected to the vocational subjects, but generally they were very committed to becoming craftsmen and learning the occupation. The register-based studies showed that the students with a skilled workers family background had the highest completion rates, higher even than students from families with higher education qualifications (Larsen and Jensen 2011). It is possible that their working class background might have held them back from pursuing higher education, but certainly not from completing a vocational education.

### **Division and streaming of students**

In addition to the informal groupings of students described above we found indications that the schools' division of students in different classes, contributed to a polarisation of the students and possible also to drop-out. One of the key measures to reduce drop-out rates in the Danish vocational education programmes from early 2008 was the dividing (streaming) of the students into different basic courses based on their skills, maturity and motivation when they started at vocational school. The aim was to tailor the programme to the students, so that especially the most 'vulnerable' students would have more time to complete the programme, and they would benefit from teaching methods that were better suited to their needs. The goal was to reduce the rate of drop-out from the system.

Three of the vocational programmes I studied, had three levels of basic courses: one for the weakest learners ('*cadet class*'), one for the strong students and a normal class. The students in the programmes for strong and normal students (Construction and Motor Mechanics) described their placement here as their own choice. In contrast some of the students in the classes for weak learners did not regard these programmes as an "offer". Rather, their experience of having been placed in these programmes after the initial assessment of prior learning was negative. In several of these classes, there were examples of negative effects of the streaming of students.

In a cadet class at a business college, several students expressed the view that that the teachers were less well prepared, had lower expectations and made fewer demands. The teaching in this class had less emphasis on the vocational subjects and more on a 'therapeutic ethos' (Atkins 2009) concerned with nurturing of the students.

Interviewer: "Yes, in the cadet class. Is it different from the ordinary class?"

Martin: "Yes, the teachers are more relaxed here than they are in the other class. I also think that they are better prepared in the other classes. And that's a little annoying."

Interviewer: "So they are not well prepared here?"

Martin: "No, because they just come here, and we often just get a paper ... like this: 'Do this'. And they are easier than in the normal classes."

Another criticism from some of the students in the cadet class is that they are prevented from learning by the many unmotivated students in this class. One student, Simon, said:

Simon: "There is almost...we are almost a group who would like to return to a normal class. And then there are those who simply: 'Mess-mess', right?" We are practically divided into two groups."

Interviewer: "Those of you who want to do something, do you have an opportunity to do something?"

Simon: "Yes, yes."

Interviewer: "You are not distracted too much by the others?"

Simon: "It's like sometimes you join in with them. Jump on their band-wagon. You play along. But it's not like... [pause] ... you know very well that you would like to, so fortunately it's not too often that you have to join in their games. You can practically control yourself. 'Here I am. And this is what I want'. Just let them enjoy themselves, so you can sit and do all your stuff. Of course, sometimes you become so distracted that you cannot do quite as good a job for example."

There is therefore evidence of negative peer-effects as a result of gathering the weakest and most disengaged students in separate classes. They tended to reinforce each other and prevent the most motivated students from learning.

The ethnographic studies of Lacey (1970), Ball (1981), Oakes (1985) and Gamoran (2010) have revealed how the school's categorisation and segregation of students can create a polarisation of the students' attitudes toward school due to a number of psycho-social dynamics. Students in classes with a lower level and lower status often experience less recognition from the school than students in the high-ranking classes and they may acquire lower self-esteem. And in the lower-ranking classes they are cut off from the opportunities for peer learning from the more competent students. Teachers often have lower expectations of these students and offer them fewer opportunities for learning, and the school often allocates teachers to their classes, who have lower qualifications than to the high-ranked classes. In addition, there may be a stigmatising effect of being placed on a low-ranking process, so that these students are excluded from the informal socialising with the highly-ranked students (Schwartz 1981). So, although the intention of streaming in Danish VET was to avoid some students dropping out, the result could well be the opposite of what was intended.

Overall, the study shows that there may be unintended and self-reinforcing effects of segregating students into different classes and courses, which the students (and possibly also the teachers) associate with a value hierarchy. A negative interaction may develop between the institutional division of the students into different classes with different status and the students' mutual inclusion and exclusion processes. This means that the school's initial assessment, categorisation and separation of the students may reinforce the differences that exist between the students when they start the programme. This can affect boys as well as girls. But we know that in primary school 65% of the students placed in special classes are boys, and that boys are generally considered to be more disruptive and maladjusted in education (Nordahl et al. 2010; Kimmel 2010). There is therefore a risk that particularly immature, unfocused boys from disadvantaged families will be placed in the cadets classes and be exposed to some of the resulting negative effects, which can increase their risk of dropping out and never completing any post-compulsory education.

## Conclusion

Today more boys than girls end up without completing any post-compulsory education in Denmark and fewer men than women complete higher education. This is a new situation compared to the situation 25 years ago, and this shift is used as argument in a discourse on a general 'boy problem' in education. In Denmark, as in other countries, this discourse relies on a stereotyped, binary and essentialist view of gender, that is not very helpful in understanding gender problems in education today (Whelen 2011; Weaver-Hightower 2003). Even though more girls than boys complete tertiary education and more boys than girls complete a VET programme, this does not mean that boys in general have problems in education. As shown in this article, men who complete a vocational programme are often better off in the labour market than women who complete a Bachelor programme in terms of income and career prospects.

The dual VET system in Denmark has been quite efficient in providing access to skilled employment for young people, also (but not only) for those who did not have success in basic school. Historically a majority of the low achieving students in VET have been male, but as the dual system has come to include typically female occupations, like the service and health occupations, VET has also become a second chance for women. A number of reasons can be pointed to for this quality of the dual system **compared to the low-level and pre-vocational programmes described by Atkins (2009) and Bathmaker (2001)**. In our studies we found that many students perceive of the vocational schools as a counter-culture, in contrast to the culture of the academic programmes. This counter-culture provides educational opportunities especially for boys who more often than girls are categorised as 'problematic' in compulsory school. The VET system is transparent to the students as the VET programmes offer strong vocational identities connected to well-known occupations in the labour market. The system mainly relies on work based learning in training placements that integrates the apprentices well in the labour market during their training. And the strong involvement of the labour market partners in the governance of the system guarantees the value of the programmes in the labour market (Jørgensen and Juul 2011).

But the role of VET as a favourable option for low achieving students is under growing pressure. Firstly, as a consequence of the increasing academic drift of young people the share of very low achieving students in VET has increased. Secondly, the Government's policy of making 95% of every youth cohort complete a higher secondary programme and the tightening of the activation measures has forced many young people to start at a vocational school even though they have no motivation for education. Thirdly, the shortage of training placements, especially after 2008, has resulted in a growing competition among students for placements. This has contributed to two interrelated processes of social and institution segregation of students.

The studies of students in the basic courses revealed a division between students who were very positive and committed, and students who were uncommitted. Both groups included girls as well as boys. There were indications that this division could have a negative self-reinforcing effect and lead to a polarisation of the students.

In addition, I found that the vocational school's categorisation and sorting of students into different courses sometimes had a negative impact on the engagement of the students in the lowest ranking courses. It can be a self-fulfilling prophecy to place some students in classes that the students perceive as 'loser classes'. I found evidence of a number of the mechanisms that characterise this process: negative peer effects, lower teacher expectations for the students and lower quality of teaching in classes with the lowest

status. It is likely that this has a greater impact on boys than on girls, because boys are more often categorised as 'problematic' in school.

The enrolment in VET is declining and only half of the students who take up a vocational programme complete it. Many of those who don't complete end up without any post-compulsory education, and a majority of these are men. This is not sign of a general 'boy problem' but of some serious problems in the dual system of VET in Denmark. First, the social inequality in the recruitment to the two tracks of higher secondary education has increased. As more and more young people have opted for the academic track, the average attainment of students in the vocational track has dropped – and this has impacted negatively on the esteem of VET. Secondly, the dual system of VET normally does not give access to higher education and increasingly it appears as a dead end in the educational system. Thirdly, the severe lack of training placements has augmented the competition among students, and that contributes to processes of institutional selection and social exclusion. Lastly, as the Danish VET system is based on gendered occupations it very much tends to reproduce the gendered divisions on the labour market. The recent reform (Febr. 2014) of the VET system has addressed some of these problems by providing better links to higher education and improving the social learning environment in the basic courses. But the lack of training placements and the problem of gender reproduction are by and large left unresolved. These problems must be addressed if VET also in the future shall offer a valuable and high-quality alternative to the Gymnasiums. One way of increasing the enrolment in VET is by actively attracting more women to the male occupations and more men to the female occupations. This would most likely also contribute to the improvement of the social learning environment in the programmes.

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