Roadmaps and momentums of success: Upper secondary school students’ motivations and experiences of how to succeed in school

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Paper

Abstract
The paper is related to a larger research project which focus on how high achieving Swedish students decode upper secondary school practices and embark on a successful educational career. The paper deals with a subtheme on the students’ own stories of how they succeed in school and what is driving them to perform well. The results are based on in depth interviews with 54 students in upper secondary school, 20 male and 34 female students. The sample is broad mix of students with different national backgrounds and mixed resources in terms of socioeconomic and educational capital. The theoretical tools are conceptualisations of social capital, but draw also on cultural capital. The preliminary results show both similarities and differences in managing school work and motivations and it seems promising to analyse the patterns of strategies in relation to their social and cultural context.

Keywords
High-achieving students, social capital, socio-economic status, educational capital, motivation

Relation to the conference theme
The paper relates clearly to the conference theme. The expected results of narratives of high achieving students have the potential to show how agency is working in creating meaning and motivation in how students shape their future, by managing demands in upper secondary school.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

This study which is a part of a larger research project, examines how high achieving Swedish students decode upper secondary school practices and embark on a successful educational career. High achievers in this study are students with varied social and cultural background that have above the average score in key subjects (Maths, Swedish and English) at the end of the first year of their secondary school experience. In the project we are interested in how their social and cultural background matters in how they manage school work and how they mobilize social and material support to succeed in school. A large proportion of students that are classified as living in economically and culturally deprived households come from immigrant background. A blind spot in research is the growing percentage of high achievers from low income household (see Bernard, 2004; Fraser, 2004; Crul, & Heering 2008). These students challenge the idea that poverty, racism/discrimination and low educational performance are linked (Wyner et al., 2007). In educational literature, these students are referred to as educationally resilient. This project builds on and seeks to expand upon the deficit explanatory model which explain the failure of these of students’ on their lack of cultural capital.
For this particular study, we focus on their own stories of how they succeed in school and what is driving them to perform well.

Even if the project is carried out in Sweden, its results is valid also on an international level since, for example, many European countries share challenges that have impact on how education is structured and delivered. To tackle structural changes and challenges facing European countries such as poverty, low cultural capital, and social inequalities there is a need to build resilience, both on an individual as well and on a structural level.

Our analytical focus can allow us to shed light on the complex interplay between social and cultural resources activated by these students in their encounter with the school practices. The literature shows that there is a range of factors within the institution’s control that impact the retention of students, such as personal tutoring, study support, etc. (Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2017) The cultural and social capital of students is thus a vital factor in the formation of support networks (Lareau, 2003). The analytical framework is inspired by Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu’s conceptualisations of social capital (1977) and these are: Ideational support, material support, and bridging support. Social capital as here seen as collective resources.

Methods/methodology
We have targeted secondary schools in areas, which are known as socioeconomic disadvantage areas and asking for a list of students in their second year of upper secondary school that are higher achievers at the end of first year of their secondary education. We arranged meetings at the schools in which we informed them about the project and if they would like to participate they should fill a short questionnaire. In addition, we contacted the students via letters using ordinary mail, text messages with invitations and with links to our homepage of the research project, which contains detailed information about the project and ethical considerations etc. Hence, the selection is not statistically representative.

Our method in this study is in depth interviews with students (n=54), 20 male and 34 female students, 37 students have parents with immigrant background and 17 have parents born in Sweden. 31 students are coming from families with high educational capital and 23 have parents with no higher education. In our sample we have for example both students with immigrant background and high educational capital as well as students from Swedish background and with parents with low educational level. The purpose of the interview is to let the student tell us how they managed to get high grades in school and how they manage school work/time management. The interviews are between 45 minutes to 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed into text files. The interviews are analysed in Nvivo both in open coding and by using our theoretical tools. Ultimately, we are interested in study how the student themselves narrate their success and their motivations.

Expected outcomes/results
We have a broad mix of students, with different national backgrounds, both born in Sweden with both parents also born in Sweden, students born abroad as their parents or students born in Sweden but their parents born in different countries like; Iraq, Somalia, Kurdistan, Philippines, India, Finland, Norway, Russia, Syria, UK, Thailand, Hong Kong, South Korea and USA. Preliminary results show that the students have both similar and different strategies when it comes to manage school work such as; carefully selecting peers in school to work with in assignments but do most of the home work alone and at home. There are also
differences in how they motivate themselves, for some students it is by performing well, it is about paying back to the parents who have sacrificed a career in their homeland or that the parents did not have had the chance to study. For others it is a lifeline a survival, away from their current situation at home. The school becomes a sanctuary and you must not think about any other than yourself. That counts also for those who are alone, that is, some of the students do not have many friends but find a way to visualise themselves in a future occupation and find meaning in pursuing the way. The success in school also have a rewarding feedback, many of the students we have interviewed are competitive and ambitious. There are students that aims for the most competitive university programmes and/or universities, but seems less convinced about the content of the programme. The competitiveness has itself a value and if you can earn a place in a prestigious programme, it means that you really are successful. This has however a downside with much stress and doubt of one own’s capacity to reach the goal. For the moment we have not analysed how their strategies and motivations are related to social and cultural resources but we expect to have results on this later on.

References