

Abstract

Title: Responsibility, flexibility, freedom of choice: An ethnographic Study of a School in Transition

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Education policy in Sweden currently emphasises personal flexibility, responsibility for learning and freedom of choice for learners and their teachers, who are to develop an education that is geared toward making motivated, alert, inquiring, self-governing and flexible users and creators, as opposed to just recipient reproducers of knowledge. These ideas derive from the international policy level in the OECD and European Union but have filtered through official national propositions and reports to the arenas of action comprised by schools and colleges as new working aims for modern schools. Using ethnographic research involving participant observation in two classes at one school, document analysis, the collection and analysis of artefacts and interviews and conversations with key local agents (specifically school leaders, teachers and pupils), the present thesis has examined and questioned the realisation processes connected to the development of these new policies.

The thesis shows that new policies were contradicted in practice because of structures related to the development of education as 'accumulated capital' and the allocation of school based qualifications as these things helped form a counteractive repertory of actual agent possibilities that contributed not to the realisation of new education ideas but to their negation. And in fact in the new school, the emphasis on individual responsibility and freedom of choice actually created a new basis for social selection and social reproduction in which the pupils who were most forthright in making demands on the educational context at the expense of others were also the ones who were most successful. Inherited cultural capital was also significant and thus features other than those resonant with the 'new education discourse' conditioned the life-chance and career possibilities generated from the education context.

The thesis demonstrates how new education policies are undermined through the protective adaptations and restraining features of education super-structure and the epistemologies of predominant education forms that are resonant with the ethics, values and practices of education as a form of accumulation (i.e. education capitalism). However, it does not blame individual teachers, school leaders and pupils for this demise, which according to the thesis is not a question of the individual capability of agents but more of a systemic feature of education under capitalism, where the identities that are culturally produced in school create the main links needed in education to make general distinctions that can become valorised in ways that concur with current structural divisions and class formations. This is a form of social reproduction. It means that even if the everyday experiences of young people in schools may have changed radically over the last two decades, in the age of high modernity their life chances will still most likely remain highly structured at the institutional and cultural levels of education.