

BEYOND THE TEACHERS' GAZE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC INTEGRITY OF SWEDISH PUPILS' SOCIAL STRATEGIES IN BACKSTAGE SPACES

Charlotta Rönn¹

¹*Högskolan i Gävle, Sweden*

Informal networks where people share experiences and events in for example Social Medias such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat increase worldwide. Simultaneously there is a development towards an individual focus on the pupil in formal education in many countries (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010) comprising Sweden (Beach and Dovemark, 2011). Summative assessment has gained land in Swedish schools, including an extensive national testing (Lundahl, 2009). It is stated in the Swedish curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018) as well as in curricula in many other countries; that pupils are to learn to identify their weaknesses and strengths in order to get accurate help and guidance from both peers and teachers (Harrison and Howard, 2013).

The theoretical point of departure is Goffman's (1959/1990) theater metaphor, in which people's behaviors are considered as being enacted either on the "backstage" or "frontstage" of social life. In the study, the "frontstage" is used for pupils' interaction with teachers in handing in written assignments for assessing or grading. "Backstage" is used for pupils' quiet informal conversations with classmates inside the classroom as well as interaction outside school which take place out of the teachers' gaze, where pupils, learn the "line" for the frontstage encounter with teachers.

The purpose was to explore pupils' applied informal social strategies in "backstage spaces" when dealing with formal individual tasks such as individual written assignment and National Tests. The research questions were:

1. What backstage spaces do pupils use together with peers when dealing with individual written assignment and preparing for National Tests?

2. How can the pupils' activities in backstage spaces be understood?

The ethnographic inspired study, conducted by the author, comprised four months of observations and two weeks of audio-visual recordings in a 8th grade class. One year later, in 9th grade, 18 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the pupils were carried out. There were 25 pupils in the class and 50% had a foreign background. Two third of the pupils were girls. The discrete staging of the audio-visual devices (Rönn, 2021) rendered possible to record pupils' low-voiced informal conversations between peers during lessons – thus a backstage space inside the classroom. The interviews revealed backstage spaces for pupils' informal social strategies outside the classroom and outside school, too. The Regional Ethical Review Board in Umeå, Sweden, reviewed the study. Pupils and their guardians gave their written consent.

The pupils were willing to assist classmates inside and outside the classroom. Some of the informal social strategies pupils applied backstage were: a) swapping computers with peers behind the teachers' back and writing (or revising) texts for friends, b) logging in to peers' Google classroom accounts and write assignments for them inside or outside the classroom, c) using smartphones to send text messages to classmates after school; asking those who had completed the given assignment to take pictures of their assignment and forward it to the requesting classmates – in order to be rewritten "in their own words" and handed in to teachers for assessment, d) sharing leaked National Tests and/or the teachers' assessing instructions for the National Tests on the class' Snapchat-group.

One finding was that the pupils who tended to supply assistance to peers, in writing for peers and/or

forwarding pictures of completed assignments to be rewritten in the classmates' "own words", put more time and efforts into schoolwork and considered assignments not only as tasks to complete and hand in to teachers, but as a process of learning for future needs. They had a more long-term perspective of schoolwork, which correspond to the teachers' and curriculum's view. Pupils who received assistance tended to have a short-term perspective on schoolwork; focusing on accomplishing assignments with little effort – and handing them in to teachers for assessing and/or grading. These pupils developed a dependence on the pupils with a long-term view of schoolwork – which might render them more vulnerable when it comes to school achievements and later on higher education and working life.

The study identified four different backstage spaces where pupils applied informal social strategies out of the teachers' gaze in producing texts to hand in to teachers. These backstage spaces have different characteristics:

1. A backstage space for synchronous face-to-face interaction at school – mainly inside the classroom – which comprises explaining to peers and swapping computers with peers.
2. A backstage space for synchronous person-to-person interaction outside school, where oral synchronous interactions takes place on the phone between two pupils. This occurs outside the school premises and after the school day – beyond the teachers' gaze.
3. A backstage for asynchronous person-to-person interaction outside school, based on written texts

messages such as SMS to classmates. The delay between the sent message and the reply makes the interaction asynchronous. This is used for request for pictures of completed assignments to reformulate in "own words".

4. A backstage asynchronous person-to-people interaction outside school, which takes place on social media, such as for example the class' Snapchat group where the pupils' shared the leaked National Tests.

The results may be understood as though, pupils move schoolwork backstage to be carried out in informally in collaboration with peers in a school context with enhanced focus on graded individual assignments. In the interviews the pupils said that it was in order to achieve good grades with little efforts that they applied the above social strategies for individual assignments. Girls with a Swedish background tended to gain the most of the system – and boys were partially excluded.

The fact that the strategies accounted for take place backstage and out of the teachers' supervision, renders it difficult for teachers to correctly assess and/or grade some of the pupils' written and handed-in in assignments (mainly the one's with a short-term view of schoolwork). Consequently it becomes problematic to cater for the individual pupil's needs for support and guidance (the where is the pupil, where is (s)he heading, and how is (s)he to get there?). The needs of pupils with short-term view of schoolwork tend to go unnoticed – even though they might achieve good grades.

REFERENCES

- BEACH, D. and DOVEMARK, M. (2011). Twelve years of upper-secondary education in Sweden: the beginnings of a neo-liberal policy hegemony?. *Educational Review*, 63(3), 313-327.
- GOFFMAN, E. (1959/1990). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.
- HARRISON, C., and HOWARD, S. (2013). *Bedömning för lärande i årskurs F-5 : inne i "the primary black box"*. Stockholm: Liber.
- LUNDAHL, C. (2009). *Varför nationella prov? : Framväxt, dilemma, möjligheter*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- RIZVI, F. and LINGARD, B. (2010). *Globalizing Educational Policy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- RÖNN, C. (2021). Gaining Access to Students' Informal Conversations with Peers: An Explorative Approach on Educational Research and Staging of Recording Devices. In L. K. SARROUB and C. NICHOLAS (Eds.), *Doing Fieldwork at Home: The Ethnography of Education in Familiar Contexts*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Swedish National Agency for Education (2011/2018). *Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet*. Lgr 11, www.skolverket.se.