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“… When It Is Us the Tests Are Made for”. Students’ Argumentations in a Performative Education System

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ABSTRACT
The aim is to analyse how policy decisions about assessment practices influence what it means to be a student in a performative system. We examine an occasion where a previously mandatory national test became optional, and how students took the opportunity to try to change the school’s decision about this. The study is based on student group interviews in year 6, and uses Conversation Analysis to examine how they use discursive resources to co-construct fabrications of the ideal student. The findings show how neoliberal rhetoric has worked its way into the students’ everyday lives, and how they display a deep knowledge about how to use arguments that work inside the system. We argue that there is a need for more knowledge about contemporary education policies from a student perspective.

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Student perspective; policy enactment; conversation analysis; national tests; assessment; video studies

Introduction
During the last decades, actors at all levels in education systems have been faced with a never-ending series of policy reforms and decisions aimed at increasing standards and competitiveness as part of a new knowledge economy associated with neoliberal globalisation of education (Lauder, Young, Daniels, Balarin, & Lowe, 2012; Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Novoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003; Rasmussen, Gustafsson, & Jeffrey, 2014). Neoliberal ideas have had a large impact on education policy on a global level, which has resulted in what has been described as a “competition state” with quasi-markets and private choice as central features (Lingard, 2011, p. 367). This development towards global competition between education systems has also given rise to what has been called “testing regimes”, referring to new modes of test-based accountability systems on national levels as part of a new market-based governance of school systems (Lingard et al., 2013; see also Ozga, 2009).

In Sweden, one expression of this need for creating measures on educational outcomes has been the development of a changed national grading system based on giving grades earlier, in combination with a more fine-grained grading scale and more explicit criteria for assessing grades. Another expression has been the development of national tests in different school subjects carried out in years three, six and nine. Historically, this development reflects a radical change in Swedish education, where gradings and their selective function in relation to higher studies have been much debated since the reformation of comprehensive schools which started during the 1940s. Later in the 1980s, grades were not given until year eight. Instead, teachers, students and parents met regularly for individual student conferences, and the curriculum strongly emphasised a student-centred perspective, focusing on an individual learning process where every child should be listened to and seen as competent and responsible for having influence over their own situation and participating in...
setting their own goals (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1980, 1994). Since then, the Swedish educational system has undergone one of the world’s fastest transformations based on neoliberal ideals characterised by marketisation, private school choice, deregulations, standardised tests and school competition. But also during this transformation, previous discourses about a student-centred approach have not been fully erased. Instead, we can see how competing ideals about a more progressive school versus school effectiveness have come to exist in parallel, where a student-centred approach still is considered to be of importance (Carlgren, Klette, Mýrdal, Schnack, & Simola, 2006; Imsen, Blossing, & Moos, 2017).

The use of testing and grading as a basis for comparisons on national and global levels can be understood as employing technologies for creating educational accountability, and a form of governance (Lingard, 2011). This has real implications at the classroom level, not least for students in their everyday lives in schools. From a student perspective, this means increased pressure towards earlier and more extensive assessment practices, where assessment criteria and curricular goals have become frequent topics in everyday instructions at the classroom level. The students in year six participated during the spring term in 16 national tests in 5 different subjects, preceded by more or less extensive preparations for the tests (Löfgren, Löfgren, & Pérez Prieto, 2018). However, within the field of policy studies the consequences of increasingly performative education systems have mostly been seen in relation to global competition and economic growth (c.f. Ball, 2006; Lingard, 2011; Lingard et al., 2013; Ozga, 2009) or, on a more local level, what they mean for parents’ school choice or teachers’ professional lives (Ball, 2003; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012), whereas research focusing on the students’ perspective, at least in a Swedish context, is scarce (Forsberg & Lindberg, 2010). Since performative assessment practices tend to dominate an increasing part of life in classrooms, and consequently terms for students’ participation and development, we argue that there is a strong need for further investigation of how these policy-driven issues are dealt with socially in students’ everyday lives.

In this article, we take as an example a scenario in which students aged 12 argue against a decision from the headteacher about taking an optional national test in year six. Due to a change of government on the national level, these specific tests in Science and Social Studies were unexpectedly abandoned soon after having been introduced. Because of the short notice, these previously mandatory tests were now made optional for the headteacher of each school to decide whether to carry out the tests or not. In the studied school it was decided (by the headteacher in dialogue with the teachers) that this school, as the only one in the community, was going to carry out the tests as planned. This turned out to be something the students found very unfair, which resulted in a meeting with the headteacher in which the students presented their arguments. We find it interesting how this unexpected turn on the political level, from a rather imperative policy directive (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011) to an optional possibility of conducting the national tests, created an opening for new negotiations, interpretations and translations that were not previously possible. The students in our example took advantage of these circumstances, and in this article we explore how the students, in four group interviews, co-construct an argumentation against the headteacher’s decision and how they position themselves as students in relation to the course of events that takes place. The aim is to analyse, from the students’ perspective, how policy decisions about assessment practices might influence what it means to be a student in a performative system. More specifically we examine how the students take an opportunity that opens up to enter the scene as policy actors, and how they choose to position themselves as students co-constructing arguments in order to try and change a policy decision in their favour.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this study, we draw on the theoretical concept of policy enactment (Ball, 2006; Ball et al., 2012; Singh, Heimans, & Glasswell, 2014) as we investigate the students’ talk about the changing test policy. Today, assessments of learning outcomes, such as the national tests in Sweden, have become not
only the teacher’s professional domain; students are also expected to actively participate in the translation of assessment policies into classroom practices. From the perspective of policy enactment this means that students have become not only subjects of policy, but also take part as policy actors in the interpretation, translation and construction of policy as they prepare for the tests. They are taught about how to understand assessment criteria related to the tests, and how to master national tests as a new kind of literacy practice (Löfgren et al., 2018; Pérez Prieto & Löfgren, 2017; Tanner, 2016). Learning how to read and seeing through the system have become aspects of what schools train their students in doing, which could be understood as facilitating “the classroom game” in which both teachers and students participate (Asp-Onsjö & Holm, 2014; Busher & Cremin, 2012; Tanner & Pérez Prieto, 2014).

As stated in the introduction, our study is made against a backdrop of neoliberal changes in contemporary education systems, where globalisation, competition and individualisation have led to a pressure to perform that actors at all levels of the school system have to manage (Ball, 2003, 2006; Hardy & Lewis, 2016; Larsson, Löfdahl, & Pérez Prieto, 2010; Pérez Prieto & Tanner, 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2014; Stahl, 2016). This means that the concept of performativity becomes central, here understood as a governmental steering mechanism, which from a distance “replaces intervention and prescription with target setting, accountability and comparison” (Ball, 1998, p. 123) in a way that has borrowed many of its specifics from commercial settings and markets. Changes in attitude and ethical frameworks, due to contemporary performative education policies, remake the ways that actors on all levels in the education system think about what they do and who they are.

The uncertainty and instability that the constant flow of performative evaluations that actors have to handle creates an ontological uncertainty among teachers and students about what they do and what they could do better in their everyday practices (Ball, 2006; Jeffrey, 2002). As a consequence, an increasingly performative society creates new forms of self-regulation or governmental technologies that have social and interpersonal dimensions. Also, students position themselves in performative identities that display central values of the prevailing discourses, as they … have absorbed the values of aspiration, continual effort and improvement as a way of life; they have a view of knowledge as that which can be tested; they have an awareness of the significance of differentiation and stratification; and they have learned to fabricate their educational practice to further performative objectives. (Jeffrey & Troman, 2011, p. 499)

We understand this quote, and that students “fabricate their educational practice”, in terms of the concept of fabrications. According to Ball (2006), doing fabrications can be viewed as the ability of individuals and organisations to select representations of themselves that correspond to policy demands in the environment. Fabrications could be understood in a double sense as both a strategy to escape the controlling gaze by constructing a facade that works, and also as a mode for compliance and submission to the demands for performativity and self-regulation (Ball, 2006). Perryman (2009) describes fabrications as strategic versions of an organisation or an individual who is made to function in a market and control society, and represents selections of a multitude of possible descriptions (c.f. Perryman, 2009). But, as implied above, fabrications are not only to be seen as aligning with external demands. Fabrications could also work as means of resistance and care of the individual self in the intersection between government, organisation and self-formation (Ball, 2015; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Pérez Prieto & Tanner, 2015). In this study, we understand students’ positions in relation to the performative assessment practices that they question and argue against, as a kind of fabrication, i.e., in the construction of the fabrication, selected versions of themselves work as performative identities of being students, which correspond to the outer demands they experience (Ball, 2006). We are interested in how these fabrications are being made through the students’ positioning work in the interaction in relation to each other, their shared experience and to the researcher who leads the interview. This must not be understood in a simple sense where they are making up their arguments. Instead, fabrications mean that the students choose between different possible positions to create arguments that they believe work, in order to build their argumentation in a certain context.
In examining the students’ arguments for not doing the test, we understand their positioning works as displaying fabrications: versions of themselves they think are suited to the situation. In the analysis we seek to understand how these fabrications are co-constructed in interaction and used in relation to how they present the process, making use of and displaying their shared experiences in taking part in contemporary assessment practices.

**Materials and Method**

This study is part of a larger project where we have conducted a total of 91 group interviews with 298 students at 17 different schools during the spring term in year six, about their experiences of taking national tests and getting grades in Swedish year six (Pérez Prieto & Löfgren, 2017). In one of these schools we also conducted video ethnographic fieldwork in two classrooms throughout the whole school year, following the teaching practices in the subjects of Science and Social Studies, and it is from this school that the empirical data used in this article are selected. The school is situated in a small community in the area surrounding a middle-sized Swedish town. 59% of the parents have some kind of higher education, which is about or slightly above the average in Sweden, and there is a rather low proportion of students with an immigrant background. In comparison with the national average the results of students in year nine are slightly below average, also considering parents’ educational level.

The analysis in this article is based on the eight group interviews that were conducted in this school, and for this analysis the video material from the classrooms is merely used as ethnographic background knowledge that helps us understand what the students refer to as they tell their story. The interviews followed the same guidelines as all the other schools that participated in the large study, and the interviews were conducted at two different points of time, firstly in January in relation to the students getting their first grades and the second time in April/May, just after they had taken the national tests in Social Studies and Science. The interview groups were composed in cooperation with the teachers in order to represent a broad span regarding student achievement and to include both boys and girls in all groups. All interviews were transcribed in full, but in this article, we have selected four group interviews from the second interview sessions and especially some sequences where the students talked about the specific course of events that took place in relation to the meeting with the headteacher, where the students argued against doing the test. (Table 1).

The selected sequences have been analysed with a focus on the organisation of interaction between the participants, where the interviewer (one of us) is also considered to be a participant in the interaction. Methodologically we draw on the ethnomethodologically grounded approach of Conversation Analysis (CA), which implies a basic understanding of interaction as the core institution of human sociality, sequentially ordered in its minute level of details and “as a product of shared methods of reasoning and action to which all competent social interactants attend” (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013, p. 2). This means that we study the interviews as communicative projects where interviewer and students cooperate in doing conversation, sequentially building up the course of interaction in the way they use and respond to each other’s turns into a joint meaning making.

In the analysis, the focus has been on how the students and interviewer talk about what happened when the students organised the protest against the headteacher’s decision to carry out the tests, and the way in which they orient to this in terms of a policy decision. We are particularly interested in how this also means that they position themselves as students in this event, positionings that we

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Total length</th>
<th>Selected sequence</th>
<th>Student participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 150,429</td>
<td>45:48</td>
<td>06:41</td>
<td>Billy, Martin, Matilda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 150,429</td>
<td>27:32</td>
<td>05:03</td>
<td>Lina, Rico, Ted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 150,507</td>
<td>42:27</td>
<td>04:44</td>
<td>Josef, Markus, Sofia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 150,512</td>
<td>41:01</td>
<td>09:34</td>
<td>Axel, Emma, Malin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Overview of the selected data from four group interviews.*
propose could be understood as fabrications of student ideals and performative identities. In line with Depperman (2013) we think that CA helps us to uncover the students’ practical knowledge about a concrete social practice, in this case about a performative school system, using available resources in the context in their talk. Depperman argues that it is through such systematic analysis of the interaction that we can reveal how the participants position each other and themselves as they ascribe properties, explain and evaluate situations, attribute responsibilities and make inferences to different social actions in their joint talk.

CA rests on an understanding that participation in interaction requires some kind of shared understanding of the situation and a public orientation to relevant aspects of the context in the joint meaning making (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013; ten Have, 1999). Analytically this means first trying to understand interaction strictly from the participants’ view, and the available resources they use to create shared understanding in interaction (Korobov, 2001; Schegloff, 2007). In the analysis, we thus avoid making our own interpretations of hidden motives or intentions behind observable actions, but always try to robustly ground the analysis in what participants make relevant for each other through what they display in interaction, and which discursive and environmental resources they publicly orient to as resources for making shared meaning. Through our ethnographic background knowledge, we analysts also share some of this discursive knowledge, which we use to understand the participants’ references and to contextualise the analysed excerpts.

Excerpts from the interviews when participants, primarily the students, in some way seem to orient to the specific event when they met the headteacher have been selected and transcribed in detail using the transcription conventions developed in the field of CA (c.f. Jefferson, 2004; Schegloff, 2007). Through this we have investigated how the students, in interaction with each other and the interviewer, position themselves, turn-by-turn, to practices of policy. Hence, in the analysis we are not only interested in what they say about doing the tests, but even more in how, together, they make different fabrications of student identities using available resources. In this case, since one of the researchers who has conducted the analysis is also one of the participants, we have been especially reflective in relation to what the turns of the interviewer do to the sequentially unfolding interaction. As is common in the field of CA, this has been made in data sessions with other research colleagues as part of the analytic process.

Results

The changed directives from the new government – that these particular tests were made optional – changed the scene and made the tests seem less inevitable, something that opened up for new discussions and made it possible for the students to take an initiative to argue against doing the test. The specific course of events in our example, that the students re-tell in the interviews, originated when the students discovered that their peers at other schools in the same community were not going to take the tests. The students found this very unfair and, as one of the students expressed it, “it is not fun to do tests”. They approached their teachers to criticise the headteacher’s decision, and the teachers in turn helped them to organise a meeting with the headteacher to give them the democratic opportunity to try to influence this decision.

In four different group interviews the students tell the interviewer a coherent story, with little discrepancy between the groups regarding the main course of events, which we use as a chronological structure that frames the selected excerpts from the interviews. We focus on the organisation of the joint interaction between the students and the interviewer in order to investigate how the students position themselves in relation to doing the national tests.

The Decision-making Process: “… Without Asking us”

The origin of the students’ protest was their discovery that they were the only school in the community that had to do the tests. This became obvious to them as, once a week, they met their peers from
the other schools during language lessons that they attended together. As it happened, a lot of these language lessons were cancelled due to the test schedule, which made it obvious for the students that undertaking the tests meant a lot of disadvantages compared to their peers at other schools. In all four interviews, the students also show indignation about the headteacher’s decision being made without asking for the students’ opinions first. Excerpt 1 shows an example of this, as the students tell the interviewer about how their teachers encouraged them to express their thoughts, and also helped the students to arrange for the meeting with the headteacher that they refer to. They took a vote in both classes, with the result that all students except one wanted the optional tests to be cancelled.

In the first line of excerpt 1, the interviewer refers to her general knowledge about the discussions among the students, which she follows up with a question specifically about these three students’ opinions first. Excerpt 1 shows an example of this, as the students tell the interviewer about how their teachers encouraged them to express their thoughts, and also helped the students to arrange for the meeting with the headteacher that they refer to. They took a vote in both classes, with the result that all students except one wanted the optional tests to be cancelled.

Excerpt 1. 150429, group 2, 02:07 – 02:33.

1 In Swedish year six the students choose a third language besides Swedish and English, usually Spanish, German or French. In smaller communities it is not unusual for several schools to cooperate in the organisation of different language classes.
from the students, where they display an agreement in their opinion, is confirmed by some additional stance markers as Ted smiles and laughs softly (lines 7 and 10), as to somewhat mitigate his statement, and Rico’s conformational *mm* (line 9). Also, the interviewer gives the minimal response *yes* (line 8), which here works as a continuer that shows her interest in hearing more about their thoughts. Rico responds to this and takes the next turn saying *just this thing that* – (line 11) followed by a noticeable silence (line 12), which here works as a pre-announcement that is launched to prepare the floor for a new or further telling (Schegloff, 2007, p. 37). He then develops the argument from Ted’s statement, by pointing out *that she decided without asking us* (line 13) and, after the interviewer confirming *yes* (line 14), *when only one of forty plus students (. ) wanted to have national tests in Social Studies and Science* (line 15). The interviewer keeps on responding with a stressed *yes* (line 17), and Rico continues to develop the argument from the students’ position *that she did not ask us first* (line 18), *when it is us the tests are made for* (lines 20–21).

The argument made in lines 15–21 orients to the moral dimensions in the headteacher’s decision, where the students as a collective “us” claim their moral right to be involved in a decision that concerns them. The interaction in this excerpt brings to the fore questions about who has the right to make this decision, that are related to the broader policy practice about national tests. The students clearly hold the headteacher formally accountable for the decision. But even if she, as an official authority, is positioned as being responsible, at the same time the students position themselves as being in their right of making their voices heard, as being the central actors in the implementation of the national tests. Understood as a fabrication, they present a version of themselves as competent actors, who understand the system and are able to use arguments within the system about the tests being something that is supposed to be favourable for students. The argument they build is also underpinned by the kind of rhetoric from previous, more student-centred discourses in the Swedish education system about children having the right to have influence over decisions that concern them. They also use the principle of majority-based decision making (only one out of forty students favoured the tests) as a democratic argument in favour of their standpoint, which adds to the picture of students as competent readers of the system. All in all, in this first excerpt it is shown how the students, in interaction, display fabrications of themselves as responsible and knowledgeable actors, able to make sustainable arguments within the system and in their full right to be listened to in decisions that concern them.

**The Argumentation: “Losing Time”**

In many of the interviews, students also argued that, besides the national tests, they had to do a large number of “common” tests in Science and Social Studies. These ordinary tests, planned and organised by the teacher, were considered by the students as more important than the national tests, whose content would not necessarily be connected to the teaching at the time. In the interviews, the students pointed out how time-consuming it was to prepare for and carry out the tests, and in particular how much time preparing for and taking the national tests took from the ordinary teaching. In the second excerpt, the students Josef, Sofia and Markus talk about how the national tests make them lose time, an argument that the interviewer asks them to develop.

In **Excerpt 2** the students tell the interviewer – here it is Josef who talks – about how the national tests in general mean that they lose a lot of time (line 1). The interviewer asks for a clarification about what it is they have lost (line 2), and after a noticeable silence (lines 3–4) Josef explains how it is bad for their learning and especially for their chances of learning and succeeding in tests (lines 4–7). In his response Josef displays some initial hesitation, not only in the initial silence but also by the stance marker *sort of* (line 4), but then he underpins his opinion by referring to the consequences that the time loss has in relation to *learning*, or to answer tests *correctly* (lines 4–9). Thus, the arguments he uses are based on a discourse about effective learning. The interviewer then asks for clarification as to whether this refers to other tests than the national (line 8), which both Josef and Sofia confirm (lines 9–10) and Josef affirms the ordinary tests (line 11). Here, the national tests are made out to be
something that is out of the ordinary and not necessarily of importance for the regular teaching and learning processes in these subjects. Instead, it is the ordinary tests that are considered to be important. The interviewer responds with a new question of whether this could be of significance for their grades (line 12), a question structured towards a preferred answer (Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013), and to which all three students align, confirming that it is at least of some importance (lines 14–16). But more interesting is perhaps the argument that follows the next question, where Josef and Sofia cooperate in explaining how doing the tests affects the total amount of time for learning that they have to distribute between different activities. If they have to take time to do the tests, their total amount of learning time will be reduced, and they will not, as Sofia puts it, be able to perform that well in doing the tests (lines 25 and 27).

This example from the interviews shows how the students, in cooperation with the interviewer, use an official rhetoric about learning and time-effectiveness to build their argumentation. In their
argumentation they construct a fabrication of the ideal student, who makes good use of the time for learning and always makes an effort to perform well. Doing the national tests is described as something that is time-consuming and lies outside of the ordinary teaching and learning situation, and something that burdens the students’ learning in Social Studies and Science. The argument is unassailable, and shows how the students’ arguments are informed by their discursive knowledge about policy demands in relation to assessment, learning and competition. The argument presented here aligns with arguments made in other parts of the interviews, where the students compare their situation with students in the other schools, who will have more time for the ordinary teaching. They use the fact that having to do something that the others don’t have to leads to a competitive disadvantage compared to the other schools.

Conflicting Interests: “Then it Sounds More Like she Does it for the Teachers and Not for Us”

The meeting with the headteacher was organised with both classes from grade six together, as an opportunity for her to listen to the students and explain her point of view. When the students tell the interviewer about the discussion, they show disappointment and say that it did not come out as they had expected. They thought that the headteacher had already made up her mind and that she did not really listen to their arguments. She responded to all their questions by referring to a “long-term plan” that she based her decision upon. The students have some difficulties in explaining to the interviewer what this long-term plan consists of, but to them it seems mainly to be about using the national tests this year as an opportunity for professional development in relation to equal interpretations of assessment criteria. In Excerpt 3 the students and the interviewer talk about how the teachers and the headteacher had been discussing the tests for a long time and decided to have them.

Excerpt 3 begins with Ted referring to the headteacher’s motivation for the decision, which he thinks was about them [the teachers] having the opportunity to develop and learn how to evaluate and things like that (lines 1–2). He supports this claim in line 4 by saying that this is what he heard from his friends afterwards that she [the headteacher] had said (since he himself did not attend the meeting). That he is able to re-tell the discussions even though he was not present shows how the students have, also at other points of time, been talking together about the discussion and the shared experience that they use to jointly construct the narrative about the event. In line 7 the interviewer initiates a repair (Gardner, 2013, p. 603) to avoid misunderstandings, and asks for clarification if he means that the tests were good for the teachers (lines 7–8) as a way to learn to assess and so on (line 10). She then continues to ask the students to develop what they think about those reasons (line 11). Ted (supported by Rico) answers that this is something that teachers actually ought to know (lines 13–14). Lina aligns with his opinion (line 15), and Rico continues when she says that it sounds more like she is doing it for the teachers and not for us (lines 16–17).

In this excerpt, a conflict of interests is constructed in the conversation between the interviewer and the students, a conflict that accounts for the students’ resistance to the headteacher’s decision. The students refer to the argumentation from the headteacher, and they position themselves in opposition to the interests of the school and the teachers. For them, it is not a valid argument that the teachers could learn from the tests since it is they as students who have to make the effort and sit down for hours concentrating on the tests. This conflict of interest between the students and the school is reflected also in other parts of the data where the school’s long-term plan of school development is set against the students’ interests in the present situation. They point out in other parts of the data how their learning does not benefit from doing the tests, and that it is unfair that they have to make an effort that their younger peers, as well as their peers of the same age at other schools, don’t have to. In this part of the argumentation, the students clearly construct a fabrication of themselves as actors being in opposition to the authority and interest of the headteacher. They disqualify the motivation of the teachers’ need for doing training, and oppose having to carry the load of the organisational needs for development.
Being Uncertain: “Well Everyone Thinks I Guess but It Was Not Everyone who Said Anything”

When the interviews were conducted, the students had already taken the national tests, and looking back they say that doing them was not too bad after all. But in their reflections about the meeting with the headteacher, they are still disappointed about not being listened to. In telling their story they also express concerns about their own role in that meeting—what they said to her, if they were too critical or if they did not have the courage to say what they wanted. The following Excerpt 4 is preceded by a discussion where the student Emma talks about how she did not dare to say much to the headteacher. Axel, on the contrary, reflects upon maybe having said too much.

Referring to the discussion with the headteacher, Axel reflects that he might have overreacted, saying too unnecessary things perhaps (lines 1–2). Even if his position thereby is the opposite of Emma’s, they both refer to the imbalance in power in the situation as they evaluate their individual participation. Axel puts his evaluation of himself in the third person, using the pronoun one (line 1) instead of “I”, and the interviewer initiates a repair asking him if this means that he is referring to himself, do you feel that you did that (line 5). Axel confirms this by giving a specific example that might have been too much, when he said that it was idiotic that what do you say we had to do it but not them (line 10), where it is the choice of the word “idiotic” that he seems to think might have been improper in the situation: that might have been a little too much that I said that but (.).

Yes (lines 12–13). His friend Emma supports this with slight laughter (line 14) and Axel concludes by saying yes (line 15). After this, the interviewer confirms their account with a neutral mm after which Malin, who has not yet said anything about this, states that she did not say much either (aligning with Emma). As Malin continues, she changes stance from talking about her individual
contribution to instead making a general reflection about the students’ positions in the meeting: well I don’t think that there is anyone in our class who wants to do it so everyone thinks I guess but it was not everyone who said anything but (lines 19–24). Thereby she makes herself a spokesperson for all students, again orienting to the imbalance in power where it is difficult for the students to voice their opinion.

In this last example, the students take a somewhat different stance towards the event than in other parts of their story. If it has hitherto seemed to be rather unproblematic for the students to take on a critical stance towards the headteacher’s decision, here is shown some hesitation about their own role in the discussion and how it might have been perceived by others, and especially the headteacher. Ball (2015) describes performativity as a particular contemporary mode of power relations in relation to neoliberal policy technologies and governmentality. The interaction in the excerpt orients towards such power relations, where the students’ questioning of the headteacher’s decision becomes a challenging situation for the students as both actors and subjects in this policy practice. In re-telling the

situating face-to-face meeting with the headteacher, the students display a stance to their subjective and individual experiences that includes taking a risk against normative expectations of the ideal student. In their argumentation they orient to an ideal of standing up for their own independent opinion, which here seems to come in conflict with acting responsibly and maturely, and not saying too much. This last example shows how this kind of contestation towards an authority is constructed as being a risk-taking for the individual student. This risk is also a discursive knowledge that student Malin refers to when she claims that everyone thinks I guess but it was not everyone that said anything. Ultimately, even if this is an example of collective action, in this last excerpt the students position themselves as individually accountable for what they said or did not say in their role as students. Ball (2015) discusses how subjectivity becomes a site of struggle when it comes to teachers performing resistance in relation to governmentality in policy practices, and in this example, it is shown how this also goes for students who want to contest existing power relations in policy practices.

**Discussion**

In the studied example, it is the unexpected turn on the political level, where the previously mandatory tests became an optional possibility, that created an opening on the local level for new negotiations, interpretations and translations that were not previously possible. At first, the school handled this as a professional question for the headteacher and her teachers, whereas the students were not asked about their opinion. This is also one of the main arguments that the students use: that they should have been informed and asked, since they are the ones who have to make the effort in doing the tests. We find it interesting and worth pointing out how these students, still quite young of age, in this example take on a position as knowledgeable actors in policy, even if it did not work out as they had hoped. As they jointly construct their story, looking back at what happened, they display a consciousness in their choice of arguments both in relation to their teachers and headteacher and to the interviewing researcher.

The arguments they choose to put forward are in line with, and could be well recognised in, the official rhetoric of contemporary dominating policy discourses. Their argumentation does not end at merely stating that the decision is unfair. They also claim their rights to have influence over a decision that concerns them, and display indignation that they were not asked beforehand. In their argumentation, they orient both to a historically grounded tradition in Sweden about the value of student influence (see Carlgren et al., 2006) and to the more recent neoliberal development towards extensive testing and comparison in education (Imsen et al., 2017). They give the picture of national tests as something other than the regular teaching, and something that takes valuable time from the ordinary subject content. From this, they conclude that the tests make them lose time, which is negative for their learning options and something that, indirectly, also puts them at a competitive disadvantage in relation to other schools. They also demonstrate competence in the way they uncover the “long-term plan” as an improvement project where they have to pay the price for something that could eventually benefit teachers and younger students in the future, but where there is nothing but the effort in it for them. And they could be said to have a point – the students pay a personal price for the benefit of a school development that is part of broader steering imperatives. Here their line of argumentation also reflects arguments that seem to draw on the kind of student-centred democratic ambitions that have traditionally been emphasised in the Swedish school system, and the analysis shows how this is still discursive knowledge that the students draw on in parallel to other discourses about the pressure to perform. Our results illustrate how neoliberal rhetorics about learning effectiveness, competition, self-regulation and the constant need for improvement have worked their way into the students’ everyday lives. The pressure to perform well on tests is, of course, not in itself new for students, but what the detailed conversation analysis shows is that these dominating contemporary discourses about performativity have now become available knowledge also for the students, that they can use as a resource to build their own cause. In the discussion, as they navigate between different fabrications for different purposes, the students display a deep
knowledge about how to find those arguments that work from the inside of the system. From the student perspective that we take in the analysis, it becomes clear that the market-based governance and testing regimes described by, for example, Lingard et al. (2013) and Ozga (2009) has worked its way into the everyday life of classrooms in a way that seems to profoundly change what being a student is about and where knowledge of the system becomes more and more central in order to be a successful student.

The students also tell a story about themselves as losers in the negotiation; they were not listened to and in the aftermath they evaluate their own role in the discussion. In this evaluation, they display some uncertainties about their own actions. Did I say enough? Or did I say too much? In this part of their story, their opposition is also referred to as containing elements of risk-taking in relation to the performative ideal of students who perform well and take responsibility for always doing their best. They are trapped in asymmetric power relations where they put their individual grades and identities as good students at stake. Through this, each individual student becomes personally accountable for performing well, which leads to a development of the performative identities described by Jeffrey and Troman (2011).

We suggest that the fabrications of student ideals, and the performative identities that the students construct in the interviews, in different ways work to align with external expectations and school demands. But the fabrications also help to create a distance from these expectations in order to protect themselves from too much pressure or loss of self-esteem while participating in “the classroom game”; in other words these fabrications become means of resistance and for care of the students’ selves (Ball, 2015; Ball & Olmedo, 2013). The students position themselves according to a two-faced ideal where they take on the responsibility both to perform well and make their knowledge assessable, and for being actors that take part in negotiations about policy translations, able to argue for their cause. They position themselves as co-players in the system, taking their role as actors who participate in negotiations in the translation of a policy directive, but without questioning the policy texts and directives as such. They do not act irresponsibly, nor do they refuse to do the tests, but they do claim their right to be listened to in a practice that they claim concerns them as major players in the policy.

Together the students are able to use different fabrications of student ideals that work to support their position, as they combine discursively shaped ideals of both independent thinking and democratic rights with other ideals about effective learning and outcomes, as resources to justify their cause (see Ball, 2006; Perryman, 2009). As they do this, they also demonstrate being knowledgeable actors that to a certain extent can manage their way through a performative system. We believe that this is a change, in the sense that this kind of rhetoric today has reached a state of “common sense” on all levels, so that even students of a young age know how to reinforce arguments within these discourses in favour of their own interests. The analysis of students’ interaction shows how a performative educational system produces performative students who learn to manage this system, and how the constantly present performative pressure has seeped deep into everyday relations between students, teachers and headteachers.

The notion of the students being described as competent actors and co-players in policy practices does not rule out that they are also objects for these policy changes, embedded in power relations with limited space to see beyond the official rhetoric. So, even if this example in many ways raises hopes about young students’ initiative and also the school’s acceptance to make space for them to have their say, the results also raise questions about how increased performative pressure affects what goes on in classrooms and schools. Knowledge about the system, and how to assess student outcome that has previously been a responsibility for teachers and school leaders, are today competencies that students, too, are expected to have. Our results raise questions about what students are actually held accountable for and what kind of game education teaches them to play – and what kind of knowledge becomes lost in this transition. From this, we argue that there is a great need for more knowledge in policy studies, as well as in pedagogical studies in general, that explicitly focuses on the consequences of contemporary education policies from the students’ perspective.
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