A double pressure to perform? Pupils talk about grades and parents in a multicultural school setting in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
The aim is to contribute knowledge about the ways in which Swedish pupils with a migrant background speak about school performances and their first experiences of being graded. The results describe pupils and parents as positioned as being lower down in a top-down relationship vis-à-vis school. The separation between home and school is best described as robust. Some pupils want and ask for a better school-home relationship because they think it would harmonise the relationship with their parents and facilitate their school work. The main conclusion is that pupils find themselves in a vulnerable position between schools’/teachers’ demands and parents’ aspirations for them.

KEYWORDS
Pupils’ experiences; grades; multicultural setting; home-school relationships

Introduction

This article focuses on children’s narratives of parental support and expectations in relation to the introduction of grades earlier in school. In 2011, major changes were introduced to the Swedish school assessment system, including grade reports from school year 6 instead of year 8 and a new grading scale from A (highest grade) to F (fail). 2. In particular, it discusses how lowering the age when pupils in Sweden receive their first grades may put certain children with a migrant background in a difficult position in the home-school relationship.

Grades from a relatively young age is a rather new phenomenon in a Swedish compulsory school context. During the roughly 30 years spanning the school reform in 1962 and the introduction of a new national curriculum in the 1990s, students in lower classes did not receive any grades at all. With the ratification of the new national curriculum (Lpö-94) in 1994, grade reports were introduced in school year 8, and no further changes have been made until the new assessment system in 2011. The issue of earlier grades has been politizised and heavily debated in Sweden over the years and still is (see e.g. Lundahl, Hultén, Klapp, & Mickwitz, 2015). In general terms the liberal and conservative parties have argued for earlier grades while the more left wing parties have argued for the opposite. The latest consequence of this debate is a recent consensus

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agreement about a trial where schools were offered to give grades in school year 4. A main argument for earlier grades was that they were supposed to improve information about school results for pupils and parents, thereby hopefully reducing feelings of stress and negative pressure on pupils to perform later on as they get used to getting grades (Government proposal, 2009/10:219). This has meant, however, increased pressure on pupils in school year six not only to achieve good results at school but also to understand how the grading system works and how to act in alignment with what is valued in this system (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017a). As part of a larger project1 aiming to explore the ways in which nearly 300 pupils experience the grading process (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2015, 2017a, 2017b; Löfgren, Löfgren, & Pérez Prieto, 2018), one particular school stood out amongst the eleven included in the project. In the interviews from this particular school, characterised by a large number (95%) of pupils with a migrant background, a pattern revealed itself where certain pupils referenced their parents’ foreign background to described how they, in specific ways, are caught in a different position from their peers in terms of home-school relationships. Specifically, these children make explicit references to being put under increased pressure, citing their parents’ lack of experience with, and knowledge of, the Swedish grading system in combination with high expectations and demands on their children’s school performance. As will be discussed in this article, a good performance is in this context synonymous with achieving the highest grades.

The data in this article is based on four group interviews with pupils in one of the nine schools involved in the project. By using a narrative analysis, we adopt a perspective that considers the multiple meanings involved when pupils position themselves in their comments about different experiences of being graded and in their narratives about their parents. The pupils’ stories are viewed as socially situated actions (Mishler, 1999), and through a positioning analysis we investigate different aspects of the parental involvement related to grades in the pupil’s stories and through their storytelling (Bamberg, 1997, 2004). This narrative approach enables a discussion of the home-school relationship in a multicultural school setting from a pupil’s point of view. The aim is to contribute knowledge about the ways in which pupils who reference explicit, or otherwise, a migrant background speak about school performance and the experience of being graded for the first time. In order to do this, the analysis deals with the ways in which the pupils’ position themselves in relation to the school’s new grading practices and their parents’ expectations.

Unequal home-school relationships

Parents, regardless of gender or social and cultural origins, want their children to succeed in school (OECD, 1997; Vincent, 2000) and play a primary role in the academic achievement of their children (e.g. Muller, 1998; Robinson & Harris, 2013). However, several researchers have drawn attention to the complications that at times characterise the possibilities for a close working relationship between home and school. This is especially true at schools with a high rate of pupils with a migrant background – in Sweden as well as elsewhere (Bastiani, 1997; Bunar, 2001; Crozier, 2000; Crozier & Reay, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Sjögren, 1996; Vincent, 1996, 2000). For many of these scholars, a major obstacle identified revolves around the question of language.
Language difficulties are seen as not only hindering communication with parents from the point of view of schools, but also impeding their ability to support homework (Bitew & Ferguson, 2010; Ibrahim, Small, & Grimely, 2009; Peterson & Ladky, 2007). Others point out that teachers and principals have a deficit orientation regarding immigrant children and parents from the outset (e.g. Chapman & Bhopal, 2013; Jones, 2014; Linde Matthiesen, 2017).

These results echo what has been uncovered in a Swedish context. Researchers have stressed that minority parents are frequently ignored and marginalised when attempting to speak on behalf of their children (Bouakaz, 2007), and that they feel what they have to offer is unimportant and unappreciated in their contact with Swedish schools (Bunar, 2001; Sjögren, 1996). Bouakaz focuses on the impact this has on children, arguing that pupils from homes with a migrant background risk being trapped in a position, to borrow from Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad, of “double loneliness” (Bouakaz, 2007, p. 199). For Sayad (2004), this “double loneliness” – or closer to his own vocabulary, “double absence” – refers to the experiences of the children of Algerian immigrants in France who feel divided between their country of origin and their host country. Bouakaz (2007, p. 299) applies this to a Swedish school context and home-school relationships as he draws the following conclusion from interviews with parents with a migrant background:

According to the parents, what their children learn at home is given little value once the children attend school. What the child is being taught at school does not seem to make sense to him or her, a fact that in this case negatively influences the child’s success at school, and in addition what is being taught at school does not make sense to the child’s family.

Others, most notably Dahlstedt (2009), go as far as to argue that schools in Sweden blame difficulties with school situations on parents with a foreign background, claiming that they are uninterested, uninformed and authoritarian. At the same time, other studies on newly arrived minors note that the parents encourage them to study, but are seldom directly involved in their childrens’ school work (e.g. Cederberg, 2006; Sundelin, 2015; Svensson & Eastmond, 2013). A reason for this emerges in studies that interview parents to newly arrived pupils (e.g. Bergnehr, 2018; Bouakaz & Bunar, 2015). These show that the parents take a step back in relation to school as they feel that they lack necessary knowledge about the Swedish school context, but also that they feel marginised in relation school. This makes them an underused resource when it comes to the schooling of newly arrived pupils (Bunar, 2015).

In the context of the USA, several researchers have found that parents with a migrant background and minority (e.g. black, Asian and Hispanic) parents place greater emphasis on their children’s academic success than white parents (Harris, 2011; Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). Portes and Rumbaut (2001) speak about the “immigrant drive”; a strong disposition for achievement which they attempt to pass on to their children through emphasising their educational attainment. Where some contend that having high educational expectations for their children is a cultural value often learned in their home countries (e.g. Harris, Jamison, & Trujillo, 2008; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), others, from different European contexts, contend that one obstacle to parents’ engagement in their children’s school work is a lack of knowledge about Western educational systems (e.g. Bitew &
Ferguson, 2010; Ibrahim et al., 2009; Peterson & Ladky, 2007). Hence, there may be a gap related to what parents know about schoolwork and what schools know about pupils’ learning at home. However, it is also important to underline that this gap in home-school relationships goes beyond ethnic lines (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017a). For instance, Markström (2013) makes the case that the central issue is the unequal power relationship between home and school – or, in her words, these relationships are more asymmetrical and vertical than symmetrical and horizontal, meaning that children are more than often subordinated to adults such as teachers and parents.

In the light of this observation, and the particular challenge encountered by pupils with parents who have experiences from school systems other than the Swedish system, this article draws attention to what pupils who refer to a migrant background say about their experiences of being graded and how their parents talked to them about grades. Previous studies make the case that the parents’ own experiences of being graded and views of grades influence the children’s views of themselves as pupils with a sense of educational resilience (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017a) and future possibilities in education and life (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017b). Additionally, several researchers stress that parents with a foreign background tend to express strong beliefs about the value and utility of education for social mobility and have high educational aspirations for their children (Andriessen, Phalet, & Lens, 2006; Hagelskamp, Suárez-Orozco, & Hughes, 2010). Consequently, this article aims to contribute to this field of research taking an interest in how the relationships between pupils, parents and schools may affect the pupils’ views of themselves (Bouakaz, 2007; Markström, 2013) as part of the experience of receiving their first grades.

**A narrative approach to parents and grading**

As a point of departure, this study makes theoretical use of narratives as social practice (Mishler, 1999). This narrative approach allows for an understanding of pupils’ positions through a focus on how pupils, in interview conversations, make narrative sense of experiences of getting grades. Looking at stories of personal experiences as a social practice means that a story told in an interview is seen as co-constructed by interviewees and interviewer. This, in turn, makes the telling of the story as interesting to analyse as its content. An analytical focus on both the story content and on how the story is told (Mishler, 1995) can teach us about what positions pupils are given/take as the stories emerge through the sense-making practice of co-narrating their past experiences. An analysis that targets the ways in which pupils as story characters are located in space and time (Denzin, 1989) and positioned in relation to each other and to the interview situation (Bamberg, 1997) can highlight different positions.

We apply a three-level model for positioning analysis developed by Bamberg (1997, 2004). Bamberg combines the narrative approach with the positioning theory originally introduced by Davis and Harré (1990). The three levels of analysis in the model target three questions. The first question is: What is the story about and how are the story characters positioned in relation to each other? At this level, the analysis focuses on how the characters are constructed within the story world, and the aim is to find out what marks the persons as agents in, or without, control, through linguistic means. The second level of the analysis asks: How do the interlocutors position themselves and each
other in the interactive situation? The analytical interest is here directed towards the social function of the story in the interactive situation. Stories can for example be told as a way to instruct and advise the audience or to make excuses and blame others for an incident. The third level targets what the “narrator holds to be true and relevant above and beyond the local conversational situation” (Bamberg, 1997, p. 337) by asking: How do the interlocutors position themselves vis-à-vis cultural discourses and normative positions? The first two levels of positioning analysis distinguish the stories of getting grades from the act of telling by separating the story characters positioned in the past story world from the positions that emerge in the immediate interview conversation. Finally, we discuss the positions emerging through the telling of the pupils’ stories in relation to culturally available discourses about performance in order to discuss how the pupils’ stories about getting graded are related to normative positions of failure and success.

**Data, methodological considerations and ethical considerations**

The research project focuses specifically on elementary pupils’ (aged 12–13 years) experiences of receiving grades and of preparing for and taking the national tests in sciences and social sciences for the first time. Pupils from 11 different schools in five different municipalities were interviewed with the purpose of obtaining a wide variety of pupil experiences. In total, we conducted 91 group interviews (n = 2–5) with 298 pupils, some of whom were interviewed twice between the years 2014 and 2015 at the time of receiving their grades. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions about experiences of being tested and graded, followed by situated questions in order to encourage detailed stories and concrete examples. Transcription and analysis of all interviews was carried out on a continuous basis.

The project adheres to the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines on good research practices, as the research subjects who participated in the project were informed of their possibility to decline or cease their participation after being briefed on the project in a way that they could understand. Initially, we contacted the teachers and informed them about the project, and they helped us to distribute a sheet with information about the project and the conditions for participation. All pupils participating in the project submitted written approval from their parents, and everyone who wanted to be interviewed was welcome. For ethical reasons, we do not use names in the data presented.

Among the schools involved in the study, one school stood out as different from the others because many of the pupils both explicitly and implicitly referred to their migrant background in their conversations about grades and parents’ attitudes to schoolwork. The data in this article is based on interviews with 19 of the pupils in this school, which is situated on the outskirts of a medium-sized town. 95% of the pupils at this school came from homes with a migrant background. Most students in this school did not speak Swedish as their mother tongue; the students spoke Arabic, Somali, and English at home but fluent Swedish in school and during the interviews. This school is situated on the outskirts of a town and most of the students reported that they live in the same area.
When analysing the data from this school we used a software program (NVivo 11) that enabled us to identify and select the transcripts where pupils implicitly or explicitly referred to their migrant background in different ways. In the next step, we identified those parts of the transcripts where the pupils were talking about their parents and their views on grades or school results. Finally, we selected those sequences presented in this article based on the principle that they are suitable for a positioning analysis, meaning that they have content that involves more than one character and a plot with an evaluative point. Due to this procedure, not all sequences presented here include explicit references to the pupils’ migrant background. Typically, the selected quotations are considered “events within brief durations” (Gergen & Gergen, 1997, p. 171) that illustrate aspects of grades and parents that are important to the pupils’ views of themselves when they talk about their experiences of being graded. In other words, the pupils’ stories are considered to be identity performances (Mishler, 1999). To further explore the evaluative points, we have considered how a sense of meaning is reinforced through the use of emotive words, quotations or humour (Bauman, 1986; Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017b). Finally, in the positioning analysis we target different positions in the pupils’ stories and through their storytelling following the guiding questions described earlier (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; Löfgren & Karlsson, 2016). As researchers we are also involved in the prosesses of positioning and meaning-making since we are the ones asking questions in the interview situation and the ones making the analysis based on the aims of the project. For these reasons, it is plausible to assume that if the research setting would have been different in terms of, for example, our age, gender or backgound other positions would be possible.

**Expressions of a pressure to perform**

As part of the project we conducted five group interviews with a total of 19 pupils about grades at the multicultural school, and in the following section we analyse the stories of three groups of pupils who all talk about their experiences of getting graded for the first time and of talking about grades with their parents. One thing that the interviews have in common is that the pupils make implicit or explicit references to their parents’ migrant backgrounds and that the stories presented here illustrate how parents contribute to a pressure to achieve good results and grades in school. This pressure is not unique for the pupils at this school (see Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017a). However, some of the pupils’ references to their migrant background and certain problems related to this indicate that they experience a double pressure to perform due to their parents’ lack of knowledge and experiences of the Swedish school and grading system. Some different aspects of this pressure are illustrated in the stories, and the issue of whether it is “double” for pupils with a migrant background is discussed in the concluding parts of the article.

In the first story, the pupils explicitly refer to their parents’ migrant backgrounds and are openly critical of their parents’ requirements for good grades and their lack of knowledge about the Swedish grading system. The second story, where the pupils implicitly refer to their parents’ migrant backgrounds by separating the conditions at Swedish schools from their parents’ experiences in another school system, is about how the parents distrust their children’s ambitions and therefore monitor their studies. In
the third story presented here, there are no explicit references to the pupils’ migrant backgrounds. However, earlier in the transcripts they have made such references when talking about lessons in their mother tongue. In this story about a mother who requires the highest grades of her son, the experience of getting grades is linked to a strong pressure to meet this expectation. The positioning analysis in this section targets different aspects of the possible “double” pressure to perform, and the three levels suggested by Bamberg (1997) are addressed in the presentation of each story.

**A struggle for the highest grades**

This story is told by three girls that we call Jaide, Dalia and Hadya who say that their parents come from Iraq, and there are two interviewers asking the questions, although just one of them is represented in the following excerpt. It was when analysing aspects of pupils’ educational resilience in this interview transcript that our attention was drawn to the pupils’ references to their parents’ migrant backgrounds when they discuss the experience of being graded. It is visible in this excerpt how some pupils find it problematic that their parents do not have their own experiences of the Swedish grading system and therefore, according to the pupils, tend to push them too hard to get the highest grades.

The interviewees describe the high expectations in terms of academic performance that their parents invest in them. In the interview, the pupils position themselves as a joint group sharing the same experience of being caught in a troublesome position between a demanding grading system and parents with a limited amount of knowledge about the national grading system. The pupils use different narrative resources to carve out this position. For example, Jaide imitates the parents’ dominant voice and her own

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**Excerpt 1. They don’t know how it works**

| Interviewer | Jaide | Dalia | Hadya | Jaide | Interviewer | Jaide | Dalia | Hadya | Jaide | Interviewer | Jaide | Dalia | Hadya |
|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Do you talk a lot about it [grades] at home then? | All three of us have parents from the same country and we have a reputation that our parents want us to have the highest [grades] and when we have a test they force us to sit with our hand-outs until we... yes all day long. And then we get home with a bit lower test [results] than they expected and then... yes, it's not that fun anymore. | They talk a lot about grades. | A lot of talk about grades in front of the relatives. | We try to explain. It is not that easy to get that grade but they say, "well, you have to". It doesn't work, we try to explain. | One of us [short interruption]. Our parents haven’t been in Sweden for long, you know. | They stress us more than our teachers do [short interruption] | Okay. | They don't know how it works. | So, your parents expect you to get better grades, or? | You know, B is not a good [grade] in their eyes. [Laugh] | [Laugh] | And when you say and just, “at least I got an E [pass] they believe it is a fail grade. I have no idea? I think I'll take mother to a talk [in school]. | Can you explain to them then, how it works here? | We try but it doesn't work. | We have done that but after a month they say it again. It's like they ignore what I said. |
subordinate tone in reaction to them. They also underline that their parents are part of a small community of people who have migrated from the same country and how they are known for having high educational expectations. Elsewhere, predominately in the case of the USA, scholars have made the case that preferences among parents for their children to maximise schooling often reflect cultural values learned in their home countries. Similar to the scenario presented here, these values regarding educational opportunities and academic performance can be reinforced in another national context via dense social networks composed of co-ethnics (Harris et al., 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1994). As the pupils suggest in the transcript above, there seems to be limited interaction between home and school, which Markström (2013, p. 49) conceptualises as the asymmetrical vertical “keep-apart-relation”. Instead, these parents, according to their children, communicate among themselves within the closely knit social fabric of co-ethnics. Loyal to the pupils’ voices, then, it is this perhaps troublesome position – in between parents with high expectations for academic achievement but limited information on what is valued and the enactment of a relatively new grading system in Swedish schools – given to these pupils that we argue needs to be further explored and problematised.

**Parents that monitor home assignments**

This story is told by two boys, Cadi and Dawud and a girl, Melek. Two interviewers are also present in the room, although just one of them is represented in the following excerpt. It concerns how the pupils’ parents “force” them to study at home. At the beginning of the interview, Dawud presents himself as coming from an Arabic country while Cadi and Melek are less specific about their background. All three pupils agree that they feel tense when they are about to get their grades as they are aware of the high – or, as they argue, too high – expectations on their school performances. Similar to the excerpt above, it is clear in the following quotation that these parents also know each other and talk about their children’s results, which, in this particular case as well in as the others discussed later on in this article, refutes claims uncovered in previous research about schools viewing parents with a foreign background as unengaged (e.g. Dahlstedt, 2009). The argument made here is that the parents involved are involved and invested in their children’s schooling, but it is a form of engagement that is strictly limited to the sphere of the home separated from school. Furthermore, and in line with previous findings (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017a), the quotation illustrates how the pupils

| Cadi          | It is tense for me          |
|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Melek         | You hope. That is, sometimes I think like, when I’ll go into the room and tell about the grades I’ll get, it feels like I aim for higher but only get lower [grades]. |
| Interviewer 1 | Okay.                       |
| Melek         | It’s like higher demands.   |
| Dawud         | And, when you get the grades you should, a kind of… Well, when you are at home, perhaps they compare with other siblings. |
| Melek         | Yes!                        |

(Continued)
claim that their parents’ school experiences matter when they evaluate their experience of getting their first grades.

The reference to the parents’ lack of experience of Swedish schools becomes a way for Dawud and Cadi to say that their parents place too high expectations on them. For these pupils with daily experience of the Swedish school and grading system, to achieve an “A”, the highest grade, is considered an unreasonable educational target. As Dawud presents the story, if his parents had been more acquainted with the Swedish school system, they would not expect top grades from him. Furthermore, Dawud and Melek agree that their parents compare results with those of their siblings and classmates and that this increases the pressure on them. These results echo findings from elsewhere on how parents’ own experiences of being graded impact on their children’s views of grading practices (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017a). Added to the equation above is that the parents’ familiarity with, and knowledge of, grading in schools derives from another educational system under different circumstances. In explicitly bringing up their parents’ common migrant backgrounds, the pupils position themselves as victims of additional pressure to perform due to their families’ and relatives’ high expectations placed on them. To further illustrate this point, the interviewees underline the difficulties in achieving exceptional results in the Swedish school system and claim that if their parents had gone to school here they would have realised that their expectations are beyond reasonable.

Noteworthy is that it is the pupils themselves that cite their parents’ foreign background as reason to their, in the eyes of their children, unreasonably high expectations in terms of grades. In signalling out ethnicity as a determining factor, the role of social class is simultaneously clouded. Although there is no information about the parents’ class position in the material analysed here, previous research have nonetheless shown that middle-class parents are more likely to put pressure on the school when their children do not achieve as well as they think that they should (e.g. Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007; Reay, 1998; Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011). The difference here, based on the excerpt above, is the “keep-apart-relation” (Markström, 2013) between the parents and school.

The story continues with a situation in the classroom when the pupils learn what grades they will get and they say that they are excited. They are lined up and go into a separate room to meet their teacher. As they walk out, other pupils try to read the
Excerpt 3. Parents that distrust their children’s ambitions

| Cadi | Dawud |
|------|-------|
| **Interviewer** | And then you return. And then all stand there in line waiting? |
| **Dawud** | It’s awful really, and then you go in and when you return you like you might be angry or something and then you understand that that person doesn’t feel very well. You are really nervous inside. So if I get a good grade then I’m good, but if I get a bad [grade] what will my parents say? They’ll think that I haven’t been like studying, you know? And then you have to sit at home with a book all the time. You don’t get a chance to rest or anything. They think you haven’t been studying, you know. |
| **Cadi** | When I don’t get a [certain] grade my father take my Ipad, my laptop, the actual computer plus my cell phone. Then I sit and study without them. But when I need [them] he usually goes to get the Ipad, sitting next to me so he can see that I’m really studying. You know, so I don’t go to games or something. |
| **Dawud** | If they notice that you don’t have any homework they believe that, they believe that you have homework but that you don’t want to do it. You tell them, “but we don’t have any homework”. |
| **Cadi** | Yes, when you say that to parents, “we don’t have any homework”, they don’t believe [you]. They had, in the old days they had homework all the time. They have had homework all the time. So when you tell them they just say, “yes, no you have homework but you don’t want to do it”. |
| **Dawud** | And my parents, you know, will ask my [twin] brother, “do you have homework?”. He says, “no”. They go, “no you’re lying, I’ll ask Dawud”. They ask me, I say, “no we don’t have any homework”. They say, “aha, he didn’t lie then”. This is what we get, they ask one of us and then the other. |

expressions on their faces. What immediately crosses Dawud’s mind is how his parents will react to the letter on his grade sheet when he gets home.

In line with a positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997), the excerpt above illustrates in detail how the pupils are positioned as being under pressure to avoid failure and work hard for future success. The characters appearing in the two excerpts are the siblings and friends who serve as references for what can be considered a good result when the two mothers compare the pupils’ results. Other characters are the classmates as a group watching each other coming out with information about their grades and a fictional angry pupil who is not feeling good, illustrating the tense situation in the classroom when they are informed what grades they will get. Further, in the story Dawud is positioned as a pupil who is worrying about his grades and what his parents will think about them. Dawud is also positioned as a son who disappoints his parents, with a prospect of being locked up with a book “without any chance to rest”. Dawud’s parents are positioned as suspicious about their two sons’ schoolwork and the twin brother is positioned as a potential liar in the eyes of their parents. Cadi is positioned as powerless in relation to his father who forces him to study when his grades are too low and restricts and controls his use of his cell phone iPad. His parents are thereby positioned as strict, and also as old-fashioned regarding their views of how to deal with schoolwork.

When telling this story, Cadi and Dawud position themselves as being under pressure from their parents to achieve good grades. The pupils use different narrative resources to take this position. For example, the fictional angry pupil serves as a narrative resource dramatising a worst-case scenario, illustrating how it might feel to get too low grades. In the excerpts it is also clear that different comparisons, for example between different pupils, siblings and friends, and in relation to the parents’ own school experiences, serve as a way to stress the position of being under pressure in the interaction between the pupils and the interviewer. To conclude so far, the
positioning analysis illustrates how the pupils describe themselves as being under pressure to perform well in school and at home.

Moreover, this story illustrates how the parents’ ambitions regarding their children’s grades create tensions and distrust in their relationships with their children. In this story, there are clear references to normative positions of failure or success. For example, it is evident that the dichotomy between good and bad is present in the discussion at Dawud’s home and it is clear that Cadi’s father sets goals for what grades he is supposed to achieve. The grades appear to be so important to these parents that they act decisively to push their children forward. They enforce a system of punishment by taking away their electronic devices and sitting by their children’s side to monitor their work. Rather than contacting the school directly and the teacher in question, the parents in this story crosscheck the truth of one child’s answer by asking a sibling, which is argued to be based on their own school experiences. Conversely, by stressing the parents’ distrust and contrasting it to the concluding statement “Aha, he didn’t lie”, the pupils position themselves as honest and doing the right thing. The pupils’ use of reported speech (Bauman, 1986) also serves as a narrative resource that emphasises the importance of this position. Regardless of whether the underlying reasons for the behaviour described by the interviewee are a consequence of limited language skills that prevents the parents from speaking directly to the school as proposed by some (e.g. Bitew & Ferguson, 2010), or if it is related to a firmly rooted respect for teacher autonomy as suggested by others (e.g. Bouakaz, 2007), the strictly vertical relationship between school and home, where dialogue between the two parties seems to be non-existent, is noticeable (Markström, 2013).

**Pressure to perform**

A similar trope of the keep-apart relationship where school and home do not intersect with each other is also present in the story below, where a pupil called Baruti describes how his mother sets high standards for him to achieve the highest grade. Another boy, Hasan, and a girl, Jina, mainly play the part of an audience, giving short answers on a few occasions to questions asked by the interviewer or comments on the story. In the transcript below, none of the pupils make explicit references to their migrant background, but earlier in the interview Baruti says that all of them attend a class in their mother tongue, an African language. This kind of reference to their migrant background is not repeated in the interview and should therefore merely be regarded as background information about the framing of the situation. When telling the story, Baruti provides us with detailed information about the conversation between himself and his mother, stressing the point that she pushes him to perform well without taking notice of what he has to learn. The detailed story illustrates tensions between mother and son when they discuss his grades, and finishes with a humorous description of what happened when he finally got them. Baruti starts telling the story when he is asked to expand on an earlier hint that the mother is interested in his grades.
Excerpt 4. Parents shaping pressure

Interviewer  You said your mother was talking a little about [grades]…?
Baruti  I have always known that I have to get good grades. “So, you should think about your future. Okay. Stop using the cell-phone, remember to study now even if you don’t have any homework. Do something like that and it’ll be a bit better.”

Interviewer  So, she’s nagging a bit at home?
Baruti  Yes, all the time.

Interviewer  Is it worse now in grade six when you get grades than before?
Baruti  Yes, in the beginning. That is [disturbing noise] in the first term I was very nervous and thought about how I would get… But now when I don’t think of it, kind of, it is easier.

Interviewer  When you don’t think about every grade, but…?
Baruti  Yes. That is, you get more… kind of, marks on every test you do.

Interviewer  Do you talk a lot about grades?
Jina  Yes
Hasan  Yes. My father.
Interviewer  Aha. Your father talks? What do you say then?
Hasan  He says that I should try to improve all grades. That is, if I get an E I should try to get a C or a D. So that…
Baruti  My mother, you know, she think that you can get an A on… you know, “you must get an A”. “Yes, mother, but I can’t just get an A. I have to be good at it”, like. No, she just goes “I don’t give a damn. You must get an A”. It’s a bit weird. I, just, how can I get an A if I’m not that good. Then she just says, “No, I don’t care. Just study. Get the book. Do your homework. You must get an A”. I just [say] “Okay, okay”

Interviewer  So she mostly cares about the result, the grade? She doesn’t think so much about how you should get there?
Baruti  Yes, kind of, “mother, you don’t know how hard it is”. But, “I don’t care. You must get an A”. I just [go] “okay, okay, I’ll get an A” A.”

The protagonists in the story are Baruti and his mother. Other characters appearing in the story are Hasan and his father and Jina. Baruti is positioned as a pupil who have hard to meet his mother’s expectations and who thinks that the schoolwork is hard. He is positioned in relation to his mother as being put under pressure to achieve top grades at school. By repeatedly quoting the mother’s words “You must get an A”, the mother is positioned as nagging regarding the grades. The pupil’s use of reported speech (Bauman, 1986) also serves as a narrative resource in order to emphasise what he considers to be unreasonable demands placed on him by his mother. The mother is also positioned as strict and authoritarian, without considering his desires and possibilities to achieve those grades.

There is a tension in the story due to the wide discrepancy between the positions given to the mother and son. Baruti positions himself in relation to the interviewer as nervous about getting grades and as resigned vis-à-vis his mother’s high demands. The position of nervousness is performed as an answer to the interviewer’s questions about how they talk about grades at home, and is a reaction to the mother’s exhortations to him to “think about your future” and to “do something to improve”. The nervousness is to some extent resisted by him trying not to think about the grades. The position of resignation is performed in the sequences where Baruti expresses his weak chances to achieve an A grade, and contrasts them to his mother’s strict attitude. The reported speech, “Okay, I’ll get an A” in the final lines illustrates the position of resignation taking shape in the tension between his own view of his limited abilities to learn and his mother’s standpoint: “I don’t care, you still need to get an A.”

These narratives align themselves to what renowned sociologist Albert Memmi (2006, p. 111), in the context of France, identifies as a divide between “the
immigrant and his children”. This rift separating parents with a foreign background and their children, Memmi argues, is characterised by not necessarily sharing the same memories or the same idea of the future. According to Memmi, for many parents with a migrant background, school signifies the gateway to advancement, often instilling desire and hope in their children’s performances. Regardless of the motives for moving, these parents invest physical and emotional resources to make a living in a new country. As such, as several researchers (Andriessen et al., 2006; Bouakaz, 2007; Kao & Tienda, 1995) contend, they carry hopes of enhancing their children’s opportunities for an education that will help them achieve an economically more comfortable life than themselves. Similar to this particular scenario, scholars assert that many parents with a foreign background believe that their children’s future employment opportunities will be constrained or compensated by pushing them to high levels of educational attainment (Harris et al., 2008).

Without enough insight into this particular case, and without an awareness of the risks of both essentialising and generalising, what can be extracted from the excerpt is how Baruti expresses that his mother draws a direct line between top grades and future success in life. For the mother, a high grade seems to function almost as a guarantee that Baruti is on the right track, which at the same time, according to his own account, adds additional pressure. Part of this is possibly related to the fact that the parent individualises success and failure. Failure in his parents’ eyes, as Baruti sees it, would merely point to the fact that he has not put in enough effort or dedicated sufficient time to his studies. According to Markström (2013), the relationship between home and school is defined in terms of separation where information from school, in this excerpt, seems limited to the anticipated letter containing the grade sheet.

Anticipation and anxiety about their parents’ reactions to the grade sheet can also be seen in the following story where Baruti describes how he employs strategies to delay the confrontation between himself and his parents in relation to his school grades.

Excerpt 5. Pupil dealing with pressure

| Baruti  | I remember. Mother was away, she was working. I stood in front of the door. It was Monday. You know, I was just... "when does it [the letter with the grades] come, when does it come?". I woke up early. But I, a kind of, wanted to see if I had lower [grades] like. |
| Hasan   | I waited until Wednesday. |
| Baruti  | Shit, I just stood there and, "when does it come, when does it come?". And mother was away that day. So I snapped it [the envelope] right when it arrived. I checked if my siblings saw me and put it in my bag immediately. And then they asked me all the time, "but hasn’t it arrived yet?" But I just [said], "but mother please, obviously it will come". |
| Interviewer | So you checked [the grades] yourself first, or? |
| Baruti  | Yes |
| Interviewer | Did she see them afterwards then, or? |
| Baruti  | Yes, in the end. She just [said], "Now, that’s it, I have to call them". "Okay, okay. I have it here. It’s in my bag". [Laughing] |
| Interviewer | Was she happy then when she got to see it? |
| Baruti  | Yes. |
| Interviewer | But she wanted more As then? |
| Baruti  | Yes. [laughing] |
In this sequence, Baruti is the only protagonist and he is positioned as being under pressure in a situation that is outside his control. The story about how he waits by the letter box and worries whether his siblings have seen him when he hides the envelope is designed to inform about this vulnerable position. The siblings and the mother are positioned as anxious to know about what grades he got when “asking all the time” if they had arrived. The story is further dramatised, as B does not show the grades to his family before his mother threatens to call the school asking for the results.

The inner dialogue where Baruti describes in detail what he thought when he was waiting for his grades works to position him in relation to those present as being very nervous about getting his grades lowered and about how his mother will react when she sees the grades. He uses different narrative resources such as providing detailed information about the time, his mother’s location, where he was standing and what he was doing/thinking, with reported/inner speech and repetition as illustrations of how nervous he was. The evaluative point of the story, however, is that the mother was content with his grades as suggested by the interviewer and confirmed by Baruti. He positions himself as relieved when he laughingly speaks about how he confessed that he had the grades in his bag and that his mother was pleased with them. He thereby repositions his mother’s strict position in the story and she is given a more nuanced image. In Baruti’s account, the mother is positioned first as anxious to know about the grades and then as pleased with them. The strained feeling of anxiety is consequently substituted as Baruti finds himself in a state of relief about his mother’s reaction on his grades.

This story illustrates how important it was for the mother that her son got high grades as early as school year six and how this standpoint made the grades emotionally charged for Baruti. Emotions of nervousness, resignation and relief emerged when he was telling the story. It is also evident in this story that the discussion about grades at home created tensions in their relationship. Once again, the relationship between school and home is best described as vertical (Markström, 2013) and the mother’s lack of information about what is expected to get an A and of her son’s view of his ability to get that grade gives her a powerless position with few means to support her son. The direct link, made by the mother in the story, between Baruti getting his first grades and a normative position that school success is a key to future success in life or in the labour market is typical of the pupils’ stories at this school. When Baruti positions his mother as strict regarding the first grades and express feelings of nervousness about seeing his grades and relief when seeing his mother’s reaction to his grades, he also accepts a normative position where getting grades is an important beginning of a narrative of either failure or success.

**Discussion: home-school relationships and grading practice**

The analysis of pupils’ stories about grading and parents from this multi-cultural school context sheds some new light on the discussion about the relationship between home and school from a pupil’s perspective. All the stories presented here bear witness to a strong presence of the, in Markström’s (2013) words, asymmetrical vertical “keep-apart-relation” with a robust separation between school and home, positioning pupils and parents as a lower part in a top-down relationship. In some of the stories, it is also
evident that the pupils want and ask for a better school-home relationship, in terms of a more horizontal, symmetrical and equal distribution of information. This because they think it would help them perform better at school and harmonise the relationship with their parents.

Adding to this body of research is how the students in this study suggest that their parents, due to their migrant backgrounds, are unable to support them in desired ways. Certainly, this is hardly the whole story and overlooks other factors and forces that may put pressure on the pupils – for example, teachers, peers, policy discourses, to mention but a few. Yet loyal to the pupils’ accounts, foreign backgrounds come to signify a general lack of knowledge about the Swedish school system and its grading practices; a phenomenon that others have identified as prevalent in studies of parents who have experiences from a different educational system than the country in which they live now (e.g. Bitew & Ferguson, 2010). The pupils are vocal about the ways in which their parents’ limited understanding of Swedish grading practices predominantly manifests itself in what the children see as unreasonably high demands regarding expected grades. This stands in slight contrast to previous studies in a Swedish context that have identified a pattern of parents with a foreign background being encouraging towards their childrens’ schoolwork but are rarely directly involved (Cederberg, 2006; Sundelin, 2015; Svensson & Eastmond, 2013). Yet, this involvement does not extend itself to a relationship with school. A conclusion that be drawn is that the “keep apart-relationship” is considered problematic by the pupils as their parents are indeed very much involved in their school work but without, in their view, the necessary contextual understanding.

Although it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the underlying reasons for the parents’ strong emphasis on high grades as an indicator of success in life, what we can see is the ways in which the children, again, partly see this as a consequence of their parents’ migrant backgrounds, echoing previous studies that have shown that minority immigrant status itself can increase parental expectations (Fuligni, 2007; Li, 2007). In short, their parents’ background matters to the interviewees in terms of how they evaluate their experiences of getting grades in the sense that they find themselves in a vulnerable position between school’s/teachers’ demands and parents’ aspirations for them to succeed at school and in life.

Notes

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2. Migrant background means that the pupil is born outside Sweden or pupils born in Sweden with both parents born abroad. Retrieved 2020-06-08 from: https://siris.skolverket.se/reports/.

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