Grades in the eyes of our parents: a narrative approach to educational resilience in pupils’ stories of getting their first grades

Håkan Löfgren and Ragnhild Löfgren

*Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden; ‡Department of Social and Welfare Studies, Linköping University, Norrköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates educational resilience from the pupil’s perspective through an analysis of how Swedish pupils in grade six position themselves in relation to their parents’ expectations and the school’s grading practice. The term ‘resilience’ refers to pupils’ own views of their potential to learn and succeed in school in a social context, where parents are important as normative actors. Data consists of group interviews with pupils at three schools. By using a narrative analysis, a perspective is adopted that considers the multiple meanings involved when pupils position themselves in their stories about grades and parents. The analysis illustrates how a situated understanding of pupils’ senses of resilience makes family expectations and the importance of pleasing yourself and others and of adapting to grading systems, important aspects to pupils’ own views of their potential to learn and succeed at school. Home and school stand out as different arenas based on the norm of success, but with different ideas about how to deal with schoolwork and grades. A conclusion is that changes in the Swedish grading system might result in a gap regarding knowledge about grades at home and school and double pressure on pupils to achieve good grades.

Introduction

In this article, we are interested in how pupils talk about themselves as people with opportunities to learn and to get good grades in school. We explore how Swedish pupils in school year six position themselves – and are positioned by their parents – as pupils with educational resilience and future possibilities in their narrated experiences of being graded for the first time. Since 2012, Swedish pupils have been given their first grades in school year six on a scale from F to A. Notions of resilience centre on children’s abilities to adapt to the social conditions of development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998) and is recognized as a process of interaction between individuals and sociocultural contexts (Edwards & Apostolov, 2007). Research on educational resilience used to centre on pupils at risk, and their abilities to succeed in school and life despite environmental adversities and difficult circumstances (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997; Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003). Recent research on educational resilience, however, has converged on different aspects that are important to all kind of pupils and their success at school (Kärkkäinen, Räty, & Kasanen, 2008; Rautiainen, Räty, & Kasanen, 2015). Some studies have described pupils as agents dealing with structural environmental aspects (O’Connor, Mueller, & Neal, 2014).

In this paper, we adhere to an interest in pupils as agents dealing with contextual factors by focusing on the recently introduced grades in school year six, and do not limit use of the concept to a certain category of pupils. Rautiainen et al. (2015) suggested that perceptions of educational resilience may represent a different dimension compared to perspectives describing children’s actual achievement in school. These authors used the concept to investigate parents’ and teachers’ confidence in a child’s educational potential, concerning their trust in the child’s ‘relatively stable and general internal capacity for learning’ (Räty, Kasanen, & Rautiainen, 2014; Rautiainen et al., 2015, p. 471). There has also been some research on pupils’ own perceptions of resilience (Räty, Kärkkäinen, & Kasanen, 2010; Räty, Kasanen, Kiiskinen, Nykky, & Atjonen, 2004; Stipek & Gralinski, 1996). Pupils’ notions of the resilience of their academic competences has been described as based, on the one hand, on their perceptions of personal improvement, and, on the other, on information about results from school (Kärkkäinen et al., 2008; Stipek & Gralinski, 1996). The former has been described as an intrapersonal aspect referring to ‘the promotional sphere of education’ (Kärkkäinen et al., 2008, p. 446), emphasizing issues of learning and development of every pupil’s skills. The latter is characterized as a normative and interpersonal aspect referring to ‘the restrictive sphere of education’ (Kärkkäinen et al., 2008, p.
446), involving issues of assessment, comparison and ranking. In this article, we adhere to the idea that pupils’ sense of educational resilience – understood as their sense of being able to develop and learn now and in the future – takes shape in a dialectic process between external evaluations (in this case grades) and more personal views of themselves as learners (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015). Even though our data focuses on experiences of being graded, which are by definition part of the restrictive sphere of education, we agree that the term ‘educational resilience’ offers an opportunity to investigate perceptions of possibilities to succeed in education and life in a fruitful way. However, a substantial proportion of the research on educational resilience has focused on adults’ views on children’s capabilities, and we argue that the concept is often used in such a way that its meaning is taken for granted. We will address these two problems in this paper.

In one study (Räty et al., 2010) of children aged 9–12 years, most respondents said that effort was the main way of improving their academic competences. The researchers concluded that:

The findings suggest that reference to effort is an explanation that helps the pupil to deal with the threat of low academic self-concept determined on normative grounds and thus to retain a quantum of hope in regard to her/his prospects of personal development. (p. 247)

This indicates that pupils struggle with issues of how to maintain a view of themselves as someone who can learn something and do something about their situation even if the school environment tends to be busy with measuring their results (Smith, 2016). As mentioned above, it is also evident that parents have strong views of their children’s abilities. This, and the now stronger interest for pupils as agents dealing with contextual aspects (O’Connor et al., 2014), motivates the pupil’s perspective that we take in this article, and a different angle wherein we focus on what the pupils say about their parents regarding their grades.

The context emphasized in the study is situations in which parents become important as normative actors who influence the pupils’ views of themselves by talking about grades in different ways. Getting their first grades and hearing comments on them from their parents is not necessarily positive or negative in terms of pupils’ sense of educational resilience, but we argue that these experiences matter when it comes to how they view themselves and their future possibilities. This twist, however, makes it important to elaborate further on how the concept of resilience is operationalized in related studies in the area. Räty et al. (2010), Kärkkäinen et al. (2008) and Räty et al. (2004) used questionnaires to address issues of, for example, whether educational resilience changes over the school year or in relation to different school subjects, or if there are differences regarding parents’ and teachers’ views on pupils’ resilience in relation to gender and educational background. Such approaches to educational resilience highlight similarities within and differences between categories, and produce generalized descriptions of pupils’ abilities to learn based on one aspect at a time. In contrast to these studies, and in line with studies that take a narrative approach to educational resilience (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015), we argue for studies that address, to a greater extent, the complexities that occur when different contextual aspects converge as important in pupils’ own evaluations of their ability to succeed in relation to the growing influence of the restrictive sphere of education.

This article is part of a project in which pupils in school year six in Sweden were interviewed about their experiences of grades and national tests. The data in this paper is based on group interviews with pupils at three schools selected based on their different characters. By using a narrative analysis, we adopt a perspective that considers the multiple meanings involved when pupils position themselves in their narratives in relation to their parents and express different senses of educational resilience. The pupils’ stories are viewed as socially situated actions (Mishler, 1999), and through a positioning analysis we target different expressions of educational resilience in their stories and through their storytelling (Bambarg, 1997, 2004). This narrative approach enables a discussion of resilience as a matter of different situated aspects that are important in the pupils’ stories (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015), and embraces the richness of different stories of being graded. We thereby adhere to requests in previous research for a deeper understanding of pupils’ own perceptions of educational resilience (Rautiainen, Räty, & Kasanen, 2014). Our argument is that senses of educational resilience should be understood not only as pupils’ ‘stable and general internal capacity for learning’, but also as a result of certain situations in which different aspects are relevant. In other words, we argue for a view where educational resilience is understood as a matter of aspects that are important to pupils in certain situations.

The aim of the paper is to contribute with knowledge about educational resilience from the pupil’s perspective through an analysis of how pupils position themselves in relation to their parents’ expectations and the school’s grading practice. The analysis deals with the following questions: What positions do the pupils take in their stories/storytelling vis-à-vis each other and their parents, and in relation to culturally available norms about school performance and future success? What different aspects of educational resilience are foregrounded in different pupils’ stories about grades and parents?
Research on home–school relations and educational resilience

The term ‘educational resilience’ traditionally refers to pupils’ abilities to succeed at school and in life despite environmental adversities and difficult circumstances (Wang et al., 1997; Waxman et al., 2003). Research has focused on risk factors and how resilient students develop abilities such as problem-solving skills and autonomy (Waxman et al., 2003). In more recent studies, students have been described as agents, and external factors such as structural barriers in schooling environments have been emphasized (O’Connor et al., 2014). A study of successful female first-generation students of colour in California, for example, illustrated how factors such as family and understanding adults and peers were woven together in students’ stories of success, and how students used resistance and resilience strategies such as ‘proving them wrong’ or ‘resistance through achievement’ (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015, p. 24). In contrast to studies of the construct of educational resilience that have emphasized drawbacks for certain categories of students, this study does not reserve the concept for any specific category of pupils. We use the concept to describe pupils’ views of their potential and possibilities to succeed in school based on their narrated experiences of being graded for the first time, and talking about grades with their parents. Research on educational resilience has also tended to emphasize adults’ perspectives on pupils’ abilities (Kärkkäinen, Räty, & Kasanen, 2009; Räty & Kasanen, 2010; Räty et al., 2004). Most such studies have used questionnaires and convincingly described pupils’ educational resilience in relation to various quantifiable categories, such as age, sex or social background. We have outlined a tendency for this research to take the concept of ‘educational resilience’ for granted and produce general descriptions of children’s views of their educational potential in relation to pre-determined categories. The studies presented here take an interest in contextual aspects, such as the role of family background or social relations in school. In the following, we first present two studies on home–school relations in Sweden and then present research on educational resilience from adults’ and pupils’ perspectives.

Relations between home and school

The two studies presented here both emphasize the vulnerable or powerless position that pupils tend to end up in between adults at home and adults at school when the two worlds do not communicate smoothly with each other. In a study of parental involvement at school, Bouakaz (2007) stated that those pupils who come from homes with a migrant background risk being trapped in a position of ‘double loneliness’. He concluded his study with the following:

"According to the parents, what their children learn at home is given little value once the children are at school. What the child is being taught at school does not seem to make sense to him/her, a fact that in this case negatively influences the child’s success at school, and in addition what is being taught at school doesn’t make sense to the child’s family. (p. 299)"

There seems to be a gap related to what parents with a migrant background know about schoolwork and what schools know about pupils learning at home. This gap, however, also seems to be present in other home–school relations. Markström (2013) described most of the power relations between home and school as asymmetric and vertical, rather than symmetric and horizontal, arguing that the parties seldom have equal influence in the relationship. She described different ways in which children talk about home–school relations. The ‘asymmetric vertical “keep-apart-relation” between home and school’ (p. 49) is characterized by a discourse of separation between school and home wherein pupils and parents are seen as a lower part and school and teachers are seen as the upper part of a top-down relationship. The ‘asymmetric vertical “keep-apart-relation” between the children and adults’ (p. 50) is expressed in generational terms and is characterized by children perceiving teachers and parents as bonding and talking about them and their performances in a way that makes them inferior. However, Markström found few home–school relations that could be described as ‘symmetric horizontal relation[s] between actors’ (p. 52) characterized by a two-way flow of information between home and school.

Bouakaz’s study stressed the importance of addressing parents’ relationships with the school when exploring pupils’ sense of resilience as a matter of relational and situated aspects, and Markström’s (2013) distinction between vertical and horizontal relationships provides us with a tool to discuss such issues.

Adults’ perspectives on resilience

Several studies of adults’ views of pupils’ abilities have indicated that teachers’ and parents’ expectations regarding pupils’ school performance and further education matters for how they are positioned as being more or less academically competent, and how they view themselves and their future at school (Räty & Kasanen, 2010; Räty et al., 2004). As early as preschool, parents have developed expectations of their children’s future education (Räty & Kasanen, 2010). By school year 7, these expectations and the
parents’ assessment of their child’s competence have become more uniform and strengthened. Rautiainen et al. (2015) showed that parents tend to attribute greater levels of educational resilience to their children than teachers do, and that both teachers and parents assess sixth graders’ resilience as being higher than that of third graders. In other words, in the eyes of parents and teachers, most children appear to develop skills that help them to deal with academic challenges at school. Rautiainen et al. (2015) argued that parents and teachers appear to protect pupils’ positive self-concept by strengthening their belief in the pupils’ educational potential, and that this might be a reaction to the vigorous assessment practice over the school years.

It is also evident from previous research that parents’ own social and educational background influences their expectations of their children’s internal capacities (Räty & Kasanen, 2010, 2013; Räty, Kasanen, & Laine, 2009), and that these expectations are gendered (Kärkkäinen et al., 2009; Räty & Kasanen, 2007, 2010). A study carried out by Räty and Kasanen (2013) suggested that highly educated parents tend to construct their ‘educational reality in terms of the social representation of natural giftedness’ (p. 1111). They concluded that socially structured fields of meaning frame parents’ perceptions of their children’s competences. Another study indicated that parents tend to resort to the school’s normative frame when they evaluate their child’s academic competences and the potential for their child to improve in mathematics and their mother tongue (Kärkkäinen, Räty, & Kasanen, 2011).

In short, these studies have shown that parents and teachers have strong ideas about their children’s/ pupils’ ability to learn and develop. They have also indicated that a pupil’s results at school, and the child as part of a family with a certain background, are aspects that are taken into account when views of children’s educational resilience are shaped. However, they have not shown how views of educational resilience are shaped, nor have they addressed the children’s own perceptions.

**Pupils’ perspectives on resilience**

Research on resilience has been criticized for concentrating too much on how children adapt to challenges and cope with adversity in their social environment (Edwards, 2007). Edwards and Apostolov (2007) suggested ‘that the concept of resilience is extended so that it includes a capacity to work with others to shape and reshape the conditions of development’ (p. 82). We agree that the research on educational resilience has also had a strong focus on individuals, rather than on relations and contextual conditions.

Regarding grades, Harlen and Deakin Crick (2003) showed that younger pupils may find it difficult to take in the complex assessment systems applied at school, and it may thereby be difficult for them to understand the meaning of the grades they receive, which in turn may leave them with a sense of being treated unfairly or a sense of helplessness. It seems, however, that many young pupils believe that they can affect their educational future if they really make an effort (Räty et al., 2010). Various studies have investigated the issue of whether pupils’ views of their own educational resilience change over their years in school, but they did not provide unequivocal results. Some studies have suggested that pupils’ views on their possibilities to improve their school performance remain fairly stable over the years (Kinlaw & Kurtz-Costes, 2007), while others have indicated that pupils’ sense of resilience tends to stabilize the older they get (Räty et al., 2004). Other studies have suggested that pupils’ faith in their abilities decreases (Kasanen, Räty & Eklund, 2009) or becomes more pessimistic over the course of their school life (Kärkkäinen et al., 2008).

It is clear that pupils’ achievements and school results, as well as their teachers’ views of them, influence pupils’ perceptions of themselves as individuals with certain abilities and opportunities in their future education. There are indications that pupils adopt ‘the school’s dominant view of ability and criteria for assessment in mathematics’ (Kärkkäinen et al., 2008, p. 454) as early as school year three, while this normative view becomes more important in school year six when pupils talk about mother tongue. In other words, the restrictive and normative aspects of education seem to be important to the pupils’ self-image earlier in mathematics than in mother tongue. Räty et al. (2004) stated that pupils who rated their potential to improve optimistically often referred to experiences of positive academic recognition they had received, and to opportunities to practise. Those who gave pessimistic ratings of their potential referred to poor performance and a lack of ability. Explanations for the pupils’ perceptions of their abilities tended to grow stronger the longer they had attended school.

In short, these studies have shown that it is difficult to say anything general and certain about pupils’ own views of their educational resilience based on previous research. There are, however, strong indications that the issue of how their abilities are recognized and how their results are dealt with at school and at home are important in terms of their sense of being able to develop and learn. This, we argue, motivates studies of how pupils perceive their parents’ evaluations of their school results and grades.
Research context, and methodological and ethical considerations

In 2012, Swedish schools began issuing marks to pupils beginning in year six instead of in year eight, and expanded the national testing in grade six. A key argument for earlier grades was that they were supposed to improve information given about school results to pupils and parents, and hopefully reduce feelings of stress and negative pressure on pupils to perform later in school as they get used to receiving grades (Ministry of Education, 2010). This article is part of a project that investigates how this policy of grading and testing was enacted in Swedish schools by looking through the lens of sixth-grade pupils' experiences.

Participants and procedure

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. Two of these schools are very attractive and competitive inner-city schools from a metropolitan city, one of which is a private school. Six municipal schools are located in different socio-economic areas in two large cities with different demographic structures. The other three municipal schools are located in a commuter municipality, a manufacturing municipality and a suburban municipality, the last of which in a sparsely populated area. In total, we conducted 91 group interviews with 298 pupils, some of whom were interviewed twice.

The project adheres to the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines on good research practices, as the research subjects who directly or indirectly 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. In some schools all pupils in grade 6 participated, while in others only one or two groups choose to be part of the study. The teachers assisted us in assembling groups wherein the pupils would feel comfortable, without any considerations regarding school results, gender, social background or other categorizations. Pupils were interviewed in groups (n = 2–5) between

the years 2014 and 2015 immediately after they had taken the national tests and 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 (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Transcription and analysis of all interviews was carried out on a continuous basis. For ethical reasons, we do not use names in the data presented.

Data analysis

We conducted a narrative analysis (Bamberg, 1997; Mishler, 1999) of the data due to our interest in how pupils ascribe meaning to their experiences of talking to their parents about their initial grades. In this article, the analysis focuses on the parts of the interviews that relate to grades and parents, and we have selected data from three schools that differ with regard to the pupils’ socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and geographical location. Our intention in this selection was to cover a variation of qualitatively different aspects of pupils’ own views of their potential and their opportunities to succeed at school, as represented in data (see Larsson, 2009). School Alfa is a highly attractive inner-city school in a large town. At school Beta, situated in a midsized town, most of the pupils come from homes with a migrant background according to the teachers, and school Gamma is situated in a white-collar area on the outskirts of the same town.

We take a theoretical perspective on narratives as social practice as our point of departure (Mishler, 1999). This narrative approach offers the opportunity to obtain understanding of pupils’ sense of educational resilience 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 the interviewees and the 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 how the story is told (Mishler, 1995) can teach us about how senses of resilience are involved as the stories emerge through the sense-making practice of co-narrating the pupils’ past experiences. An analysis that targets the ways in which parents and pupils as story characters are located in space and time (Denzin, 1989), and how pupils are positioned in relation to each other and to the interview situation (Bamberg, 1997), can reveal different aspects of resilience involved when they negotiate their positions.

We apply a three-level model for positioning analysis developed by Bamberg (2004). Bamberg
combined the narrative approach with the positioning theory originally introduced by Davies and Harré (1990). The three levels of analysis in the model first target how the story characters are positioned in relation to each other. The analysis focuses on how the characters are constructed within the story world, with the aim being of finding out, through linguistic means, what marks out the individuals; for example, agents in, or without, control. In this first step of analysis, it important to identify whether the pupils themselves or their parents are positioned as being in control of how to evaluate the grades, if neither of them is in control or if they share the evaluation of grades in the story. In the second level of the analysis, the interlocutors’ position vis-à-vis themselves and each other in the interactive situation is stressed. 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 pupils involved in the interview situation can, for example, position themselves as being in opposition to or allied with their parents’ standpoint regarding grades. The third level targets what the ‘narrator holds to be true and relevant above and beyond the local conversational situation’ (Bamberg, 1997, p. 337), and addresses how the interlocutors position themselves vis-à-vis cultural discourses and normative positions. In this case, the obvious example is how the pupils position themselves in relation to the restricted sphere of education, where grades might be seen as a vehicle to future success or failure.

This three-step positioning analysis aims to answer our two research questions, as it allows us to identify how grades are discussed by parents and children and how pupils evaluate not only their grades but also their parents’ views of grades. From that analysis, we draw conclusions of what came to the foreground in different pupils’ views of educational resilience in their stories about grades and parents.

In short, this analysis was implemented by asking three questions in relation to the parts of the transcripts about grades in which parents were involved.

(1) What are the personal stories of grades about, and how are the story characters (parents, other pupils, etc.) positioned in relation to each other?
(2) How do the pupils and the interviewer position themselves and each other in relation to the narrated experiences in the interview situation?
(3) What culturally available normative narratives on schoolwork and achievements emerge through the positioning of story characters and storytellers?

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 analyse the positions emerging through the telling of the pupils’ stories and the different senses of educational resilience that take shape in relation to culturally available norms about performance within the restricted sphere of education.

Findings: pupils’ resilience in stories about grades and parents

In this section, we present the positioning analysis of three stories dealing with the research questions concerning the positions the pupils take in their stories/storytelling and the different expressions of resilience that emerge in their descriptions of being graded, and about their parents’ expectations on their schoolwork. The stories illustrate how senses of resilience become a matter of: (a) family expectations, (b) pleasing yourself and others and (c) adapting to grading systems. The analysis targets different positions in the stories, in the storytelling and in relation to culturally available narratives on schoolwork and achievements within the restricted sphere of education.

Resilience as a matter of living up to family expectations

This story is told by three pupils, C, D and E at school Beta. It is about how the grades imply a pressure for the pupils to perform well at school. The differences between the parents’ school experiences and their own stand out as a major problem for the pupils. In this story, however, the pupils repeatedly speak about their family connections and common origin from a country in the Middle East as important aspects that they have to deal with in relation to their grades. Through the way they tell the story, including details about their family connections and common origin from a country in the Middle East as important aspects that they have to deal with in relation to their grades. Through the way they tell the story, including details about their family connections and common origin from a country in the Middle East as important aspects that they have to deal with in relation to their grades. Through the way they tell the story, including details about their family connections and common origin from a country in the Middle East as important aspects that they have to deal with in relation to their grades.
The characters in this story are the pupils C, D and E appearing both as a collective ‘we’ and as individuals. Other characters in the story are their parents as a collective ‘they’, C’s mother, the relatives and the school teachers. In the later sequence about the past, the pupils’ parents appear as a group of children meeting their teachers. D’s mother and E’s cousin also appear as individual characters in the story. The three pupils as a collective are the protagonists in this story. They are consequently referred to as ‘we’ even when the interviewer turns to them as individuals (23–24). In this sequence, they are positioned as objects for their parents’ and relatives’ ambitions for them to succeed in school. The importance of achieving good results in school stands out as a ‘duty’, first and foremost to their parents (3, 8–9, 18–19), but also to their relatives (10–12) and implicitly to their country as they refer to reputation in terms of them all coming from a certain country (2–3). The parents are positioned as strict and responsible for their children’s success in school; they ‘force’ them ‘to sit with our hand-outs’ (4), stress them more than their teachers (15, 19), and talk about their grades in front of relatives (9–10). The parents are also positioned as ignorant about the Swedish school and grading system (16). The pupils explain that their parents have not been in Sweden for long (13) and that they try to explain to them how hard it is to get good grades (11). Due to this knowledge gap, the pupils are positioned as unsuccessful educators of their parents about the Swedish grading system and in need of help from school (21–26).

The story continues when the interviewer asks them to compare their parents’ schooling and grading system with their own.
In this sequence the parents as children are positioned as afraid of their teachers (31) and the parents’ teachers are positioned as violent and frightening (31–37). When the systems are compared, the differences relating to homework are emphasized and serve as an explanation for why their parents are so strict about them doing homework even on the days they do not have any assignments. The pupils are positioned as pupils in a completely different school system with other working methods (40–41) and conditions for grading (43–47), causing sharp tensions in the family (50–54).

When telling the story, the pupils position themselves as victims of a twofold pressure, on the one hand from a school system in which it is really difficult to get the top grades (11, 51) and on the other from their parents and relatives who express very high expectations in terms of their school performance (2–6, 53–55). When the pupils compare their own experiences with their parents’ schooling, it is evident that their sense of educational resilience becomes a matter of, on the one hand, getting good grades in school, but, on the other, of putting the same effort into their homework as their parents had to. The comparisons between their parents’ school experiences and their own thereby serve as a powerful narrative resource that explains why they never feel that they can live up to their parents’ and families’ expectations in a school system that does not reward pupils’ discipline and ability to do their homework. The differences are consequently highlighted when, for example, they do not achieve good enough results in tests even if they have studied hard (3–6), or when the second highest grade (B) is too low in the eyes of their parents and when C is considered a bad grade (54) or a pass grade (E) is mistaken for a fail (21–22). By stressing this discrepancy between what stands out as being possible for them to achieve in the Swedish grading system and what should be possible to achieve via hard work in the eyes of their parents, their sense of resilience becomes a balancing act between different educational values in the different school systems. The pupils express anger explicitly directed at the family (49–55), and frustration due to the knowledge gap between them and their parents regarding the grading system (21–26). Nevertheless, putting an effort into schoolwork appears to be an important aspect in these pupils’ and their families’ sense of educational resilience (see also Räty et al., 2010).

The presence of the normative position of the importance to succeed at school as a vehicle to a good life in the future is obvious in this story. The interesting facet that is added here is that there are such monumental differences in what the pupils need to achieve to get good grades and what their parents had to do. In this story, the relationship between home and school could be described as vertical (Markström, 2013) in the sense that the pupils express a sense of being powerless in relation to school and the parents are positioned as being unaware of the grading conditions. There is also a generational aspect involved in this story, however, because the parents are not positioned as being powerless but rather as representing another school system with different strategies for success in school. This story raises a question of whether the twofold pressure is a matter of the families’ migrant background or a more general observation. The following two stories are told by pupils who do not have a migrant background.

**Resilience as a matter of pleasing yourself and others**

This story is told by three pupils at school Alfa, a highly competitive inner-city school in a large Swedish town. All three of them are involved in a discussion of their own and their parents’ expectations regarding their achievements and their grades. The story alternates between the importance of feeling pleased with your own performances and a desire to get grades that are good enough. Once again, it is clear that the parents’ experiences of being graded matters for the pupils’ evaluation of their own grades. The pupils’ sense of educational resilience is associated with a sense of being pleased with yourself and that the parents are pleased with the pupils’ efforts and results. The parents’ evaluation of their children’s resilience seems to be closely linked to their understanding of the present grading system, as well as their own experiences of previous ones.
The story is about how pupils should evaluate their own performance and how to understand their parents’ and classmates’ evaluations. The characters in the story are the three pupils, parents and ‘others’ in general, C’s and E’s parents and B’s mother. ‘Some’ classmates and one particular girl are also mentioned in the story. Parents in general and others are positioned as having (too) high expectations regarding their children’s grades (7–9), a position that is emphasized by reference to a daily newspaper. Both B’s mother (12–13) and E’s parents (17–22) are given a similar position in the story. As in the previous story, the parents’ own experiences stand out as being important when E describes how they put too high expectations on her by comparing the present grading system with the previous one. C’s parents, however, are given a more empathic position, being pleased as long as she is pleased (14–16). The other classmates, and specifically the crying girl, are positioned as stressed by the high expectations and dissatisfied with their grades when compared to their own expectations of what they thought they could achieve (27–34).

When telling the story, the three pupils mainly take two different positions, where the sense of resilience becomes a matter of external evaluations and of being pleased with oneself. One of them refers to results and specifically to grades as the important scale when evaluating one’s educational resilience. This position is reinforced in statements about parents’ expectations being too high (7–8), B’s mother’s high expectations but lack of means to help (12), and the pressure to perform in class (27–34). It is also emphasized when E talks about her parents’ dissatisfaction with her grades and her opposing the statement that it is easy to get an A (20–22). The other position is about the sense of being pleased with your own achievements and is repeatedly mentioned by C (3, 15–16, 30–31, 38–42). The dividing line between the positions is whether the pupils focus on the external evaluation or whether their learning stands out as being important for its own sake. Similar to the previous cases, the relationship between home and school is best described as vertical, and the pupils’ descriptions of how their parents refer to previous grading systems shows of a lack of knowledge about the present. This is a little surprising, because
these pupils attend a school that is considered very attractive and to which pupils compete to get access, and one might assume that the parents would be familiar with the current system. The normative position of the importance to succeed at school and get good grades from the beginning is also strikingly present when these pupils talk about their experiences.

Resilience as a matter of adapting to grading systems

The last story is told by three pupils at school Gamma, situated in a suburb outside a medium-sized Swedish town. It provides an answer to the interviewer’s question of whether it is a good idea to give grades to pupils in school year six. The story is about how the recently introduced grades in school year six have meant increased stress for the pupils, and once again focuses on parents who talk about their own experiences of being graded. This story clearly illustrates how the pupils are affected by the grades every day at school, and refer to the grades as an important aspect of educational resilience.

The characters in this story are the three pupils, L’s mother (19), a fictitious pupil called X (23) and L (23) imagining herself as being transferred back to her mother’s school years. Later, in the section about the G to MVG grading system, a more abstract ‘you’ (27) is the only character. The three pupils are repeatedly positioned as being stressed in the first part of the story (2–15). L’s mother and the past version of L are positioned as victims of a system where the top grades (five) could run out so you always risked getting a lower grade than you deserved (23). X, on the other hand, is positioned as more fortunate because he received one of the desirable fives, that here is valued as ‘a C or a B’ (23–26) in the currency of the current grading system. Finally, ‘you’ are positioned as being fortunate as a pupil in a grading system where it appears to be easier to get the top grades (27–30). The top grade MVG is also valued as a C or B in the present grading system. The different criteria for assessment between the systems are compared in detail, and it becomes clear that in the previous grading system you only needed two ‘things’ (28) on the higher level to get a top grade. The evaluative point in this story is that ‘A is super hard to get’ (26) when compared to the previous grading systems that the pupils’ parents and past generations experienced.

By telling this story, the pupils position themselves as being graded in a very strict grading system. When
present grading system. This, we argue, signals that the pupils in this excerpt view themselves as being graded in one of the strictest grading systems in Swedish school history. Potentially, this position also gives them an opportunity to shape a sense of resilience that is not only synonymous with getting the top grades. However, we argue that this is a strong illustration of how the grades now become increasingly important to pupils’ sense of resilience. The pressure to achieve good grades is highlighted as an unavoidable part of these pupils’ sense of educational resilience. It is clear that the importance ascribed to the first grades for future success is not just an issue in schools with pupils who have parents with a migrant background, or in highly competitive inner-city schools, but in most schools.

In this excerpt, as in the others, the pupils talk about problems they have with getting their parents to understand the difference between the grading systems (both 1–5 and G-MVG) that they have experienced and the one applied now. This indicates that the asymmetric vertical ‘keep-apart-relation’ (Markström, 2013, p. 49), where there is a gap in information between home and school regarding grades, is a problem for many schools in Sweden.

Discussion: resilience as a matter of relationally and situated aspects

This study scrutinizes the pupils’ subjective constructions of ‘the restricted sphere of education’ (Kärkkäinen et al., 2008, p. 446), consisting of negotiations of school success in relation to normative parental expectations. One might say that the three stories presented here illustrate a kind of defensive argumentation, as they stress ideas of living up to expectations not only from oneself and school, but also from parents. One thing that the three stories have in common is that when the pupils talk about their experiences of discussing grades with parents they position their parents as normative and influential actors when evaluating their own sense of educational resilience. The parents’ views of the pupils’ grades and grades in general stand out as important aspects of how they evaluate their own opportunities to learn and develop. The norm stressed in the stories is that it is important to succeed in school and to get good grades from the beginning. In that sense, one might say, getting their initial grades appears to be a somewhat uncomfortable experience for these pupils, and parental expectations often seem to have contributed to a pressure to perform and feelings of uncertainty about their educational future. This differs from previous indications that parents and teachers protect pupils’ positive self-concepts from the impact of the restricted sphere of education stressing results and competition (Rautiainen et al., 2015), and research that has stressed parents as an undivided positive aspect for pupils’ sense of educational resilience (cf. Portnoi & Kwong, 2015).

The stories also say that parents refer to their own school experiences and to other grading systems when they talk to their children about their achievements and grades. On the one hand, the parents serve as role models who have been striving for the highest grades (Alfa and Gamma) and working hard with their homework (Beta). On the other, those experiences are described as being hopelessly outdated in relation to the pupils’ own experiences of schoolwork and of being graded. The parents’ experiences do not provide any help for the pupils when they try in the interview situation to position themselves as pupils with potential and opportunities to develop and get good grades. In this sense, all the stories presented here bear witness to a double loneliness similar to the one described by Bouakaz (2007). Home and school stand out as different arenas, both based on the norm of success but with completely different ideas about how to deal with schoolwork and grades. Obviously, the home–school relationship might be described as vertical (Markström, 2013) in a sense where school has the power to inform about grades, and pupils and parents have to understand the grades and the grading system. However, the stories also describe the pupils having to relate to their parents’ interpretations of what they need to do to improve or succeed at school, and that they have a hard time explaining the current grading system. In this sense, the pupils describe a kind of double pressure from both school and parents to get good grades. This double loneliness regarding the knowledge about grades in different arenas and double pressure to get good grades might be a result of the frequent changes in the Swedish grading system and the recent introduction of grades in school year six. In Finland, for example, the same grading scale has been used for decades (from 4 (fail) to 10), whereas in Sweden a new grading scale was introduced in 2011 (from F (fail) to A). In Sweden, therefore, both pupils and their parents are novices when it comes to receiving grades, as well as discussing grades at home.

Previous research that has investigated pupils’ educational resilience – in terms of confidence in a child’s ‘stable and internal capacity for learning’ (Räty et al., 2014; Rautiainen et al., 2014, p. 471) – has convincingly described the levels of resilience as changing over time (Kasanen, Räty, & Eklund, 2009, 2008; Räty & Kasanen, 2010; Räty et al., 2004) and as dependent on what subject matter is in focus (Kärkkäinen et al., 2008). We are also convinced that the social context in terms of teachers and parents matters for how pupils view their own educational resilience (Rautiainen et al., 2015), and that pupils believe that their own efforts make a difference.
to their future opportunities in education (Räty et al., 2010). One thing that these studies have in common is that they describe that structural or contextual aspects matter when senses of educational resilience are ascribed to pupils by themselves or by others. We argue, however, that it is also important to recognize that senses of resilience take shape in processes of interaction between individuals in sociocultural contexts (Edwards & Apostolov, 2007) where children develop abilities to adapt to the social conditions (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). In other words, different aspects of educational resilience become important in different situations, and the pupils in this study are adapting to a situation in which they are being graded for the first time in a school system that has recently introduced a new grading approach.

In accordance with this, and in line with Portnoi and Kwong (2015), we have used a narrative approach (Bamberg, 1997; Mishler, 1999) in this study to investigate how pupils’ sense of resilience became a matter of different socially situated aspects in stories of experiences of being graded. We argue that this situated approach is useful when taking the next step in the discussion about pupils’ self-perceptions vis-à-vis their parents and in relation to culturally available norms about school performance and success. The positioning analysis of the three stories illustrates how a situated understanding of pupils’ senses of resilience makes family expectations, the importance of pleasing yourself and others and the importance of adapting to grading systems central aspects in pupils’ own views of their potential and their opportunities to learn and succeed at school. These aspects of educational resilience do not necessarily refer to the pupils’ ‘stable and internal capacity for learning’ (Rautiainen et al., 2014, p. 471), but they highlight the differences between how pupils in grade six view their opportunities to learn and develop in relation to a certain situation in which they have been talking about grades with their parents. This, we argue, contributes to a situated understanding of pupils’ educational resilience that considers contextual and relational aspects, and that nuances the picture of how pupils in school year six view their capacity to learn and succeed in school (cf. Räty & Kasanen, 2010; Räty et al., 2004).

Finally, our intention was to cover the variation of qualitatively different aspects of pupils’ own views of their potential and their opportunities to succeed at school represented in data. This does not, however, necessarily reflect the full breadth of the variation in terms of generalization (Larsson, 2009). A major point of conducting this kind of narrative analysis that adheres to the socially situated character of stories and storytelling (Bamberg, 1997; Mishler, 1999) is that we try to find out what becomes important to the pupils themselves in a situation where they have recently received their first grades and talk to their parents about them. The variation in what become important aspects regarding pupils’ sense of educational resilience when being graded for the first time is probably broader and more nuanced than we have been able to illustrate in this paper. A strength of using this approach, we argue, is that it enables illustrations of how, for example, the expectations of family members, or parents’ experiences of other grading systems, becomes important when pupils talk about grades with their parents, and how this influences their own view of their educational resilience.

**Conclusion**

One implication of this study concerns the strong influence of testing and grading on shaping national education policies (Smith, 2016). The results presented here illustrate how the changes in grading practices in Sweden in recent decades have resulted in confusion among parents about what the actual grades represent. In all three stories presented in this article, the way the new grading policy was enacted at school triggered intense discussions in the pupils’ homes. It is evident that grades are a serious matter for the pupils and their parents, as they positions themselves in different ways in relation to norms about education as an important vehicle for future success in life.

Regarding the discussion about the relation between home and school from the pupil’s perspective (Markström, 2013), the stories presented here bear witness to a strong presence of the asymmetric vertical ‘keep-apart-relation’ (p. 49). We argue that the different views among pupils and parents of how to understand the grades might contribute to a further separation between school and home, positioning pupils and parents as a lower part in a top-down relationship. The pupils’ stories implicitly and explicitly stress that better home–school relations, in terms of a more horizontal, symmetric and equal distribution of information about grades, would help them to perform better in school and harmonize their relationship with their parents. A conclusion that we draw from this study is that policymakers should be cautious about reforming the grading system in Sweden in the near future, since different views of what the grades represent appears to direct attention towards the grading system when pupils and parents talk about school. Pupils’ senses of educational resilience then risk becoming more closely linked to their own and their parents’ interpretations of the actual grading system, rather than to issues of learning and intellectual development.
Notes

1. The grading scale in the current grading system goes from F–A.
2. The grading scales in the previous systems go from G (pass)–MVG (pass with special distinction) and from 1–5.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was funded by the Swedish Research Council as part of a project called ‘Pupils’ stories about grades: a study of pupils’ experiences of getting grades and of conducting national tests in grade six’ [Dnr. 721-2013-1668].

References

Bamberg, M. (1997). Positioning between structure and performance. Journal of Narrative and Life History, 7 (1–4), 335–342. doi:10.1075/jnlh
Bamberg, M. (2004). Form and functions of ‘slut bashing’ in male identity constructions in 15 year olds: ‘I know it may sound mean to say this, but we couldn’t really care less about her anyway’. Human Development, 47(6), 331–335. doi:10.1159/000081036
Bouakaz, L. (2007). Parental involvement in school: What promotes and what hinders parental involvement in an urban school (Dissertation) [Malmö studies in educational sciences, 1651–4513; 30.] Malmö: Malmö högskola.
Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 20, 43–63. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x
Denzin, N. (1989). Interpretive interactionism. London: Sage Publications.
Edwards, A. (2007). Working collaboratively to build resilience: A CHAT approach. Social Policy and Society, 6 (2), 255–265. doi:10.1016/S1477-4746(06)003514
Edwards, A., & Apostolov, A. (2007). A cultural-historical interpretation of resilience. Critical Social Studies, 1, 70–84.
Goodson, I., & Sikes, P. (2001). Life history research in educational settings: Learning from lives. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Harlen, W., & Deakin Crick, R. (2003). Testing and motivation for learning. Assessment in education: principles. Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 10 (2), 169–207. doi:10.1080/13603100290140040
Kasanen, K, Räty, H, & Eklund, A.-L. (2009). Elementary school pupils’ evaluations of the malleability of their academic competencies. Educational Research, 51(1), 27–38. doi:10.1080/00220663.76.1.75
Kärkkäinen, R., Räty, H., & Kasanen, K. (2009). Parents’ perceptions of their child’s resilience and competences. European Journal of Psychology of Education, 24(3), 405–419. doi:10.1007/BF03174769
Kärkkäinen, R., Räty, H., & Kasanen, K. (2011). Parents’ perceptions of the malleability of their child’s academic competencies. Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 55(3), 213–224. doi:10.1080/00331383.2011.576875
Kärkkäinen, R., Räty, H., & Kasanen, K. (2008). Children’s notions of the malleability of their academic competencies. Social Psychology of Education, 11, 445–458. doi:10.1007/s11218-008-9062-2
Klaw, C. R., & Kurtz-Costes, B. (2007). Children’s theories of intelligence: beliefs, goals, and motivation in the elementary years. The Journal Of General Psychology, 134 (3), 295–311. doi:10.3200/GENP.134.3.295-312
Larsson, S. (2009). A pluralist view of generalization in qualitative research. International Journal of Research and Method in Education, 32(1), 25–38. doi:10.1080/17437270902759931
Markström, A.-M. (2013). Children’s perspectives on the relations between home and school. International Journal about Parents in Education, 7(1), 43–56.
Masten, A., & Coatsworth, J. D. (1998). The development of competence in favorable and unfavorable environments: Lessons from research on successful children. American Psychologist, 53, 205–220.
Ministry of Education. (2010). Betyg från årskurs 6 i grundskolan [Grades from year 6 of compulsory school]. Retrieved from http://www.regeringen.se/rattsdokument/deparrtmentsserien-och-promemorian/2010/05/ds-201015/
Mishler, E. G. (1995). Models of narrative analysis: A typology. Journal of Narrative and Life History, 5(2), 87–123. doi:10.1075/jnlhl.5.2
Mishler, E. G. (1999). Storylines: Craft artists’ narratives of identity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
O’Connor, C., Mueller, J., & Neil, A. (2014). Student resilience in urban America. In R. H. Milner & K. Lomotey (Eds.), Handbook of urban education (pp. 75–96). New York, NY: Routledge.
Portnai, L. M., & Kwong, T. M. (2015). Employing resistance and resilience in pursuing K-12 schooling and higher education lived experiences of successful female first-generation students of color. Urban Education, 1–29. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x
Rautiainen, R., Räty, H., & Kasanen, K. (2014). Do mothers and fathers perceive their child’s academic potential in a similar way? Educational Studies, 40(5), 533–536. doi:10.1080/03055698.2014.936680
Rautiainen, R., Räty, H., & Kasanen, K. (2015). Do parents’ and teachers’ views of educational resilience matter? Educational Studies, 41(5), 471–475. doi:10.1080/03055698.2015.1043981
Räty, H., Kasanen, K., & Rautiainen, R. (2014). Educational resilience from parental perspective. Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology, 4(1), 1–9.
Räty, H., Kärkkäinen, R., & Kasanen, K. (2010). To be or not to be? Pupils’ explanations of the malleability of their academic competencies. Educational Research, 52 (3), 247–261. doi:10.1080/00461283.2007.1110006
Räty, H., & Kasanen, K. (2007). Gendered views of ability in parents’ perceptions of their children’s academic competencies. Sex Roles, 56(1/2), 117–124. doi:10.1007/s11199-006-9153-5
Räty, H., & Kasanen, K. (2010). A seven-year follow-up study on parents’ expectations of their children’s future education. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 40(11), 2711–2735. doi:10.1177/002193891036677x
Räty, H., & Kasanen, K. (2013). Parents’ perceptions of their child’s academic competences constrain their educational reality: Findings from a 9-year longitudinal study. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 43(5), 1110–1119. doi:10.1111/jasp.12076
Räty, H., Kasanen, K., Kiiskinen, J, Nykky, M., & Atjonen, P. (2004). Children’s notions of the malleability of their academic ability in the mother tongue
and mathematics. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 48*(4), 413–426. doi:10.1080/003138304200245807

Räty, H., Kasanen, K., & Laine, N. (2009). Parents’ participation in their child’s schooling. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 53*(3), 277–293. doi:10.1080/00313830902917352

Smith, W. C. (2016). *The global testing culture: Shaping education policy, perceptions, and practice*. Oxford: Symposium Books.

Stipek, D., & Gralinski, J. H. (1996). Children’s beliefs about intelligence and school performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 88*, 397–407. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.88.3.397

Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1997). Fostering educational resilience in inner-city schools. *Children and Youth, 7*, 119–140.

Waxman, H. C., Gray, J. P., & Padrón, Y. N. (2003). *Review of research on educational resilience*. Berkeley, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence.