

ALONE WITH THE TEST – STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON AN ENACTED POLICY OF NATIONAL TESTING IN SWEDISH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT IN SWEDISH

Den här artikeln handlar om mellanstadieelevers erfarenheter av nationella prov i SO- och NO-ämnen i årskurs 6. Särskilt fokus riktas i artikeln mot hur ansvaret för förberedelser och resultat av nationella prov beskrivs av eleverna. Resultatdokumentation på mellanstadiet är inget nytt i sig, men återinförandet av betyg och fler nationella prov menar vi får konsekvenser för hur kunskapsbedömningar görs och i förlängningen för hur elever formas och formar sig som skolelever. Artikeln är baserad på data från sex gruppintervjuer med elever från tre olika skolor. Eleverna berättar om en ökad press såväl hemma som i skolan att prestera goda resultat på proven, men i elevernas berättelser så framstår de ofta som ensamt ansvariga för såväl förberedelser som resultat. Studien ger en bild av fragmentariska förberedelser i skolan inför proven och av elever som förväntas, och själva vill, visa goda resultat. Eleverna framträder som i huvudsak hänvisade till varandra, stressade, ibland lurade, men också nöjda i sina berättelser om sina erfarenheter av proven. Elevernas identitetsformering beskrivs här som effekter av hur policyn med nationella prov 'görs' (is enacted) i lokala praktiker. Detta ses i ljuset av förändringar i utbildningssystemet i riktning mot ett starkare intresse för elevers resultat i ett recentraliserat och konkurrensutsatt skolsystem.

Nyckelord: Nationella prov, Elevperspektiv, Policy, Utbildningsreformer

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INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Recently, grades from schoolyear six instead of schoolyear eight were introduced in Swedish schools. Simultaneously the national testing that previously covered the school subjects Swedish, English and mathematics was extended by tests in science (biology, physics or chemistry) and social sciences (history, geography, civics or religion). All in all the students took 16 sub-tests during the spring term 2014 due to this extended practice of national testing. Against the backdrop of these reforms this article focuses on elementary students' (age 12 – 13) experiences of taking national tests. The aim is to provide rich and detailed empirical data on student identity formation as an effect of changes in the education system toward a stronger state interest in knowledge measurement in a recentralized and competitive school system (Lundahl, 2005; Lindblad, 2000) governed by principles drawn from New Public Management (Svensson, 2011). A key issue when policies are implemented, or rather enacted, in such systems is the strong focus on students' achievements and who is made accountable for the results (Ball, Maguire & Brown, 2012). However, in this study the interest is not directed at the students' achievements in terms of fulfilment of the specified goals that are measured in the national tests. On the contrary, the focus here is whether or how students get involved and are made accountable for the tests in relation to a more general process of individualization of responsibility in society (Bauman, 2001). In other words, we are interested in what the schools do, or not do, in terms of common preparations and processes of involving students when enacting the policy of national testing. Previous research on policies of extended national testing indicates that agendas of standardisation and accountability focusing on the goals tend to downplay cultural differences in a way that disadvantages certain individuals and groups of students. This calls for practises that recognize a shared responsibility for the test results between teachers, parents and students (Klenowski, 2014). We consider the following research questions: How do students experience the responsibilities for preparing and conducting national tests in science and the social sciences? What are the implications of this experience for the ways students are shaped and shape themselves as students? Data consists of student's stories about their experiences of preparing for and taking national tests, and is analysed in terms of micro-narratives at the backdrop of research on the assessment of national tests (Klenowski, 2014) and policy as enacted (Ball et al., 2012). Hopefully, the results of the study invite a broad discussion of the consequences, for both individuals and society, of the extensive discourse of testing.

AN INCREASED INTEREST IN STUDENTS RESULTS ON NATIONAL TESTS

Comparing to many other countries Sweden has had relatively few national tests measuring learning outcomes for students under the age of 15. For example in USA, as well as in England, that has been described as "the most tested nation[s]" the students take approximately 60 standard-based tests between the ages of 4 and 18 (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003, p. 171). However, the now extended practice of

national testing in Sweden is one step in a series of reforms aiming to strengthen the impact of learning goals formulated by the state. The reform is regarded as a manifestation both of the state's increasing interest in managing and controlling schools and of the call for unambiguous information about school effectiveness from actors in a national school market (Lundahl, 2005). Both the state and parents choosing schools for their children request simple measures of school quality (Lindblad, 2000).

O'Neill (2013) shows that the results of student assessment can be used by student, parents and teachers in order to judge what has been learnt – or not learnt. However, she questions the value of reusing the same evidence for second-order purposes such as holding teachers and schools to account.

While the hope of those who reuse assessment evidence for second-order purposes is that those who teach pupils and prepare them for examination will do it to a higher standard, the reality may be different. (O'Neill, 2013, p. 5).

Addressing the escalating student diversity in Australian schools and increased demands on accountability, Klenowski, (2014) discusses an increased diversity in assessment practices as well. She suggests a stronger involvement of students, parents and teachers in recognizing cultural knowledge and experiences that students bring to their learning contexts. She therefore raises questions about the role of standardized tests in improving student learning, fairness and high equity. Furthermore, research on assessment questions the strong focus on results and suggests a stronger focus on processes in the classroom (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Popham, 2008; Stiggins, 2008). It has also been shown that high stake testing only concerned with student achievement cause negative feelings among students in terms of fear and test anxiety (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003). However, from a perspective emphasising New Public Management as a model of governance, the students' results work as data about individual schools and teachers performances (Elstad, 2009). In this sense, the tests are high stake performances not only for the students, but also for their teachers and parents.

POLICY ENACTMENTS FROM A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

In school, teachers as well as students deal with demands on transparency, control and competition (Ball, et al., 2012). While the goals are increasing in number, the identity projects that we are dealing with are made a more individualized task, and in accordance with that Bauman (2001) argues that individuals become more anxious about focusing on the wrong target. This is the backdrop against which we can understand students' stories about national tests as performances and as versions of how a policy is 'translated' and 'enacted' in different schools (Ball, et al., 2012). When investigating effects of governance control and policies, the idea that reforms are translated and enacted rather than implemented emphasises an actor's perspective. We consider the students' stories of how they prepare for and take the national tests as translations of an education policy that stresses that producing and measuring students results are the main tasks for all actors involved in

the education system (Ball, 2006). Consequently, this research is based on a vision of educational reforms as something that, on the one hand, frames and shapes the terms for students and their ability to shape their identities. On the other hand, the students' stories or translations of the national testing reform reflect how it is enacted in practice and how its results can be understood (Ball, 2006; Ball et al., 2012).

However, the policy of an extended praxis of high stake national testing is part of a system based on ideas from New Public Management (Svensson, 2011) that stresses the accountability of everyone involved. The pressure not just to deliver results, but also to adjust and become loyal to goals set by the state has been described in terms of a performative pressure (Ball, 2006). Performativity is regarded a technology, a culture, and a governance model through which schools' and students' results are compared and used as incentives for control and change. In school, teachers and students alike deal with policies in performative ways that align with the demands for transparency, control and competition. We regard education policy as something that is not only shaped by policymakers but is also produced in a performative way—that is, it is interpreted and enacted by the subjects involved in solving the problems stressed in policy. The teachers, of course, play a crucial role in making policy into a process of change, but other adults in school, as well as the students themselves, are also part of this process (Ball, et al., 2012).

We make ourselves up within the information we provide and construct about ourselves. We articulate ourselves within the representational games of competition, intensification and quality. (Ball, 2006, p. 693).

The policy-making process – or rather, enactment – involves interpretations and recontextualizations. The school students that we have listened to may not have been interpreting policy documents themselves, but they were certainly working with “interpretations of interpretations” (Rizvi & Kemmis, 1987, p. 13), interpretations that constitute a social and cultural process influenced by different people's roles and experiences (Rizvi & Kemmis, 1987).

METHOD AND DATA

The data was collected through qualitative interviews with groups of students and a narrative analysis was conducted. The students' stories are considered as identity performances that are socially and contextually situated actions (Mishler, 1999). This means that a student can, on the one hand, be recognized as a certain “kind of person” (Gee, 2000, p. 99) in a given situation or context, but on the other hand, he or she may also have multiple identities. We regard identities as processes that are relational, situated, and sometimes contradictory (Mishler, 1999). However, a struggle for coherence (Linde, 1993) in the students' stories may shape images of coherent identities in a given interview setting. Coherence can be found not in the stories themselves, but rather in the context in which the stories are told. Mishler (1999) describes this as an “interpretation of meaning” (p. 15) in stories that are produced in the process that takes place between interviewer and interviewee as each tries to make sense to the other.

In this article we show results from six interviews. These interviews represent students from three different schools that were interviewed in groups ($n = 2-5$) a few days after taking the national tests. Most students in School A lived in the countryside near the small town where the school is situated. Many reported travelling by school bus every day, and they all spoke Swedish as their mother tongue. Most students in School B did not speak Swedish as their mother tongue; these 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 lived in the same area. School H is situated in a residential area in the suburbs. All the students interviewed there were native speakers of Swedish and lived near the school. A letter of information and consent was handed to students and signed by their parents. The names of students used in the interview excerpts here are pseudonyms in order to preserve the interviewees' privacy.

These interviews are part of a larger projectⁱ where sixth-grade students in nine schools and from different backgrounds (e.g., socioeconomic conditions, geographic location) were interviewed. In total, we conducted 80 interviews with 195 students. However, it was not possible to include all schools and interviews in this article. The interviews presented here, were chosen due their rich representation of experiences of taking national tests.

The main interview question (e.g. Can you tell us what it was like to take a national test?) is broad and strives to capture students' feelings and experiences about writing the test. In some interviews, the students talked freely, and we did not need to draw them back to the focus of the interview, whereas in other interviews we also used several prompting questions in order to help students remember their test-taking experiences such as the preparations before the tests, and the talk about the test afterwards among teachers, parents, and classmates.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We listened to the interviews and read the transcripts several times and conducted a narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) of the students' stories about their experiences of the national test. The analysis aimed to distinguish different micro-narratives associated with the extended practice of national tests. We use the micro-narrative as an analytical unit in order to emphasize that this is a "story within a story" (Linde, 1993, p. 35). Typically, micro-narratives refer to "events within brief durations" (Gergen & Gergen, 1997, p. 171). They are, in other words, short, and have a distinct closure with an evaluative point that refers to the storyteller's identity performance. So as 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).

Other micro-narrative characteristics that we have attended to in the analysis are condensed formulations, and the dramatization of important events that are highlighted by the storytellers (Marander-Eklund, 2011). This means that the analysis serves as a way to focus on what the students themselves have highlighted as important events, rather than as a way to collect any stories about the practice of national testing in general.

RESULTS

The results are presented in temporal order. We start by relating micro-narratives concerning long-term preparation for the national tests and end with narratives that evaluate the preparation after the test. These micro-narratives concern how students talk to their parents, siblings, relatives and friends about their experience of preparing for national tests. A common narrative feature is the indication that students' lives in and out of school have changed since the national tests in year six were introduced, and most students stress that the tests are important to their future prospects and therefore need to be prepared for.

CHANGES TO LIFE AT HOME

These micro-narratives centre on how students' everyday lives changed as a result of the national tests in year six. The four students in School B, namely Abdal, Samer, Amer and Ashmed, say that they are talking about the national tests at home, and that their families are getting involved in different ways. Amer says that he finds it difficult to talk to his mother about the national tests because she cannot speak Swedish. He says that he talks a lot with his cousin, and that they practice speaking English because his cousin is good at it. Abdal says he talks to his parents and siblings if the tests have gone well. If the results are good, he is allowed to "play or something". Usually his parents reward him or "they are buying something for me, like a mobile". But he says that he must still do his homework. Samer says that he mostly talks to his mother about the national tests, and that he usually gets a reward if things go well.

Samer: She says, how did it go? When that was, in January, it was when I got my new phone [...] I asked if I'd get the phone, and she said that, if you pass three tests in a row, you will get it, and I did, so I got it, and now when [...] I passed them, then I got to play a lot, or a little more.

Abdal says that he shares a room with his twin sister, and at night when they go to bed they talk a lot about the national tests. Ashmed says that at his house, they also talk a lot about the tests.

Ashmed: I usually, my father works and mother is with my [...] siblings, yes, [...] then I start, first talk to her and say how I think it went and then in the evening when father comes home, then I talk with him. [...] My sister, she, she interviewed me too much, and then she wants to prepare. [...] She is in the fourth grade! [...] If I get a good score, I get extra money, and some other kind of reward.

The students agree that the "nagging" about homework has increased since they started sixth grade. Samer says that the parents are "pushing us much more." He says, "the demands are higher all the time, so you have to work more", and Abdal says that they need to show their work not only in school but also at home. They also say that they had to stop playing to keep up with the tests, and that as a reward they were given permission to start playing again after the tests.

Samer: Well I did not play before, because I did not have time. [...] Before I didn't play because I wasn't allowed, only, "there are national tests you need to practice for"

The students also talk about other changes since the national tests were introduced. Previously they often went to church and to a leisure club, but they have had difficulties keeping that up now.

Amer: First I was involved in the leisure club, but then I quit because I didn't have time

Samer: You should choose what you want. [...]

Amer: But I had kind of soccer practice, was doing homework, national tests. [...]

Abdal: In the fourth grade, and fifth grade, then I went to the leisure club, I usually come home every day at six, because I used to leave at five, and I live pretty far away, it takes 30 minutes to walk there, and then it got difficult for me. Mother, "just do not go, for you are wasting a lot of time on it". Because we finish about three here at school, when [...], I came home like three, kind of like that. It takes some time to do homework and stuff.

The evaluative point of these narratives is that the students emphasize that the national tests have become important in their homes and in their everyday lives. Many people in the students' proximity are interested in their performance, and their commitment manifests itself in conversations about the tests, some assistance in preparing for the tests and rewards after the tests. But the students also report restrictions on their freedom of action. They are not allowed to play games, they have less time for leisure activities, they have to rush home after school, and they need to choose how they use their time more efficiently than before.

PREPARATION AND EXAGGERATION IN SCHOOL

This micro-narrative is told by three boys at School H, Philip, Leo and Gustav. The narrative is about their observations of last year's national tests. Their observations become part of their long-term preparation for the tests. Philip's first experience of the national tests in grade six was that he had seen what it was like when last year's students did their tests. He says "they looked really tired" and that they "exaggerated with refreshments and so on". The three boys continue the story together by saying that last year's students brought too much packed lunch every time they were to take a national test. They tell us that the whole schoolyard was littered with empty sweet bags and soft drink cans. They end the story by comparing what they are allowed to bring when they take a national test.

Philip: So, now we are only allowed to bring [...] some fruit maybe

Leo: You may bring other refreshments if you want

Gustav: No, not real refreshments [...]

Leo: But some cookies one can always have

Gustav: Rice cookies

Leo: Yeah

Evidently, their observations of other students have become part of their preparations for the tests. However, the final discussion between the boys suggests that

the enactment of the national test is being played down in their school. Formerly, school practice contributed to making the national tests into something different from other school tests by encouraging students to bring refreshments to the tests, which is usually not allowed. But the notions of “some fruit maybe” and “rice cookies” suggest that the packed food bags that are now allowed are more in line with what is usually allowed in school. We regard this as an indication that the extended assessment practice in this school is being normalized and internalized.

OUTSIDE SCHOOL PREPARATION FOR A HISTORY TEST

Each school is assigned to test one of the subjects in the social sciences (i.e., religious studies, history, geography or civics). The following relates to the micro-narrative of two girls, Nassrin and Nami, and two boys, Neil and Ivan, all going to School B. The micro-narrative is delivered in response to a question about their preparation for the national test in history.

Nassrin says that on the day when the test was to be taken they were told that the test would be about history in the morning. Nami immediately corrects her, however, saying that she read it on the “blog”. The blog is an information platform that the teachers use to inform the students via the internet. She says that she read the information on the blog during the weekend a few days before the test. When she saw that it was history, she began to “read, read [...] did not have time to read so much.” Neil does not remember when he got the information that the test would be in history, and Ivan who overslept that morning found out when the test began.

However, the students had been informed much earlier that they were going to have national tests in one of the social science subjects. The micro-narratives about how they prepared are dramatized in somewhat different ways, but the evaluative points all concern preparation as a matter for the individual student. Nami says that she and Nassrin went to “the big library” and borrowed books in “history and religion since there were no books in civics and geography.” Nami borrowed three books in history and Nassrin four. When we asked them if it was hard to find the right books, they answered that they got help from a librarian, but it was a bit difficult because “the books were mostly about the old days, and that was not the content we read about in school”. Neil says that he did not prepare at all before the test. Ivan, however, says that he visited his uncle who “has a huge attic with lots of old books, so I was looking there, trying to find something.” He says that he found a lot of books to read and that he spent a whole month reading before the test.

One point we want to emphasize with the micro-narratives is that many of the students expressed a strong desire to succeed in the test, but that their attempts to prepare seemed almost futile because they relied on the help that they could find outside school. The wish to succeed on the test, which manifests itself in both the preparation procedures as well as in nervousness when the test begins, suggests that students perceive the test as an opportunity to influence their future.

PREPARATIONS IN SCHOOL AND CONCERN FOR TESTS

In addition to the individual preparation described so far, students at School B relate that they prepared for the test on one occasion in class, where they used questions and answers to an old national test in geography. The teachers also encouraged them to visit the website of the Swedish National Agency for Educationⁱⁱ if they wanted to prepare for the test. However, this story ends with students saying that they felt unprepared for the test, and that it made them very nervous just before taking the test.

Nami: You get panicky [...] it's history, you don't know what will come up. [...] Once you have the test in front of you, it is easier.

Ivan: Yes, you get panicky [...] no, "I have forgotten everything." [...] I was nervous. I even burned the breakfast.

Nassrin: I was not really prepared. [...] Oh no, I didn't have time to read so much.

However, Neil expresses his emotions more laconically: "Just thought like this [...], I sat completely still, and whoops, now it's happening". This evaluative point stresses a sense of powerlessness when answering the questions on the test.

Other micro-narratives told by three other girls at School B, Bodi, Maria and Rhena, also emphasise their agitated feelings the morning before the national test in history. Bodi says that it was "very nervous" and that she "did not want to go to school that day, but I came anyway". Bodi and Maria say that the mood of the class, when they took the exam, made them anxious too. They describe how they influenced one another on the morning before the test.

Maria: No one looked happy that morning.

Bodi: Everyone stood here and did not know which subject the test would be in, when we said that it was history and everyone started screaming.

Bodi continues by saying that she thought that the test would involve civics, because she had misunderstood the information given by the school via a blog on the Internet. Maria says that they were told to read up on all the knowledge requirements for all subjects in Social Sciences through an internet link. This internet link was given to them a week before the test, and some day before the test they had been told that the test would be in history. In addition, inside the classroom the furnishing was different from how it usually was. When students were allowed to come into the classroom, Rhena says that it looked "like a whole mess", because the desks were pulled away from each other and the whole classroom was furnished in a new way to prevent students from cheating. Maria says that she tried to prepare by going through "a lot of paper" as she had done in the fifth grade, but the national tests differ from normal tests in school because:

Maria: The ordinary test is something that shows how much you know, and it's only your own class that knows about it, but the national tests, it's kind of throughout the municipality [...] every school takes it, it feels. I get stressed thinking about it, you know.

Bodi and Rehna also think it is hard because the test can be about stuff that they have read a long time ago and perhaps forgotten. However, the evaluative point in Maria's micro-narrative is that the worries before the test were exaggerated. Once they got started and began working on the test, the situation improved.

Maria: Some sat here [in a small group room], like two or three students, while others sat in the other group room; it was a bit messy in there too, but it went really well, so everybody was quiet and did what they should do ... and when we were done we went out for a break.

Maria's quite abrupt statement that "it went really well, so everybody was quiet and did what they should do" ends the story.

The point of these narratives, we think, is that the students expressed that their experience in preparing for the national test in history was an important and upsetting experience, but in hindsight it was an experience that should not be exaggerated. That it was important and worrying is clear in the statements that the same test was done by many other students in the municipality, that the test was more unpredictable than the usual tests in school, that the classroom was refurnished, and that there was a tense atmosphere when they came to school that morning. However, the conclusion that "it went really well, so everybody was quiet and did what they should do... and when we were done we went out for a break," suggests that the anxiety they felt before the test was fading out afterwards.

DIFFERENCES IN SUBJECT CONTENT IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE NATIONAL TEST IN RELIGION

The following narratives are told by a group of students at School A. They argue that the subject content of the national test in religious studies is not so much in tune with what they learned about religion in school. Olle expresses that he feels cheated when it comes to the content of the religious studies test. Also, Anton and Cilla partially share Olle's critical approach to the content of the test in religion.

Olle says that since he started grade six he is thinking of his grades all the time, "it is the only thing that goes through my brain, I have to do this to get this [grade] and this for grade A". He says that they do not practice so much in school before taking the national tests and that they were told the day before that their national tests in social sciences would be in religion. The other students continue by saying that they worked on religion in school earlier that semester and had an ordinary test. In addition, they say that they practiced on an old national test on religion, and that they were offered a booklet about religion that they could use as an optional preparation for the national test. Anton concludes that "you feel quite safe" when it was time to take the national test on religion. However, Olle reacted strongly to a question about love and friendship.

Cilla: It was about a love problem, I think it was [...]

Anton: There were three people [...] And then, you had to read about them, what kind of problem they had, and then you should write an answer to them [...]

Cilla: You also got a box with words and you should use at least one of these words, and then write an answer as well as possible

Neither Cilla nor Anton found it difficult to answer such a task, but Olle points out that his lack of experience of similar situations is a problem for him.

Olle: It was, it depends on which [question] you chose. You should try to see it from another person's perspective and try to answer, very difficult ... but if you have been in that situation yourself, you don't have to think it's just to write it down. [...]. There are many things you must consider in order to write a good answer. If you haven't been in that situation yourself, you are not one hundred percent sure how to actually respond to them, then you have to, you have to try to see it from their perspective, which can be quite difficult when you have a lot of pressure on you, when doing a test.

Finally, the three students negotiate their understanding of the experience of the religion test:

Olle: I had studied a lot, a hell of a lot, on that paper. I wrote it down, read it, and then all of a sudden, hey, this is a friendship test! Yes, then I was a little annoyed.

Interviewer: What was that paper, it was something ... ?

Olle: It was a booklet we got from the teacher before we did the second test. We knew by then that it was religion on our test, but we did not know it was about friendship, so we did get to sit and work with it if we wanted to practice.

Cilla: But I think it feels easier because, I do not like religion, I'm not so good at religion, and then it's easier if it's about friendship, for I think this is quite easy to write about. [...]

Interviewer: How did you, did you think it was unfair?

Anton: Yes.

Olle: Didn't you read on [...] that paper?

Anton: Yes.

Olle: Didn't you get a little annoyed, there was a small flame inside?

Anton: Yes, when you are sitting and studying so much, and then the questions that you are prepared for are not asked at all, it feels weird.

Olle's point in this micro-narrative is clear: he felt cheated. He does not think that the test examined his knowledge in religion, but that it demanded life experience that he did not have. However, Anton's and Cilla's points in the story differ in part from Olle's. Anton does not think the test was unfair, but he was a little concerned because he did not benefit from having studied. Cilla, however, regards it as an advantage that the test contained questions she could answer – even though she sees herself as a poor student in the subject of religion. She thus confirms Olle's point that the test was not really focused on religion.

In these micro-narratives, student identities are shaped that stand in opposition to the interpretation of the subject of religion in the test. This is one of the few opposition stories about the change in assessment practice. We understand this as

a criticism of specific parts of the content of the test, rather than as a general criticism of the national tests. Students are loyal to the teaching they received, because it is in school that they learned what religion really is. The micro-narrative should, therefore, not be seen as a criticism of the system, but rather as an indication that the test and teaching should be better coordinated.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we describe students' experiences of the responsibilities for preparing and taking the national tests in grade six as they are reflected in our analysis of student micro-narratives. Not surprisingly the preparations and testing procedures were enacted in different ways in different contexts (c.f. Ball et al., 2012). In some schools the national tests have started to become a part of the routines where students are involved, as illustrated in the micro-narrative of exaggerations previous year. However, other micro-narratives describe poor common preparations in school and concerned students that express feelings of being left alone when dealing with the tests.

Finally, we wish to discuss some of the implications that the students experiences may have for the ways they are shaped and shape themselves in school. It is evident in our data that the national tests in grade six influence the students' everyday lives and views of themselves as students. The micro-narratives illustrate how long-term, as well as short-term, preparations for the tests have an impact on what they do in their leisure time and in school. Their long-term preparations include, among other things, conversations with family members, relatives and friends and "interviews" with those who have experience of taking the tests. As part of their preparation, they also observe their senior schoolmates. However, most of their preparation in the school subjects and for taking a national test has a short-term character. This is illustrated in the narratives of students who take initiatives and, for example, borrow books from the library or from relatives, and in accounts of teachers letting them practice on old national tests or referring them to blogs and links on the Swedish National Agency for Education's website so that they can interpret goals and find exercises by themselves. The micro-narratives also concern the pressure from families who want their children to perform successfully, and stressful situations immediately before conducting the tests. In hindsight, after conducting the test in religion, some students expressed their disappointment that the test did not mirror their preparations and what they had been taught in school.

The micro-narratives thus contribute to descriptions of how the policy of national testing is enacted in Swedish schools and to a story of performative pressure on the students (Ball, 2006; Ball et al., 2012). A lot of people around the students, such as teachers, parents and by extension policymakers and actors in a school market are interested in the students results, and the students express a strong urge to perform well. However, we argue that the results in this study indicate that the students, in most of the micro-narratives, emerge as being quite lonely in their preparation for the tests, even if their stories have different evaluative points. The

micro-narratives depict fragmented preparation, often of a practical nature, for the tests in school and the teachers do not stand out as influential supporters in the preparations. Furthermore, there is little evidence of parents helping their children to prepare for the tests. An obvious interpretation of this is that the new assessment practice, i.e. the new grading system and the increased national testing, is intended to evaluate student performance as a result of many years of teaching in school, not of short-term preparation. However, this makes it difficult for parents, regardless of background, to help their children to prepare and for the students to prepare.

We regard this 'loneliness' as an indication that the extended assessment practice contributes to individualization processes in school, as the students have to take a great responsibility for their own preparation and ultimately for their future (c.f. Bauman, 2001). This is in contrast to Klenowski (2014) who suggests involvement of teachers, students and parents in assessment and learning practices in order to achieve fairness and greater equity. However, the students in our study primarily shape identities as students who are loyal to the new practice of assessment and in particular to how it is enacted in their school. The identity constructions performed in the micro-narratives reveal students who try to take responsibility for their results by obtaining the information that is available and by talking to each other or to anyone who has experience of the tests. The ambition in most of the narratives is to see the tests as an opportunity to showcase their own skills. We regard this as an expression of performativity in national school systems (Ball, 2006). The students have everything to gain from shaping their identities as students in tune with the objectives and grading criteria developed by the state.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, these micro-narratives help us understand how an institutional narrative of the increase in the national testing of student performance, serving as a way to manage and control schools, is translated and enacted from a student perspective. In a school system based on ideas of accountability, measuring student knowledge is an important part of the information that teachers and schools are expected to provide as part of school management. Obviously, both the state and the different prospective actors in the education market are interested in this easily interpreted information (Lundahl, 2005; Lindblad, 2000). However, it is clear that the national tests do not only create opportunities for students to improve their grades, but also limit students' opportunities. Based on our results, we strongly suggest that there is a need to discuss how and why the preparation for, and the results of, the national tests have become an individualized responsibility, delegated to individual students, rather than being a shared responsibility between students, families and schools (c.f. Klenowski, 2014).

NOTE

i This project was funded by the Swedish Research Council and is called; 'Pupils stories about grades - a study of pupils' experiences of getting grades and of conducting national tests in grade six.'

ii On the Swedish National Agency for Education's website (<http://www.skolverket.se/bedomning/nationella-prov-bedomningsstod/gamla-nationella-prov-1.218172>) it is possible to download old national tests for anyone.

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