A Problem of Democracy

Stereotypical notions of intelligence and identity in college preparatory academic programmes in the Swedish upper secondary school

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Monica Johansson’s (2009) ethnographic study of student identity questioned the differentiation of young people in upper-secondary school in terms of the way this contributes to both create and reinforce strongly student or student identities, such as the active, gifted academic and the practically interested work-oriented but intellectually passive vocational student. Moreover, Johansson also critiqued the introduction of enhanced differentiation, as conferred by the then current recommendations of the most recent reform of Swedish upper-secondary school (see SOU 2008:27), which she saw as likely to exacerbate what was already then a very problematic situation.

This is also the starting point of the present article. With a special focus on third year upper-secondary school students from three different college preparatory academic programmes (natural Sciences, social Sciences and aesthetic), the article interrogates the beliefs held by these students in terms of how they describe their own abilities, along with the abilities and characteristics of their perception of typical students from prac-
tical/vocational programmes. These naive beliefs and implicit theories can form the basis of stereotypes about social identities that can create conflicts between different groups (Klein, Tindale & Brauer, 2008), they may also contribute to future subtle and implicit forms of exclusion and discrimination (Kerrick, Neuberg & Cialdini, 2005; Lundahl, 2008; Beach & Dovemark, 2009, 2011).

Students from upper secondary school vocational programmes are generally recruited from the working class (Broady & Börjesson, 2005). They are also not irregularly regarded as tired of school, unmotivated and lacking the necessary intellectual abilities and interest needed to make good the academic content of academic subjects on a typical college preparatory programme (SOU 2008:27; Prop. 2008/09:199). This belief may well be a serious problem for a democratic society that purports to be equal (Nylund & Rosvall, 2011), although it basically does not act in this way, due to an asymmetry in terms of social and institutional inclusion and exclusion (Beach 2001, 2003; Maass & Cadinu, 2003). What is implied is that there is a form of institutionalised discrimination at play that has effectively been built into the legal, political, economic and social institutions of the school (Feagin & Feagin, 1999; Beach & Dovemark, 2009, 2011).

The questions outlined above are significantly important ones, which our research project addresses. The total material available to us is extensive and described in its entirety in Jonsson and Beach (2013). In the present instance, we have chosen to focus on part of this research and examine the stereotypes associated with ability, intelligence and talent that are shared by students on college preparatory academic programmes. These students have been asked to freely describe in writing what they see as a typical student on a college preparatory academic programme and a typical student from a vocational programme by using ten characteristic attributes in each instance.

We are therefore interested in the way in which a specifically chosen group of people with a particular connection develop and use common norms when they communicate with others who they also generally expect share these norms. In effect, it is these stereotypes that we have asked upper-secondary school students on college preparatory academic programmes to describe.

**Theory**

In terms of theory, our research interest is easily identifiable as having been informed by investigations and ideas developed by researchers such as Pratto, Hegarty and Korchi-máros (2008) and the conceptual theory of social norms. This theory expresses that people within the same culture are exposed to the same aspect of the social world and mass media effects and that this constant exposure means that the same prototypes and stereotypes representing different group norms will be automatically activated in daily interaction. However, like Klein et al. (2008) we do not fully support this notion as we do not feel that exposure alone is sufficient to generate these kinds of norm.

Instead Klein et al. (2008) argue that it is not enough to be in one culture and only to be exposed to specific stereotypes and norms; rather the reproduction of stereotypes also requires specific communication within specific in-group constellations and with certain characteristics where the in-group develop and express agreements among themselves on what constitutes a meaningful representation of things and what doesn’t. In other words, and as also stated by Klein et al:
only does so if the shared information is collectively interpreted (and communicated) as forming the basis of a meaningful representation. (Klein et al., 2008, p. 267)

Holding stereotypes is not a problem in itself. However, it can become one under certain circumstances, as in-group consensus and stereotype formation can increase the risk of large-scale social impacts such as institutional discrimination if power and (other) social conditions are conducive to this (Feagin & Feagin, 1999). Johansson (2009) has recognised this problem in the modern upper-secondary school and points out that it is therefore crucially to investigate whether students with college preparatory focus share the same stereotypes regarding both their own group prototypes and the prototypes of other programmes that they compare themselves with, and what the effects of this could be in the future.

As Johansson noted, different educational environments, such as college preparatory and vocational programmes, can have strong but differing effects on these students, which can affect their understandings of themselves, their possible future and future social and economic conditions. Puaca and Daoud (2011) have also commented on this effect. They describe the development of an institutional habitus that is affected a great deal by the educational environment students experience, one that they have linked to the complex process of school choice. Developing one kind of institutional habitus or another has, they argue, significant consequences for students’ future educational relations through school choices.

In addition to theories of stereotype and institutional discrimination and habitus in the present investigation we have also drawn influence from Carol Dweck’s (1999, 2007) research on implicit theories of intelligence. This theory in itself is not a theory of intelligence in the strict sense of examining what intelligence is; rather it represents a theory that tries to understand what meaning people read into the concept of intelligence, and how this then controls their behaviour in particular learning situations.

Dweck’s theory maintains that there is a distinction between the different understandings of intelligence that people hold: they comprise either an entity theory of intelligence or an incremental theory of intelligence. Accordingly, people who hold entity theories of intelligence see and describe intelligence as fixed and innate, while those who hold incremental theories of intelligence see and describe intelligence as changeable and dynamic. Dweck’s concept of implicit theory of intelligence is significant in the present research in a particular manner, which we shall now elaborate on.

In scientific literature, implicit theories are often dubbed «naïve beliefs» or «folk psychology» (Malle, 2004); they are considered to be part of ordinary individuals’ attempts to explain cause-effect relationships in the environment around them, in a manner that allows them to fit complex and potentially contradictory information together in a way that it is coherent and comprehensible (Kunda, 1999). In other words, they are part of the attempts people make to explain and predict the surrounding context; it has also been shown that similar experiences and social conditions produce similar theories and explanatory models as this (Kunda, 1999; Jonsson, Beach, Korp & Erlandsson, 2012).

The link to our research becomes clear here. Implicit theories are the basis for the attitudes, norms and preferences people develop (and possibly their actual behaviour also), and it is these norms in a particular group (in the form of group stereotypes) and their possible and actual effects that we are interested in. According to Dweck (1999), children identify with one or the other of
these two views of intelligence as early as in kindergarten, the identity development of pupils/students is then affected by these implicit theories (Gonida, Kiosseoglou & Leonardi, 2006). Moreover, implicit theories of intelligence also have an influence on achievement and grades in school (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007; Carr & Dweck, 2011).

Of course, implicit theories of intelligence cannot be investigated if they remain implicit. They have to be activated in some way in the working memory. This can be done, for example, by posing a straightforward verbal question. Indeed, when such theories remain implicit, unconscious and unspoken, the individual in question has no control over their eventual effect on stereotype formation and prejudice about different groups’ abilities and identities as learners (Levy, Stroessner & Dweck, 1998). Making implicitly held assumptions explicit helps us to investigate them and also helps individuals understand these previously implicit assumptions and their possible effects.

**Method**

In the present investigation, we have studied students’ implicit theories of intelligence and ability indirectly by asking them about conceptualisations they have about their own student group (in-group stereotype) and their view of a typical student from a vocational programme (out-group stereotype). The students were enrolled on college preparatory academic programmes in their third high school year. Our research question therefore concerns identifying the naive theories of ability and intelligence that are constructed in the Swedish high school system, and how these are used to explain student performances and education participation (Beach 2001, 2003; Beach & Dovemark 2009, 2011). In asserting this, it is important to also emphasise that it is the students’ view of themselves in comparison to their views on students in vocational programmes that is of particular interest to us. The perspective is thus based on these young people’s views of their own group’s intelligence and ability, and their view of intelligence and ability of students from vocational programmes.

The investigation included 224 students from an upper-secondary school in Western Sweden. Of these 224 students, 110 came from social science programme classes, 67 from natural science programme classes and 46 from aesthetic programme classes (and one student did not state their programme of study). In addition to asking them to reveal their views of themselves and of vocational students through our questions, we also asked for some background information. This information concerned gender, specific programme of study and parental education levels.

There were 150 female and 73 male students registered (one student did not disclose their programme of study or gender). The parents’ education, as reported by the students in the survey, was wide-ranging but nevertheless roughly corresponded to national variations, in the regard that there were significantly lower numbers of parents with only a basic comprehensive education as their highest educational level, compared to the national average for all upper-secondary pupils, as well as significantly higher numbers of parents with a university degree or its equivalent. For instance, only 4.5% of mothers and 8% of fathers had only a comprehensive school education; 41.1% of mothers and 38.8% of fathers were upper-secondary school graduates; and 42.9% of mothers and 30.8% of fathers had some kind of higher education. In 11.6% of mothers and 22.3% of the fathers’ cases, students have not provided information about parental education.
Regarding the main question of interest to us, the students were each asked to complete a fairly simple verbal task: to describe, on paper, a typical student from a college preparatory academic programme using ten attributes and then ten attributes to describe a typical student from a vocational programme. We imposed no specific further restrictions and invited students to choose to use either single words or short phrases, either individually or in combination, to complete the activity. Examples of attributes used varied accordingly from just one word, such as verbal or intelligent, for example, to longer phrases, such as typically likes discussions and is usually good at analysing or feels easily stressed by others. Students performed the task on one specific occasion and were requested to refrain from talking to each other during the task.

A study assistant was present in the classroom during the entire data production event. Of the 224 participants, 196 students completed the task concerning the college preparatory academic programme student, while 28 refused to complete the task. Participants used between 1 and 10 attributes, and the mean number of words each student used on this task was 16. 189 remaining students of the 224 participants commented on a typical vocational programme student, with 35 students abstaining, between 1 and 10 attributes were used and on average, with a mean average 17 words per student.

The data collected was aggregated and gone through several times by both authors. We tried to identify and mark key points in the aggregated text and to develop a series of codes pertaining to these markings. These codes were then grouped into similar concepts, in order to make them more workable, we also tried to generate categories from these concepts that could be used in the creation of a local theory.

There are certain similarities between our approach to analysis and several other so-called qualitative methods, such as membership categorisation analysis and grounded theory. These methods were developed by a generation of researchers who were attempting to produce what was dubbed «middle-range theory» (see also Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), a form of inter-subjectively constructed and shared truth that is deeply rooted in empirical data, not least conceptually. Researchers engaged in such work generally involve a combined inductive and abductive approach to generate and test ideas in a manner that is almost the reverse of the processes involved in traditional social science research. Rather than beginning with a hypothesis, the first step is data collection, followed by an iterative form of analysis. Charmaz (2006, p. 181) has described this as follows:

Taking comparisons from data and reaching up to construct abstractions and then down (again) to tie these abstractions to data. It means learning about the specific and the general – and seeing what is new.

Induction and abduction are described according to this tradition in a particular way. Induction is defined as inference and evidence; it begins with a study of a large number of individual cases and aggregation of data from these. This data is subsequently coded and then broader categories derived by juxtaposition and use of abstract concepts that are then, if possible, linked by an overarching theory or idea. The process therefore successively moves analyses from specific and descriptive instances to more general and abstract explanations of events, processes, understandings, actions and so forth. It entails moving from a descriptive detailed level to an abstract level by developing core concepts and fusing them in an empirically
grounded theory. Abduction has been defined as follows:

Abductive inference entails considering all possible theoretical explanations for the data, forming hypotheses for each possible explanation, checking them empirically by examining data, and pursuing the most plausible explanation. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 188)

In order to develop particular codes and uncover patterns, we applied the principles of induction and abduction in very concrete and easily replicable ways. In the first step, we read, coded and sorted attributes into different thematic categories. However, we found that the exact same words (or very clear synonyms) were repeatedly mentioned by the participants with great respective frequency with respect to the two targets of the typical academic student and the typical vocational one; there was also very little overlap across the two. For example, when commenting on the stereotype of a student on a vocational programme, words like *stupid* and *unintelligent* were regularly used, but these words never arose when the stereotype of an academic student was described. Instead, typical words used here were ones such as *high IQ*, *great ability*, and *intelligence*.

Next, we coded and developed categories of data from the aggregated material produced from the questions posed to the participants. In doing so, we allowed the same word to appear in several categories when it seemed appropriate. The codes that emerged were then provisionally arranged as follows: *IQ*, *Obedience*, *Motivation*, *Requirements*, and *Personality*. Collectively, these categories are associated with ability and intelligence and were duly analysed in depth in this specific study.

**Results**

The results of the analysis firstly suggest that there is a clear consensus on stereotype content among the students, regardless of which college preparatory programme they attend. This finding is very clear and in line with Beach and Dovemark (2011), who found that academic students commonly described themselves using concepts such as *fast*, *sharp* and *intelligent*, while students from vocational programmes were described as *dull*, *slow* and *stupid*. Moreover, the results were, in a sense, (therefore) also anticipated. We expected students from the college preparatory academic programmes to use different attributes; we also expected such students to be more likely to describe themselves in positive terms than the typical vocational programme student.

What we did not know in advance was the analytical outcomes derived from closer consideration of the make-up of the attributes and consideration of what these may communicate about the students’ naive, implicit theories. One reasonable assumption, however, was that we felt that *fluid intelligence* (cf analytical, abstract and mathematical intelligence) could be anticipated to be a fundamental factor for the in-group attributes, as this is what is emphasised in the scientific world for a group with their recognised scholastic aptitudes (Ackerman & Lohman, 2006; Gustafsson, 1984). For example, the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test is structured on this basis and employed as a means to predict the future capacity of individuals to assimilate and benefit from university studies.

However, we did not identify this phenomenon for fluid intelligence. Fluid intelligence is generally described as inherited (ge-
netic) rather than culture dependent (learned) and this understanding of (fluid) intelligence was not suggested by the investigation findings. Instead, three categories emerged from the data as central when it came to intelligence and ability; these were:

- \textit{Gc (crystallised intelligence, culturally accessible verbal ability)}
- Thinking ability
- Concentration ability

This is an important result, it means that the abilities recognised by students who have been selected as being academically talented, in terms of characteristics of their own skills and capabilities, such traits are strongly related to both language skills and practices (Gc) and a dynamic view of intelligence (incremental theories of intelligence) that stress the importance of practicing a language ability and emphasise that effort can influence and develop these language capacities and intelligence.

However, another important finding was that the same implicit theory of intelligence seems to be used by academic programme students, in both describing the academic (in-group) and vocationally oriented (out-group) students. What was different was expressed in terms of what kind of language games were practiced in each of the different programme types; the main characteristics of these; and the degree to which students enrolled on them are able to practice and are also committed to, and have mastered, advanced analytical communication skills through this process. For instance, the in-group stereotype was expressed as follows:

- \textit{Category Gc}: likes to read, reads a lot, happy to discuss, handles intellectual conversations, good writing, proper language, has a head for reading, reads willingly, will read a book even if it's not homework, writes well, good at expressing themselves, easier to read.

These expressions were duly associated with:

- \textit{Thinking Ability}: good at thinking, thoughtful, tries to think and plan before action, quick-witted
- \textit{Concentration Ability}: focused, patient, attentive, concentrated.

In the out-group stereotype (students at a vocational-oriented programme) the following was articulated:

- \textit{Category Gc}: does not like to read, does not read, is a poor reader, not used to reading quickly, reads no or few books, dyslexic, does not have a head for reading.
- \textit{Thinking Ability}: backward-thinking, cannot be bothered think much, plans are less advanced or theoretical
- \textit{Concentration Ability}: unfocused, absent-minded, lack of concentration.

At the next level, we incorporated these basic categories (Gc, Thinking and Concentration) in combination with two abstract concepts. When we did this we found that the in-group stereotype of upper-secondary school students on college preparatory academic programmes is characterised in terms of intellect and intelligence as follows:

- \textit{Intellect}: more educated, broad knowledge, intellectual, versatile, broader perspective, questioning attitude, critical, open-minded, factual, philosophical, wise, have knowledge about how to plan work, study skills.
- \textit{Intelligence}: problem solver, smart, quick on the uptake, understands more, higher IQ, good ability, efficient learner.

The stereotypical student at a vocational-oriented programme was as follows:

- \textit{Intellect}: lacking general knowledge, uncultivated, less educated, not intellectually inclined, less philosophical, snowed under, socially clumsy, narrow-minded.
Intelligence: unwise, incompetent, stupid, less smart, not very smart, mediocre and merely street smart, slow on the uptake.

A category relating to democracy can be developed from the analysed material. This category illustrates a view of the democratic community citizen as either an active agent, able to influence things through linguistic abilities and language use, on the one hand, or alternatively as a passive un-influential non-participant due to lack of linguistic abilities, on the other. This has been derived from the in-group stereotype as politically conscious, cultural, community-minded, committed to society, having social awareness and news interest and being versed in what happens in society while the out-group stereotype (vocational programme student) can be characterised as not versed in public debate, holding opinions based on ignorance, not caring about politics, prejudiced, xenophobic and un-cultural.

Summarising the results
In summary, the in-group stereotype for college preparatory academic programme students is one that depicts a person who is well versed and highly competent in reading, writing, discussing and developing this verbal ability and articulacy in harmony with a capacity to concentrate and to use the mind as an analytical tool. The out-group stereotype concerning the vocational student is quite the reverse: he or she is described as one that reads and writes to a much lesser degree than academic programme students do and consequently has a less developed capacity for thought and influence. This student is instead often described as taciturn, dyslexic, with poor concentration skills and less advanced thinking when compared with the academic student, who has greater general knowledge and intellectual skill.

Some of the dimensions of these findings are worth emphasising in particular. One of these is that understandings of intelligence are suggested by our analysis of the attributes students have chosen to use as significantly influenced by language practices and not as innate, mathematical qualities. This is visible in that vocational students are seen as uneducated and unintellectual because they are seen as students that do no practice language to the same extent as students at the college preparatory academic programmes do, however nor are they typically afforded the same opportunities to do so. Moreover, prospective academic college students describe themselves as wiser, of higher IQ and able to participate actively in society because they are proficient in, and able to practice and develop, these same verbal skills on a daily basis through their education.

This implicit theory of intelligence and ability therefore clearly points to something that is highly problematic in a number of ways for the education system, not least in terms of the view and possibilities of democracy and social and political influence that can be related to, and is effectively expressed in, by and through the organisation of this highly differentiated system, particularly at upper-secondary level (also Johansson, 2009; Beach & Dovemark, 2009, 2011).

Discussion
School reform processes in Sweden, from 1970 onwards, successively set out to integrate academic and vocational education in such a way that, irrespective of the programme the student followed, it still provided so-called vertically organised abstract, analytical knowledge (Lundahl, 2008). This vertical knowledge was seen as useful because, in contrast to context-dependent horizontally organised everyday knowledge, it can be generalised to a variety of contexts (Bernstein, 2000) and it also thereby provided the opportunity for continued contact.
with formal education, and access to, higher education (Lundahl, 2008). Vertical knowledge is crucial to democracy and to political and reflexive action, when it includes a context-independent content with the ability to argue, analyse and respond critically to arguments and suggestions (Norlund, 2009).

This type of goal formulation has recently disappeared from vocational programmes in the new curriculum for Swedish upper-secondary schools, where the student’s role as creator, critic and interpreter of texts has been toned down and the previous explicit goal to prepare students for the role as a political citizen has been removed (Nylund & Rosvall, 2011). This occurs within vocational programmes where it is now seemingly no longer considered necessary or desirable to develop linguistic competence to the same extent as it is on college preparatory academic programmes (e.g. SOU 2008:27, Prop. 2008/09:199). This is an example of institutionalised discrimination (Feagin & Feagin, 1999). It has occurred because key political players (who also often hold an academic qualification from a segregated academic education) hold a particular consensus about a specific stereotype. In this case this is an out-group stereotype of a student attending a vocational-oriented programme and his or her typical study characteristics.

We therefore need to ask why the «typical» vocational student is described as linguistically incompetent, unintellectual, unable to think and as having poor concentration. Why is such a student seen as stupid and ultimately unable to handle social debate? What has made this representation meaningful? Moreover, what function does this stereotype fill in a democratic society?

Based on the conclusions of Parker (2007), a critical function of school in a democratic society is to sort children and young people into two groups: those who are destined for manual labour; and those who will progress to higher study and later obtain professional, management, administrative or academic work. The latter group will consequently enjoy very different future life chances. A goal formulation such as this, however, is hardly morally or ethically feasible and cannot, therefore, be made explicit. In order to accept it, one first needs to construct a model of explanation, an implicit theory, and to justify it by making it coherent in the sense of Malle (2004). This theory is indispensable and operates as a hegemonic device that explains the logic of why some students’ opportunities are restricted while others are not (Beach, 2001, 2003). It helps conceal what is in fact a process of institutional discrimination by virtue of helping it to be understood in another, more palatable way, in terms of quasi-natural individual dispositions of group of students as agents (Beach & Dovemark, 2009, 2011).

As Klein et al. (2008) describe, the risk of institutionalised discrimination is particularly large when there is a strongly implied exclusion among the social groups regarding the phenomenon concerned. This is the case here when it comes to the implicit theories of intelligence that students on college preparatory academic programmes develop. These students are housed separately in school and follow different courses of academic study, with different demands (Rosvall, 2011a, b). They thereby develop, and subsequently communicate, different understandings about themselves and others; there are therefore important educational democracy issues embedded in this (Norlund, 2009).

The more one uses their verbal ability, the more skilled one becomes in verbal activities and the more able one is to be actively involved in intelligent role-play scenarios. However, when one is restricted to vocational programmes that conserve class structures by omitting the means by which the
upper-middle classes valorise their own personal class-cultural capital as education capital then these capabilities are less likely to flourish. This proves to be critical in a modern information/knowledge society that has reached the point that, in order to participate and actively influence things, linguistic competence is necessarily high (Norlund, 2009). By denying some youngsters such opportunities, while giving others good access to the power to influence, society becomes divided (Parker, 2007); existing conflicts between different social groups or classes may intensify (Klein et al., 2008); and school becomes an incubator of class distinctions and motor for social differentiation.

It is highly noteworthy that, at the present time, the government’s education policies seem determined to further reduce the academic language stimulation for students on vocational study programmes (Nylund & Rosvall, 2011). This is despite the fact that research has strongly warned against the democratic consequences of such policies. For example, Anita Norlund (2009) showed that students are required to be able to handle vertical discourses effectively in order to pass national tests in Swedish with distinction; and to be able to perform linguistically context-independently through universal reasoning and arguments relating to cause and effect. Norlund went on to suggest that, without this verbal proficiency, full democracy is unattainable. Those who master the language, master the production of discourse and ideology and determine how the world will look through language (laws, agreements, regulations etc.). Those who do not, on the other hand, are only able to be reactive toward, or subject to, this discourse and its ideological effects (Beach, 2001, 2003). This assertion is close to Vygotsky’s theory of human ability. It states, as did students in the present investigation, that the most fundamental ideological tool is language; furthermore, the fullest possible realisation of any individual’s intellectual abilities depends on their living conditions and the possibilities these help create for the expression and practice of such capabilities in social and cultural context (Grigorenko, 2004).

The kind of attributes the students use in the present investigation and the way they use them thus reflect an implicit adherence to a Vygotskian notion of human intellectual capabilities and their antecedents. This is by virtue of the fact that they stress the importance of linguistic practice and mediation (the need to «read a lot of books») in terms of their effects on thinking and concentration, which in turn affects operations of intellect, intelligence and the ability to actively participate in society. Being bright, they say, is about how much you read and how much time and effort you invest in language use in general, this in turn provides the basis for the development of active community citizenship. The individual without language will stand outside society, without the possibility of influence; an individual who has not read, written or practiced discussion is unable to independently organise and identify their thoughts and advance their own opinions and conclusions in dialogue with the rest of society.

We suggest that it is highly problematic that the new upper secondary school reform (Prop. 2008/09:199) and the recommendations it is based on (SOU 2008:27) choose to reduce advanced language training and use in vocational programmes, despite these being the programmes that already have a lean structure in this respect (Nylund & Rosvall, 2011). Indeed it is frightening that such institutionalised discrimination may operate in Sweden today, given its well-known consequences (Feagin & Feagin, 1999). It does so though through a new upper secondary school reform that reproduces a general stereotype of the vocational-oriented student.
Nylund and Rosvall (2011) show that vocational-oriented students are very much aware of the importance of language skills and want to master them and this may account for why they have so strongly rejected the new reform, by not electing to pursue the programmes of vocational (only) training it prescribes for them.

Conclusion

This study has examined the stereotypes of intelligence expressed by 224 students on theoretical upper-secondary school programmes as revealed through an analysis of short (attribute) statements about the beliefs they hold about themselves and a typical student who is enrolled on a vocational programme. The stereotype of the student on the vocational programme was of a pupil who reads and writes to a much lesser degree and has less developed language. The stereotype of the theoretical student is quite the opposite and is attributed with enabling them to participate actively in, and influence, society, in stark contrast to pupils from vocational programmes. The linguistic competence of the pupils is found to be described as incremental and dependent on effort, rather than as an innate feature that a person either does or does not possess. Abstract mathematical competence is not mentioned except for two times among these 224 students. This finding is extremely interesting in respect to the bulk of recent upper secondary school curriculum and organisational reform, as well as the recommendations it was based on.

Based on our study, we clearly see a strong consensus regarding ability stereotypes that not only hamper some students but also increase the risk of conflict between social groups in society in the future (Klein et al., 2008). We therefore recommend that high school should be restructured so that upper-secondary preparatory/academic and career-oriented/vocational programmes are always in the same school and that courses in the core academic subjects should be comprised of students from both programme types. This is not only a social justice aspect to help guarantee that everyone has good possibilities of access to the same kinds of knowledge. It is also essential for the students to get to know and understand each other and thereby acquire respect and togetherness. To do so would establish the foundations for a more socially sustainable future, in which the risk of conflict between groups in society would seemingly be reduced.

Literature


