

Abstract

Based on fieldwork in two lower secondary schools in Norway's capital city, Oslo, this thesis explores how pupils and teachers at the 10th grade level construct community and community boundaries. I analyse the construction of community in three clusters of relationships: relationships among pupils; relationships between pupils and teachers; and relationships between families and school. Theoretically, I draw on Cohen's (1985) perspective on communities as symbolically constructed and on Barth's (1969, 2000) concept of boundaries. The thesis argues that community is constructed as a lived experience by pupils and teachers who interact over many years in their local school. Community boundaries are constructed through acts whose symbolic meanings the members of a school community recognise as boundary markers.

The analysis of pupil relationships shows that the acts considered as boundary markers are locally defined. I therefore argue that exclusion or inclusion in a school community is not determined a priori by specific pupil characteristics such as academic ability, gender or ethnicity. Rather, the position a pupil is accorded among his or her peers depends on the interplay between such characteristics and the way a school community is symbolically constructed. The analysis thus demonstrates how school studies may benefit from a shift of analytical focus from definitions of pupil categories to the question of why certain distinctions become significant in some local contexts and not in others.

The analysis of pupil-teacher relationships shows that the community of pupils and teachers is constructed differently in the two fieldwork schools. In one school, teachers defined their relationship with pupils as an alliance wherein teachers assisted pupils in becoming self-governed and high achieving. In the

other school, teachers built relationships with pupils based on the assumption that many pupils need to experience teachers as caring in order to be able to care about school. Using Verdier's (2000, 2007) notion of different principles of fairness, I argue that the State's ambition to create equal opportunity and level out differences between pupils is locally interpreted by the teachers in their respective schools. I also contend that close and caring relationships may be a tool that teachers use to compensate for disadvantages that pupils bring with them to school.

I use the 10th graders' process of choosing upper secondary education tracks as a lens for studying community between families and school. My analysis shows, first, that support for children's autonomy in educational decision-making functions as a main symbol of the family-school community, and, second, that the practices through which parents support their children's autonomy differ. Based on this finding, the analysis argues that for a sense of family-school community to be maintained, distance may be important in that it may enable families to ascribe their own meanings to their relationship with the school. This finding broadens the understanding of how sameness is implicated in individuals' experiences and ideas of community and thereby contributes to on-going discussion about the meanings of equality as sameness in Nordic countries.

Taken together, the analyses in this thesis show that the way social relationships unfold in schools contributes to shaping schools as institutions. I argue, therefore, in line with Reed-Danahay (1996) and Anderson-Levitt (2003, 2012), that anthropologists need to study schools not merely as instruments for the State, but just as much as institutions shaped by the practices and projects of the people who interact regularly within the schools.

Finally, the thesis also aims to bring anthropological discussions of methodology a step forward. It offers a detailed discussion of the methodological and ethical implications of conducting fieldwork among minors

in an institutional setting such as schools. In particular, I discuss the implications of consent and non-consent to participation in research when attendance in the institution itself is compulsory.

