**Students’ unfair struggle to choose between learning, grades and their future**

*It is a bit sad that all our focus is on what we need to learn for the test, but that is what always happens. We have to [learn it], not because it is part of the course or the topic that we are exploring at the moment but because “we have to know this exercise because it will be on the test”.  (Anna 17)*

We started out to explore the effects of using pictorial instruction in chemistry laboratory classes in secondary schools, but in the stories that the students told us we found something unexpected. These young adults explained to us how they focus on grades and assessment, and how they sometimes felt that they prioritized grades over learning. While this in itself was not so surprising, it was interesting to learn from them that the main reason for the focus on grades was to be accepted at the “right” university. These young adults wanted to be prepared for the transition from school to university. They were simultaneously aware that focusing on tests and grades was not necessarily helping their learning, and at the same time grades were important for their future. Being in the center of this paradox made the students sad and feeling helpless, as they did not know how to balance both aspects.

The stories this paper is based on where collected through focus group interviews and in-class observations at two secondary schools with high performing students in Sweden. It is through these accounts that we can see glimpses of which underlying reasons and discourses influence young adults to focus on grades. By listening to them, it becomes possible to unveil the side effects of the current system of university entry requirements and admission processes, as well as the struggles neoliberal education has created (Giroux, 2002).

In the current education system, there is a paradox were learning is assessed through high stakes testing and used to select students, and at the same time learning becomes student-centered with a focus on developing self-regulated learners that value learning and education (Shepard, 2000). Young adults are left alone to figure out how to best navigate through this system, and what priorities to choose. In the students’ struggles, learning opportunities are lost and the joy for learning is damaged. The education system leads students to perceive learning as a stepping-stone to be able to get a good job, and schools become a place for preparation where grades are used as a selection filter (Schommer & Walker, 1997).

Giroux, H. (2002). Neoliberalism , Corporate Culture , and the Promise of Higher Education : The University as a Democratic Public Sphere. *Harvard Educational Review*, *72*(4), 425–464.

Schommer, M., & Walker, K. (1997). Epistemological Beliefs and Valuing School: Considerations for College Admissions and Retention. *Research in Higher Education*, *38*(2), 173–186.

Shepard, L. A. (2000). The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture. *Educational Researcher*, *29*(7), 4–14.