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Swearing as a method of antipedagogy
in workshops of rap lyrics for ‘failing boys’
in vocational education

Swearing as a method of antipedagogy

Abstract

Public debates in Finland on the unwillingness of boys to learning literacy have called for masculine role models to promote reading. This article analyses a privately funded project where two adult males lead a series of gangsta rap workshops during the Finnish language and communication lessons. The workshops were aimed at students in male-dominated fields in vocational education and training (VET). From a methodological perspective, this study contributes to the field of feminist ethnography, and the article draws from sociolinguistic research on swearing. The analysis demonstrates how the workshop leaders profile the students as ‘laddish’, which justifies the leaders’ swearing and thus creates an affiliation to working-class, anti-school masculinities. The article concludes by reformulating the concept of *antipedagogy* that intersects the ‘failing boys’ discourse with neoliberal mentalities of education. This involves a necessity for leaders to please by performing ‘laddism’ and drawing distinctions within the educational context.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Literacy, Masculinities, Social Class, Language, Neoliberalism, Ethnography, Discourse Analysis

Rap literacy workshops for the ‘failing boys’ in vocational education and training

Boys succeeding poorly at school has been a topic of public debate for decades in several European countries. This travelling discourse on ‘failing boys’ (Arnesen, Lahelma and Öhrn 2008), sometimes referred to as ‘Moral Panic’ (Epstein et al. 1998; Francis and Skelton 2005) or ‘Boy Crises’ (Kimmel 2010), concerns gender gaps in attendance, achievement and behaviour at school. This discourse has its background in statistics and achievement tests that have been instituted by restructuring policies, with a neoliberal focus on standards and competition (Lahelma 2014). A typical argument of this worry discourse is that either school institutions or female teachers are blamed for the poor achievement of boys and thus for causing their failure (Lahelma 2005; Carrington and McPhee 2008). Other popular explanations include that gender differences are not properly acknowledged at school and that labeling reading as ‘girly’ decreases boys’ interest in it. (Sorri 2018, Lahelma 2014). This argument purports that the act of reading needs to acquire a more masculine image. The public debates in Finland on ‘the failing boys’ have regularly occurred following the publication of PISA results, because the gender gap in literacy has been larger in Finland than in other OECD countries. This article explores an example of ‘boy pedagogy’, and more specifically, a series of rap lyrics workshops led by two men, whose objective was to improve boys’ attitudes towards literacy. These workshops were organised in upper-secondary vocational education and training (VET) institutions in Finland and focused on the male-dominated technology field. The workshops were funded by a private company.

It is hardly a coincidence that the workshops focused on Finnish VET technology students. Traditionally, the criteria for student admission to the field of technology have been low, although this varies between study programmes. This means that many students, but not all of them, had poor school results in comprehensive school (Education Statistics Finland A). In Finland, the VET technology students are often from working-class backgrounds (Niemi and Rosvall 2013, Nylund et al. 2018) and the vast majority of these students are male (Education Statistics Finland B). The

strong discourse regarding boys being unmotivated to do their schoolwork might easily result in making cultural stereotypes of working-class masculinities (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2011, Willis 1977), such as presuming that laddism and anti-school masculinities apply to all the male students in VET. When analysing ethnographic studies conducted in the technology field of VET institutions, Rosvall (2015) determined that the vast majority of the studies reproduced the stereotype of male students displaying anti-school masculinity. However, Niemi and Rosvall (2013) provide a more varied and diverse perspective on school motivation and the approaches by students to academic subjects, and the authors based their claims on one-to-one interviews with students. This suggests a need for more detailed analyses of VET students and their attitudes towards schoolwork and studying academic subjects. This article offers a new perspective on this phenomenon through analysing workshops run by visitors without pedagogical training in the subject of Finnish language and communication. The analysis focuses on examining how the leaders of the rap lyrics workshops profile their audience, the VET technology students. Central to the present analysis is how the male leaders contrast their workshop and performance to the prevailing educational context.

Performing masculinities by swearing and drawing from gangsta rap

In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler suggests that gender is profoundly performative, meaning that gender is not to be considered something apart from its performance in some constitutive or biological terms. Gender itself is the same as its dynamic process of doing. The performatives refer to other performatives, and thus produce gender in space and time. However, gender is not performed on its own, but rather as intersecting with other differences, such as social class. Thus, there is no unitary performance of ‘maleness’, but an open selection of various and multiple masculinities – which then tend to be established in hierarchies (Connell and

Messerschmidt 2005). Jackson (2006, 10–11) argues that in school, laddism seems to overlap with hegemonic masculinity, concepts that incorporate roughness and avoidance of femininity.

This article draws from sociolinguistic research on swearing (for example, see Beers Fägersten and Stapleton 2017). We consider swearing to perform gender and class. Even though no manner of language usage or linguistic style is inherently ‘masculine’, cultural discourses concerning gender index certain types of language use to masculinities and others to femininities (for example, see Kiesling 2007, Benwell 2014, and Milani 2015). Linguistic styles make distinctions between certain groups and categories, while creating affiliations to others. Swearing and the use of some particular expletives are often considered to refer particularly to working-class masculinities (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 307; Stapleton 2003). According to sociolinguistic studies, working-class masculinities are often articulated by the use of non-standard language and associated with low levels of education and socioeconomic status (Stapleton 2010, 291–292; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 294). A review of research (Lawson 2015) on the use of non-standard language in schools among adolescent males suggests that non-standard language implies not only ‘working-class-ness’ but also ‘toughness’, and that using non-standard language, such as swearwords, actually constitutes a way to avoid ‘effeminacy’ (see also de Klerk 1997).

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) argue that swearing is one means of social bonding. For example, all-male groups use swearing to establish opposing stances towards authorities, as swearing ‘signals shared freedom from the control of those who have criticized such language in the past: mainly, mothers and schoolteachers (mostly women)’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 183). Hjort (2017) also maintains that swearing is a means to claim and construct memberships to groups that are thought to practice swearing. In the study by Stapleton on a drinking group, participants thought swearing had a ‘shocking effect’ on people who did not belong to the group examined in the study. The swearing practice strengthened group identity by creating distinctions between those who were shocked by the expletives (outsiders) and those who were not (insiders)

(Stapleton 2003). This perspective is important when discussing male swearing at school and in the presence of (often female) teachers as well as a mixed gender study group. Swearing is uncommon in hierarchical and institutional settings such as education, and therefore students and teachers are more likely to swear outside the school environment (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton 2017, Hjort 2017).

This study focuses on the Finnish swearword *vittu*. The literal English translation of *vittu* is *cunt*, but the function of *vittu* in conversation is similar to the English swearword *fuck*. For this reason, *vittu* is translated as *fuck*¹ in the data excerpts below. In a study on Finnish folk linguistics, Finnish-speaking participants reported *vittu* to be the most offensive swearword (Hjort 2017). Stapleton's study (2003) reveals that the literal counterpart of *vittu* in English, *cunt*, has similar outlines for reported obscenity. Hjort (2015) suggests that *vittu* and *fuck* have similar functions in underlining masculinity as well as in forming in-group memberships. Stapleton (2003) also reported that nearly all female participants but only half of the male participants agreed that 'vaginal' swearwords, such as *cunt*, are the obscenest. The female participants stated that they never used these swearwords, while male participants reported that they only used vaginal swearwords in all-male company (Stapleton 2003). Some researchers claim that women might experience social pressures that are grounded in stereotypes and thus select standard forms of speaking and avoid swearing. It is clear nonetheless that women also swear (Stapleton 2003; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 294).

Even though swearing is context bound, and groups exhibit different communicative practices, swearing – and in particular the use of the Finnish *vittu* – is likely to be used in performances of working-class masculinities and low levels of education. This swearword is more likely to be used among men in informal situations than for instance, by women in formal situations. In other words,

¹ Hjort (2015) describes the relationship between *vittu* and *fuck* as a marriage, or a literary coexistence between the two words: 'Vittu and fuck are arguably both prototypical swearwords in the respective languages. Both arise commonly into public debates, face censorship and are taken as examples of bad language and 'youth decadence'. (Hjort 2015, 321)

swearing and uttering *vittu* repeatedly is one means in formal school situations to perform hard working-class masculinities. The use of *vittu* expresses a degree of nonchalance in formal institutions and with the representatives of female authority, such as teachers. Using the swearword *vittu* therefore signifies flirting with anti-school attitudes.

The workshop leaders selected gangsta rap as the theme for their workshop. Gangsta rap lyrics typically romanticise decay and views it from an insider's perspective. The gangsta rap topics are inspired by life on inner-city streets and in miserable suburbs, heavy drinking, drug abuse, heteronormativity, misogyny and social crises such as marginalisation, unemployment, and crime (for example, see Weitzer and Kubrin 2009, Rose 2008, Krims 2000). Ghetto-centricity and masculinity constitute a gendered 'hardness' which is essential to gangsta rap (Krims 2000, Williams 2015). One element used to reinforce the 'hardness' required for credibility in gangsta rap is misogyny in lyrics, which includes swearing, especially when there are doubts of the artist's so-called authenticity (Armstrong 2004).

Westinen and Rantakallio (2019) argue that Finnish rap is somewhat complex in regard to 'authenticity', or 'keeping it real', and this is a recurring and a significant topic of discussion among rap researchers and artists. The concept of authenticity has traditionally concerned the artist who bases his or her music on personal experiences, embedded in societal and cultural histories and, of course, in former rap culture. In fact, those writing lyrics about hard gangsta life without having personal experiences of that lifestyle are not appreciated in rap communities. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Finnish (gangsta) rappers are white middle-class men. Finnish rap authenticity in general draws from individual and local experiences, emphasising masculinities by mimicking American music styles and their background in gangsta cultures. Thus, Finnish rap does not consist of the societal and cultural commentaries on poverty, working-class-ness and race that are common in American rap. However, the gangsta rap genre as well as the elements and meanings from which

it draws from, echo in the rap lyrics workshops that are analysed in this article.

Materials and methods

This study is conducted within the field of feminist ethnography (see Skeggs 2001). Pietilä conducted fieldwork in 14 rap lyrics workshops, and in addition, she asked the workshop leaders, Matias and Ville (pseudonyms), to record their reflections after their workshop sessions.

During the fieldwork, the aim was to understand the on-going (communication) practices in the workshops from a participant's point of view (for example, see Delamont 2014, Carbaugh et al. 2011). Pietilä got interested in how the leaders contrasted their workshop activities with the official educational context, and their frequent swearing appeared to be an example of this. The leaders swore constantly which appeared to evoke multiple meanings within the workshops. The swearing was a detail in their workshops that 'tickled our brain' (Lahelma et al. 2013).

In the first section of the following analysis, we describe the workshop conduct. However, the analysis focuses on the reflective discussions between the two leaders. The analysis has two parts: the first is based on fieldwork, the second focuses on the leaders' reflections on their swearing.

The main data in this study consist of 12 audio-recorded reflective discussions between the rap workshop leaders consisting of a total of 5.5 hours of talk. In each of these discussions, the leaders discussed the recent workshop, compared it with other sessions and evaluated the conduct in the workshops in general. This usually occurred when they were driving in Ville's car on their way to the location of the next workshop. The leaders' discussions cover various topics related to their communication during their workshops, the students and groups that participated in them, teachers, and overall schooling. From the ethnography of communication perspective (Winchitz 2018), all communication includes metacommunicational commentaries on the relationships between the speakers, topics and contexts as they are encoded in the language structure and use. However, for

the scope of this article, it is sufficient to state that besides this basic assumption, the leaders' reflections on swearing are also metacommunication in the sense of being talk about talk, or reports of the enactment of swearing (Carbaugh 2007).

The analysis on the leaders' reflections draws from ethnography of communication (for example, see Winchitz 2018) and cultural discourse analysis. The central idea of cultural discourse analysis is that as we communicate, we engage in stating metacomments regarding who we are, how we are related to each other, what we do, how we feel and how we are placed in locations (Carbaugh 2007). In what follows, we examine how the leaders' reflections concerning swearing make statements about the leaders themselves, the relationships between them, the students and teachers, and about where the leaders place themselves within the educational context.

In the analysis, we consider *vittu* a key term in the entire communicative situation. In other words, *vittu* is salient and meaningful on its own, but it is also symbolic, implying to and accompanied with other ways in meaning-making (Carbaugh 2007). Swearing can be a means of performing societal differences and meanings, such as classed masculinities, and in our analysis, *vittu* is a key term to these performances. Following this assumption, the discussions on swearing represent the leaders' relationship to those performances, and simultaneously, reflect how they relate to other people and contexts in the situations under discussion. This analysis will address three questions. Firstly, how do the leaders make sense of their swearing practice? Secondly, what are they achieving by swearing in the educational context? Thirdly, how does this practice of swearing and the reasoning behind it relate to the discourses of the 'failing boys'?

Setting the scene: rap lyrics workshops in Finnish language and communication lessons

The goal of the company-funded project was to improve the motivation of VET technology students towards learning literacy by offering a total of 100 rap literacy workshops. Teachers were offered

the opportunity to order one 90-minute workshop per study group. All workshops were run by two white male visitors, Matias and Ville. They both had academic education in literature but no training in pedagogy. Matias is a literary critic, and Ville a rap artist. The study groups during the fieldwork were diverse, and all students participated in the workshops regardless of gender, nationality, age or other intersecting differences. However, a vast majority of the students observed during the fieldwork in 14 workshops were young males, approximately 16–20 years old. Further information about the social backgrounds (such as immigrant status or family circumstances) of the students was not available. The teachers were usually present in the classroom, and they were female, with a few exceptions.

The workshops were organised as part of the Finnish language and communication curriculum in standard classrooms, where the leaders stood in the front of the room and the students were seated. The teacher usually sat with the students, stood by the classroom door, or leaned on a wall. Pietilä made notes on a laptop and sat at the back of the classroom or in a corner at the front. Each workshop had a similar programme, and communication during them was also highly routinised, as the same dialogue and the same jokes were repeated from one workshop to another. The leaders addressed the class or each other, adopting a joint lecture style, and the students listened. The students were provided some opportunities to contribute to the discussion.

The leaders used swearwords rather frequently during their workshops, and according to the reflective discussions, this was the case for all their workshops. They predominately used the word *vittu*. Other swearwords were rarely used and presumably for this reason, the leaders referred to *vittu* when discussing swearing in general during their reflective discussions. The swearing was intense particularly at the beginning of the workshops and whenever the leaders had to gain the lost attention of the students.

The programme usually consisted of the following sequence of events: Firstly, Matias introduced Ville as the rap star and the main character of the workshop, and himself as Ville's 'sidekick'. They

did not mention their academic education in literature, but instead emphasised their ambivalent attitudes towards reading and literature when they were the same age as the participating students. Ville asked whether the students read in their free time. He was rather quick in assuming that the answer was ‘no’. ‘That’s right. No one reads but everyone listens to rap music, shaking their bottoms on Friday nights – and on Sundays, some might listen to the actual lyrics’, he summarised, while explicitly referring to himself as a teenager. Matias subsequently stated that literacy is lifesaving and provided a few examples of this. For instance, it is essential to be able to interpret traffic signs, and drunken, aggressive people in suburban pubs. He continued that the purpose of these examples was to highlight that literacy not only concerns words but also contexts and situations.

Next, the leaders and students listened to two rap songs and analysed them. The students could also read the lyrics on prints. The topic of the first song was an alcoholic who collects bottles in order to buy himself more alcohol. He sings of not going to work but instead continuing his life as an addict because he considers the work available to him to be ‘shit’. This song is paradigmatic in the gangsta rap genre discussed above (Westinen and Rantakallio 2019, Krims 2000). The topic of the second song was ‘taking it slow’ and being critical of capitalism – which in this song meant work and other obligations that the society requires of an individual. The analysis was a leader led short discussion on ‘who speaks’ in the lyrics. Matias posed questions to the students, and during this discussion, created an imaginative character and a life for the speaker of the lyrics.

In addition to the speaker analysis, the leaders asked questions about rap music and artists in general. The students appeared to run the risk of being ‘uncool’ if they did not know what or how to answer. Ville, a rap artist himself, recounted anecdotes about the underground rap scene and made it obvious that he knew the rap artists in question personally. The leaders sometimes asked the teacher questions related to underground rap culture. This appeared to test whether the teacher had sufficient knowledge of the subject. This practice usually made it clear that the teacher was not

literate in rap music. Yet this was not always the case. When the teacher knew the correct answer, the leaders congratulated the students for their teacher being ‘on the ball’.

After this, the students were assigned the task of writing down a line from their favourite (rap or other genre) song on a piece of paper. The leaders then collected the papers and the lines were analysed once again, similar to the two rap songs. They imagined a speaker, context and situation in which the line could have been situated. Some students were eager to present their informal literacies and knowledge of underground rap and suburban life. At times, these eager students had long discussions with Ville, as they seemed to somehow compete with each other with their relevant inside knowledge of rap and the artists.

Most students did not actively participate in the discussions but still listened to the leaders’ presentation. Some students refused any contact with the leaders and listened to their own music instead, concentrated on their smart phones, or spoke with their peers. Some teachers appeared uneasy or confused during the workshops. One reported to have felt sorry for the students because they were not sufficiently familiar with rap or not adequately fluent in either listening or reading. This teacher argued that leaders presupposed that the students were not interested in studying Finnish language and communication and assumed that there were conflicts between the students and teachers, which was not the case. Even so, some teachers regarded the workshops as subversive, as the male leaders were able to ‘talk with the boys’ and provide them with a new and fresh angle, that of rap as literature.

The performers: leaders who swear

In the excerpt below, the leader, Matias, discusses problems concerning teaching literature for male students who study technology at VET.

Matias: in my opinion – a reason that explains low enthusiasm towards reading is that it seems so homogenic, all the literature there is, it is really academic and also, it is sort of legitimised and all the authors have this certain type of status as well as the teachers of course because they have to do the teaching and keep the whole thing together – so for the teachers there is not that much space to do other things – like coming there one day to drink beer with the lads instead of going through all the learning content – so this is why – there is a clear demand for other approaches, one gets the feeling that literature teaching could be something else, one might approach this in some other ways and it might be that it is the shocking effect that is the real gem in this [workshop]²

Matias refers to literature in terms of it being institutional and academic. The implied social and societal differences between the VET students and literature institutions engender ‘a clear demand’ for something other than regular literacy teaching. The workshop is an attempt to address this gap, as the leaders discuss literature ‘in other ways’ than the teachers, with the ‘shocking effect’ of using language such as swearing.

The language used during lessons in all Finnish educational contexts is predominantly standard language and this includes VET schools. Thus, if one intends to dissociate, or differentiate oneself (Willis 1977) from the school institutions, then informality needs to be emphasised, which is done by using nonstandard language such as swearwords. In the following excerpt, the leaders explicitly define themselves as ‘swearing authority figures’.

Matias: we were authority figures who swear bucket loads

Ville: today in my opinion it was appropriate and smooth but still good – a couple of tactical fucks were thrown in between but we didn’t have to spread the swearing as

² The excerpts are our translations from Finnish.

much as sometimes

Matias: they did laugh at our jokes today, them lads

When swearing, the leaders present themselves as non-institutional figures which contrasts with the teachers, who represent the educational institution. According to Matias, being figures of authority and swearing ‘bucket loads’, was considered to be extremely positive. However, Ville highlights that they did not need to swear as profusely this time, and he presents this minimum amount of swearing in a positive light. This alludes to the leaders’ ambivalent motivation for swearing: it is not always a good practice, but it is good when used as a ‘tactic’ with the students referred to as ‘lads’. Swearing is therefore a tactic, consisting of conscious word choices, with the aim of gaining and maintaining the students’ attention.

Sometimes local representatives from the company that funded the workshops visited them and gave the students presentations on the company as an employer as well as encouraged the students to apply to work there. During these workshops, the leaders needed to deviate from their regular workshop programme, because they had to provide time for company representatives. The leaders were concerned that these representatives would use standard speech in their presentation to the students, which would destabilise the informal concept of the workshop. However, it went well at least once:

Ville: [in his presentation] factory manager said it like straight “this is not the way in which school books talk but I really do say that everyone is pissed off [‘vituttaa’] every once in a while and it sucks” and like as a factory manager he really did use language that these lads get

Matias: yes he did take the piss [‘vittuilla’], even he realised that you cannot preach in there, that you must say something that interests them

Ville: and in their own language

During this excerpt, the leaders report a factory representative who uses swearwords when speaking to the students, thus resorting to speaking in ‘the students’ own language’, using a verb that is derived from the noun ‘vittu’. Moreover, the representative is referred to contrast his style of speaking in the workshop with the language used ‘in school books’ (see Wilkins 1999). This has interesting metacommunicational implications. Students are supposedly swearers, and this speaking style is a good practice for any visitor to follow. The leaders base their decision to swear on their interpretation of their audience, the VET students and their presumed language usage and preferences. The assumption is that the students have a distinctive communicative style (in which swearing is essential), and the leaders adopt it to their workshops’ conduct. In doing so, they express a goal for some type of similarity between the leaders (‘laddism’), the factory representative and the students.

This resonates with the idea of matching the characteristics of teachers and pupils, such as gender, to achieve better educational outcomes (Carrington and McPhee 2008). It is obvious that neither the leaders nor the factory manager are working-class youth – they are highly educated adults. It appears that their swearing is an attempt to overcome differences that are understood to be obstacles between the leaders and students, such as differences in age, education and social class. Swearing affiliates the leaders and the factory representatives with adolescent male groups and anti-school masculinities such as laddism. As such, swearing constitutes male bonding and its function is to show gendered and classed distinctions between workshop leaders and (female) teachers – as well as all those who do not engage in swearing at school.

The audience: profiling the ‘target group’

One of the central topics of the reflective discussions is the habitus and behaviour of the students, which serve as a basis for assumptions about their social backgrounds, wellbeing, interests in life and motivation in their Finnish language and communication studies. The leaders describe

observing anti-school attitudes and behaviour, which they envision as developing into an interest in the workshop, especially if the leaders swear sufficiently in their talk. The students are difficult to please, to get them listen, and therefore any method is valid:

Ville: like nowadays all [students] but especially this ADHD gang, if we get this gang to just stop for a moment and listen to us, that is why this [the workshops] is really becoming hot stuff, whatever the way we do it – even though it was a bit tough – when it works if we get them listening and reading – and doing fucking textual analysis, for guys like these who just mess around and blabber who can't concentrate and who come from horrific circumstances and probably getting them to be still and quiet would be significant for their future life and mental wellbeing

The leaders repeatedly speak in terms of a core target group which consists of students who live in working-class, low socio-economic suburbs and have 'rough' life histories and 'horrific circumstances'. To the leaders, these students are best able to understand rap properly. The reason is that the leaders assume that the students' personal experiences are similar to those presented in gangsta rap lyrics. It is interesting that this assumption is analogous to gangsta rap 'authenticity' which is based on an artist's personal experiences that are highlighted in the lyrics (see Westinen and Rantakallio 2019). Consequently, the students who are not interested in Finnish language and communication studies and who display anti-school behaviour must also lead rough lives and those students are therefore sufficiently authentic to interpret gangsta rap lyrics. The workshop leaders attempt to utilise the assumed experiences of the students to establish common ground. The leaders therefore aim to please the students by interpreting their habitus and rough experiences, which presumably correlate with them having a preference for rap music. These students are best served by instruction that is 'a bit tough' and includes swearing.

The leaders also mention students who are school-oriented, well-dressed and well-behaved who do not belong to this core target group. The leaders describe the schools in small cities and rural areas as particularly posing a problem for them in this sense.

Ville: we don't really realise the amount of Helsinki slang we talk – sometimes it feels that the gang is looking at us like some fucking odd spectacles who blab something probably interesting stuff – in the worst case scenario – and then sometimes students don't like understand it because we are just such odd guys like “oh my god that guy has a beanie and he said fuck”

In the excerpt above, Ville describes students as being surprised, even confused, by the leaders' swearing. This is presented as a prototypical perspective for students outside metropolitan areas, who are not literate in the gangsta rap life. These students appear school-oriented, and they therefore cannot relate to the rough rap lyrics world or are not sufficiently interested in them for the workshop to be successful. This analogically opposes the authenticity claim – these students are not 'authentic' enough for the workshop or its contents. From the leaders' perspective, those students lead safe, middle-class lives. These students may behave well during the workshop and express interest. Yet to the leaders, something is missing: these students do not relate to the lyrics like those in the target group. These two categorisations closely resemble the 'ear'oles' and 'lads' proposed by Willis (1977).

Matias: they were too schooly, sitting straight and just too much – it was somehow a bit too stiff – we should have sworn more or something – we didn't swear that much and I think that we should just talk more about inappropriate stuff so then we would have got more out of those lads

Matias describes how a 'stiff' group receives the workshop. He reasons that their conduct in a workshop too strongly reflected the standard style of speaking that occurs in educational contexts

(Wilkins 1999) and concludes that the more inappropriate the communication and content, the better the workshop. His underlying assumption is that the VET students appreciate and productively react to inappropriate talk such as swearing. Hence, the leaders' swearing during the instruction resembles a brush that is able to remove the false stiffness from the students and uncovers their true thoughts, which are hidden due to the social norms in the classroom. Swearing, in contrast, is 'keeping it real', which is analogous to gangsta rap authenticity. Usually school rules prohibit this type of authentic speaking, and the workshop is an opportunity to embrace the nonstandard variants of language, which is defined as a preference that all students share.

Ville and Matias were obviously not content with the lack of interest by the boys in their workshop who seemed more middle-class, rural, or high performing. The leaders do also talk about girl students in their reflectional discussions. These comments mainly concentrate on individual girls' habitus and behaviour. Girls were not mentioned when swearing was reflected. Moreover, the leaders appear not to have considered whether students, teachers or the researcher might have felt the lessons awkward because of the sexist swearing.

The show at school: drawing distinctions

It is evident that the workshop leaders did not attempt to adjust to the formal educational context. Instead, many of their actions aimed to deviate from it. The leaders also considered that their instructional discussions with students were informal; to them, the workshops resembled more a chat than a visiting lecture. In the following excerpt, the leaders discuss the connection between teaching, chatting, and giving a show:

Matias: I have a feeling that the further we go from teaching and from that school-likeness and the more we just joke around with the dudes, the better the outcomes are

Ville: yes – someone sent to Instagram that “thanks you did like a really good gig” –

like it was a fucking show, I think it's hilarious – there is the gang who look with their fucking mouths open like “who are these guys, blabbering and fucking swearing” and “like pretty interesting stuff” and multiple teachers – [say] like “well it was really cool to see your show”

The leaders discuss the feedback on their workshop as a ‘show’ in a somewhat surprised tone.

Matias states that the workshop is at its best when it is not school-like, and that joking results in better outcomes. Ville states that teachers and students repeatedly thank them for their show. It is interesting, however, that even though Matias argues against ‘school-likeness’, the leaders lectured for the most time of the workshop and invited students to analyse texts and reflect on ‘who speaks’, which are prototypical to literature lessons in comprehensive school. It was their swearing and other means of embracing laddism that created a distinction between a ‘school-like’ lesson and a show.

What is central to this show? Does it entail flirting with anti-school attitudes, gangsta rap perspectives, hard masculinities, and ‘working-class-ness’? The leaders capture rap perspectives and release them into the classroom environment in the workshops to create something that is best understood as a show. The use of the swearword *vittu* is one feature of this performance, as Ville demonstrates above by mentioning that a student is stunned by their swearing. Swearing signifies ‘laddism’ and a resignation from teachers. By swearing, the leaders step out of the educational context, and their show demonstrates how they do not actually belong in the classrooms. In Willis’ (1977) terms, the rap lyrics show is a differentiation from the educational integration.

Swearing during a lesson emphasises the contrasts between standard and non-standard communication as well as formal and informal styles, which are associated with institutional and non-institutional communication. This carries implications of gendered and classed meanings that stem from the discourses about the ‘failing boys’. These involve dichotomies in masculinities and femininities, the working-class and the middle-class, and (female) teachers and (male) gangsta rap authority figures. Thus, the leaders use their way of speaking to locate themselves outside the

educational context and they claim that this is exactly why their show is meaningful to students.

Thus, the workshop show is merely a well-planned concept that is designed to fulfill the needs of ‘failing boys’, which the worry speech alleges the (female) teachers are unable to do. If teaching does not offer a solution, then a show might provide the required entertainment. The workshop is constructed rather uncritically to *please* students with its content of ‘pretty interesting stuff’ and swearing as indexing to the students’ assumed way of speaking. The underlying reason for this is the image of the students’ lives as ‘authentic’ and similar to the worlds of gangsta rappers’ lyrics. This includes reproducing stereotypes but giving them a neoliberal twist with reasonings considering a ‘target group’.

Aftermath: antipedagogy for failing boys?

Following Raewyn Connell (2013), we suggest that neoliberal notions regarding education as a market enable company-funded consultants to visit the school and make promises to solve long-lasting educational issues and to help teachers in their professional tasks. In this case, the company that funded the workshop had concerns about the literacy skills of the VET technology students and an interest in improving their skills because they could eventually become employees. The selected method of addressing the issue was for the two male leaders to speak on gangsta rap to VET students who were all a priori assumed as laddish. The practice implies gendered and classed dichotomies that are rationalised within a neoliberal framework of profiling and serving a target group with a concept. We suggest that the acts of contrasting the rap workshop to literacy teaching creates an example of antipedagogy for ‘the failing boys’, which we consider as negative of the educational context.³

³ *Antipedagogy* was originally used in Germany in the 1970s (*Antipädagogik*, von Braunmühl 1975). Von Braunmühl’s concept included philosophy promoting non-education – a radical notion

Within the feminisation of schooling discourses (for example, see Carrington and McPhee 2008), the entire education system seems unsuitable for ‘failing boys’. The presupposition in these discourses is that because their school and teachers have been unable to teach them, the boys have failed. The main reasoning is that male students and their backgrounds have not been understood properly and consequently, the teaching has not achieved outcomes, and that the teachers need help. Thus, neoliberal educational policy that creates pressures to utilise visiting consultants and projects (Connell 2013), instead of ‘failed teachers’, might be particularly strong and tempting when discussing the ‘failing boys’. We argue that this intersection serves as the background for a mentality which we refer to as *antipedagogy*. By recontextualising that term, the intention is to illustrate how the neoliberal understandings of education intertwine with failing boys’ discourses, and how this produces and motivates practices that draw distinctions to education: antipedagogy claims to matter to ‘failing boys’ because it is *not education*.

This article presented one example of an antipedagogy that was a paradigmatic boy pedagogy project, which consisted of workshops on gangsta rap, and offered to VET technology male students to improve their literacy skills. The focus of our analysis was on the workshop leaders’ reflections on their swearing in the workshops. An adult male leader who uses the swearword *vittu* (‘cunt/fuck’) during a workshop in a Finnish language and communication lesson serves as an interesting and intensive performative. This case reveals how swearing is used strategically as a means of performing working-class, anti-school masculinities and male bonding. By swearing, the leaders attempt to bond with (male) students, and simultaneously present themselves as a contrast to the educational context and the (female) teachers, and all students who do not belong to the ‘target group’, within it. Their reflections on swearing imply classed and gendered dichotomies when

of children who were not educated, but who were equal to their parents, teachers and other adults (Nordenbo 1996). However, *antipedagogy* was briefly reformulated as *postpedagogics*, as another German philosopher, Schoenebeck, considered the concept of antipedagogy as ambivalent to a philosophy of education (Hengst 2008). An American educational discussion of a similar nature was called *against education* (Nordenbo 1996).

profiling the students as a ‘target group’ that has not been served well by the educational system. The students become profiled as a unitary group that has distinctive way and a preference for swearing because the students are assumed working-class, they have rough life histories and thus they are able to ‘authentically’ interpret gangsta rap lyrics. It simultaneously circulates cultural stereotypes about working-class ‘lads’ who espouse anti-school attitudes (see Rosvall 2015).

These stereotyped notions are paraphrased in market rhetoric as attributes of a ‘target group’ and as such, they are rationalised with neoliberal logic. The workshops are constructed to aid in educating this target group by *pleasing* these students with a static concept. We suggest that it is essential for antipedagogy to form apriori assumptions about the interests or lifestyles of the students (or customers) and that the objective is to please them by maintaining to these assumptions. For antipedagogy, it would be far too risky to introduce students to otherwise unfamiliar areas of life or literary works because that would potentially drive students (or customers) away from the education (or business). Antipedagogy aims to please students (or customers) by maintaining to supposedly familiar perspectives (see also Scholes 2019). As such, it is a negative for any form of pedagogy. We ask, what should motivating, pleasing, and stereotyping mean for education, and hope that the example illustrated in this paper encourages further considerations on antipedagogy – neoliberal mentalities intertwining with the discourses about the ‘failing boys’.

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