

# Anti-schoolness in context: the tension between the youth project and the qualifications project

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**Abstract** In this ethnographic study conducted in two classrooms in Norway, grade nine (14-year-olds) in lower secondary school and the first year (16-year-olds) of upper secondary school, attention is drawn to how classroom culture is constituted through relationships between students. Through processes of power, dominance, hegemony and marginalisation, classroom culture forms the conditions for a learning environment, and has different opportunities, dilemmas and costs for the students. As classroom culture is negotiated in contextual and relational processes, classroom culture and ways of performing masculinities and femininities vary in the different classrooms, even within the same school. This article explores two classroom cultures, a “rule-breaking” classroom culture and a classroom culture in which the fear of being labelled a “nerd” dominates, to show how boys and girls use different solutions to balance the development of their identity as youths (the youth project) and the acquisition of academic competence and skills (the qualifications project).

**Keywords** Classroom culture · Ethnography · Anti-schoolness · Popularity · Rule-breaking · Being sociable

## 1 Introduction

Since Willis’ ground-breaking studies from the sixties of working-class boys who formed a tough counter-school subculture to compensate for their failures in school (Willis 1977), a growing amount of literature and research points out how gender constructions affect boys’ and girls’ school motivation and activity. Several studies from the UK, the US, Canada and Australia, and also from the rest of Europe, have pointed

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out how anti-schoolness and laddish behaviour have been part of constructions of masculinities at school. These masculinity constructions are at odds with the school ethos and incompatible with academic success (Francis 2000). Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman's study showed that hegemonic and popular masculinity in the early years of secondary school involved "'hardness', sporting prowess, 'coolness', casual treatment of schoolwork and being adept at 'cussing'" (2002, 10), a masculinity position adopted by African Caribbean boys. While it is important to stress that anti-schoolness positions are not adopted by all boys, the Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman study, as well as other studies (Martino 2001), have shown that the macho or anti-schoolness identity construction has also been widespread among middle-class boys. However, the term anti-schoolness is not only reserved for boys. Jackson has described how some girls have adopted laddish and anti-schoolness behaviour. The feminine version of the term lad—ladette—characterises girls who are troublesome, loud, disturbing, rude to teachers and self-confident in an aggressive way. The ladette culture is completely in opposition to nice girls and swots (Jackson 2006). This means that laddishness and anti-schoolness performance also can be a part of a feminine identity.

The aim of this article is to explore how certain student constructions affect classroom culture, and particularly, how they affect all the students, boys and girls, when the classroom is dominated by different kinds of anti-schoolness. Jackson and Dempster (2009) have pointed out the different terms of school resistance the masculine anti-schoolness construction contains: (1) denying achievements and valuing bad marks, (2) valuing rebellious behaviour in opposition to school and teachers' demands and expectations, or (3) related to school work, regarding making an effort as 'uncool', which Jackson and Dempster (2009) have called "the uncool to work" pupil discourse. The present article aims to contribute to the discourse on (some) girls' dominance in school performances and (some) boys' anti-schoolness construction by pointing out that students, both girls and boys, serve as each other's context in the construction of gendered student positions and ways of conducting oneself in the classroom. It also attempts to illuminate girls' construction of resistance to school in classroom cultures that are dominated by girls as well as cultures dominated by masculine anti-schoolness.

Classroom cultures are negotiated through processes of power, dominance and marginalisation, and through social relationships and friendships between gendered groups of students. Due to classroom culture, the masculinity and femininity constructions are considered to be contextual, contrary to fixed typologies for the distinct student styles, as the Norwegian sociologist Selma Therese Lyng (2007) has posited. Typologies underestimate the situated practices and the dynamic relation between individual and context. The context that the classroom constitutes is considered in relation to the social structures and discourses in which school and classroom are embedded, in accordance with Bourdieu's practice theory, and to the meaningful processes that take place between the students, and even between teachers and students in the classroom. The anthropologist Sherry Ortner adds the concept of human agency with the play of power in social life. She distinguishes between two modalities of agency. The agency of power is related to dominance and resistance, while the agency of project is related to that of the intentions, purposes and desires often formulated in terms of "goals" for individuals. The agency of project is not about unique individuals, bourgeois strategizing or routine everyday practices. It is about "life socially organized

in terms of culturally constituted projects that infuse life with meaning and purpose” (Ortner 2006, 145).

## 2 Methodology and context

The study was carried out by undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in two classrooms in Norway, the first year in upper secondary school, the study programme qualifying for further studies (16-year-olds), and grade nine in lower secondary school (14-year-olds).<sup>1</sup> The methods employed included participatory observation in the classroom, which took place over a period of two and a half months in each classroom, one day a week. The participatory observation was followed by focus group discussions with the students. Focus group discussion is a qualitative research method where data are generated through interaction amongst the participants on topics supplied by the researchers (Morgan 1997). The topic in the discussions was life at school, which was mainly related to photographs the students were asked to take before the focus group discussion.<sup>2</sup>

The school context is a modern, urban Norwegian school. There are about five hundred to six hundred students in each of the schools. The lower secondary school is situated close to the city centre, while the upper secondary school is situated in an urban district outside the city. The residential areas where the students in both schools live are mixed areas regarding social class and the types of housing. According to the national statistics for graduation examinations, the upper secondary school is a little above the national average, except in maths. The results from the lower secondary school place the school directly below the national average (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2009). The school buildings are a mixture of new and old architecture, and the pedagogical practice is traditional and recognisable, dominated by teacher-conducted lessons, classes in one group and the frequent use of blackboards.

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<sup>1</sup> Lower secondary school is compulsory in Norway. Almost all schools are state schools and students have no choice of school (they attend the school in their geographic area) and no choice of programme, except for two lessons a week in a second foreign language. Upper secondary school is voluntary, and 94% of all 16-year-olds start upper secondary school. The students decide which school to apply for and they can choose between vocational programmes or study programmes qualifying them for further studies. About 75% of the students are granted their first choice concerning programme and school.

<sup>2</sup> The focus groups consisted of peer groups, both gender-mixed and gender-separate. To achieve a dialogue that is less controlled by the researchers, the group discussion relied mainly, but not exclusively, on photographs the students had taken from their school day. The interaction in the focus group is regarded as constitutive for the discussions, at the same time as the interaction itself, comprising self-presentations and relationships, and the discourses being used in the interaction, are analysed in the study. There is always a methodological risk connected to placing individuals in focus groups. The dividing lines between schoolmates, which appear in the analysis of the data, may be reinforced and even constructed by the process of grouping itself in focus group research. Sometimes we experienced that students in a group were more in agreement than had been expected, but in many groups, the opposite was the case; the composition of groups actualised certain tensions and confrontations between opinions. The student groups characterised in the analysis are not entirely identical with the focus groups.

### 3 The qualifications project and the youth project

One does not need to stay for long in a classroom in secondary school to discover the two central culturally established projects that take place there, sometimes occurring as parallel projects, sometimes in complete opposition to each other: the youth project and the educational project, also called the qualifications project. *The qualifications project* is defined as students' acquisition of academic competence and skills (Nielsen 2009), and is the society's idea of education faced by students. *The youth project* refers to students' gendered identity projects, and also the project of acquiring social relationships with peers. However, using the youth project implies that gendered identity is considerably intersectionalised through age and phases of life. According to Jackson, social relationships between students are definitely of great importance in their daily life at school (Jackson 2006).

These relationships are included in the formation of alternative cultures in schools and classrooms. Even the formation of alternative cultures is, of course, not limited to secondary school. Berentzen has shown how pre-school children already form a peer culture, partly in opposition to the institutional culture, and how the meaning of children's actions is interpreted differently in these two cultures (Berentzen 1994). How students construct the youth project, or construct themselves as gendered youth, meshes with the ways they perform the qualifications project, through their interpreting and actualising of the educational demands and how they relate to the school's structures and rules. Students' interpretations of the value of knowledge—and the qualifications based on this knowledge—as capital, can differ according to gender, ethnicity and social class, and according to different discourses on knowledge and qualifications (e.g. lifelong learning, theory versus practice-based learning, the exclusive mechanisms in the labour market that particularly affect ethnic minorities, and the expanding of personal qualities and qualifications resources).

As the youth project and the qualifications project are cultural projects, they are, according to Ortner, “organized in and around local relations of power” (Ortner 2006, 145). They are enacted “in the face of domination by outsiders and powerful others” (Ortner 2006, 147). Concerning school, James et al. (1998) have described how the classroom can be regarded as an exercise of discipline through the spatial positioning of children, through the timetables' punctuation of time and the limiting of issues, and through the educational system's definitions of failure and success, which are embodied in the curriculum. With respect to the internal relationships of power between students, which is addressed in this article, the individuals and groups are not equally positioned; they enter into relationships of power, dominance, hegemony, subordination and marginalisation. According to Connell (2000), the students' display of different life-styles also needs to be analysed to reveal the dominance and forces between groups. The local power structure amongst students forms the classroom culture which can be decisive for how knowledge and qualifications are valued by students, and have an effect on the students' continual self-presentations according to the youth project and the qualifications project. However, power relations are unstable and classroom cultures will always be in motion and differ strongly in different classes: in some classroom cultures the qualifications project and the youth project can be combined or balanced in different ways. In others, the two projects can be completely

opposed. The analysis explores how two different classroom cultures are formed and negotiated through the following: relationships, power and dominance between student groups; negotiations between dominating and subordinating positions; and the possibilities, dilemmas and costs created for the individuals. The classroom culture in the present study will be analysed as a “rule-breaking” culture in grade nine and as a culture dominated by a fear of being labelled a nerd in the first year of upper secondary school, which entails different gendered solutions.

#### 4 Rule-breaking culture and challenging teachers’ authority

Secondary schools have become some of the biggest common community centres for young people in cities, towns and villages, a fact that makes them marketplaces for the negotiation of youth projects. [Haavind \(2003\)](#) has pointed out that at the age of twelve or thirteen children have often obtained a certain degree of self-determination at the same time that the market for possible peer relationships is growing larger due to the transition from primary to secondary school in Norway at the age of thirteen. The youth project in grade nine in lower secondary school is visible in many ways in the classroom, which can be seen as a melting pot for identity projects in the shape of equipment such as i-pods, cell phones and big handbags, such styles as clothing, sagging trousers, hairdo and pots of hair wax, habits and ways of talking, and through strongly investing in relationships. According to [Søndergaard \(2000\)](#), students construct or actualise themselves as youths by making use of the socially available discourses of being young persons. [Maira and Soep \(2005\)](#) point out that globalisation has created changes in the cultural frameworks of young people’s lives. The globalisation, which appears first and foremost, but not exclusively, through modern technology, has made countless discourses available to young people. However, the possibilities and diversities of cultural imagination about the self, the others and the world outside are negotiated and interpreted in the light of young people’s local contexts, which can be nations and ethnicities, as well as gender and social classes. For young people, the local culture of young people as interpretative communities will be decisive for how they negotiate the discourses of youth.

The students are divided into two informal groups: popular students and unpopular students who do not mix with each other. Some popular girls describe the division of students in the classroom as “us the cheeky ones versus the dolts”. Some others describe it as “the normal versus the invisible ones” or versus “students who do not dare to break teachers’ rules”. Some boys characterise the division as “students staying in the corner in the schoolyard where students usually smoke”, which is forbidden, versus students who do not. The class culture can be considered as a rule-breaking culture, and challenging the teachers’ authority is an important way of behaving.

One group of boys can be identified as making most of the trouble and contributing to the rule-breaking culture in the classroom. Their masculinity construction is identical to a masculinity usually described as lads and laddish behaviour (e.g. [Epstein et al. 1998](#); [Frosh et al. 2002](#); [Jackson 2006](#); [Kulbrandstad 2003](#); [Martino 1999](#); [Martino 2001](#)). The boys challenge the authority of teachers and school, provoke or

spoil lessons, and leave themselves open to the school's punishment, which [Mac an Ghail \(1994\)](#) has described as conflicts related to the school's ethos.

These boys can be said to be in a hegemonic position in the classroom. The rebellious boys have a cool, tough appearance and brandish a "couldn't care less image". Most of them are football players; the leader of the group is even a much respected one which, according to [Swain \(2004\)](#), is often decisive for obtaining popularity. Their hegemonic position is expressed by the fact that none of the other students complain about or oppose their behaviour, although many of the students in the focus group discussions admit that they are often disturbed and interrupted in their school work by the boys' rebellious behaviour. Girls are also important in the process of underpinning the rebellious boys' dominance. A group of nice-looking girls are a supportive audience for the rebellious boys' confrontational and uncompromising behaviour, which gives these girls an appreciated break from the monotony of the classroom teaching. They support the rebellious boys, try to help them with arguments against the teachers and also show consideration for them in relation to the teaching. These girls have recently dropped out from organised leisure time activities, some have started smoking and drinking and going to parties at weekends. They appear self-confident, also with respect to sexuality and intimacy, which they verbally embellish in ways which can often embarrass some boys. A good relationship between the rebellious boys and these girls can be characterised as heterosexual friendship. The boys are not their boyfriends even though some of them sometimes practice or pretend affection by hugging, kissing or embracing each other.

These girls that we regarded as defiant are also oppositional in the classroom, but without directly disturbing the lessons. They rather create some trouble through their way of communication: They talk fast and aggressively, make sharp, ironic and sometimes cheeky remarks. They initiate all kinds of negotiations with teachers, and sometimes they also blame teachers for things such as "you have stolen my book". Girls' use of communication strategies as resistance in classrooms in lower secondary school is well known from the eighties ([Nielsen 1998](#)). In grade nine, the defiant girls often challenge the teachers' authority. One of the girls often signals the end of lessons or the time for lunch by crying out "yes" or "so", and then all the students leave the classroom or start eating without the teachers' intervention. Other comments can be as follows:

After the teacher has been shouting loudly to the students, telling them that they should not spoil lessons for the other students, one of the girls replies ironically: "Thanks a lot for an interesting conversation, but now it's finished." And then she adds quietly: "I have to see a doctor" (field notes, grade 9, science lesson).

This means that gender is decisive for how resistance and opposition are acted out in this classroom, and how the different ways of marking opposition produce different sanctions from the teachers. The defiant girls are more difficult for teachers to deal with, particularly for male teachers who often do not penalise their comments at all. They control the verbal communication, which makes them more unassailable than the rebellious boys. However, most of these students performed well in school earlier, and they all still appreciate getting good marks. The academic performance of the rebellious boys is declining due to their resistance to work. The academic performance

of the defiant girls is also in decline, but in contrast to the boys, the girls have what for lack of a better term can be called an off-on button; sometimes they are interested in lessons, sometimes definitively not. The girls relate very selectively to the various school subjects. Some subjects, such as maths and science, are issues of considerable controversy that they do not care about at all, while they find other subjects more interesting. The girls' simultaneous mixing of adapting and deviant behaviour in the classroom, illuminated by the British researcher Lynn Davies (1984) some decades ago, seems still to be present.

The rule-breaking or oppositional culture also influences some of the other boys and girls in the classroom: girls and boys who perform well and who want to be popular among their classmates as well. Some boys who have academic ambitions adopt a competitive masculinity position. They keep a certain distance to the rebellious boys, except towards one who used to be a friend at primary school. However, their cultural affiliation as popular boys is confirmed by nurturing friendship with the defiant girls, and by showing their ability to break rules and oppose authority as well. The ambitious boys' rule-breaking is intended to initiate collective opposition or rule-breaking, such as to encourage all students to leave the classroom while the teacher is out, which means that nobody can be accountable. They also commit individual rule-breaking, but of a more harmless nature. Their ambitions give them, nevertheless, some challenges in the classroom. By declaring that they "hate to lose", they exaggerate the competition, similar to the middle-class masculinities Connell has referred to as emphasising "competition through expertise rather than physical confrontation", and as "much more compatible with the school's educational program and disciplinary needs" (Connell 1996, 220). Obtaining good marks as part of competition has roots in, may be inspired and even legitimated by the common cultural exaggeration of interest in sports and sports competition. Competitiveness could also acquire legitimacy from the contemporary penchant for quizzes and contests related to facts and knowledge in the media and culture. In attempting to obtain good marks, the ambitious boys also make use of shortcuts and guile, which means their performance does not always conform to the school ethos, and thus probably makes them more accepted in class.

Two boys try to persuade the teacher to postpone their oral presentation of their project-work to the next day. They argue that they could make a better presentation by including the comments the teacher already has made on the other students' presentations. The teacher does not accept their reasoning and the boys reluctantly make their way up to the blackboard. On their way up one of them asks a girl to lend him her transparency. He gets the transparency and puts it on the overhead (field notes, grade 9, science lesson).

As Renold and Allan (2006) and Francis et al. (2009) have pointed out, the high achieving girls with academic ambitions in this class also have to negotiate their practice in the existing classroom culture to avoid being unpopular and invisible, a consequence that nice, clever girls in school often are at risk of. All the spoiled lessons and noise in the classroom disturb the ambitious girls and make it difficult for them to concentrate on their schoolwork. Their own ethos is never to spoil lessons for someone else. Even though they are not so related to the rebellious boys as the defiant girls, they strongly defend the boys. They blame the teachers instead, particularly for acting unfairly and

unreasonably with the boys, and generally for failing to handle young people well. Sometimes we observed that they tried to negotiate with the rebellious boys by means enticement, saying that ‘denying work is not cool’, but without success. On the other hand, they stretch to the end of their tether to accept the boys’ behaviour.

In accordance with the oppositional culture, even the ambitious girls have to consider themselves as rule-breakers in the classroom, even though we never observed this, with the exception of listening to i-pods when working, scribbling on textbooks or putting on make-up. Other ways of demonstrating that they too are involved in rule-breaking are the narratives they tell about themselves. These narratives consist of stories of events when they were running away from the classroom or hiding from teachers, all quite harmless narratives that can support their self-image as nonconformist and visible. And even though the ambitious girls are conscientious in academic work, they draw a line at work that will not be checked by the teachers. These girls are capable of being self-regulated, but they do not want to be seen as nerdy exaggerators of academic demands.

While some dominate the classroom culture through laddish and rebellious masculinities, others are marginalised. The marginalised boys are those who consider themselves as “the reasonable guys”, or “the guys paying attention”, in opposition to “the guys who make noise”. They have much in common with the boys Lyng considers to be geeks, boys who never make a spectacle of themselves, who “have a corner of their own” and are considered by the staff to be “calm, nice, pleasant, friendly, and proper” (2007, 8), but contrary to Lyng’s geeks, these boys are not considered to be so by most of their co-students. The marginalised boys’ ways of behaving harmonise well with what the teachers and the school requires of effort, participation and conforming behaviour, even though their school performance largely differs in the group.

The marginalised boys’ social relationships at school are limited. Their lack of power is visible as they are ignored and even insulted on a daily basis by the rebellious boys. The marginalisation and powerlessness of these boys is sustained, and even reinforced, by the behaviour of the girls: the defiant as well as the ambitious ones. The girls make the marginalised boys invisible by keeping their distance, ignoring them and never talking to them, and claiming that they are immature. One of these boys who performs well is even considered to be one of those who acts dumb, which, according to the girls, is a ridiculous thing to do. Even the attempts these boys make to offer funny comments in the classroom do not change their status, but instead sustain their marginalised and childish masculinity position.

The ethnic minority students, being the first, second and third generation of immigrants from Asia, South America and the Middle East, are neither unpopular nor popular in the classroom. The disturbances and disruptions bother them all and they share the marginalised boys’ displeasure with it. But instead of blaming the rebellious boys, they blame the dominant culture: the lack of authority, control, discipline and penalties on the part of the teachers, as well as parents, and the lack of respect among young people. However, for one of the minority boys who performs well and has further ambitions for an academic education, his exclusion from the group of popular students and his lack of ambitions to be one of them can nevertheless make it easier for him to fulfil the qualifications project.



In this account from the 14-year-old ninth graders, the anti-schoolness culture which is dominant is related to rule-breaking and challenging teachers' authority. The anti-schoolness culture influenced by rebellious boys and defiant girls affects other students in the classroom who want to be popular and visible. Boys and girls who perform well and have academic ambitions need to incorporate some of the anti-schoolness in their construction of masculinities and femininities, without necessarily decreasing their academic efforts.

## 5 Feminine culture of sociability

The study programme in upper secondary school that qualifies students for further education is traditionally based on more specific subject knowledge and university educated teachers than in lower secondary school. The students attend this school through their own choice or priority, in contrast to compulsory school, and they are usually 16-year-olds when they start, at least two years older than the students in grade nine. Therefore, one does not expect a frequent occurrence of rebellious rule-breaking and similar behaviour. This expectation notwithstanding, a group of cheeky and socially self-exposing girls dominates the classroom. The teachers describe the first year class in upper secondary as an average class with many gifted students, but also with some classified as "lazybones". The class culture values good performance and marks without exactly being competitive. There is no strong diversity between groups in the classroom; the class consists of a multiplicity of peer-groups or couples with relationships to other groups and couples. The cheeky girls noted as troublemakers by the teachers form the glue between the different groups in the classroom. They have good relationships with most of the girls and boys, except some of the high achievers and some of the ethnic minority students.

What are understood as acceptable and unacceptable positions are limited by the word *nerd*, a slang term used to describe persons who work passionately to pursue intellectual and esoteric knowledge, or this type of activity, instead of participating in the social life at school. The *nerd* term is applied by everyone, regardless of their own performance level, and is always directed at students who perform better than they do themselves, sometimes in a joking manner, but also in a serious way. "Look at those nerds, don't they have a life?", is an example of comments about them. The fear of being called a *nerd* works as a strong discursive control on student performances, similar to Francis' studies of the role of the *boffin* among high achieving students (Francis 2009), and can be considered as an inheritance from lower secondary school. Many students, boys as well as girls, talked about their experiences from cultures where students were proud of bad performance and marks. Due to their status as first year students at upper secondary school, and in the study programme qualifying for further education, they express ambiguities and insecurities about values and judgments in the classroom culture.

You're always a bit afraid. It's quite superficial, you know, quite superficial sometimes. You're afraid of being excluded so you try to fit into the pattern or the patterns if there really are any here. But actually it's the way it works all over where people meet. People want to try to fit in (focus group discussion).

In year one, gender seems significant when protecting oneself from being labelled a nerd. Girls draw on one of the youth project's discourses about being sociable in the sense of being social as a person and having a socially exciting life with (many) friends. However, being sociable is achieved by the cheeky girls who do not perform well at school, and who therefore will never be labelled as nerds; these are the girls who dominate the class socially with a high social profile in the classroom as well as in their leisure time. The high social profile prevails strongly and subordinates their academic efforts. In the focus group discussion, the cheeky girls speak about school as an arena that maintains several personal and relational functions. Their most important school narrative is about the big group that meets during lunch and takes over the centre of the school cafeteria, usually the noisiest and happiest group to be found. They feel comfortable at school when joining together in this group, where out-of-school activities and weekends are organised, social events are discussed, and everyday experiences are interpreted, including personal as well as collective problems, failures as well as successes. In the lessons, the cheeky girls project themselves by making glib remarks and displaying humour and self-deprecating irony, as well as an impressive ability to put words to and interpret the reality around them. Schoolwork is made into social events and self-representative processes, especially group and project work, oral presentations and discussions of academic topics. 'Social overheating' could be an appropriate term for this culture, inspired by Ziehe and Stubenrauch's (1983) concept relating to overheating of the subject, which implies the longing to make all contexts in which one is involved into personal and emotional concerns.

The cheeky girls are experts in the social life at school. Their attractive appearances and trendy style according to the socially constructed popular femininities, their lively descriptions about experiences with boyfriends, sex, parties and alcohol, give them social authority and power. Both boys and girls want to keep in with them, even though the boys sometimes also ironically ridicule them. For high achieving girls, popularity and relationships with these girls are ensured by being sociable. Even the best achieving student in this class, a girl with ambitions and perfectionism that exceeds everyone else, is not seen as nerdy and boring. She plans almost everything and utilises free time at school to do assignments. Sometimes she is at school early in the morning to finish schoolwork, and she has clear aims with respect to acquiring a university education and a career. The others describe her as cool, social, funny and helpful. The combination of what the others regard as an adult life, the social attitudes and the fact that she has an individual style when it comes to clothing make her original and creative. Another very important reason is her generosity in helping and sharing her schoolwork with others, to use a concept from [Renold and Allan \(2006\)](#), which is of great importance to the cheeky girls who do not achieve well.

Being sociable is also an important issue in [Francis et al. \(2009\)](#)'s studies of 12–13 year-old high achieving girls' attempts to attain popularity. In their studies, girls talked more about communications and relationships with friends as a positive aspect of school, compared to the boys. In year one, some other high achieving girls attempt to balance between social life and school performance, between being sociable and doing their best academically. This means that these socially balancing girls decrease their level of expectation; they do not need top marks as they can

be next to the top. They contrast their youth with adult life, proclaiming they can indulge in books and knowledge later in life, but the time to be young cannot be postponed; it must be lived now. Similar balancing acts are well known from Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody's (2001) analysis of the balance between femininity and school performance, particularly among middle-class girls. On the other hand, some high achieving girls are excluded—or exclude themselves—from the network of the social girls. Their social position is limited and they keep to themselves. They seldom act out, and rather play the role of audience for the social communication in the classroom. Their practice is considered as socially restrictive, which, among other things, is about sharing; they do not share with students who do not make an effort, but actually only share in their small peer group. This is why they are called nerds by the others.

## 6 A masculine culture of laid-back appearance and lack of effort

Contrary to the hegemonic culture in grade nine, two different kinds of gender specific cultures exist side by side during the first year. These gendered cultures carry different hegemonic standards for how girls and boys can appear, at least for the high achievers who want to be popular or not taken for nerds. While being social protects high achieving girls from being unpopular nerds, being cool and relaxed is the high achieving boys' way of performance in the first year. Their performance shares some similarities with the discourse Jackson (2006) has described as “uncool to work” or “effortless achievements”. The relaxed boys have social connections to most of the cheeky girls. They appear as distant, uninvolved and ironic, without caring too much, and are popular boys. The relaxed boys always have a story which in various ways relates their own lack of effort: about marks they did not deserve, minimal efforts which gave amazing results, or how they were unfairly favoured in comparison with others.

“I wonder if she makes mistakes sometimes, I really do,” says Nils. “Take me for example, once when I did something, we made a presentation for Trine (the teacher), it was like, oh shoot, I thought when I was done, it was really bad. And then I got the mark from her, which I felt should have been completely different, so I didn't get it why I got that mark. I had done a really bad job and then I got a very good mark from her. I don't know if she likes certain students better than others or what” (focus group discussion).

Nevertheless, these boys, all with middle-class backgrounds, are high achievers. Their talk about coincidences and jokes about inherent intelligence can be affected by the classical, masculine discourse which idealises genuine and autonomous intellectual capacities (Jackson and Dempster 2009). This is confirmed by many of the students in the class who describe some of the relaxed boys as born geniuses or as having photographic memories. Even when these boys talk about the best achieving girl in the class, who definitely puts in a great deal of effort, they talk about her as an amazingly effortless achiever. However, Jackson and Dempster emphasise that effortless achievements are never completely effortless.

... in that there is always an implicit acknowledgement that some effort is expended in achievements, but for the achievement to be most impressive the effort expended must appear to be minimal (Jackson and Dempster 2009, 342).

The relaxed boys stand out from a less popular group of high achieving boys who display another long-established masculine position. The less popular group of boys seems to be purposeful, intellectually grasping and competitive, and appears to be minimally social outside of their own small peer group. Their stories are sharply contrasted to the stories told by the relaxed boys, often about the irritating fact that friends who do not make an effort get the same marks as they do, negotiating with teachers about ignoring a bad mark and not least, situations where they *should* have got a better mark.

“I’m a little annoyed in science class,” says Christian. (He is laughing.) “Last year my science teacher wouldn’t give me better marks because I had to know more than he did. And this year the teacher says that she won’t give me the top mark because she just won’t, or she doesn’t feel like it, even though she says that I deserve it. It’s too early, she won’t give it to me, she says” (focus group discussion).

These nerdy boys rise above the threat of being labelled as nerds and clearly demonstrate that they work to get good marks. Contrary to the nerdy girls who in the focus group discussion talk about their exclusion from the popular relationships with displeasure, the boys appear unbothered.

The cool, relaxed, distant and uninvolved masculinity construction can also be comprehended as negotiated between ambitions and purposes related to the qualifications project and judgments of some other boys; the truant boys who skip lessons are evasive and totally inactive in the classroom. The truant boys are not popular at all and their ways of opposing do not influence the classroom culture. However, we observed that these boys had a certain influence on the relaxed boys who take part in the same local youth culture outside school. In the focus group discussion, the relaxed boys frequently glanced at the truant boys to confirm acceptable statements and avoid making a fool of themselves. The relationship between the relaxed and the truant boys may also be considered as a mutual exchange; the relaxed boys share tasks and assignments with the truant boys, and in return they make important alliances and gain access to the locally appreciated youth culture.

The dominating masculine culture also affects another group of boys, boys who socially and academically display themselves in an unobtrusive way. However, the unobtrusive boys, mainly with a working-class background, admit that achievements demand maximum effort and that it is inconceivable to spend that much time on school-work. They do not merely risk their popularity. Their school achievements are at risk at any rate, and failing could be devastating for their self-esteem if they really make an effort, so they are probably not willing to take the risk of showing maximum effort. Jackson has spelled out this argument, saying that the uncool-to-work-discourse can be considered as a protection strategy against the “feeling of failure, such as shame, anxiety and withdrawal” (Jackson 2002, 41). Then their effort and not their ability is to blame. The unobtrusive boys do not join the effortless achievements discourse as

the relaxed boys do; they instead estimate the effort as insuperable. With a minimal effort, which means that they do the work they are instructed to do, and trying to pay some attention in the lessons, they can manage to avoid standing out.

Being labelled a nerd is a continuous danger for both the girls and boys in this account from the first year of upper secondary school. Masculinities and femininities differ as to how to avoid this label. While being sociable is part of the dominant culture for the girls, they construct femininities by balancing being social persons in the classroom and making an academic effort. On the other hand, the dominant culture of the boys is a relaxed laid-back culture, which precludes them from showing too much academic effort. The two dominating cultures coexist, but they are hardly equally positioned. Even if the relaxed boys seem to appreciate the attention they receive from the cheeky girls, their attitudes toward them appear to be ambiguous. The way the relaxed boys sneer when the cheeky girls are talking, or the way they allude to the girls' limited vocabulary indicate that the feminine position of being sociable in school in itself cannot ensure respectability, definitely not from high achieving middle-class boys, no matter how relaxed these boys appear to be.

## 7 Concluding remarks

As the classroom culture is negotiated in contextual and relational processes between different and sometimes conflicting groups of boys and girls, the classroom culture and the different ways of performing masculinity and femininity will vary greatly from school to school and even within the same school, even though these are not entirely disconnected from the global or regional (hegemonic) ways of doing gender. However, statements concerning the school's better adjustment to girls (Nordahl 2003), girls' stronger wish to learn (Nordahl 2007) and schools as a feminised organisation which disables boys (Bredesen 2004) are countered by the presence of great variation within the same gender in the performance of the qualifications project as well as the youth project. These variations notwithstanding, the study also shows that the dominant ways of opposing and rejecting in the classroom are gendered: rebellious rule-breaking is more prevalent among boys, whereas girls make trouble in the classroom through defiant and cheeky communication, or through overheated social and self-exposing behaviour. There are also gendered differences in how girls and boys manoeuvre between popularity and high academic achievements. This illustrates that some recognisable ways of being girls and boys seem to be persistent across classrooms, a fact that reflects circulating normative ideas and expectations of femininities and masculinities among young people. Bearing this in mind, the groups of boys and girls in grade nine in this study in some ways come close to Lyng's typological descriptions, for example, her golden girls (Lyng 2007) and the ambitious girls found in my study. Nevertheless, the actual context, the rule-breaking culture in which these girls are situated, turns Lyng's golden girls in the present study into rule-breakers, though relatively harmless, and into girls who certainly oppose being golden girls.

There are two senses of being successful at school: succeeding in academic achievements and succeeding in the youth culture in the classroom, and this implies two different and often disharmonious standards. To succeed in both, or as one of the

female students in upper secondary expressed it—“you’ve kind of made it”—requires a great deal of balancing on the part of the students. Boys in the two classroom cultures handle the tension between popularity and high achievement by applying two extremes: by being distant, uninvolved and laid-back, or by exaggerating the competition, sometimes also accomplished through shortcuts and ploys. Girls handle it in two other ways: by not doing the self-regulated schoolwork which will not be checked by teachers, or by lowering and justifying academic expectations in order to be social and popular. Both contribute to lower academic achievements. Concerning self-regulated work, Phoenix points out how underachieving boys face a paradoxical situation when the effort they need to make seems impossible. She connects this paradox to the last few decades of neo-liberalistic principles in school. Self-regulation, according to the quality and quantity of schoolwork to be invested, has “served to individualize learners by rendering them responsible for their learning” (Phoenix 2003, 227) and this fails to agree with the masculine student culture’s subjectivities and everyday practices. When teachers do not check schoolwork, this can be seen as part of the neo-liberalistic principles, and also part of what Dale (2008) describes as teachers displaying indulgence. The study reveals that self-regulated schoolwork can be difficult to accomplish, even when it comes to the high achieving and academically ambitious girls in a rule-breaking culture, if they want to be accepted, normal and popular. Even though they are personally capable of being self-regulated, they do not want to be seen as nerdy exaggerators of academic demands. Actually, research has considered high achievements and academic ambitions as incompatible with both femininity and masculinity, but in recent discussions in Norway, the importance of challenges, strategies and balancing acts girls deal with in relation to high achievements and academic ambitions is underestimated.

Not gaining popularity in the classroom or being socially delimited as high academic achievers can be less vulnerable for boys than girls. While high achieving girls deplored that they were excluded from the popular group, the boys did not make an issue of this at all, at least they do not articulate such a concern. Probably, high achieving boys are able to handle this by expecting that their individualism and effort will be rewarded in the future: this is also the case according to the research of Nielsen and Rudberg (2006) of some “new” girls who also subordinate social friendship to educational effort. However, the tension between being popular and high achieving, or being socially accepted and individualistic, still seems to be the case for many girls.

Success in the youth culture combined with lack of effort in academic work has long been a powerful construction in lower secondary school, and this has also increased in upper secondary school. Rebellious boys and defiant girls are well known in school research. However, the masculine anti-schoolness position has mainly been considered to be hegemonic, as having an effect on other students’ construction of gender, particularly the construction of masculinity. Nevertheless, the masculine rebellious position seems to be obviously related to the students’ age and school level. It is less likely to be acceptable, and far from hegemonic in the upper secondary studies programme qualifying students for further education. Feminine defiance, as well as the extremely socially overheated and extremely self-exposing conduct, can still be successful in this upper secondary school classroom. However, the condition for success is probably that the defiance and conduct are constructed by hetero-normative, attractive,

nice-looking girls who have started to experience the modern life of young adults by going to parties, drinking alcohol and having sex, and who do not entirely reject school work. The feminine on-off strategy prevents them from doing that. The rebellious position, which in lower secondary is associated with maturity, has a shorter lifespan at upper secondary school, and is at risk of being comprehended as immaturity and as a result leaving one marginalised.

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