

# Crossing Boundaries? Complexities and Drawbacks to Gendered Success Stories

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This chapter focuses on two groups of adolescents who seem to ‘do gender’ in quite successful ways.<sup>1</sup> One group is made up of popular and high-achieving girls; the other group consists of some ‘immigrant’<sup>2</sup> boys who emphasise their recent development into pro-school identities. We intend to explore in particular the complexities and implications of the kind of ‘success stories’ told by pupils from these two groups.

The focus on these groups should be seen in the light of the interest paid in recent years to what seem to be more flexible ways of ‘doing gender’ within educational settings. Although it could be argued that gender relations are very stable even when viewed in a long perspective (Delamont 2001), there are also indications of more variation than was previously described. As pointed out elsewhere (Öhrn 2000), this could also be seen in relation to changes in the theories and research methods applied, meaning that variation is more emphasised in contemporary gender research than in research from earlier decades. Such variations are further theorised by Connell (1996a) as he analyses the ways various masculinities (and femininities) are constructed. He identifies the positions as hegemonic, participating and subordinated masculinities, arguing that they emerge as more or less dominant in different contexts and indicate the simultaneous existence of various local ‘gender regimes’. Mac an Ghail (1994) describes a contextual fluidity in the construction of described meanings that mediates the institutional signifiers of what it means to be masculine or feminine in the school and other settings. Specific places, contexts and persons involved are crucial for assigning status in groups.

Connell (1987) argues that there is no hegemonic femininity. Instead, women’s global subordination to men provides a basis for the differentiation of

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this chapter with the same title will be published in a book from the European Conference on Educational Research, edited by Ghazala Bhatti, Chris Gaine, Francesca Gobbo and Yvonne Leeman.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term ‘immigrant’ since that is the word used by the pupils themselves.

femininities. One form defined around compliance – emphasised femininity – supports hegemonic masculinities, while other femininities are seen as defined by non-compliance and resistance, or combinations of compliance, resistance and cooperation. In general, femininities are said to be more diverse than masculinities because of differences in pressure to submit to hegemonic forms of gender. Contemporary empirical research on education also points to the variation of femininities rather than masculinities when discussing presumed changes over time. Proposed ‘new’ gender patterns emphasise the changing actions of girls – not boys – whether in achievement or in classroom behaviour. There is no male equivalent to the ‘New Girl’ proposed by some Nordic<sup>3</sup> educational researchers during the last decade (Öhrn 2000).<sup>4</sup>

As for masculinities in school, markers of status often mentioned by schoolboys are toughness (physical as well as verbal), prowess in sport, competition and (hetero-) sexual interests (e.g. Connell 1996b). Often these masculinities are described as antithetical to school achievements. Among girls it seems more expected and acceptable to become a ‘swot’ (Epstein 1999) and norms point more to being adaptable, good-looking and attractive (e.g. Frosh et al. 2002). But femininities and masculinities in school are also seen to vary between settings. For instance, girls have been found to challenge authority, whereas boys comply (e.g. Öhrn 1998).

Connell (1996b) points to the particular importance of informal peer cultures for the development of gender relations (see also Sernhede, this volume; Soysal, this volume). The boundaries between the genders are carefully guarded by the group, especially by the boys (Mac an Ghail 1994). Violations and ‘jokes’ might safeguard the norms and unity of the group and also fix the boundaries to keep other groups out. Homophobia, sexual harassment and sexist jargon are vehicles for doing this (Osbeck et al. 2003). In order to resist and respond to such actions, social networks and friends are vital (Gordon et al. 2000).

In line with the above, gender is seen in this essay as socially constructed and something people *do* in social interactions. Schools, for their part, are actively involved in the construction of different femininities and masculinities (Connell 1996b). We acknowledge gender as having different bearings for various social groups in school, with demarcations of status/class and acceptable ways of doing gender among young people taking on different forms of ‘styles’, attitudes, reputations, etc. (Berggren 2001; Trondman 1999). In Sweden as elsewhere, pupils themselves consider family background – not least ethnicity – to matter for their position and situation in school (Öhrn, 2005). As demonstrated by, for instance, Mac an Ghail (1988), in Britain different groups of ‘immigrants’ are expected to act and achieve differently in school, with bearings on the kind of femininities and masculinities likely to develop. Also, gender relations at large are expected to vary with respect to ethnic groups. As for Sweden, research on ethnicity and racialisation has

<sup>3</sup> The Nordic countries refer to Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of the ‘New Girl’ was introduced by some researchers in the 1990s as they found groups of girls acting in more publicly active, extrovert and independent ways in class than usually reported. It has been argued, however, that this is neither a new finding nor one typical of contemporary gender research (Öhrn, 2000).

pointed to norms of gender equality as vital for the very construction of Swedishness and, hence, for the understanding of the 'others' (see Öhrn 2002). 'Immigrants' are stereotyped as largely not accepting norms of gender equality (if men/boys) or as victims of patriarchal structures in the 'immigrant' culture (if women/girls).

### **The empirical study**

When analysing gender in this essay, we draw on an ongoing Swedish project<sup>5</sup> that explores how various groupings of pupils experience daily life in school and the ways they 'do gender'. The aim is to analyse the processes of gender formation in school today, but also to contribute to knowledge about possible changes in recent years. The project includes two schools chosen from contrasting areas; one from a rural area and one from a medium-sized town, both representing different sets of social structures and class/ethnic relations. The first school is located in a rural community with barely 20,000 inhabitants and the second one in an urban community with about 100,000 inhabitants. The schools comprise 500 pupils between the ages of 12 and 16, and both are located in their community's largest population centre. The first school is ethnically homogenous with only a small percentage of the pupils having other ethnic origins than Swedish. The second school is situated in an ethnically diverse district and has approximately 25 per cent of pupils with other ethnic origin than Swedish.<sup>6</sup> From each school, one grade 9 class<sup>7</sup> was selected for the study. In all, 42 pupils (19 girls and 23 boys) participated.

The fieldwork at the two schools took place in 2003-2004. The data production included observations in the selected classes during lessons and breaks in order to observe interactions, peer relations and relations with teachers, with an overall focus on gender processes, as well as single-sex group interviews with the pupils. Informal conversations with pupils and teachers were held in connection with the observations. In addition, one teacher who often met the pupils was formally interviewed at the end of the fieldwork in each class.

The pupil interviews focused on specific incidents that had been observed during field work as well as common themes concerning pupils' individual experiences and conceptions of gender in school. For the purpose of researching issues of positions and hierarchies among femininities and masculinities, questions about popularity were thought to be useful. Here,

5 The essay reports on the project 'Young people's perspectives on their schooling. Emergent femininities and masculinities'. The project is part of a large Swedish research programme (Changing Sex/Gender Orders in Schools and Education. Policy, Perspectives and Practice (GPPP), involving collaboration between educational researchers in Borås University College, Göteborg University, Malmö University College and Umeå University in Sweden. The main focus of the research programme is on changes in the meanings of sex/gender in educational settings over recent decades. The research work is carried out in two stages with (1) five local 'qualitative' studies (the project reported on here being one of them) followed (2) by a national survey of pupils and teachers. The local projects are reported separately, but are also used to generate themes and questions for the joint national questionnaire.

6 There are about 30 mother-tongue languages in the school, the most common being Arabic.

7 In Swedish schools, grade 9 means pupils aged 15-16.

methods from international empirical research, in particular Frosh et al. (2002) have provided important points of departure (see also Phoenix 2004). By studying young working-class boys' definitions of popularity among boys in school, Phoenix and her colleagues were able to map accepted and dominant as well as subordinated positions of masculinity.

### **The 'popular' girls**

In the rural class (12 girls and 12 boys), a majority of the pupils live in the same neighbourhood and know each other well. The class seems to be open and talkative. The classroom observations show pupils walking around and chatting as well as having seemingly friendly physical contact during lessons. There appears to be a strict hierarchical order among the groupings in the class, apparently related to competitiveness and prowess in sport. Football seems to be highly valued both at school and in the local area at large. A majority of the boys and girls in the class are engaged in different sports, in particular in playing football in the local club.

#### *Positioning in class*

One of the groups in this class is made up of three girls: Susan, Pia (both ethnic Swedes) and Kim Ling (from an 'immigrant' background).<sup>8</sup> The group has a strong position in the class and, according to the interviews, is largely seen as the most popular in the school. The girls seem socially extrovert, good-looking, competitive, self-confident and successful in sports as well as schoolwork, all aspects mentioned by the adolescents in the class as being highly valuable. The girls describe themselves as 'We take what we need', 'We want to show off', and admit to being quite talkative and dominating in class.

Even though a few of their classmates voice some dissatisfaction with the girls, perceiving them to be snobs, their status is acknowledged by most of the class. Jonna and Yasmine, the least popular girls in class, express their admiration of the popular girls:

Jonna: They are dressing in a special way.

Yasmine: They talk to everybody. They are really kind and nice.

Jonna: And they talk in a special way that makes you completely captured by them. (...) Susan certainly has her own way of doing things. I guess that's why all the boys fall in love with her. They [the popular girls] have their own special style, they are very special.

Social relations are important for establishing a strong position in class and the three girls stress their interpersonal relationships. Their group seems largely closed to the other girls in the class, and the popular girls declare that they prefer to join the group of popular boys – an alliance, which seems to reinforce and strengthen the prestige and status of both parties in the class. The popular boys and girls hang about during breaks, they sometimes work together during lessons, and they enjoy some friendly physical contacts (like hugging or caressing). This kind of cross-gender networking is described by the girls as a

<sup>8</sup> All names in the text are assumed names.

joyful way of getting closer to each other which also gives them the strength to speak up in class. Judging from our observations it might be that the popular boys and girls have developed seemingly more fluent, less fixed forms of masculinity/femininity. Relations and behaviours in the top set of groups tend to be more cross-gendered, compared with other groups in the study. At the same time, both groups stress individual 'female' and 'male' features in physical appearance and emphasise their heterosexual interests. The friendly 'flirting' between girls and boys in the top set might be seen as acts confirming their success in a heterosexual market, which helps them to establish a strong position in class. It might also be seen as emphasising heteronormativity, which – according to interviews as well as field notes – appeared uncontested in these settings.

Social skills to establish friendships with peers and adults both within and outside school seem important to the girls' location in the social hierarchy at school. Having a lot of friends and being known by other groups are mentioned as sources of popularity. Relations with boys and their activities seem to be of particular importance. The fact that Kim Ling has an older boyfriend who comes from another town and has a driving licence is seen as contributing to new acquaintances and enhancing the group's prestige.

Having a prominent position in class might also open up opportunities for transgressing norms, and set a new agenda for other pupils. One boy in class describes an episode when Susan, one of the popular girls, appeared in school wearing sweatpants because 'the rest of her clothes at home were dirty', and thereby started some sort of fashion trend. Quite annoyed, the boy says: 'After that, everybody came with the same kind of trousers. Just because she is sort of popular!'

### *Football*

While the literature on Physical Education and gender often shows sporty girls being viewed as not adjusting to a 'proper' femininity (Paechter & Head 1996), the apparently strong position of the girls discussed here seems related to their skills in traditional male sports. They take pride in, and make use of, their interests and prowess in sports and describe themselves as very competitive. They say that they are competing with each other but also with the (popular) boys, in doing well during PE lessons as well as in overall achievement and good marks. They are quite successful in asserting themselves against the boys in PE, an otherwise male-dominated arena (e.g. Carli 2004). The girls are active players in the local football team, a fact that is deemed to add to their status as well as to show up in their relationships with others:

Pia: Well, most of those who play football or do sports have a lot of friends. They meet and join a lot of friends and then they become popular.

Susan: Most people who are pushing on the football field are also pushing in other ways. You act as a person the same way you would in the field.

The status of football is emphasised in other ways as well. Pia's father is well known in the community as a former 'star' in the local football club and as the present coach for grammar-school boys. These circumstances lead to the fact that, as Susan puts it, that 'All the boys in the upper secondary school who are

interested in football know who Pia is.' Pia herself seems to enjoy being famous, which of course adds to her own as well as her friends' prestige in school.

### *Celebrating male relationships*

Although these girls are successful in both the formal and informal arenas of school, they seem inclined to celebrate boys and their relationships and activities. This adds ambivalence to their own success:

Ann-Sofie: Is it the same or different being with girls as it is with boys?

Pia: Boys are more troublesome.

Susan: Yes, it's more fun being with them.

Ann-Sofie: In what way?

Susan: Being with girls an evening for example, we mostly just sit and talk, but when you are hanging about with boys things like happen. They always make up something odd and fun, you know. [Laughing]

(...)

Kim Ling: Perhaps boys are more playful than girls.

Pia: ...and more childish.

Susan: Girls are somewhat 'No, I can't do that. What will others think?' Boys don't bother that much, I think.

(...)

Susan: Girls are more complicated than boys.

Kim Ling: Yes, boys are more uncomplicated.

Pia: Exactly, they take things as they come!

Susan: Boys can hang about with one pal one week, and another pal the next week. If girls change like that... Imagine, if I'm with another girl [than Pia and Kim Ling] one week and then want to go back to them again, then they'll probably lock me out, because they think I have deserted them. Boys are not like that. They just say: 'Come on!' and then go on as usual.

(...)

Pia: We [girls] often exaggerate problems. A small thing may annoy us for a long time and we create huge problems out of it. Boys usually don't bother about things that way.

Susan: Exactly. Girls have to analyse everything in detail before they can leave things behind. Boys treat problems more easily: 'Is it OK with you? Is it OK with me? Okay, let's go then!'

Susan believes that boys' ways of relating to each other also make them stronger as a group in class compared with the girls: 'They are hanging around with everyone, while the girls tend to split into different groups. Sure, the boys divide into different groups as well, but they don't demarcate the limits the same way as girls do. The gangs sort of join each other across the borderlines.' When trying to explain these assumed gender differences, Susan turns to biology.

Susan: I think it has something to do with boys playing football, team sports when they were younger. Much more than girls.

Ann-Sofie: But you play football as well.

Susan: Yeah, but if boys have got a minute left they go out to the backyard, split up into teams and play football. And they do this every break. Girls are more likely to say [in a creaky voice] 'No, I don't want to get dirty!' Certainly they

practise in the regular football training, but not otherwise. That's not as natural for them as for boys. I think it's innate. It has developed from generation to generation.

These three girls have been acting quite successfully in an arena traditionally thought of as masculine in Sweden. Despite this, and despite the fact that they seem to display most of the valuable features mentioned by others as important for gaining a strong and powerful position in school, they nevertheless tend to depreciate girls and their activities. They describe girls in general as being – compared with boys – more dull, cautious, complicated and not letting go of things. What might be seen as challenging traditional gender stereotypes thus goes along with a celebration of male activities and relations that might be taken to strengthen a (traditional) gender order.

### *The hierarchical order*

According to our field notes, the top-set girls tend to be popular with the adults at school. The teachers show great trust and confidence in them and sometimes even consult them about democratic or relational dilemmas in the school. In this respect the school contributes to maintaining the girls' already strong position. When explaining their success, one teacher says, 'They take what they need'. Interestingly, the teacher uses a similar expression when talking about the problems (or failures) of Yasmine, one of the least popular pupils in the class. Yasmine, who is a girl with an 'immigrant' background, has some problems with her studies and is rendered invisible by both classmates and teachers. In addition to attributing Yasmine's problems and marginalised position to her ethnic background the teacher says: 'She doesn't take what she needs'. This might be seen to imply that it is up to the pupils themselves whether they are recognised or not in school. Issues of equality thus become to some degree individualised.

Jonna judges herself to be another low-status girl in the class. She seems well aware of the order of rank among the girls in the class. She pictures the hierarchy in terms of 'colours' or 'medals', and assigns the most popular group of girls gold medals, while the next two groups get silver and bronze respectively. Finally, at the very bottom, she allocates 'a smaller one in a bronzish colour' to Yasmine and herself. When analysing this 'ranking order', we note that the positions among the girls appear to be related to their social background. The three girls in the 'top group' come from economically privileged families with large and well-developed social networks outside school, while the two girls at the 'bottom' both have less resourceful backgrounds.

### **The 'immigrant' boys**

The urban class (7 girl and 11 boys) can be described as silent, 'closed' and, as one of the teachers puts it: 'The pupils don't give much of themselves'. The pupils come from different parts of town and, even though they have been schoolmates for three years, the different groupings hardly seem to know each other. 'They are split up into different islands,' as one teacher describes it.

According to our field notes, the pupils seldom interact during lessons, either with each other or with the teachers. Nevertheless, in the interviews they claim that the atmosphere in class has changed recently and that the class nowadays (in grade 9) is more open-minded and talkative than previously. They seem not to recognise any obvious hierarchical relations among their classmates. In the interviews, they had some difficulties in defining the bearing of status in class or selecting any group as clearly more popular than others.

### *Being the 'Other'*

Ali, Yamal and Hamid are three 'immigrant' boys in the urban class. They have neither the same ethnic background nor the same mother tongue, but they share the experience of being categorised as 'immigrants', which knits them tightly together. As Yamal describes it:

Yamal: Yeah, we sort of stick together.

Ann-Sofie: What makes you choose each other?

Yamal: We come from different countries. We are the ones in the class who come from abroad. All the others in the class are Swedes, so the three of us are kind of keeping together.

Ann-Sofie: Do you have the feeling of 'it's you against your Swedish classmates'?

Yamal: No, no! But we thought so earlier, in grade 7. We thought all of them, even the teachers, were racists. So we stuck together and annoyed everyone. Since we have become 9-graders, things have changed. Now we are hanging around with everyone.

As seen among the young men interviewed by Sernhede (this volume), 'immigrant' might be claimed to be a unifying concept. In the present study, ethnicity is strongly related to the peer groupings in class, and in some situations is seemingly of more importance than gender for social relations. This is seen in the case of Zamira, the only 'immigrant' girl in the class. The boys say they often notice her being lonely and excluded by the other girls and they therefore jointly take care of her. They chat with her, sit next to her in the classroom, let her join their team-work etc. Zamira herself expresses her satisfaction with the boys being, as she says, 'like brothers' to her.

The ethnically Swedish pupils in the class seem to position the 'immigrant' boys as 'others', judging them to 'think in another way than we do' and stating that 'they are different from us'. The ethnic Swedes also seem almost afraid of the 'immigrant' boys, who are taller and are said to behave in a tougher and noisier manner in class. The 'immigrant' boys, on the other hand, blame the ethnic Swedish pupils in class – in particular the boys – for being 'chickens who don't have the guts to speak up for themselves'. They stress the importance of having the courage to stand up for oneself and one's opinions – qualities they largely associate in the interviews with their own 'immigrant' background.

### *Developing a pro-school identity*

In the interviews the boys recount that their attitudes towards schooling have changed dramatically in recent years. From a previous orientation to the 'here and now', rejecting both academic work and the authorities, they seem to have developed more of a pro-school identity with an orientation directed towards the future. Ali and Hamid describe the change like this:

Ali: Well, you know, if you want to take school seriously you better not live in Tengsta [their local neighbourhood]. But if you prefer knocking about with friends and getting into trouble, then you should live in Tengsta. People there think like: 'Come on, let's go into the city. Don't care a damn about homework, let's go into the city!' And when they've arrived there: 'Come on, let's destroy and run! We'll knock somebody down' and things like that. Well, I think these people have the wrong attitudes. That's why I don't like Tengsta. But I'm used to it, I've lived here all my life. I'm familiar with it now.

Hamid: Both of us have been engaged in pranks and mischief and messed around with these guys. But now we have put an end to it. Now we are sensible. We have matured and are more concerned with school now.

Ali: I was hanging around with these guys [in Tengsta] before, but then I started to reconsider things. My parents told me: 'Think about school! Now, you are having fun with your friends and don't care about school, soon enough, in a couple of years, you'll be sitting there with a bad future, living on social welfare...nothing. So be something, something good, then you'll be enjoying life in the future.' So I listened to my parents and thought their advice was a better choice for me.

Ann-Sofie: When did you reconsider?

Hamid: In grade 9.

Ali: In grade 9. You can ask all the teachers, everybody in the school about us, how we behaved when we started grade 7. We turned all the teachers' hair grey. We really behaved like animals, if you know what I mean? But now we have calmed down. But earlier, you can ask anyone, everybody had a bad picture of us then, but now we are improving that image.

As it seems, the boys' new pro-school identity also includes their dissociating themselves to some extent from their former friends in their neighbourhood. They talk about the hard jargon and pressure in the gang, and describe the suburb's climate as highly destructive and fated to failure and criminality. The boys now stress the importance of the family (cf. Sernhede 2002; Ålund 1997) and describe their efforts in school as an opportunity to 'pay back' to their parents.

Hamid: You know, our parents are the most important persons to us, they come first. Imagine, they have raised us and they have left their countries for our sake. That's impressive. To think, your parents have come to Sweden to give you a chance to get a good education and to be something... If you fail, your parents, of course, will be disappointed in you and you'll be disappointed in yourself as well.

The boys say that they rarely hang about with any ethnic Swedes after school, although they would like to do so. They say they believe that being with Swedish friends would be pleasant and at the same time would improve their language skills. In the following quotation Ali almost glorifies his Swedish classmates:

Ali: In Tengsta we immigrants think: 'We are tougher than the Swedes'. When I was younger I thought so too, but now I have realised that: 'Tougher? How come?' All of us are human beings and no one is tough...well, you know. Previously I thought like: 'I'll never be a real friend with a Swede'. Today I realise that Swedish friends might almost be better than immigrant ones.

The boys emphasise their recent development and explain the changes with reference to maturity and responsibility. They describe high future career goals, and their plans to go on to further education and eventually get a job as an engineer, a dentist or a doctor. When asked if they spend time on schoolwork, Yamal answers: 'Of course! I have to do well in the future. It's all about swotting now.' Hamid says his goal is to get through the national tests and improve his grades in mathematics. He expresses full awareness of the necessity of really hard work, since he has 'wasted' his time in previous years and claims that 'I have lost five years (...) because I was hanging about with the wrong people and didn't care about school.' One of the teachers confirms the boys' school ambitions by saying: 'They are fixated on the grades.'

The pro-school identity also seems to be related to the boys abandoning their former focus on the collective group for a more individualistic view. Previous research shows pupils who change their anti-school attitudes sometimes changing their friends as well (Hill 2001). In the present study, the three 'immigrant' boys seem rather to change their attitudes jointly, and they describe a common strategy for how to succeed in school:

Yamal: In grade 7 the three of us always sat together in the classroom. The teachers complained and grumbled at us all the time because we were chatting a lot. Now we've decided to sit separately in the classroom. We made that agreement in grade 8, so now we don't chat any more. Now we learn better during the lessons.

Even though these boys mostly do not sit together during lessons but are spread out in the classroom, our observations indicate that they are keen on keeping in contact with each other by glances, facial expressions and comments. They are also seen to back up or defend each other when they consider themselves to be subjected to racism from teachers or classmates. The importance of the group for young 'immigrants' identity and position is also pointed out elsewhere (see Sernhede, this volume; Ålund, 1997).

According to our classroom observations, the boys are quite talkative and demanding in requiring support and help from their teachers. Nevertheless, their forthcoming behaviour often seems to elicit a positive response. Since the class is thought to be quite harmless and colourless by the teachers, the 'immigrant' boys tend to be regarded as a breath of fresh air. As one of their teachers puts it: 'It would have been boring in the classroom without them.' This reaction is different from other school research, which maintains that minority boys in general are viewed as problematic people in school and are often described in terms of deficits (cf. Gitz-Johansen, 2003).

When talking about popularity, the boys stress the importance of being visible. Hamid describes two different ways of making oneself visible:

Hamid: Being a nuisance! A tiresome person who doesn't care a damn about school and doesn't care a damn about anything. Who is cruel, tough and knocks

everybody down. Then you, sort of, show up yourself. But other persons can be visible in a good way. Like, there are some pupils who are visible because they are nice and kind and at the same time like strong and brave. But they hide that part and just show the nice part. But everybody knows that you shouldn't be naughty to that guy...

Hamid says that he does not want to be connected with the tough guys at school or give the impression of being dangerous. He wants people to like him, he says, for the person he really is. He also seems, in parallel with the pro-school development, to reformulate his views of ideal masculinities. He says he can still be 'strong and brave', but now in a positive way, which means being humble and school-directed. Even though Hamid and his friends are distancing themselves in the interviews from their former reputation as 'bad', they nevertheless seem to utilise their experiences of it when presenting their new mature identities. To have already proved a tough masculinity might mean running less of a risk of being seen as soft.

### *Changed understandings of discrimination*

Parallel to their recent pro-school orientation the boys voice a changed understanding of racism and harsh treatment in school. Contrary to their former demarcation of 'us against them', they now express a more open-minded attitude to Swedish society and to their teachers and ethnic Swedish schoolmates.

Hamid: If I may say, in school almost everyone is fairly treated. Almost everyone.

Ann-Sofie: Who do you think is not fairly treated?

Hamid: Well, there are immigrants who will be treated unfairly.

Ali: Yes, but to be honest – the reasons why they are treated unfairly are not because of their immigrant background. They are treated that way because they are stupid and bad behaving. They are mean to teachers! Then the teachers think...well, you know.

This attitude also seems to make them accept treatment they probably would not have accepted before. Ali says he is discriminated against by one of the female teachers who acts offensively and 'points him out' in front of the class. In spite of this, Ali has decided not to make a fuss about it, since it is not worth risking his grades and he will finish school soon enough anyway. Ali also expresses some distrust of the teacher Henry, whom he considers too influenced by Western ways of thinking when teaching. Henry, on the other hand, maintains that he teaches in accordance with the national curriculum. He also says that he prefers to discuss the Middle East issue in class when Ali is absent, since the boy tends to get very agitated when the subject is on the agenda. This is also the reason why Henry takes the opportunity to lecture about the foundation of the state of Israel during the very period when Ali is being interviewed. Ali, who appears to be fully aware of this, brings it up at the end of the interview:

Ali: [Looks at his watch] It's time to stop in five minutes. Now all the others in class are sitting in the classroom talking about Palestine-Israel. That's why Henry doesn't want me to be in there.

Ann-Sofie: Is that making you upset?

Ali: Well, he sort of says things like: 'The Israelis lived there first and then the Palestine people came and took it. Then the Israelis wanted to get it back again.' But that's wrong, I think. I have my Palestinian background and he has his Swedish background, and he reads books written by Americans. Americans are good at making things up, everybody knows that. They interfere in everything, in both small and large issues. They write books about what's happening, for example that the Israelis had the land first and that it was their land and things like that. And now Henry will not let me tell my version. He sort of wants to speak freely now, for example: 'It's the Israelis who are right and the Palestinians wrong.' And I am not allowed to say anything since he doesn't want me in there.

Ann-Sofie: Maybe you will be allowed to do that another time?

Ali: Another time is too late. Then they [the classmates] have already understood that the Palestinians are...

Ann-Sofie: Would you like to go in there and tell them right now?

Ali: No, no! I have my belief. Let them think whatever they like.

Hamid: But Ali, you've got your opinions and they have theirs. You can never change other people's opinions.

From their previous expectations of racism among their classmates, the boys nowadays demonstrate a wider acceptance of such tendencies and reformulate them as not being serious:

Yamal: In grade 7 they [the classmates] sometimes expressed themselves in racist terms.

Ann-Sofie: Can you give an example?

Yamal: Not exactly, but John [one of the ethnic Swedish schoolmates], he is sometimes joking and calling us 'Blackies' and things like that. He says it even in front of the teacher. But we all know he is only joking. But in grade 7 we were sure he really meant it. I don't think he is a racist.

To conclude, it seems that the boys, in their striving to succeed in the Swedish school system, need to create strategies to handle their 'new' pro-school orientation. To avoid anger on the part of their teachers, they split up their grouping during lessons and work separately from each other. Judging from our observations, they also act quite demandingly in class, asking for a lot of teacher support during lessons. Furthermore, they use various strategies to excuse or play down racist tendencies in school. One such strategy is to attribute discrimination to the individual rather than the structural level. Another is to explain acts of harassment as 'It was only a joke', a frequently used term by teenagers in school (cf. Lahelma 2002; Osbeck et al. 2003). Sometimes, the boys also seem to use the strategy of gritting their teeth and (in pretence?) not caring.

### **Concluding remarks**

This essay discusses two groups that seem to manage school in quite successful ways. The first one is a group of girls whose prominent position seems closely related to their interest and prowess in traditionally male sports. Also, they spend a lot of time with the popular boys in their class, a kind of networking that they consider helps them to speak their mind in class. Whereas previous research often shows girls' position in class to be closely related to their

informal female networks, this study shows girls also gaining from associating with boys. In particular, the relationships between girls and boys in the top set seem to confirm their mutual success in the heterosexual market and thus to establish highly valued femininities and masculinities.

Emergent femininities among the top-set girls might be compared with the 'New Girl' in Nordic research mentioned earlier, appearing both self-confident and academically well integrated (Öhrn, 2000). Furthermore, the top-set girls compete in a traditional male arena of sports. Within schools, physical prowess is strongly associated with hegemonic masculinity. Physical education is a strongly gendered school subject, which provides status to those with certain bodily features and behaviours. The top-set girls position themselves within traditionally male sports that, according to the interviews, they celebrate and admire. This seems to go along with a depreciation of traditional female activities. These girls in a sense appear very successful, but they nevertheless position themselves as subordinated. They talk about their friendship with girls as very valuable and important to their self-confidence and welfare, but also consider girls to be complicated and celebrate boys' presumed more easy-going and joyful ways of interacting, as well as their skills in sports. In these respects, they seem to strengthen the position of traditionally male competences, behaviours and relationships. Thus male activities help both to further these girls' prominent position in school, and to position them as secondary to boys.

The group of 'immigrant' boys describes a kind of success journey towards pro-school identities that seems to rest largely on their previous experiences and reputation as troublemakers. This background makes it possible for them to include values of achievement and schooling without being relegated (by their classmates) to the inferior positions of swots. They seem to develop a kind of masculinity embracing both the strength and danger of their earlier days and the mature responsibility of the young men they are to become. Their change is portrayed as one of development and maturity, and a way of paying back to their parents what they have given up for them, not as one of accommodation to school expectations or demands. Furthermore, they appear at least partly to escape the stereotyped images of 'immigrant' boys (held by teachers) seen in previous research. Their attempts to succeed in school might be framed within an understanding among teachers of boys' school achievement as due to maturity (Öhrn, 1990). Thus they could be acknowledged as adhering to the expectations of any 'male' – rather than an 'immigrant male' – behaviour.

While building on their previous anti-school identities, the boys also emphasise their changed position vis-à-vis the norms prevailing in their local ('immigrant') neighbourhood. Their success implies distancing themselves from the kind of actions and relationships prevailing in the area where they live. While remaining critical of culturalistic understandings among teachers and peers in school, they appear to revise their earlier analyses of ethnicity as central to their position. What they previously saw as racism when analysing school is now framed partly as individual responsibility, calling attention to 'immigrant' pupils' own behaviours. In this sense they appear to be retreating somewhat from their earlier analysis of ethnicity as central to social positions. Similar to the 'strong girls', these boys tend to celebrate 'Swedish', male activities and distance themselves from their 'own' group.

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