

Educational pathways of minority youth in Norway: Intersections of gender, ethnicity and social class.

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Resumen/ Abstract

Educational aspirations during lower secondary school and choice of upper secondary education are important for young people's future trajectories into higher education and labour market positions. In line with ideas about reflexive, autonomous individuals (Giddens, 1991), choice of education is often represented as a young person's individual decision, and educational guidance as aimed at discovering what 'fits' an individual's personality, interests and abilities. Educational aspirations and choices are also social patterns that are reproduced. Some population categories represent exceptions from expected patterns of social reproduction of educational level and professions. In several countries, one such category is young people from families with migration experiences (Lauglo, 2000; Modood, 2004).

In Norway, students have a legal right to non-compulsory upper secondary schooling and 96 percent of the students continue from lower to upper secondary school. In spite of positive developments regarding minority youths' completion of upper secondary and higher education in later years, studies still persistently show lower educational attainment among minority youth, particularly among boys (Fekjaer, 2006). However, in lower secondary school, minority youth tend to have markedly higher educational aspirations and stronger learning motivation than their majority peers, as well as greater effort in school and strong adherence to school values (Lauglo, 2000) *despite* lower educational attainment or lower socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, gender differences in educational aspirations seem to be smaller among minority youth.

The principal objective of the study in progress that will be presented in this paper, is to describe how processes relating to gendered, ethnic and class-based identities influence young people's educational choices. The study is undertaken as a PhD project in social anthropology. The methodological approach is ethnographic longitudinal fieldwork in two multicultural lower secondary schools in Oslo. The study is part of a larger project that also include quantitative analyses of longitudinal data covering 9th graders in Oslo 2006 through four data collections during lower and upper secondary school.

Palabras clave / Keywords: educational aspirations, minority youth, intersectionality

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Educational aspirations during lower secondary school and choice of upper secondary education are important for young people's future trajectories into higher education and labour market positions. The principal objective of the project presented in this paper is to describe how gender, ethnic and social class identities and positions influence young people's educational aspirations and decisions. Minority youth are the main focus of the study. A secondary objective of the study is therefore to explore how minority youth's educational aspirations and decisions are shaped by how the school relates to a diverse student body. The study is a PhD project in social anthropology. The methodological approach is ethnographic fieldwork in two multicultural lower secondary schools in Oslo. The study is part of a larger project that also includes quantitative analyses of longitudinal data collected from 9th graders in Oslo 2006. The longitudinal study will consist of four data collections among the same students during lower and upper secondary school and a follow-up questionnaire at the age of 24.

The context

In Norway 10th grade, the last year of lower secondary school, marks the end of 10 years of compulsory schooling. Students then have a legal right to non-compulsory upper secondary education, and 96 percent of students continue from lower to upper secondary school. During the last semester of 10th grade the students, aged 15-16, will make their first 'real' educational choice, the most important aspect being which field of study to pursue. There are two main directions of upper secondary education: Vocational studies qualify students for the labour market after two years of schooling and two years of apprenticeship, whereas 'general areas of study'ⁱ qualify students for higher education at college and university levels. The two different branches of study also point towards different social positions: Vocational studies typically qualify one for working class professions, whereas 'general areas of study' often lead to middle class careers.

Whereas students during primary and lower secondary education are generally obliged to attend a local school, 10th graders can choose any upper secondary school within their county. As Norway is mostly sparsely populated, most 10th graders can, in practice, only choose among a very limited number of schools. In Oslo, the capital of Norway and the location for this project, this situation is different. Here, 10th graders can choose between 28 public and approximately 30 private upper secondary schools.ⁱⁱ These schools differ not only with respect to the fields of study they offer, but also with respect to their position in an intricate hierarchy shaped by public perceptions of the quality of education they provide as well as the social positions of the students they attract.

Oslo is to a large extent a socially and ethnically divided city. The social and ethnic division is more or less an East End / West End division: The western part of Oslo is largely white and middle class, whereas the eastern part of town is mainly working class, with a relatively high proportion of people from minority backgrounds.ⁱⁱⁱ While minorities comprise [30] percent of Oslo's population, some West End primary and lower secondary schools have as few as 3 percent students from minority backgrounds, and some East End schools have more than 90 percent (Oslo municipality data 2006).



Quantitative studies show that there is a strong relationship between social background and upper secondary school choice in Oslo (Hansen 2005). Obviously, the most prestigious schools recruit students with the highest grades. For historical reasons, most prestigious schools are located in the western part of Oslo. West End students who do not qualify for West End schools typically prefer private schools to schools with a strong East End identity. East End students with good grades, however, increasingly choose to go to prestigious West End schools (Hansen 2005). Students' preferences for secondary schools and their ideas of where they will – and will not – fit in therefore provide important insights into their current and future social identities.

Educational aspirations and social reproduction

In this study, educational aspirations in lower secondary school are defined as plans for secondary education (choice of school and course of study), and plans for higher education (duration and field). In several countries, young people from families with a recent history of migration, diverge from expected patterns of reproduction of educational levels over generations: In Britain, studies have shown that young people from immigrant backgrounds increasingly enter and complete higher education. Compared with non-immigrant youth of the same socioeconomic background, they have a higher level of upward social mobility (Modood 2004). In Norway, there are few studies of minorities in higher education. In lower and upper secondary education, studies still consistently show lower educational attainment among minority youth, particularly among boys (Fekjær 2006). Nevertheless, in lower secondary school, minority youth tend to have markedly higher educational aspirations and stronger learning motivation than their majority peers from the same socioeconomic background (Lauglo 2000). What happens in the transition from lower to upper secondary school, as well as from upper secondary to higher education has not been sufficiently studied. There is therefore a need for research on how and to what extent educational aspirations are realized among minority youth, and what obstacles to educational attainment they encounter.

Definitions and analytical perspectives

In Norway, as in other multicultural countries, the terms used to refer to people of different origins are constantly debated and contested. In this study I will use the terms minority and majority youth, in order to keep in focus the structural relationship between minorities and the majority. The school is situated in such a structural relationship, being an institution managed by people of majority backgrounds and representing majority culture and society (Schiffauer 2004). I want to avoid the concept 'ethnic' minority because this concept is easily associated with essentialising understandings of minorities as having 'culture' whereas the majority does not. The advantage of an ethnographic approach is that it enables us to avoid ascribing identities to people, as we try to discover which identities or sense of belonging are important for the people themselves. However, in a fieldwork context, it is not possible to avoid existing identity labels entirely. The terms used refer to people of different origins in the media and among people in general is important, regardless of my choice of analytic terms.



The debates about concepts and categorisations are important. Concepts and categories shape understandings of social phenomena, such as what factors contribute to reproducing social inequality. In the wake of the British sociologist Tariq Modood and his colleagues' studies of social mobility among 'ethnic minorities' in Britain (Modood 2004; Modood, et al. 1997), critics have argued that 'ethnic' categories are diverse and differentiated and that a focus on culture conceals structural differences between and within ethnic groups (Banton 2007). Moreover, it has been claimed that the use of 'ethnicity' as an explanatory factor justifies racist explanatory models and contributes to essentialising cultures as well as social groups (Banton 2007; Smith 2002).

This study aims to understand processes underlying young people's educational aspirations and choices. The critiques discussed above remind us that ethnicity alone is an insufficient analytical tool. Perspectives that explore how different dimensions of identities – such as ethnicity, but also social class and gender – interact and contribute mutually to constitute identity categories, are generally referred to as intersectional approaches (Anthias, et al. 1992; Brah and Phoenix 2004). In the present study, a key question concerns how these and other identity dimensions influence students' educational aspirations and choices.

In line with ideas about reflexive, autonomous individuals (Giddens 1991), choice of education is often represented as a young person's individual decision. In this context, the purpose of educational guidance is to discover what 'fits' an individual's personality, interests and abilities. One main research perspective views educational choices as rational deliberations over available means and abilities to reach desired goals (Boudon 1974; Breen and Jonsson 2005; Goldthorpe, et al. 1980).

The present project takes a different starting point, approaching educational aspirations as linked to identities and to structural positions. Aspirations are products of cultural, social and structural factors (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), but aspirations are not necessarily a replica of parents' educational level and social position: Aspirations are also formed by individual experiences and agency. In explaining variations between minority and majority youth or between groups of minority youth, the interaction between structural and individual factors are important, forming what Margaret Gibson has termed structural and situational rationales that guide student behaviour in school (Gibson 2000). A reasonable assumption is that initial educational aspirations formed during secondary school are adjusted according to changes in academic attainment, individual identities, social expectations and perceptions of achievable goals. As for youth from minority backgrounds, my hypothesis is that social expectations and perceptions of achievable goals are also related to how schools incorporate minority students (Schiffauer 2004).

Comparison will be important on several levels in the study. I will compare the following: two local settings, minority youth with different ethnic identities and majority youth, boys and girls, youth from different class backgrounds, and combinations of these identifications. Inevitably, the patterns emerging from such comparisons will be very complex. It is therefore important to point out that the comparative process will contribute to revealing which dimensions are the most relevant for understanding educational aspirations and choices.

Another important purpose of this comparative approach is to generate descriptions of how different young people experience limitations and opportunities relating to future education, as well as the possible conflicts that are linked with educational aspirations.



As the previous sections indicate, the study of educational aspirations must consider a wide range of structural, cultural and individual factors, which together shape a young person's perceptions of achievable goals and limitations relating to future education. In the following sections I will discuss in more detail the different arenas in which perceptions of the future are defined, and where conflicts arise and are played out.

Unitary school and differentiation

Different nation-states have different conceptions of how to deal with cultural difference within the nation-state's borders. The concept of 'sameness' has been argued to be crucial to understanding how cultural difference is dealt with in Norway (Lidén, et al. 2001). The concept of sameness implies a number of interrelated ideas about the value of underplaying social and cultural differences. In public schools – which are almost universal in Norway^{iv} - the idea of 'sameness' is expressed through the concept *the unitary school*. The explicit goal of the unitary school is to ensure that every student goes through more or less the same curriculum during the 10 years of compulsory schooling.

In the present project I will explore to what extent and in what ways different students experience inclusion and discrimination in school. Some research argues that experiences of exclusion be related to how public schools function as hegemonic institutions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Other perspectives point out that school is an arena to socialize students in values and expectations crucial to the nation-state's self-image, a process labelled civil enculturation. How this process occurs shapes minority students' experiences of schooling (Schiffauer 2004).

In Norway, there is increasing awareness of diversity regarding students' cultural background as well as learning abilities (Engen 2003). Still, an ethnographic study comparing Dutch and Norwegian primary schools' approaches to cultural diversity concludes that in Norway, cultural homogeneity is taken for granted and cultural difference is downplayed (Seeberg 2003). Whereas the Norwegian school system is constructed on ideas of 'sameness', Dutch schools are founded on ideas of tolerance and freedom. Seeberg concludes that these ideological differences provide different contexts for how children learn to deal with cultural difference, as well as for how different national self images are constructed.

Staunæs (2004) argues that a school's ideology as either 'monocultural' or 'multicultural' influences the making of gendered and ethnic subjectivities, in other words in what ways young people can understand themselves, and for how they are understood and categorised by peers and teachers. Similarly, Margaret Gibson shows how minority students of Mexican origin in American schools feel that they do not belong in school, and that this perception constitutes an important hindrance for school adaption and motivation (Gibson and Bejinez 2002). Important questions therefore concern how students' with minority backgrounds experience that different dimensions of their identities are made relevant by the school staff and teachers, and which identity dimensions are acknowledged and which are underplayed.

Finally, the importance of 'sameness' in public schools is also expressed as a political ambition to create equal opportunities for all by offering education that can contribute to reduce social inequalities. At the same time, schools have a complementary task of differentiating and sorting students during their schooling. The



negotiation between ‘sameness’ and differentiation is likely to be particularly visible towards the end of lower secondary school, when the students will be guided into different educational pathways. The transition between lower secondary and upper secondary school is a particularly interesting case for the study of how students’ perceptions and the school’s perceptions of difference – relating to ethnicity, social class and gender, as well interest and ability – influence educational choice. In this project I aim to explore the consequences of categorisation of the students – by peers as well as school staff -- for what positions students see as realistic for themselves in the future.

Family and local context: Mobility, upbringing and transnational relations

Several authors have pointed to how families who have experienced migration are often particularly concerned with education as a way of realizing social mobility. A desire for social mobility could be the original reason for immigration in the first place, but a different explanation may also be that the family wishes to compensate for the loss of status that migration often entails (Vermeulen and Perlmann 2000). In line with this contention, research has found that education is often considered a collective project for the entire immigrant family (Engebrigtsen and Fuglerud 2007; Prieur 2004; Østberg 2003), and it is reasonable to expect that dimensions of young people’s identities that are related to family and migration backgrounds are visible in young people’s choice of education.

But what happens if the family does not have higher educational ambitions, or if the family is divided with respect to ambitions, or if the youth themselves do not share family ambitions? And what are the implications of family ambition and dreams for the educational plans of youth from Norwegian family backgrounds? By explicitly exploring how family background and migration histories are expressed in youths’ and parents’ reflections about education, I also hope to capture the meanings of transnational sense of belonging for educational plans (Engebrigtsen and Fuglerud 2007). By doing so, I will also be able to explore the common assumption that making use of the educational institutions of majority society indicates an intention to integrate from the minority’s point of view. In a study of migrants from Punjab, living in California, Gibson (2000) found that parents’ strongly supported the schools’ pressure on children to conform with norms for behaviour, but at the same time exerted control of their children in order to prevent socializing with peers from other groups that they believed would lead to “Americanization.” In the present project I wish to explore how educational plans are positioned with respect to overarching family projects: Are educational plans motivated by concerns for the family, by young people’s own interests and wishes, or by an intention to integrate in majority society?

Another question concerns how ideas of young people’s autonomy and parental authority influence parents’ and young people’s discussions of and decisions on education. What are the differences and similarities between perceptions of young people’s autonomy and parental authority when comparing majority and minority families? What other dimensions of belonging – for instance religion and social class (Abbas 2003)

-- are influential here? Different practices of upbringing can be an important source of differences in what possibilities and alternatives young people see themselves as having



in their choice of education. In a study of youth from Tamil and Somali backgrounds in Norway, Engebretsen and Fuglerud (2007) describe Tamil practices of upbringing as based on intensive monitoring, which is only relaxed for participation in school related activities. Among the majority population in Norway, the concept of autonomy and free choice is not as straight forward as it may appear: Sørhaug (1995) claims that although Norwegian parents raise their children with the goal of enabling them to choose for themselves, there is an implicit expectation that that children should use this freedom in ways that conform with parents' values and expectations.

Gender, class and peer relations

In Norway, there are important gender differences in choice of education, and choices are structured according to traditional gender patterns (Bæck 2006).^v This project will explore whether students from different backgrounds follow traditional gender patterns to the same extent. An additional gender-related aspect of education in Norway is the relatively high drop-out rate in upper secondary school of boys from minority backgrounds (Markussen, et al. 2006). A consequence is that a higher proportion of girls from minority backgrounds complete upper secondary education (Fekjær 2006; Støren 2005). How can we explain these gender differences?

Several existing studies provide ideas for how to understand this phenomenon. In his now classic study of *the lads* -- white, working class boys in Britain -- Willis (1999 [1978]) argues that the relationship between the boys and their shared class identity assumes vital importance for their relationship with school. In a study of young people from minority backgrounds in Swedish suburbs, Sernhede (2005) shows how gender identities are expressed through young people's attitudes towards education and their thoughts about their prospects in the future. Sernhede claims that due to the negative portrayal of minority men in Sweden, young minority males experience a specific form of masculine alienation in relation to majority society. This experience contributes to the boys' marginalisation in different arenas, including in education and the labour market. Similarly, in a study from Norway, Vestel (2004) describes how young minority males in Oslo's East End construct communities at the margins of majority society through leisure time interaction.

In her studies of different minority groups' experiences of schooling in America and the Caribbean, Gibson (2000) shows how there are sometimes important gender differences with respect to schooling *within* ethnic groups, and that this may be connected to how "the same" behaviour may be accorded different value for boys and girls. Similar findings have been made in European studies focusing on social class: Studies show that working class girls' attitudes towards education differ from the attitudes of working class boys (Ambjörnsson 2004; Skeggs 1997). Based on survey data from Norway, Heggen and Clausen (2006) show that rural girls from working class families have considerably higher educational mobility than boys from similar backgrounds. In this study I will explore if minority youth and working class majority youth demonstrate similar gender differences in educational motivation.



Methodological approach

The fieldwork location will be two schools in Oslo's East End. The fieldwork will focus on students from diverse cultural backgrounds in their last year of lower secondary school and follow them into their first year of upper secondary school. My ambition is also to interview and, to the extent possible, do fieldwork in the home setting. I intend to do fieldwork in the two schools concurrently, such that I can follow both sets of students through the processes leading to the decision of which upper secondary school to choose, as well as what field of study to pursue.

Comparative school studies have been used as a method in several, thematically related studies over the last years (Ambjörnsson 2004; Gibson 1987; Seeberg 2003). The two schools that have been recruited for the study have been chosen on the basis of certain similarities and differences: Both schools are multicultural schools, but although both schools are East End schools, the local geographies, differ. One school is recruited from a suburb with a substantial representation of middle class families of majority backgrounds living in villas and semi-detached housing, but with an approximate 20 per cent representation of families from minority backgrounds, typically living in the cheaper apartment buildings in the area. The other school is recruited from a suburb characterised by housing consisting of mainly apartment buildings, a substantial proportion of (approximately 60 per cent) of families from minority backgrounds, as well as majority families of working class backgrounds. Schools with contrasting socio-economic compositions will enable me to discover how gender, class and minority/majority identities interact and contribute to structuring peer as well as teacher/student interaction. Of particular interest is also how different socio-economic backgrounds create different contexts for educational aspirations and choices among students with similar academic abilities. Two contrasting socioeconomic groups of majority students will also provide a reference point for exploring how minority students' reflections on future education differ from or are similar to that of majority students of different backgrounds. Finally, through intentionally choosing schools different with respect to socio economic composition of students, I will also explore how schools interact with students of different social backgrounds.

In complex, urban societies schools are more likely to be accessible for ethnographic research than households (Frøystad 2002). An advantage of using schools as a fieldwork arena is also that there are a number of available roles that the fieldworker can assume: Students and teachers are accustomed to teachers in training observing their classes. There will probably be opportunities to help the students with school related matters, and there are places such as the canteen and the library, where it will be legitimate for an outsider to "hang out". Moreover, the school itself accommodates two of the contexts that I want to access in this study: the unitary school as a majority institution on the one hand, but also breaks between classes as a leisure context that are not subject to intensive monitoring by school staff.

There are, however, some obvious challenges associated with fieldwork in schools, particularly among this age group: In contrast to fieldwork among younger (and perhaps older children/youth), 15-16 year-olds will not readily be interested in spending time with an adult during breaks or free time. Moreover, being a white, middle class female in the early thirties, it is likely that many students initially will categorise me as a kind of teacher. A teacher identity may prevent access to the students' 'backstage' perceptions of school and perhaps some sensitive areas of their



lives that may be highly relevant for their educational aspirations. In order to avoid categorisation as a teacher I will seek to avoid too much contact with other teachers, for instance by spending short breaks and lunch with the students, not the teachers, and also by renouncing “teacher privileges” such as keys to the school building.

I will also need to be sensitive to divisions (ethnic, gendered, class based, geographic or subcultural) and conflicts among the students that could make it difficult to simultaneously maintain good relations with students belonging to different social groups simultaneously. Again, my own social position in terms of gender, class and ethnicity could imply challenges when trying to build good relationships with different groups of students. It is an explicit goal of this study to actively include majority students in the study, not only to enable comparison, but also in order to avoid selecting research subjects based on ascribed ‘ethnic’ identities in a multicultural school setting.

I will also include fieldwork in leisure settings, such as youth clubs, sports activities and libraries. Others studies (Vestel 2004) have shown that minority girls are often underrepresented in such settings. I therefore need to pay particular attention to gender and try to localise arenas where it will be possible to meet girls from different backgrounds.

In order to access the family context I will use meetings for parents in schools, parents associations as well as ask the students themselves if I can talk to their families.

Students and parents will receive written information about the study, and parents have to give active, written consent to their children’s participation in the project.

Notes

ⁱ The Norwegian term for college/university preparatory studies (*studieforberedende fag*)

ⁱⁱ Some private schools are religious, some are founded on alternative pedagogical principles, whereas others are specifically marketed to students who either want to improve their upper secondary grades in order to enter specific university studies, such as medical school, or who want take additional subjects in order to fulfil requirements for such studies.

ⁱⁱⁱ Housing prices have been rising rapidly in Oslo over the last 15 years. As a consequence, the eastern parts have received a substantial influx of young people with college and university degrees, thus gradually changing the population composition.

^{iv} Only 2 percent of Norwegian school children attend private primary and lower secondary schools (Statistics Norway 2006, www.ssb.no).

^v The traditional gender pattern in educational choice is somewhat surprising, considering that Norway is considered to be a country in which feminism and gender equality has a strong position.

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