# Changing School – Changing Self. Ethnic Minority Girls' Active Struggles for Educational Success

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## Abstract

As education is of great importance for individual success, it perpetuates inequalities when ethnic minorities are educated less than majority populations. Based on life stories with ethnic minority women who have done well in the Danish educational system, this article offers a detailed analysis of a critical time period in early adolescence where such young women's dreams of upward social mobility were threatened. In the 'contact zone' of their local school classes, the proximity to ethnic majority pupils' experiments with alcohol and cigarettes challenged the educational aspirations of the ethnic minority teenage girls. The article conceptualises this challenging time as a 'vital conjuncture' – a critical life period in which both different futures and different identities are at stake – and shows how a school change could alleviate personal pressures, and avert the impending danger of school drop-out. This analytical approach demonstrates both how intersecting identities tied to ethnicity, gender, and class may operate in different ways, but with similar consequences of threatening educational success, and points to the scope of agency which ethnic minority teenage girls may exert as they struggle to shape their futures, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.

## Introduction

Education is generally considered of great importance for individual success in societies worldwide. Hence, it perpetuates inequalities when ethnic minorities fare less well in education than majority populations (Christensen, Egelund, Fredslund and Jensen 2014, Heath and Brinbaum 2007, OECD 2006; Source removed).

Different explanations for this phenomenon coexist, and they include the lower class positions of ethnic minority families; differences in immigrants' cultural and linguistic backgrounds from those of the majority, and the persistence of discriminatory practices in national educational systems (Archer and Francis 2007, Collier and Thomas 2002, Ferguson 2001, Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007).

Faring well in education is thus often challenging for immigrant and refugee children. Drawing on life story narratives with ethnic minorities, this article investigates both experiences of and responses to such challenges. Using interview material with 25 ethnic minority women, all of whom completed their educations in Denmark, the article focuses primarily on the narratives of three women, explicating how they struggled to overcome inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity at a crucial point in their educations and lives – in their early adolescence, around age 14.

The article suggests the concept of 'vital conjuncture' – a term coined by the demographer Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002) – as well suited for analysing these narratives. The concept of a vital conjuncture is:

> …a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential […]. Vital conjunctures are particularly critical durations, where more than usual is in play, where the futures at stake are significant (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 871).

The concept can facilitate a better understanding of both how perceived threats arising from specific intersections of gender, class and ethnicity may endanger young minority women's aspirations for achieving upward social mobility and also how such women may be able to resist and change the difficult situations in which they find themselves.

The aicle, first, outlines the context of the study, namely the Danish educational system, with a focus on the roles that identities tied to ethnicity, class and gender are known to have. Second, it unpacks the concept of vital conjuncture, before, third, discussing the methodological approach of life story interviews. Fourth, the analysis draws on the selected narratives of young women facing difficulties in education but overcoming these challenges through changing schools. The article ends with conclusions.

## The context of the study – ethnicity, class and gender in the Danish educational system

The article's study is set in Denmark, a Scandinavian welfare state with only 5.5 million inhabitants. It is a small country by European standards, and its history of larger-scale visible immigration is relatively recent, dating back only to the 1960s (Koefoed and Simonsen 2010).

Today, according to Statistics Denmark, 10.1% of the population are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. The share of immigrants of non-Western origin, including their descendants, stands at 6.7% of the total population (Statistics Denmark 2010). Thus while Denmark's share of ethnic minorities is rather low when compared to countries such as the UK or neighbouring Sweden, one in ten pupils in the Danish school system nevertheless do not have Danish as their mother tongue as they have non-Western family backgrounds (Nusche, Wurzburg, and Naughton 2010).

Possibly due to the historically recent changes in the otherwise quite homogeneous Danish population, the majority/minority dividing line appears to be attributed considerable importance in Danish schools, even though educational institutions often seek to downplay this division (Gitz-Johansen 2006). The importance of this division may arise from 'equality' being considered a central cultural value in Scandinavia, with the added understanding that being 'equal' implies being 'alike' (Gullestad 1992). As

visibly different ethnic minorities stand out from the majority, many majority Danes view such 'foreigners' as challenging national similarity and unsettling national cohesion (Hervik 2004). It is therefore no wonder that in a Scandinavian context, ethnic minority pupils often feel negatively 'different' in the school context (Runfors 2003), where they also may often face lower expectations from teachers (Gilliam 2006; Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007) and have to work extra hard if they wish to gain acceptance (Hällgreen 2005).

Recent institutional ethnographies demonstrate the salience of this majority/minority dividing line. In the 'contact zone' (Phoenix 2009; Pratt 1991) of the Danish 'Folkeskole' – compulsory education, lasting for ten years, and ending when students are around the age of 15. Research shows that 'Danish' (i.e. white majority) children are generally those whom the teachers here single out as 'good pupils', while 'foreign' children – and especially boys – are often perceived as problematic (Gilliam 2006). As a consequence, similar behaviour from pupils may elicit different teacher responses, depending on the pupil's ethnic background (K. Andersen 2005; Gilliam 2006). Minority pupils may also face challenges relative to the tuition's taking place in a language that is not their mother tongue (Collier and Thomas 2002) and due to the value attributed to nation-specific knowledge, to which ethnic minority children have less access (Gitz-Johansen 2006; Pastoor 2009).

As well demonstrated by intersectionality studies (Gross, Gottburgsen and Phoenix 2016; Valentine 2007), ethnicity often centrally intersects with class. As Denmark historically has had limited skilled labour migration, a large share of the immigrants and refugees entering the country since the 1960s have had low levels of educational qualifications (Tranæs and Zimmermann 2004). Adding to this problem, skilled individuals arriving, for example as refugees or marriage migrants, often have difficulties putting their qualifications to use in the Danish labour market (Nielsen, C 2011). Thus from a class perspective ethnic minorities in Denmark are overrepresented in lower class levels. Today, as a 'second generation' is increasingly moving through the Danish educational system, the perpetuation of these class differences is central to understanding why ethnic minority youth fare less well in education than their majority peers (Jakobsen 2015).

However, whilst such lower class positions of ethnic minority families generally delimit the resources available for children's educational achievements, this low class position may conversely feed educational aspirations. Furthermore, in Denmark – in contrast to many of the ethnic minority families' countries of origin – education is not only readily available and free, but the state also offers all students at higher levels a subsistence grant, thereby supporting studying for all, regardless of family background. Hence, many ethnic minority families see education as an option for bettering

the class position of the next generation, and attribute great importance to their children's studying (Andersen, J 2008). This attitude has been termed an 'immigrant drive' towards educating (Lauglo 1996). As documented elsewhere in Scandinavia (Sletten 2001; Støren and Helland 2009), high educational aspirations are similarly found among immigrants in other national contexts (Perreira, Harris and Lee 2006; Salikutluk 2016).

Ethnicity and class intersect with gender in various ways relevant for educational success. A first general observation is that girls – regardless of ethnic background – often fare better in education than boys (Bakken et al. 2008). This gendered difference is largely due to the often limited educational achievement of lower-class boys, who may respond with opposition when faced with school demands that they have limited resources for meeting (Jackson 2003; Willis 1977). Of particular importance for the present study is how broader gendered expectations may affect ethnic minority women at school. Research shows that female behaviour is often considered a boundary marker of great importance for ethnic minority groups (Mooney 2006; Yuval-Davis 1997). Hence, for example, ethnic minority girls from Muslim backgrounds may face gendered expectations – e.g. abstaining from drinking alcohol and not dating – that differ considerably from the expectations facing girls from the majority (Prieur 2004).

**Conceptual approach**

The variable importance of identities linked to gender, class and ethnicity take on importance in human interaction. Symbolic interactionism tells us that all identities always have an internal and an external dimension: the internally oriented *identification* of self and the externally oriented *categorisation* of others. 'Who one is' is thus never fixed once and for all but is always open for negotiation and central to the interplay between the individual and the collective (Jenkins 2004). As we can all identify with, as well as be categorised by, different systems of categorisation, we 'are' not (essentially) one thing or another. Rather, different systems of categorisation intersect in various ways and intermesh with one another in specific historical situations.

Thus gender and ethnicity may centrally structure experiences in the educational system. So may class, but time spent in education may also in itself affect class: completing of educations at higher levels facilitates entry into the higher echelons of a society, and education is thus a primary route to class mobility.

Such educational journeys towards achieving higher positions in social space must be "…paid for by labour, by effort and especially by time" (Bourdieu 1992: 232). While the 25 interviewees in this study had all successfully

completed this journey, many had felt challenged at one or more points along the way. This article suggests that such a time of challenge can usefully be conceptualised as a 'vital conjuncture':

> …a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential… [Here] action is conjoined to a particular, temporary manifestation of social structure, [making vital conjunctures] particularly critical durations when more than usual is in play, when the futures at stake are significant (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 871).

Johnson-Hanks takes the term 'conjuncture' from Bourdieu (1977), who uses it to express the conditions that manifest social structure and that thus serve as the effective context for social action. While 'vital' comes from demography's 'vital events' of important status passages such as birth, marriage and death (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 872), Johnson-Hanks states that the concept can also encompass other important status passages such as graduation or dropping out of education. Proposed as an alternative to the life stages approach in ethnography, a vital conjuncture as a unit of social analysis is "…based in aspiration, rather than event" (865), and proposes a way of working between the individual and the social in a world, where life courses vary considerably – an observation that diminishes the relevance of working with a pre-determined set of consecutive life stages.

Having a dual focus on societal institutions and individual aspirations, the concept of vital conjuncture is well suited for grasping the experiential dimension of social processes, which on larger scales may coalesce into recurring systematicness (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 872). In the present case, the concept may thus add to our understanding both of the generally lower levels of educational attainment among ethnic minority youth and of the ways in which achieving educational success may be closely linked to individuals' hopes and aspirations, upon which they seek to act.

As a last step before applying this concept to the analysis of ethnic minority women being educated in Denmark, I describe the method I used and the way in which it ties in with the conceptual approach.

## Methodological approach

Half a century ago, C. Wright Mills wrote his renowned book *The Sociological Imagination*, in which he argued that sociology should concern itself with the interrelation of individual and society:

> The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. […] Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both (Mills 1959: 1).

Today, life story interviews remain a method well suited for the endeavour of interrelating individuals and broader societal contexts (Walker 2005). As French sociologist Daniel Bertaux argues, such interviews contain detailed information on individuals' '*situated courses of action*' through time and space. Carried out with a group of individuals who have shared similar life circumstances, a body of life story interviews can thus add to our understanding not only of individual life experiences but also of broader social processes (Bertaux 2003).

A life as told, however, is very different from a life as lived. With the linguistic turn calling attention to the constructed nature of texts, we cannot take life stories as unproblematic windows into people's past lives. A life story is a retrospective narrative construction, made from a given present-day viewpoint and in a specific interactional interview situation with a researcher-cum-interviewer (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

A useful tool for attending to the constructed nature of a life story is to distinguish between the 'narrator' (the individual telling the life story) and the 'protagonist' (the narrator's former self, as constructed in the life story; Goffman 1986: 520). For example whilst the narrator may be a 30-year-old woman with a completed education, the protagonist in the text of the life story will be her former self constructed at various ages, growing and maturing, and at times facing crossroads she must choose between. The protagonist of the narrated life story will at one point in the interview reach the space and time of the present-day narrator, who is telling the life story, and this present-day ending point is of great significance for the construction of the entire narrative (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Throughout, it is the present-day narrator who attributes importance to certain events and not to others, as she explicates the development of the protagonist (her former self) over time. Consequently, an analytical focus on passages that are narrated in great detail can be a methodological tool for investigating the times of challenges and the turning points to which the interviewees themselves attribute importance (Source removed).

**The interview material**

This study is based upon a body of 25 interviews. All the interviewees were women, all were of non-Western ethnic minority origin, and all had completed a tertiary education in Denmark (lasting between three and a half and five years), with around half the interviewees having completed master degrees at Danish universities. The women differed in a number of ways, e.g. age, country and class, as well as whether they had been born in Denmark or not. The women were recruited through a number of different channels, including personal networks, educational institutions and places of work.

As to interview approach, the women were told about the study's interest in their educational experiences, and then asked to freely tell their story 'from the beginning'. As the women started speaking, interruptions were kept to a minimum to allow the narratives to unfold without undue interference (Source removed). Instead of posing all emerging questions immediately, the interviewers jotted down topics of interest whilst listening and brought up those issues in later stages of the interviews. All interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed. Experiences of meeting challenges in achieving their educational goals, due to intersecting inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity, occurred in varying forms in most of the interviews. This analysis focuses on the narratives of three women, particularly on their experiences in the last years of 'Folkeskole', when they were around 14 years old. The choice of in-depth analysis of a selected few interviews was made to give space to the uniqueness of single lives and to avoid fragmenting their individual life stories (Gullestad 1996).

## Majority/minority divisions at school – Sayyidah's case

The first case it that of Sayyidah[1]. Born in Denmark, her parents had come to Denmark as labour migrants from Pakistan in the early 1970s. Of her last years in 'Folkeskole', Sayyidah says:

> 'My time in 'Folkeskolen' was fine. I lived in Vesterbro [central Copenhagen district with many immigrants] until I was 12 years old. I felt at home there. But then we moved to Valby [less central Copenhagen district, with fewer immigrants.]. There were not so many foreigners there – there were only two in my class. It wasn't great at all. All the time you felt *outside* in some way, I don't think they were used to foreigners at that school. But then I entered high school, and there were a lot of foreigners there again – it certainly improved'.

This statement evokes the theme of this article: First, the time in question is the last period of mandatory schooling, which coincides with the first years of adolescence, around the age of 14. Second, a central issue is how the shares of 'Danes' vs. 'foreigners' in a given school affect the person's well-being. Third, the theme is how changing school at this time may alter the person's situation. Sayyidah experiences two such school changes, one when her parents moved the family to a new school district and the second when she entered high school after completing 'Folkeskole'. Sayyidah's statement clearly shows that the share of other 'foreigners' in the 'contact zone' of her school environment was central for whether she felt included or excluded during these years. While Sayyidah does not posit the challenges of feeling 'outside' at school as having endangered her educational ambitions, the next sections will show that for other women, lacking group peers at school during

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[1] All names are pseudonyms. Details of e.g. geographical places may have been changed to protect anonymity.

the years of early adolescence can indeed be experienced as an imminent threat to one's educational aspirations.

**Introducing Liyana and Mahsa**

The remainder of the article focuses on the narratives of Liyana and Mahsa, who both were the children of refugees and who, with their parents, arrived in Denmark as young children. The article contrasts and compares their narratives, focusing on the interplay between individual well-being and identity constructions in the school context, issues which affects students' abilities of achieving academic success (Ulriksen, Murning and Ebbensgaard 2009).

Liyana's family came as Palestinian refugees from Lebanon. Whilst her parents were both educated, in Denmark only her mother managed to find employment. Liyana was the oldest child, having two younger sisters, and thus she was the first child that her parents had to raise in Denmark.

Mahsa's family came as refugees from Iran, where they had been politically active. Both parents were educated, and after re-educating in Denmark, both managed to find qualified employment, although at lower levels than in their country of origin. Nonetheless, they did not find settling in Denmark easy, and they were divorced before Mahsa reached school age. Such household break-ups occur very frequently in Iranian refugee families, in part due to the stresses of flight and settlement in a new context, which seem to affect men and women in different measures (Darvishpour 1999). Mahsa and her sister came to live with their mother, who occasionally suffered from depression. The older sister did poorly at school and had considerable personal problems.

**Point of departure – school choice and share of pupils with ethnic minority background**

Due to the two families' limited incomes, both Liyana and Mahsa grew up in residential areas of rented flats, occupied predominantly by ethnic minorities. Renting is in line with the general situation in Denmark, where ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the owner-occupied housing of the majority Danish middle class (Statistics Denmark 2010). Housing segregation clearly affects the composition of pupils in local schools, giving some public schools in segregated residential areas very large shares of ethnic minority pupils. Indeed, in Denmark around one in five ethnic minority children attends schools in which more than 70% of the pupils are ethnic minorities like themselves (OECD 2006, 74). These schools are in Danish colloquially termed 'black' schools, as compared to majority-dominated 'white' schools, and research has linked such large shares of ethnic minority pupils to lower levels of academic achievement (Jensen and Rasmussen 2008; Szulkin and Jonsson 2007).

Apparently keen to facilitate the academic achievements of their daughters, the parents of both Liyana and Mahsa opted for their daughters to enter schools at some distance from the neighbourhood school, dominated by the Danish majority. As both sets of parents were well educated, their awareness of and resources underlying this choice can be interpreted as one of the ways in which parents seek to transmit class across generations. Thus the two interviewees tell the following stories:

> We lived in [residential area] where there were many children with ethnic minority backgrounds. So, even though it was far away, my parents sent me to another school, in order for me to learn Danish (Liyana).

> I lived in [residential area with many ethnic minorities] and the school I went to was in a very different area, in such a hippie district, where all those from the detached houses and the villas went to school (Mahsa).

Liyana here states that the linguistic differences linked to the share of ethnic minority pupils was central for her parents' school choice on her behalf: The choice of the more distant school was made for her to learn (better) Danish, considered central for her future prospects in Denmark. Mahsa instead foregrounds the class difference associated with the choice of a 'white' school, saying that her school peers were the children of 'hippies', living in 'detached houses' and 'villas'. In a few words, Mahsa thus conjures up a central-left-leaning majority Danish middle class, affluent enough to be home owners. This affluence differed greatly from the economic situation in Mahsa's deprived ethnic minority neighbourhood, and the troubled family life that framed her own childhood.

While both girls began their schooling in rather distant schools, they also both experienced feeling 'different' in ways that they did not find easy to handle. Like Sayyidah, Mahsa also expressed feeling that she did not 'fit in' at her school:

> I was in a fine class and I had friends and I had been home with my classmates and all that. But I never really felt that I was *really* within, *truly* a part of the class. They were sweet enough, but I just kind of did not fit in. I was an outsider (Mahsa).

Mahsa continues that in the 7th grade (when she was 14), her time at school became so problematic as to endanger her future possibilities for education. Liyana had similar fears at this age. The challenges that these two narrators experienced at this time in their lives is the topic of the next section.

## Adolescent changes and gendered challenges – Liyana's case

With the onset of adolescence, pupil behaviour generally changes markedly in the Danish 'Folkeskole'. Experiments with practices associated with youth life commonly begins in the 7th grade, and whilst both drinking and smoking may often be prohibited by parents and school staff, trying out such practices

is often considered part of 'growing up' in Denmark. Thus more than 80% of Danish youth have been drunk by the age of 15 (Rheinländer 2007), young Danes are some of the heaviest drinkers in Europe (Hibell et al. 2009; Demant and Krarup 2013), and much interaction in Danish schools revolves around alcohol, parties and dating (Demant and Østergaard 2007; Staunæs 2003)[2]. Liyana explicitly addressed these age-related changes in the practices of her majority Danish classmates:

> At one time it just became tough for me, because Danish children, in the 7th grade, they start getting new habits. Funnily enough it is cigarettes and alcohol and such. And I wasn't allowed to do that. It was both that I did not want to do anything wrong towards my parents, but it was also that it felt like the right thing [not to drink and smoke] because I knew it was outside my culture and my norms. So it was just really difficult (Liyana).

The challenges Liyana refers to here arise from intersections of ethnicity and gender, and the associated discrepancy between expectations at school and at home: in her class she faced peer pressures of participating in the 'new habits' of the 'Danes' – but doing so was at odds with the culture and norms of her family background, a cross-pressure that is a recurrent theme in studies of young ethnic minority females in education (Ajrouch 2004; Espiritu 2001). Adhering to these norms was especially crucial for Liyana, as her father was ambivalent about her being educated in the first place:

> My father was not quite sure of what he wanted for us girls. He heard his family [in the Middle East] saying: "Girls, they should not be educated. They are bound to be homemakers for their husbands anyway". So he wasn't quite sure of how to handle us. Whether we should be the capable Muslim girls [in education] or whether we should be in the home – cooking and cleaning. He was frustrated, when he saw that his friend's children were good at cleaning. One girl wearing a [head]scarf and all. [My father] was really torn, and it was tough on him, I think. He came from a background where he had been educated, but all of his family were uneducated (Liyana).

As both minor and a female, Liyana's position was one of dependency. If her father withdrew his support of her studying, she could do little to achieve her educational goals. This type of conflict between educational aspirations and traditional gender role expectations, challenging ethnic minority girls' educational participation, is also documented in other settings (Ahmad 2001).

Class is also present in Liyana's narrative about her father's ambivalence towards her education. She points out that whilst her father was educated (albeit unemployed in Denmark), all of his family was 'uneducated'. Liyana

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[2] Another central element in the youth culture is experimenting with intimate relationships. Thus, on average, a young Danish woman has her sexual debut shortly before turning 16 (L. Nielsen 2007).

offers this lack of education in her father's family as an explanation for why he did not wholeheartedly support her studies.

When Liyana explains why staying in education was so important to her, she states that doing so was not only due to considerations about her future class position. Education would also centrally intersect with gender relations, and thus have a direct bearing on her intimate life and the scope of self-determinacy, that she could achieve in this life domain. As she said in the interview:

> Already in the 7th, 8th grade, I wanted more and more freedom. There was this thing that you, as a girl, you should be 'below' the man. And I didn't *want* that. So I felt that the only way I could come to say to a man: "You know what? You are not right. What *I* say is right, and I *know* that" – doing so would only be possible if I were educated (Liyana).

As other studies have shown (e.g. Kragh 2010), succeeding in education may indeed equip young ethnic minority women with resources that enable them to transform and reduce patriarchal control in their personal lives, a dynamic that may in itself increase the educational aspirations of such young women.

**Adolescent changes and classed challenges – Mahsa's case**

Mahsa also encountered difficulties in the 7th grade, but compared to Liyana, her challenges were structured in rather different ways. She relates the following about that time:

> I was a bit of a rebel and was friends with the punk girl of the class. Then, in the 7th grade I started skipping school like crazy – went out and smoked cigarettes instead of attending classes (Mahsa).

Likewise experiencing the changing habits of her majority Danish classmates in the last years of 'Folkeskolen', Mahsa did not distance herself (as Liyana did) from the majority practices of drinking and smoking. Instead, Mahsa herself partially changed her practices in this direction.

While smoking can damage one's health, Mahsa's skipping school at the time was a more serious threat to her future educational aspirations. Her behaviour at this life stage can be labelled 'deviant', presumably springing largely from her problems in the family domain (i.e. her entire family remained marked by the traumatic experiences of having had to flee their country). Mahsa continues:

> '… I really just felt terrible. I probably had a depression or something. I had all that pain inside of me, due to what I had experiences, but my classmates had no idea about what the heck I was talking about'.

Furthermore, at home, Mahsa had to 'just take care of [her]self' due to her life with an absent father, a mother with psychological problems, and a sister whose hardships overshadowed any of her own. Mahsa's challenges were thus not linked to the same type of intersection between of gender and ethnicity, with which Liyana struggled, but rather to her specific refugee background and the upheavals of persecution and flight. Indeed, Mahsa's parents were well-educated leftist refugees, and subscribed to much more liberal norms for young female conduct than Liyana's father did. It was primarily Mahsa's deeply troubled family life that undermined her well-being, including in school. This observation underscores the importance of not expecting all ethnic minority girls from Muslim countries to be facing, for example challenges of patriarchal control (Keddie 2011).

**Dangerous times and vital conjunctures**

Regardless of the specificities of the challenges they faced, both Liyana and Mahsa relate that they, around the age of 14, feared that the troubles with which they were grappling could endanger their educational futures. Hence, I posit that these times of their lives can be considered vital conjunctures, as they were precisely "particularly critical durations, where more than usual is in play, where the futures at stake are significant" (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 871). Such conjunctures draw their significance from the fact that the contested futures not only concern what will happen in the time ahead, but also have major implications for "…the future person, the range of identities that could possibly be claimed" (872). In Liyana's and Mahsa's cases, they feared that the strains they were facing would throw them off the educational path – and if they could not succeed in school, they would not be able to become the educated selves they aspired to be.

Vital conjunctures have different imagined futures as their horizons, and "the analysis of vital conjunctures rests on an understanding of what horizons, what futures, are imagined, hoped for, or feared" (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 872). Thus, according to both narratives, although both girls wanted to stay on the path towards becoming well educated, they could also see the path of a school dropout looming ahead of them – a path likely to lead them towards a much less desired future. With research showing that ethnic minority pupils more often than their majority peers either drop out of education or end school without the skills necessary for educating further, the two girls' fears at the time were most likely not exaggerated. Their feeling the pressure of this growing danger to their future aspirations raises the question of what the girls themselves could do to make one future, and not the other, become a reality.

As young individuals, they had few options for affecting the larger structures of class, gender and ethnicity in which they were enmeshed. While changing

their cultural background, skin colour or family history was of course not an option, one avenue for action lay potentially open: they could seek to change the schools they went to and, by moving to a different spatial location, alter the micro-context of their day-to-day school lives. Both Liyana and Mahsa did so. Both initiated the changes to local schools in their segregated neighbourhoods, and thus the two girls both entered new school classes where the minority students were the local majorities. Furthermore, both narrators construct this change of school as centrally important in their life stories. The story of how this process unfolded is the topic of the next section.

**Actively seeking to change schools**

Whilst the two girls had felt perpetually 'different' in their first (majority middle class-dominated) schools, they came to feel more at ease after changing to local minority-dominated schools. Like Sayyidah, Liyana's move reduced her heightened visibility as a minority. The change came about in the following way:

> I simply decided to face my father and tell him that it was too hard, and that I wanted to change the class I was in. [My father] said: "Why do you want to change school? You can do it [i.e. manage without changing school]". *Blah blah*. But after I had talked with him, my father could understand it. He knows of these problems – he can feel that there is a dilemma inside a child between what the *culture* says, and what *society* allows and the other children do. So in the beginning of the 8th grade I moved to a school closer by. It was nice. There were more girls from my background – Turkish girls and Arabic girls (Liyana).

In her new context, Liyana's possibility for continuing to behave according to what the 'culture says' eased considerably, as she could now share her school life with classmates for whom the intersections between gender and ethnicity held the same implication for day-to-day practices as it did for her. Hence, in her new class, she found a sense of collective identity and shared cultural experiences. The ability to share day-to-day school life with group peers has been shown as central to the well-being of e.g. refugee students (Gay 2000; Oikonomidoy 2010).

Mahsa's 7th grade stresses were of a different kind and arguably had less to do with her minority status *per se*, and more with the ways in which her own 'rebel' attitudes were threatening her educational aspirations. Mahsa related the story of her younger self's decision:

> [Due to skipping classes] I didn't get much subject knowledge out of school. Then I thought: "Ay, this is enough. I only have 2-3 years left to pull myself together and improve my grades". I didn't really speak with anybody about it – it was just in my head. So I told my mother that I wanted to move to X-school [in the residential area], where my best friend was. I said it was because the school there was more serious. And [my mother] thought that was fine.

According to her narrative, Mahsa's change of school sprang from her reflexive understanding of the dangerous path she was on, and she acted to avert an unwanted future while there was still time. With her change of school, she thus actively sought to alter the direction in which she was moving, a process that the next section lays out in greater detail.

**Staying oneself or becoming another in order to stay on track**

While Liyana's change to a class dominated by other 'foreign' girls made it easier for her to adhere to expected norms of Muslim female conduct and thus to *remain the same*, Mahsa's similar move was central for her ability to *become someone else*. As Mahsa says about her school change:

> I had been this rebel – hanging out on the street and smoking, so all my friends in the [new] class thought "here she comes!". We were all rough kids. But when I transferred, I just think it was a possibility for me to become *someone else* than the one I had had the possibility of being. So I became the top girl of the class (laughs a little). I turned up ten minutes to eight every morning. I still smoked cigarettes and disagreed with the teachers, but I did all my homework and was the one holding my hand up the most. In the 8th grade we started getting grades, and I got the highest average in the class.

Deliberate school change is often termed a 'fresh start' (Juelskjær 2009), and Mahsa was indeed able to use her change in such a way: she changed from identifying as a 'rebel' (skipping school) to acting like a 'top girl' (arriving early, doing all her homework and being active in class). Entry into a new context – where the new teachers did not have negative expectations to her – probably facilitated Mahsa's personal turn-around, as teachers' expectations are central to pupils' performances (Rosenthal and Jacobsen 1968).

Mahsa's move from a 'white' to a 'black' school may in itself also have facilitated her swift move to becoming the highest achieving student in her class: the change in context changed her relative position vis-à-vis her classmates. She thus went from being a negative deviant (due to both class and ethnicity) in the 'white' school into deviating positively in the 'black' school. This change occurred when Mahsa brought with her the manners and language she had learned in the 'white' middle class school during her first seven years of schooling. The skills she learned there most likely influenced her new teachers' categorisations of her, as Mahsa – in her new class – became the one conforming the most to the image of a 'good' student, which in the Danish public school system is modelled after a white middle-class norm (Gilliam 2006; Willis 1977).

Paradoxically, then, while low shares of ethnic minority pupils are generally associated with better school performance (Szulkin and Jonsson 2007), in individual cases such low shares may challenge the educational achievement

of minority students who finds themselves to be the only ones of their kind in a given school class.

**Conclusion**

Individuals act, but they do not do so in circumstances of their own choosing. Thus this analysis documents how the interviewees' situated courses of actions' (Bertaux 2003) took them into perilous terrain during the tender years of their early adolescence – a time in life crucial for individual identity construction. The analysis also documents how intersections of ethnicity, gender and class can operate in different ways but with similar consequences of threatening the educational achievements of ethnic minority youth. In various forms, such challenges were also present in the broader interview material underlying this study, even though the 25 interviews were all conducted with individuals who managed to achieve educational success.

As the analysis shows, gender was implicated in the ethnic minority interviewees' aspirations for good educations. One underlying motive was that higher levels of education enables women to achieve greater levels of self-determination in both private and public spheres. But gender was also central in the schools' openness to the idea of ethnic minority girls or young women being 'good students', as when Mahsa became the top student in her new class. For ethnic minority boys, such openness may be harder to find, due both to the negative perceptions held by many teachers, and to the peer processes among marginalised boys at school which may actively undermine their abilities to perform well academically (Gilliam 2006).

Another central point of this article is the suggestion that the concept of vital conjuncture is analytically well suited for understanding the interplay between individual and society, including people's abilities to act, in circumstances not of their own choosing. Thus it is notable that whilst Liyana and Mahsa were each challenged in different ways, the horizons of the vital conjunctures present in their narratives were remarkably similar. This observation corroborates Johnson-Hanks' claim that the social patterns in horizons makes precisely these conjunctures suitable units of analysis (Johnson-Hanks 2002). Similar, too, was the agency that the two 14-year-old protagonists exerted as they sought to shape their own destinies. Their actions testify to their being much more than passive victims of discrimination, patriarchy, or both. Girls such as Liyana and Mahsa must be better understood as skilled social actors, possibly mature beyond their years as a result of their refugee experiences and the difficulties their parents had in coping with their new life circumstances.

The agency that both girls exerted was to move themselves in space, moves which in their cases contribute to our understanding of what may increase

the educational success of ethnic minorities. The efficacy of these moves points to the close links between social and physical space, and how movement in one type of space may correlate to movement in another. Their complex manoeuvring between contexts of similarity and difference indeed aided the two girls in either *becoming somebody else* (as in Mahsa's case) or *remaining the same* (as in Liyana's case), through affecting the localized intersections of ethnicity, gender and class (Jenkins 2004).

A further point is that the timing of the vital conjunctures narrated by the interviewees were linked to changes occurring among the majority Danish youth. Marked changes in majority practices (e.g. drinking and partying) constitute well-described majority 'rites of passage' from around the age of 14 (Demant and Østergaard 2007), and encountering such changes in the 'contact zone' of school classes may intensify the pressures on already vulnerable ethnic minorities. While responses can both be either distancing the self from, or participating in such practices, both responses may adversely affect individual well-being and drain already strained resources. The life stories of this study thus suggest that we must also attend to the importance of such age-graded changes in majority practices when wishing to understand ethnic minority educational experiences in greater depth.

As a final note, these retrospective narratives were constructed from the narrators' present-day viewpoints of having completed educations in Denmark. However, other ethnic minorities end their 'Folkeskole' years in ways that preclude them from continuing in education, thus contributing to the differential educational attainments of ethnic minorities and the Danish majority (Christensen et al. 2014). This disparity calls further attention to the need for altering the multiple ways in which the share of pupils with ethnic minority background today structures school experiences to the detriment of ethnic minority students, who often have to struggle hard if they are to turn their aspirations for their futures into lived reality.

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