To pass the test: the timing of boys’ parallel positioning

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Abstract

Boys’ (under) achievement is frequently on the agenda in the Nordic countries, like in other parts of the Western world. Theoretical explanations for their lower achievement than girls typically emphasise the dissociation between hegemonic young masculinities and school work. In this paper, we focus on boys’ strategies for managing schools conflicting demands, using data from a recently completed Swedish ethnographic study of the discourses of gender and pupil achievement at school in various local settings. The analyses show that boys engage in a strategy of complex parallel positioning to master school demands and peer-group expectations; they appear to distance themselves from swotting yet, at the same time, devote themselves to schoolwork. This dual positioning needs to be accomplished over a short period of time at the beginning of the semester. The analyses point to the critical time sequencing, and reveal what seemed to be a carefully self-monitored process where boys’ academic participation had to appear convincing to teachers but neither too long nor too intense to interfere with their peer-group interactions and positioning. The analyses also show teachers’ appreciation of the boys who manage to position themselves well academically.

Keywords: gender, achievement, peer group, secondary education, Sweden

Discussions of gender and achievement have a long, and shifting, history in Western societies. As Weiner, Arnot and David (1997) concluded in the case of Britain, the dominant discourses have changed from targeting female underachievement in the 1970s to focusing on male underachievement a decade or two later. In Sweden, as in the other Nordic countries, the boys’ underachievement discourse appeared later, and the media debate has not been as loud (or strident) as in Britain (Arnesen, Lahelma and Öhrn 2008; cf. Epstein et al. 1998). Still, boys’ under-achievement has been noticeably prominent on the agenda in the Swedish media and politics, and school authorities have put forward both biological (late maturity) and prevailing ‘anti-school’ masculinities as reasons for boys’ low achievements (SOU 2014: 6; Skolverket 2006).

Previous international and Swedish research typically emphasised the importance of social constructions of masculinity (and femininity) in determining levels of
achievement. Vital to this is the balancing of partly contradictory peer-group norms and those of academic performance, where young people generally need to appear neither too weak nor too strong academically to handle peer-group demands (e.g. Phoenix 2004a). In many respects, performing this balancing act is especially troublesome for boys: a great deal of the evidence suggests that young girls appear to manage academic achievement and peer-group interaction much better than young boys (see Francis 2009; Francis, Skelton and Read 2010). This is certainly not to say that girls’ schooling is unproblematic or that their achievements come without costs, a fact demonstrated by decades of gender research (e.g. Deem 1980; Brock-Utne 1982; Walkerdine 1990; Berggren 2001; Weiner and Öhrn 2009); but essentially the balancing of achievement and peer pressure appears especially difficult for boys. Theoretical explanations for this emphasise the dissociation between hegemonic young masculinities and school work (e.g. Connell 1996), and these are supported by empirical research that points to boys’ difficulties in focusing on their school work whilst also appearing as attractive and popular to their male and female peers (e.g. Holm 2008; Martino 1999; Martino, Kehler and Weaver-Hightower 2009; Francis, Skelton and Read 2010; Skelton and Francis 2011). The dominant masculinities, as highlighted by this research, emphasise the overt demonstration of strength, ‘coolness’ and independence, together with a relatively laid-back attitude to schooling that is typically characterised by ‘anti-swot’ attitudes (Phoenix 2004b, 233) or where effortless achievement is an ideal (Jackson 2010, 508). This indicates that the balancing is primarily concerned with peer-group demands in relation to studying; and less with relationships between peer-group norms and good achievement per se. Nyström (2012), for instance, concluded from a study of socio-economically ‘privileged’ young men that the possession of knowledge and talent was celebrated, but the process of learning was not.

When young men negotiate their masculinity it is a priori established in opposition to femininity (Connell 1996). Learning to be a heterosexual boy is thus based on the avoidance of femininity: “Sexuality for the ‘cool boys’ is linked to a particular policing of themselves and other boys as means of marking out the boundaries of a desirable form of hegemonic masculinity”, as Martino puts it (1999, 256). One such marker is playing football and the adoption of pro-sport values (Jackson 2010, 508). The boys who are unable to measure up to what is considered to be appropriate male behaviour are seen as the ‘other’ (Martino 1999, 251). In this process of structuring the subjectivity, the ‘cool boys’ define the agenda and certain boys are downgraded to ‘nerds’ or ‘boffins’ (Francis 2009). The ‘nerds’ are often characterised “as being a conformist, constantly working hard to ensure high academic achievement, no sense of humour, being socially inept, physically unattractive and unfashionably dressed”, as described by Skelton and Francis (2011, 465). For the nerds, reading and studying hard tends to be in conflict with appropriate masculine behaviour.
However, what is deemed appropriate does vary between contexts, in keeping with theories which expect dominant masculinities and gender regimes to vary locally (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). One dimension central to the local gender regimes refers to the symbolic gender relations that might take on different forms; whereas some competing masculinities are oriented towards traditional athletic male ideals and physical competition (such as sports), others emphasise intellectual expertise and positioning (Connell 1996). These dynamics also change over time; for instance, the development of a post-industrial knowledge economy changes the hegemonic masculinity that was formed in industrial society, and puts greater demands on theoretical and abstract knowledge (Kimmel 2010). The modern school, with its demands for individualised responsibility and performance, requires pupil ambition and a willingness to compete (see Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002; Ball 2003; Francis, Skelton and Read 2010; Skelton and Francis 2011; Schwartz 2013). Boys and girls who are able to decipher the school codes and calculate the most profitable actions emerge as the most competent players (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012). For boys especially, it has become increasingly important over time to perform well in school. And as Francis (2006) emphasises, in this demanding environment low-achieving boys risk being identified as “problem boys” and subsequently demonised. Today’s young men need educational capital to an extent that they did not in the days of Paul Willis’ (1977) famous lads; although young men in Scandinavia are more likely than young women to find a job without a higher education qualification, they still usually need to reach upper secondary school. Consequently, the last year in compulsory school is a crucial one, and for some boys – as discussed below – it is a time when they realise in full the need to achieve sufficiently well enough to reach the next level of schooling. For them, this is the time when the conflict between social peer-group positioning and achievement becomes most evident and acute. In this paper, we draw on classroom observations and interviews to explore how especially high-achieving boys manage these various demands. We show, in line with Skelton and Francis’ (2011) studies in Britain, that high-status masculinities and good peer-group positioning might be maintained alongside high achievement, and point to the importance of timing in the process. Further, the analyses show that high-achieving and high-status boys are appreciated by teachers and receive more attention in class.

The study
The analysis reported here is part of a larger study based on year 9 pupils (15–16 years old) at nine Swedish schools. We took as a starting point contemporary gender differences in achievement, and aimed to explore the discourses on gender and educational achievement that are communicated in various teaching settings, between teachers and pupils and between pupils themselves. The research questions concerned the understandings of achievement and grades that are communicated
among various groups of young people in school, and their relationships to dominant femininities and masculinities within those groups; we also considered the understandings of achievement and gender communicated during teaching, and pupils’ conceptions of the meanings of academic achievement for their present and future lives.

Central to the project was Connell’s (1996, 2009) emphasis on the differences between local practices and contexts for the production of various masculinities and gender relations. Gender regimes might shift between schools and individual classes, and vary with social structure and local labour markets (e.g. also Weis 1990). Consequently, the schools were selected to include different local areas in terms of social class and ethnic composition. The subset of schools reported on in this paper is located in three different surroundings: Southern Town School is located in a gentrified, former working-class area with a large representation of middle-class families. Many of these families have considerable social and cultural capital, and some of them also do well economically. The girls in the class studied perform better than the boys, but the pupils perform above-average overall. The pupils in Mixed School come from two nearby but socio-economically diverse areas. Half of the pupils reside in a relatively wealthy suburb, while the other half comes from a nearby socio-economically deprived area with a large proportion of pupils with a foreign background. The selected class is a sports class with students who actively practise some kind of sport such as football, gymnastics or dance. The grades achieved by the pupils vary considerably and generally correlate with social class and immigrant background (cf. Öhrn, 2011). Suburban School is located in an area with a large percentage of inhabitants of non-Swedish origin. A clear majority of the pupils in the class came from working-class families and all, with the exception of two boys, had immigrant backgrounds. The level of educational achievement was far below the Swedish average for both boys and girls.

The fieldwork carried out in these schools, as was the case generally in the study, relied on a compact form of ethnography, where the researchers tried to gain access to as many venues as possible over a rather short and intensive phase. This lasted for about a month and was combined with a periodic form of ethnography with regular returns to follow up questions and themes from the compact phase (Jeffrey and Troman 2004; also see Dovemark 2004) and also conduct formal group interviews with pupils and a sample of teachers from the observed classes. Hence, this paper builds on fieldwork with 149 classroom lessons observed, supplemented by observations of breaks, field conversations, formal group interviews with 36 girls and 25 boys, and individual interviews with 4 female teachers and 3 males. In the analysis phase, the field notes and interviews were transcribed, and both social and discursive practices were examined the matically in accordance with the aim of the study. Central to this were analyses of the relations between student and teacher experiences and classroom processes. Contemporary Swedish and Nordic research
on gender and education has – in contrast to earlier research – largely focused on relations and hierarchies within peer groups and less on the reproduction of gendered values through teaching and teacher responses (Öhrn 2002); we wished to include both elements in our study, an approach which accords with Connell’s (2009) emphasis on teachers and teaching as vital in the re/production of masculinities (also see Smith, 2007). In the first phase, the data from the three single-site ethnographic field studies were analysed separately. Thereafter, we worked collaboratively on the project to establish comparative interpretations (Lahelma et al. 2013).

Results
The analyses show few instances of boys who voice anti-school attitudes and make an active choice not to study, but there were many boys who seemed to have difficulties encoding how to proceed in order to be successful both academically and among their peers. Especially for the less successful boys the final year of compulsory school appeared as a time when the conflict between social peer-group positioning and achievement became markedly difficult. Others, the popular and high-achieving boys, managed to perform well academically while at the same time being accepted by their peers. Here, we focus primarily on the latter and how they do when they perform well in school, while at the same time guarding the boundaries of what can be considered acceptable behaviours for other boys.

Boys’ parallel positioning
As shown in research (e.g. Francis, Skelton and Read 2010), all pupils must negotiate the relationship between academic knowledge, learning and achievement, and their social positioning among their peers. This balancing applies especially to boys and appears particularly difficult in high school as the need to achieve is constantly emphasised. Both pupils and teachers point to boys’ social positions as important for whether their academic ambitions and achievements are to be accepted. “To be high in the guy’s hierarchy you have to be cool – and others must think you are”, as Helge claimed. Those who wanted to succeed academically, whilst also being well positioned among their peers, were faced with a problem that typically seems to require a certain order: one’s social status in the group needs to be secure first (also see Martino 1999; Phoenix 2004a; Francis, Skelton and Read 2010). As John puts it: “You have to be kind of cool first … It’s ridiculous but you can’t do anything about it”. For the boys who are not that successful socially, an intricate parallel positioning has to be developed:

William: If you are sociable and everyone likes you, then it’s nice to have good marks but to have top marks without being socially accepted is no fun at all! (Interview, Suburban School).
It is important to fit in socially and to balance one’s appearances between peers and teachers. Managing this is a delicate matter and it might be best to “play safe” and not attract too much attention: “You should keep to yourself and not be too confrontational”, as Anton put it. One of the boys in Southern Town School clarified this line of reasoning:

Edvin: Guys who are already popular can study without being called nerds. If you have a high social ranking, you can devote yourself to studying. It works for the fancy people, so to speak (Interview, Southern Town School).

According to Edvin and others, the boys who have passed the social test and gained status among their peers have qualified for studying without being seen as the ‘other’ and losing rank in the masculine hierarchy. This pattern was visible in all of the observed schools, but was most obvious in the middle-class schools where the competition for high scores was most intense. For instance, a teacher at Mixed School said, with reference to a couple of boys who performed at the highest level:

Teacher Jan: Guys who enter the class with a high social status don’t need to devote time and energy to social positioning but, just as the most talented girls, they can wholeheartedly devote themselves to studying (Interview, Mixed School).

Thus, once the boys had placed themselves in the male hierarchy, they could perform academically without ‘sideways glances’. The girls seemed to acknowledge this balancing as a problem for boys in particular: “the boys in our class should both be good pupils and ‘cool’ at the same time”, as Emma put it. One of the high-performing boys, who appeared focused on his school work during lessons and examinations and at the same time was well positioned among his peers, explained that he did not mind sporadic sneers:

Magnus: You can have many friend seven if you study hard. Someone might say ‘damn swot’ but I don’t care. You got your good grades and that doesn’t change because someone calls you a swot (Interview, Suburban School).

According to the interviews with Magnus’ classmates, he has high status among boys in the class, but this does not protect him from occasionally being called a “swot”. However, this name calling is not seen as a serious threat to his masculinity (also see Skelton and Francis 2011). He aims to attend a high-ranked technical university, and works hard to achieve this. The distinct goal outside the school seems to provide him with a kind of accepted reason for studying. School knowledge is not seen as ‘real’ knowledge and does not provide legitimacy for studying, but a clear goal placed in working life outside school sometimes confers dignity and acceptance (also see
Asp-Onsjö 2014). Studying is not generally deprecated, or as Ahmed said: “It’s good to be good at school. If someone says it’s corny, he’s just jealous. That’s how simple it is”. Another boy from the same school spelt out the contradiction between academic and peer-group positioning as follows:

Danny: It’s okay to have good grades but not too good, because then you might count as something else, as something with four letters, geek or nerd, and that’s not so nice. Previously, in sixth grade, I was two maths books ahead of everyone else. But then I was called that word [nerd], and I stopped studying. After a while, it became a habit not to study that much and I have followed that line ever since, and now I have just G [pass] in maths. Before I had the highest grade. It really wasn’t nice to be called a nerd (Interview, Southern Town School).

To be teased and marginalised, and to appear as someone who does not fill the demands of fitting in with the hegemonic masculine order, is described as a powerful deterrent by Danny. Faced with the risk of social degradation, he would rather accept a lower mark. John, who was attending the same group interview, clarified that the word “nerd” might take on different meanings due to the context. It might be used as a friendly joke (cf. Francis 2009; Ottemo 2010), but then again such naming might be fatal for someone without a secure position in the masculine hierarchy, increasing the risk of demotion within the peer group. To be a high-achiever without peer support is considered a difficult task.

The importance of timing in parallel positioning

So far, we have considered the options for academic positioning for the boys who are already well positioned socially. What then are the options for those who cannot rely on their already-accepted position in the peer group? It appears that one way of handling the situation is through an almost simultaneous positioning among peers and teachers. The urgency of successfully managing this appeared as particularly strong during the last year of comprehensive schooling, when the pupils were to apply to enter upper secondary education. For some boys, the academic positioning was further complicated by the fact that they had understood the importance of studying, as they said, “too late”. Mohammed, for instance, a boy from a working-class and ethnic minority background, regrets that he had not taken his school work seriously before:

It’s important to perform well, if you want a good job and ‘a good wage’ in the future. I didn’t think much of it in 6th and 7th grade. Then I just wanted to have fun, but now I get it, and now it’s too late (Interview, Suburban School).

Many boys who had not performed well seemed quite resigned when they realised that this meant that their future opportunities were limited. Balancing seems to be a
relatively exhausting process; the boys, within a short time in any new group, have to prove their adherence to the dominant ideals of the group while also posing as interested learners to teachers. The latter, it is said, has to be done very early on:

Sven: Many of my friends say that now I'll make sure to perform well in the beginning so that my teachers look at me that way. You have to do your best at the first encounter. And, you have to do it immediately! (Interview, Southern Town School).

Sven implied that the teachers shape their views of the pupil at an early stage, and that a boy has to qualify as high-performing from the first day or week, or at least within a very short time. He has to appear as ambitious, pleasant and adaptable in front of the teacher. However, as this behaviour is not as rewarding in relation to his peers, he also has to demonstrate ‘coolness’ and independence from the ideals of schooling on view in front of him. This requires a balancing that is easily ruined:

Petter: In high school, I’ve decided to give a good first impression in front of the new teachers. I didn’t give a good first impression here. During the first lesson, someone threw an eraser at me and I started screaming and was sent out to the hallway! (Interview, Southern Town School).

In the classroom, the boy has to showcase these two contradictive images of himself virtually at the same time and in the same place. This is acknowledged to be difficult; as John put it, “If you want to get further up in the peer hierarchy in this class, you might go for that instead of studying”. Those who still choose to attempt both have to appear interested to the teacher while at the same time keeping up the appearance of ‘coolness’ to their classmates. This requires careful monitoring of public academic participation so as to ensure that it is neither too long nor too intense to jeopardise the more laid-back appearance required for a prominent position within the peer group. This positioning is, at least partly, played out in public; as the following incident shows, during the fieldwork it was common for boys to have their attention directed towards each other and to comment on each other’s statements and make jokes during lessons:

During a music lesson, the pupils play different instruments together in the school orchestra. Peter, who plays the guitar, turns up the volume so that it drowns out the other instruments. He is joking and imitating a ‘pop star and attracts the other boys’ attention. Dan, who plays the drums and is acting as a conductor, suddenly addresses Peter: ‘Turn down the volume, or go home, darling’. The teacher does not comment on the (sexist) joke but requests the other boys to ‘follow the drums, listening to each other’s accords’ (Observation, music lesson, Suburban School).

Obviously, boys such as Dan, who want to position themselves academically and aspire to high grades, cannot demonstrate the required coolness through explicit
anti-school attitudes in class, as this would ultimately affect the teacher’s impression of him. Instead, Dan behaves ‘nicely’ in front of the teacher while – at the same time – monitoring Peter’s performance when he tries to impress his classmates. So, as also shown by the other school classes in the project, the boy’s social positioning has to be managed through small group participation and conversations that run parallel to the participation in formal teaching. This parallel positioning is called for in each new constellation when pupils begin a new class or have a new teacher. Consequently, it is most intense early on during a semester. As Carl said: “Later, when everyone has found their roles, it is calmer in class”. After a while, when the social positioning is less intense, the atmosphere in the class becomes more relaxed.

The girls also seemed aware of the peer group’s importance for boys’ performances and commented on it. For instance, Hallina (from Mixed School) said that, “Everyone wants to get into college, but some [boys] end up in a bad routine and then it is difficult to change. And their buddies usually are the same”. As indicated by Hallina, pupils tend to socialise with like-minded people who have similar achievement patterns. This adds to the dual standards about what constitutes normal or desirable behaviour. However, such social norms differ between various school contexts. It is obvious from the analyses of the three schools discussed here – as well as from other schools in the project (see Gustafsson and Öhrn 2012) – that boys in some contexts explicitly distance themselves from studying, whereas in other contexts they appear more anxious to achieve. For instance, in the working-class and immigrant Suburban School, where most of the pupils are relatively low-achieving, the school’s function as a social arena tends to take prominence at the expense of academic positioning; the parallel positioning does not emerge as clearly as in Mixed School and Southern Town School where most of the pupils are higher achieving. Consequently, although the process of parallel positioning was observed during fieldwork and identified by boys in all classes, it was much more frequent in the middle-class settings. There was virtually no expression of the kind of ‘anti-school attitudes’ often reported in previous research (e.g. Francis 2009; Jackson 2010), not even in the working-class settings, but there was a kind of distance; some boys obviously find it difficult to understand the school codes and some appeared almost exhausted from trying.

**Teachers’ alliances with the successful boys**

The high-achieving and successful boys were seen to occupy much space in class, both physically and verbally. They appeared to be appreciated by teachers and interacted frequently with them during lessons. Laila, one of the teachers at the Town School, described some of the boys as “positive locomotives” who carry
the rest of the pupils with them. This makes the class as a whole more manageable for her:

Laila: In some classes, negative leaders and cultures rule, and it often rubs off on the class as a whole. In this class, however, some of the boys are ‘positive locomotives’. They are ambitious and others follow. As a teacher I’m grateful for that (Interview, Southern Town School).

Both the teacher and the high-performing boys seem to have a lot to gain from the alliance. The high-achieving boys are often singled out for attention, as seen in the following excerpt from our field notes:

During a lesson in chemistry, the teacher Bernt leads the pupils in a two-way discussion. Several of the boys place themselves at the front of the chemistry hall while all the girls sit further back. The teacher turns exclusively to some of the boys who are active and respond loudly to question seven when they are not asked. The girls look uninterested and some of them discreetly play with their cell phones (Observation, chemistry lesson, Suburban School).

Throughout this lesson, one girl (Janna) repeatedly raised her hand to answer the teacher’s question, but she was never asked and did not get access to the public discussion. Instead, the teacher exclusively involved the successful boys sitting in the front. Even though Janna tried to attract the teacher’s attention, he took no notice of her. This is an example of a pattern that some pupils highlight – that many teachers divide their attention quite unequally between different pupils. As one of the girls explained:

Isolde: The favourites receive much more attention from the teachers and it’s often the same pupils who get all the credit. They get a lot more chances to ‘show off’ than others (Interview, Southern Town School).

As the above excerpt shows, the high-performing pupils often get the most attention and this might result in a positive helix that builds up their self-confidence. Giving opportunities for pupils to demonstrate their skills, or make their competence visible during lessons, is crucial in a performative discourse in which concerns about marks and other measurable results are one of the most important driving forces (cf. Ball 2003; Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012). The uneven distribution of attention seems obvious to many of the pupils in the study, and also to those who themselves appear to be ‘favoured’:

Martin: It may well be that the teachers favour those who are high-performing. In maths, the teachers first go to us to ask ‘how have you solved this?’ It is natural, I think.
Jonas: Ok, it might be like that, yeah.
Martin: But I would not say it’s unfair, really. It gives you encouragement to continue.
Jonas: But then the others also should get some encouragement … but they might not receive it in the same way.
Martin: Well both of us are a little favoured, right? (Interview, Southern Town School)

Both Jonas and Martin belong to the group of high-achieving pupils in class, but they view the problem of the unequal distribution of attention in somewhat different ways. Martin said that it is natural that the high-achieving pupils receive the most attention, while Jonas questioned this (although at the same time seeming to justify it with the claim that those who can ‘best receive the attention’ deserve it most). Further, Martin monitors or controls the social order in the classroom. If some of the other boys try to check the social space and act cleverly before the teachers they run the risk of getting ridiculed in front of their peers:

Martin: You might have a little jargon and tease the others a bit but it’s nothing serious. Sometimes, you might bully someone a bit because he tries to seem clever. But actually, it’s a good thing to be smart! (Interview, Southern Town School).

As Martin’s statement implies, the high-achievers try to get the chance to qualify academically whilst at the same time ‘policing’ their classmates. These boys create the boundaries for the social arena (male hierarchy) and regulate the other boys’ opportunities to perform. As has been highlighted in previous research (see Martino 1999; Martino, Kehler and Weaver-Hightower 2009; Francis, Skelton and Read 2010; Skelton and Francis 2011), the high-achieving boys are also generally the boys with the highest social status, often from middle-class families. Typically, the boys with secure social status are not forced to constantly prove their manhood in order to be accepted. Instead, they can devote themselves to studying without jeopardising their masculinity. Thus, the boys who did well in class academically and received a great deal of positive teacher attention were typically also well positioned among their peers. They could occupy a lot of physical space and take up a good deal of teaching time in the classroom without being openly questioned by their peers; the teachers perceived them as good leaders who helped to raise the level of ambition in the class. Some pupils talked about such high-performing boys as in a sense typical of a more universal gender pattern: “The really smart ones usually are boys”, as Alice in Mixed School said (cf. Lahelma and Öhrn 2003). Or, as the teacher Theo said, “The boys have greater potential in general”. In line with this, boys also appeared as the most visible in class, and were typically the recipients of most (positive) teacher attention:

The boys position themselves more centrally in the classroom and take up more space, both socially and verbally. The teacher also caters more to the boys in the class during the lesson (Observation, Swedish lesson, Suburban School).
The idea that boys have greater potential than girls or are smarter might seem at odds with contemporary discourses on widespread underachieving by boys that point to their difficulties in school. Actually, several of the teachers in this study said they were well aware that boys on a group level performed less well than girls; they also indicated that they wished to compensate for this by focusing on the boys during lessons. Our observations also indicate that teachers pay more (positive) attention to boys than girls, but only to academic high-achievers – not to boys in general or the low-achieving boys in particular. It was generally the well-performing boys – rather than other groups of boys or any girls – who were singled out for teacher attention and conversations. Thus there is a risk that the ambition to focus more on boys to further their achievement, which has frequently been on the agenda in the Swedish media as it has internationally (see Arnesen, Lahelma and Öhrn 2008), might instead provide the already successful ones with extra attention and so widen the differences between high-and low-performing boys. This was acknowledged by a teacher at Mixed School, who said that:

Teacher Jan: It’s a mistake to prioritise boys in class because that’s based on the assumption that all boys perform worse [than girls] which might not be true (Interview, Mixed School).

This particular teacher also claimed that such actions would exert negative effects on the girls, and he instead proposed a norm-critical perspective to question the standards that are taken for granted. However, this teacher is an exception.

Concluding remarks
This ethnography of the three classes studied shows, in line with previous research (e.g. Holm 2008; Martino 1999; Martino, Kehler and Weaver-Hightower 2009; Francis, Skelton and Read 2010; Skelton and Francis 2011; Nyström 2012), that boys need strategies to balance their investment in school work with their adherence to peer-group norms of masculinity. As mentioned above, the ‘cool’ and high-achieving boys managed to perform well academically while at the same time being accepted by their peers. But others must negotiate the relationship between academic knowledge, learning and achievement, and their social positioning among peers. As Phoenix (2004b, 243) concluded, (some) boys have to spend a great deal of effort to be accepted while doing some schoolwork; she reported in her study that “Performances of masculinity were ... constrained by canonical narratives of masculinity. For this reason, many negotiated a middle position for themselves between being too academic or failing”. Some boys in our study deemed this dual positioning as simply too demanding to deal with. Faced with the dilemma of the parallel positioning, many prioritised their position in the peer group; to deviate
from present norms of youth masculinity was too high a price to pay for success in school. Our analyses point to the critical time sequencing of the process of performance: academic positioning needs to happen close to the first encounter with any new teacher and to be managed parallel to their positioning among peers. This was typically managed through what seemed to be a carefully self-monitored process during the short period of time when boys’ academic participation had to appear convincing to teachers, but neither too long nor too intense to interfere with their peer-group interactions and positioning. For boys who had difficulties performing well in school or who had an uncertain social position in the peer group, this seemed to be a relatively exhausting process. Boys from working-class and immigrant communities were generally far less likely than middle-class boys to be high-achieving and to take part in any parallel academic and social peer-group positioning in class. But those (few) who did managed the parallel positioning in similar ways as the middle-class boys (cf. Francis, Skelton and Read 2010), and like them experienced favourable responses from teachers. Hence a tentative suggestion from our limited data would be that the process of parallel positioning shares some features between different contexts.

The boys in the study who successfully managed the parallel positioning were typically acknowledged by other boys and occasionally even seen as a kind of role model. This supports international studies of successfully literate boys who, far from being marginalised by other boys, occupy a socially dominant position in the classroom (Skelton and Francis 2011). Further, the high-achieving boys were seen policing what was deemed as acceptable male behaviour in class. These boys regulated the framework for how much space the other boys could take academically, and did so without compromising their own social status. The high-achievers were also highly appreciated by teachers, and received much positive attention from them. They were seen as assets in class, as “positive locomotives”, helping to make lessons run more smoothly and involving other boys in formal school work. This prominent position might seem at odds with the discourses that prevail in both Sweden and internationally about boys’ under achievement and the difficulties they have in positioning themselves academically (e.g. Arnesen, Lahelma and Öhrn 2008; Epstein et al. 1998; Kenway and Willis 1998; McDowell 2000). Central to an understanding of this, as Haywood and Mac an Ghaı́ll (2013) have pointed out, is the tendency to homogenise boys and thus to neglect variations between groups and context. This builds on a binary that pictures girls as doing well and boys as doing badly—or underachieving—academically. Such tendencies are also demonstrated in this study by teacher worries about boys’ generally lower performance that served as a motive for focusing more on their achievements in class. As this attention did not target the low-achieving boys, but focused on the already high-achieving ones,
it helped promote their participation and good academic positioning. Thus to act on homogenising discourses about boys’ under achievement might underpin teacher focus on boys, and through this provide the already successful ones with further help and attention. Consequently, it risks further reproduction and deepening of the divide between different groups of boys.
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