

# Becoming a “foreigner”: The principle of equality, intersecting identities and social exclusion in the Norwegian school

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*This article explores how some minority students' self-definition as "foreigners" leads to their inability to also consider themselves as good and talented students in the Norwegian school. The minority students' self-definition as "foreigner" creates binary understandings of being a good and conscientious student, a definition that is often understood as being "Norwegian". Through observations and conversations with young minority students in upper secondary school about their everyday life, this article shows how the bodies and behaviour of some minority students are excluded in a firm and often-instinctive understanding of equality conceived as sameness. It is argued that even if the concepts of diversity and tolerance are important foundations in the Norwegian educational policy, this principle creates a specific notion of a "normal student". This tacit normality have different consequences for different minority student, creating complex intersected identities along the categories gender, social class and ethnicity. While the notion of a normal student creates social exclusion for some students with minority background, it gives an opportunity for success for others in the same educational system.*

## The principle of equality in Norway

Egalitarianism is a characteristic feature of the Western world (Dumont, 1986), and cultural studies suggest a special form of egalitarianism in the Nordic countries and in Norway (Seeberg, 2003; Pihl, 2009). Gullestad (2002; 2006) has analyzed the central value of equality (*likhet*) in the Norwegian society, as a version of egalitarianism, meaning “likeness”, “similarity”, “identity” or “sameness”. *Likhet* implies that social actors must consider themselves as more or less the same in order to feel of equal value.

*When they thus manage to establish a definition of the situation focusing on sameness, each of the parties – paradoxically – also gains confirmation of their individual value (Gullestad, 2002, s. 47).*

According to this logic, the interaction style through this cultural principle focuses on commonalities, while differences between social actors are played down.

The Norwegian principle of equality appears then to be a major cultural premise in the society, and it is described not just as a political concept, as with the Swedish *jämlikhet* [equality] and the French *égalité*. The Norwegian equality is more closely linked to the Norwegian culture than to political discourses. The understanding of equality is then more closely tied to the Norwegian people, to the way they behave and demeanour, *to equality as*

*sameness*, rather than to a political goal. Equality becomes then a characteristic of the Norwegian people, and this cultural value has an ethnical character in Norway (Gullestad, 2006; Pihl, 2009; Chinga-Ramirez, 2015).

One of the main discussion of this article is about the Norwegian educational policy promoting equality, and experiences of social exclusion of minority students in the Norwegian school. It explores how minority students experiences different social actors in school, such as teachers and students with Norwegian majority backgrounds, and it examines the way the cultural principle of equality is framed in a discursive understanding of an imagined sameness, giving unknown conditions for minority students' integration process in the Norwegian school and society. The article also discusses paradoxes and issues concerning cultural circumstances existing in the Norwegian society and the educational system that can produce success and social differentiation for minority students, and it examines the paradoxes regarding these student's experiences of recognition and social exclusion in school.

This article starts with a statement of the situation of minority students in the Norwegian school today. Previous research will be presented, continuing with the methodological and empirical data of the study. The analysis are based on theoretical and empirical discussions of the minority student's constructions of their self-understanding in school, and reflections about the creation of the self-definition as *foreigners*. At the same time, the analysis explores the creation of intersecting identities. As we will see, social exclusion in schools is not just a direct consequence of being ethnically different from the imagined sameness. The complexity of the minority students who succeed or fail are analysed through life stories of minority students belonging to several social categories at the same time (Bhopal & Preston, 2012).

### Ethnic diversity in the Norwegian school

Over the past four decades, Norway has undergone substantial socio-demographic changes. From being a relative ethnically homogeneous population until the 1970s, Norway is today a multicultural society, where over 16 % of the population have an immigrant background (Statistics Norway, 2016). These demographical changes affect the educational system, and the Norwegian government, through several public reports and white papers, has set diversity high on the educational agenda. Objectives on multiculturalism, tolerance and inclusion in and through education, are one of the pillars in the Norwegian educational system today (*Kompetanse for mangfold* (2013) [Competence for diversity]; *St.meld. 20: På rett vei* (2012) [On the right way]).

In 2010, 7000 students with minority background started in upper secondary school in Norway. Five years after, a third part quitted school before it passed three years, a third part completed upper secondary school, but without having passed all the subjects, and without a diploma. Moreover, the last third part completed upper secondary education with better grades than students with majority background, starting in higher education to a greater degree than Norwegian students (Statistics Norway, 2016).

Educational research suggest a polarizing tendency in terms of school achievement for minority students in the Norwegian school (Støren, 2010). It is, however, disagreement of the reasons or the recognition of this polarization in school achievement. Seeberg's (2003) doctoral thesis, based on six years of ethnographical fieldwork in an elementary school in Oslo and a corresponding field work in a primary school in Amsterdam, shows how perceptions of alterity are expressed in everyday school life in the Netherlands and in Norway. In the Netherlands, the principles of tolerance and freedom have the most important role, while the principle of equality is perceived as the most important and most valuable national characteristic in Norway. The school system in Norway is built around the idea of equality, while the educational system in the Netherlands is shaped by the idea of tolerance and freedom as the central. This gives different frameworks for how children learn to deal with diversity. In Norway, the equality limits are challenged in dealing with diversity, while in the Netherlands, the limits of tolerance are important (Seeberg, 2003). Music & Godø (2011), in their study on minority boys and their everyday life in a lower secondary school in Oslo, suggest that resistance practices based on street masculinity, often taken from a media conveyed street culture, are activated when these boys experience defeat at school. They argue that gender practices are important in shaping the minority boys school opportunities, showing that minority boys who are unable to create a good self-esteem through academic performance, plays a tough masculinity as a strategy to succeed socially and avoid the social position as a loser in school (Music & Godø, 2011).

The overall picture in the Norwegian society is that minority students have poorer school performance and interrupt upper secondary education to a far greater degree than majority students. Fekjær (2007) conducted a study of registry data from individuals with both immigrant and Norwegian background. In the study, she explored how ethnic differences in education can be explained by comparing majority and minorities in their educational choices. Fekjær (2007) found that minorities groups in Norway are more polarized than the majority in their educational choices: Many minority students quit upper secondary school, particularly in

general studies lines. Many of the students who continue do really well, sometimes better than the majority, and they often take education right up to Master Degree. Fekjær concludes emphasizing social class background as more important than ethnicity. She refers to a long tradition of educational research that has shown how students with middle-class backgrounds perform best in education. The reasons include better economy, knowledge of education, parents who involve themselves in schoolwork, greater professional knowledge, better ability to formulate, prioritizing education and a home environment that appreciates middle-class culture and behavior (Fekjær, 2007).

As we see, educational research focus on different dimensions to explain school segregation or drop out of minority students in the Norwegian school. Chinga-Ramirez (2015) doctoral thesis has, however, a multi-dimensional approach to minority students' experiences. In her ethnographical study, she explores minority student's social experiences in three upper secondary schools over a period of seven month. She shows how a complex social interaction process takes place in social meetings between majority and minority students in schools. Interwoven categories and intersections of ethnicity, skin color, religion, gender, social class and cultural competence creates minority students as both the subordinate (Subaltern), or "the same" in relation to the majority in the school context. The study shows how the Norwegian school is framed in both a Western, individualistic, middle-class mentality that is understood as pedagogical neutrality, giving minority students constraints, challenges and opportunities in coping the everyday life at school, depending on the social positioning they are attributed by school, along the several social categories they belong to (Chinga-Ramirez, 2015).

### Reflexive methodology and the empirical material

The point of departure of this study are classrooms and school observations in one upper secondary school, and a collection of counter-narratives provided by eleven students with minority backgrounds from one class. The data material was collected over a period of seven months in an ethnically diverse school in 2011-12. This is a comprehensive school where the vast majority of students are attending the programme for specialisation in general studies. This large urban school have more than 1000 students, and approximately 30 per cent of the student body comprises minority students. The empirical material consists of a minority class with 20 students, and three ordinary Norwegian classes, consisting of 25-30 students in each class. The minority student group consists of both girls and boys, aged 16-20. All of the students attend their first year in this upper secondary school, and the students come from

many different parts of the world (Rwanda, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burma, Somalia, Iraq, Poland, Lithuania, China, Thailand, etc.).

#### The minority class

The minority class function as a transitional model in the organization of the education of minority students in upper secondary school in Norway. The upper secondary schools in Norway are given the option to choose which model they want to use in dealing with minority students (St.meld. 20, [White paper] 2012). This school chose a semi differentiated pedagogical model, in which the students attend the minority class in subjects such as Norwegian, English and career counselling, while they attend the other subjects in an ordinary class with regular Norwegian students. This means in practice that these students belong in two parallel classes throughout upper secondary school, the minority class and an ordinary Norwegian class. The minority class allow newly arrived minority students with better-adapted teaching in Norwegian and English. This transitional model also allow establishing contact with Norwegian students by at the same time belonging to an ordinary Norwegian class. Students in the minority class have either lived for a short time in Norway, and they often have language challenges (Norwegian and/or English).

The minority students in this study belong to one minority class, and to three ordinary Norwegian classes, because they are scattered to different *normal* classes. The minority class was selected due to the focus on minority students in the Norwegian school, and due to the scope on inclusion and social relations with majority students in a Norwegian school context.

#### The qualitative reflexive process

An important source of information in this study was classrooms observations of minority students in both, the minority class and the regular Norwegian class, and observations in different school contexts (like in the cafeteria, at recess, in free periods, etc.). The reflexive process was initiated when the minority students changed behaviours in the minority class compared to when they attended the ordinary Norwegian class. Observations of this change became an important source of theoretical and empirical reflection that led to insight into how visible ethnicity, gender and social class, shaped the minority students' experiences of being different and construct the students self-understanding of becoming a *foreigner*.

### *Us as foreigners – the social construction of the minority students self-understanding*

During the observations and the informal conversations with minority students in different school contexts, I noticed that they had creative definitions of being Norwegian as opposed to being *a foreigner*. These definitions would often be counter to the students' actual ethnic origin, and often the minority students would define others and themselves as either Norwegian or foreigner. The students would often joke about being Norwegian and being a foreigner, and who was defined into these two categories (Norwegian and foreigners) would vary from one day to the next, from class to class and from one context to the next. Often they might cry out "*Now you've gone completely Norwegian!*" (In a derogatory way), or they could say "*Damn foreigner!*". These boundaries crossed ethnicity and skin colour borders, and I observed that the conscientious and quiet students were defined as Norwegian, and the silly and flippant students were characterized as foreigners. Haben, an 18-year old girl from Eritrea, expresses this:

*"I wonder why the foreign boys are so quiet in the Norwegian class and why they disturb and yell so much when they come to the minority class. It is surely difficult for them also to come to Norway; not just for me. They may have many conflicts that they want to vent in the minority class, but they interrupt a lot and sometimes it is uncomfortable to be in the minority class because of all the noise. But it is in this class that I have my friends at school"*

The minority class students gathered in the school cafeteria, during breaks, flocking together during free periods, and using the same seating and their regular benches, when in the school cafeteria. This applied to both girls and boys from different nationalities, ethnicities, skin colours and religions. Through the observations in the minority class, I noticed a friendship that transcended ethnic differences. The students became friends and wished to be together based on a kind of exile, which bound them together. It did not play a role which nationality the students belonged to, they found a sense community by being a foreigner in the upper secondary school. As Stella, a 16-year girl from Rwanda states:

*"In the minority class, we all are foreigners; we make jokes and have fun about Norwegians. There the students get help to understand the language, words and expressions we don't know in Norwegian and we also receive extra help from the teachers, and they take the time to give us better explanations than the teachers in the other Norwegian classes. I can be myself there".*

While boys (and some girls) in the minority class often joke and are rowdy in class, and act like *foreigners*, they change their behaviour and conduct themselves quietly and controlled in the Norwegian class. In the Norwegian class, they become *Norwegian*.

Safia, an 18-year old girl from Palestine, say this:

*It is a very good environment in the minority class. We are all friends. All the girls and boys are friends and we like each other. We joke, talk, and stuff. In the Norwegian class, I sit silent. It has been a few months since we started school, but I don't talk much in the Norwegian class and there nobody knows how good I'm in the subjects and stuff. They (Norwegians) probably think I'm a bit stupid or that I can't do anything. Norwegians are not so open to get to know other people. Maybe they don't want to know others foreigners. If you are different, you are not familiar with them.*

In the minority class, there is a movement away from self-definition as Somali, Indian, Iraqi and Afghan to a self-definition as foreigners, where being a foreigner becomes a common designation for students who are not Norwegian, white and *normal*, regardless ethnicity and skin colour. This process of becoming a foreigner in school appears to be important for students with minority backgrounds in the minority class. Here the students find support in each other and find a community in the integration process they are undergoing. Boya, a 20-year old boy from Burma express this:

*To be honest, I thought before, in the minority class, that "he was not thinking well, he did no good", but afterwards I became acquainted with some students in the class, so now I think that there is not just one thing that is right, but many. We learn about so many cultures and ways of being in class, and it's so nice to meet people from all over the world. I have realized that there are several cultures, yes, we are many in the world. When I'm in the regular class with Norwegians, I feel like I'm stupid and bad. But when I'm in the minority class, I feel quite as normal.*

When Boya is with Norwegian students, he feels stupid, and when he is with other foreign students, he feels equal. Many of the minority students are aware of the low status of the category *foreigner* in school, and several expressed that they felt stupid together with Norwegian students. Fakhira, a 16-year old girl from Somalia, express this:

*My favorite class is with many "foreigners". I feel like I can be myself, talk broken Norwegian and not be afraid to fool out of myself. It's so nice to be in company with students from other countries. When I am among the Norwegians I feel that they are much better than me and that I'm stupid, and when I'm with foreign students I feel that we are equal"*

These students' reflexions indicates that there may be othering processes and discursive ideas that create a conflict between the equal and the others in the Norwegian school. Here referring to the discursive understanding of equality as sameness in Norway, and how this cultural principle frame a particular understanding of sameness, implying being white and with Norwegian ancestry (Bhabha, 1994; Gullestad, 2006; 2006; Pihl, 2009; Chinga-Ramirez, 2015).

The feeling of being different from the Norwegian students is an experience many of the students in the minority class expressed. It is not just that they feel differently than Norwegian students, but they feel inferior differently than the majority at school. These

experiences can be analysed with Bhabha's theory of *fixity* in the structuration of the individual's self-understanding. Bhabha believes that processes of essentialisation and the notion of a human essence have been decisive in othering discourses, legitimizing hierarchical ethnic social relations in the Western world (Bhabha, 1994).

The creation of the minority students' self-understanding as *foreigners* is considered as a reaction to a stated and tacit normality in the Norwegian school (Pihl, 2009; Chinga-Ramirez, 2015). Being a foreigner describes an opposite imagined community, a similarity inside the minority class by being different from the Norwegian students, in contrast to the Norwegians imagined sameness (Gullestad, 2006). Within the minority group, this description is positive because it increases the sense of fellowship, but observations show that this at the same time leads to a self-inflicted segregation of students in the minority class. In this class, they create their self-understanding by being different from the majority, i.e. not white, not Norwegian, not *normal*. Here are some quotes that show the experiences of being different:

*None of the Norwegian students speaks to me in the Norwegian class. No one will work with me on assignments or other forms of cooperation. I do not feel accepted, although nobody mobs or bothers me directly. When there is teamwork, nobody chooses me, and when the class had an ice-breakers week at the start of the school year, no one asked even my name! It seems as if I'm invisible in Norwegian class (Salimah, 18-years, from Palestine).*

*I think it is difficult for foreigners to go in Norwegian schools. I've seen how other foreigners are being teased and bullied, and I think that's very bad. I have not experienced anything negative at this school, but I do not talk so much with other Norwegians either. In lower secondary school, I was bullied, I remember yet ... Norwegian youth have no respect for other people, and especially for other foreigners. For example, a student from Somalia. You can't just come and call him negro and stuff. I think that's disgusting (Yasir, 18-year, from Afghanistan).*

*I got extra attention from teachers after I started wearing hijab at school. It seems as if teachers think that I need extra help just because I wear the hijab, something I don't need all the time (Leilah, 16-years, from Iraq).*

*Norwegians may not want to get acquainted with foreigners. It is difficult when the teacher in the Norwegian class says that students can work in groups as they can choose by themselves, and no one picks me. Everyone gets a group, and I must often go to the teacher to say that I'm alone. It's sad (Sihar, 17-years, from Ethiopia).*

*I find that there are many who look ugly on me because I wear the hijab. If I go by, they move from me and pull away. But I don't care about it! (Selam, 17-years, from Somalia)*

Analysis of immigrants with similar experiences show how equality understood as sameness characterizes how people envision the national community, and points out the invisible

boundaries that are erected against those who are perceived as not belonging to this community (Gullestad, 2006). As we see, several of the minority students experience being treated differently and feeling different in school with Norwegians. Based on their experiences, it is the body and their visible ethnicity, which labels these students as different (Fanon, 2008). Camilla, a 16-year old girl from Lithuania, reflect about this from her social position as a minority student, European and white:

*"You are taken more seriously in Norway if you are white. Norwegians think that perhaps I am Norwegian, or that I come from a country that is not so far away. It's worse for those who come from Africa or Asia. They are exposed differently so no one talk to them. I notice it at school. It's strange that Norwegian teachers find me and other students from Europe automatically better at school just because we come from other European countries. Teachers consider me better than the others, so I often have to help students who struggle a bit more than I do. It often ends with me learning Norwegian and helping students from Africa or Asia in the minority class. I almost don't get any help from teachers to my own language learning"*

Camilla, as a white minority student, argue that the skin complexion is of significance in how teachers treat students in the minority class. Behind many experiences of marginalization and not belonging, we find opinions and feelings, widely held ideas and notions about what is right and normal. Camilla notice that the students in the minority class feel these boundaries on their body, through the reactions they experiences from students and teachers in school (Bhabha, 1994). The overriding self-definition as foreigners in the Norwegian school may partly be related to feelings of being physically different compared to white and normal Norwegian students in school (Olalde & Velho, 2011).

#### [The significance of the teacher](#)

Educational research has shown that students respond to teachers' expectations about their potential (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). Through the classroom observations, I was witness of an episode where a teacher had an othering approach in the minority class:

*It was a typical Norwegian subject period in the minority class, and I observed that several of the students talked and moved around the classroom, without listening to the teacher who told them to work on the tasks. They had just begun to answer questions from a text they had been given by the teacher, and I sat in the back of the classroom and observed students while they were working with tasks, either alone or in pairs. Several students spoke loudly and showed no respect for what the teacher told them. After a while, and after several messages from the teacher while the noise level rose significantly in the classroom, the Norwegian teacher shouted out this comment to all the students in the classroom: "Do you realize that none of the other teachers at the school want you because you behave like this and jump around like that? Why do you think nobody want to teach you?" One of the boys stands up and responds immediately: "Because we are foreigners, therefore no one will have us!" All students laughed loudly.*

This episode has at least two perspectives. One side is the teacher's perception of lack of control over students who make noise and do not listen to what she says. She experiences it as chaotic when the noise level gets too high, especially after she repeatedly tries to tell the students that they should be quiet. When she arrives with the above comment, it indicates that she considers the entire group of minority students as a homogeneous and problematic group that no teachers will teach. She says directly that none of the other Norwegian teachers want them because they make noise like that. The question is what happens to the minority students' self-understanding when they get such comments from teachers. Is this comment just a confirmation of what these students already know; that they are inferior Norwegian students and that there is therefore no teachers want them?

The other side is the students' experiences. I observed the same pupils blaring, danced and ravaged in minority class, be invisible and quiet as a mouse in Norwegian class. This suggests that since they could not express themselves in the Norwegian class, these students need to show who they were in the minority class, but in an enhanced form. I noticed, on several occasions, how students exaggerated their behavior in the minority class, as a kind of balloon that burst in a context where they could finally express who they were. This may suggest that these students transferred the energy they had accumulated in the Norwegian class, to the minority class.

One downside of this process may be that the minority students essentialise their subjectivity as *foreigners*: *We are this way because we are foreigners in school* (Said, 2003). These students may link the negative things that happen to them in school to the rationale that they are foreigners, that they are different, and that they, therefore, encounter resistance in school. They naturalise themselves as *foreigners*, and they naturalise *the Norwegians* as a counterpart to who they are. In this process, many students with minority backgrounds may become blind to other explanations of their experiences in school, and they may ascribe all the experiences and perceptions being a *foreigner* (Youdell, 2003).

Another drawback is that even if this process creates a positive sense of community within the group, being a foreigner becomes an umbrella term for many aspects of attending school (Gillborn, 1995). One consequence of being a foreigner is that students with minority backgrounds will not believe that they can do well in school because they are *foreigners*. Through defining foreigners as the counterpart of being Norwegian, where *Norwegian* means being quiet, conscientious and doing well in school, their self-definition as foreigner becomes

the counterpart of this. The designation *foreigner* becomes then a collective term that restricts the opportunities of foreigners by putting these students in the opposite corner of *correctness* and *being Norwegian*. The minority students may thus gain the idea that they cannot be both foreigners and do well in school, because being a foreigner implicitly leads to being defined as flippant, rowdy and unable to take school seriously. The result can be that the collective designation *foreigner* may restrict the opportunity the minority students have to define themselves, making them always a part of a collective category (Youdell, 2006).

### Intersected identities – issues of time, gender and social class

The challenge and difficulty of concluding that othering processes based on ethnicity and skin color occurs in the Norwegian school through discursive ideas of imagined sameness (Gullestad, 2002), is relevant due to the complexity of social life and social relations in schools (Bhopal & Preston, 2012). Through the fieldwork period in this upper secondary school, I had the opportunity to observe students with minority background in regular Norwegian classes. I observed them in schools public contexts (such as the cafeteria, in free hours, recesses, etc.), and in their regular Norwegian classes (where some of the students from the minority class were scattered). These students were often Norwegian born from immigrant parents, or they had arrived to Norway as children. These students talked Norwegian perfectly and their behavior and demeanor did not differentiate from regular majority Norwegian students. The complexity that arise here is that it seems that these students do not experience the same othering processes as the students in the minority class, although they also have a different complexion and an immigrant background that differentiate them from the majority students in school.

The reflexive process continued when I interviewed one of these students, Sarangan. Here is his story:

*Sarangan is a 16-year old boy, Norwegian born, from immigrant parents from Sri Lanka. Both his parents have higher education and they have a middle class background. He also has two elder brothers studying at the local university. Sarangan has attended the Norwegian school his entire life, and he is in a regular Norwegian class in upper Secondary school. He tends to do well in school and he works hard to achieve good grades. He is happy at school and he believes that it is up to him to get good grades and enjoy school. He has several Norwegian friends and he does not feel different from other Norwegian students. Sarangan speaks Tamil at home with his family and he practices the Tamil culture at home. He sometimes feels torn between the two different cultural contexts, but this is not a problem for him. He accustomed to switch according to the social context, and it feels natural for him. He sees this condition as positive, because he gets the best from both cultures, as he mentions. Sarangan feels that he can be more foolish with his mates at school than he can be at home with his brothers and parents. He also mentions that it is expected that he treat others Tamil adults with*

*respect and courtesy, something that is not so clearly emphasized in school in relation to Norwegian teachers. Since he is the youngest of three brothers, he has gotten easier with regard to boundaries to go to parties and stuff with Norwegian friends. However, he feels he has to be very respectful with his parents, because the Tamil culture is stricter and it is present at home.*

*Sarangan feels that the school has taught him much about the Norwegian culture and the Norwegian customs. He believes that he has become Norwegian by attending the Norwegian school and having Norwegian friends there. He feels formed and socialized in the Norwegian school, and he feels Norwegian inside, even if he does not look like one, as he mentions. Sarangan speaks perfectly Norwegian, he acts like a Norwegian and he feels no difference between him and other majority students, except his physical appearance. At the same time, he does not like to bring Norwegian friends to his home. It smells much spice in his house, and he is embarrassed of what the others will think of him when they smell so much spice. He brings friends only when they know him very well and he can trust them.*

In the analysis of Sarangan, I lean upon Staunæs doing perspectives and intersecctionality, where notions of power are liquid and contextually, and where a relational and contextual approach is favored. This theoretical position argue that the individuals self-understanding as f.ex. a women or a minority occurs in the context in which they are relationally connected, and can thus change in other contexts that understands these categories differently.

Individuals can be part of several power structures simultaneously, and while some categories may be important in some contexts, they may lose much of its power in other contexts.

Sometimes they reinforce each other, while in other contexts the interweaving of social categories weaken its effect (Staunæs, 2003). Interseccionality, as a theoretical framework in understanding social interaction and social relations, focuses on the intertwining and the entanglement between several categories, and it explores the individuals social positioning in different contexts. This framework states that although ethnicity is an important category for the construction of self-understanding, it always interact with other categories, such as gender and social class. For individual's, social categories never operate alone in structuring self-understanding. From an interseccional perspective, this means that although ethnicity is still a relevant category in the understanding of minority student's social experiences in school, I nuance the meaning of ethnicity with an enhanced look for complexity and a focus on multi-dimensional analysis of the students' lived life (Winker & Degele 2011).

Although Sarangan is a minority student and has a dark complexion, he does not feel different in school's social context, as many of the other students in the minority class do. Sarangan was born in Norway and he speaks good Norwegian, he masters the social codes and norms, and he has the ability to adapt to different cultural contexts. This suggests that knowledge of social norms and rules, as well as mastery of the Norwegian language are important categories

in the inclusion of students with minority backgrounds. Knowledge about social norms and rules, and language acquisition requires time, and time, as a social category, is for this reason important for the construction of the minority students' self-understanding. None of the students in the minority class has lived in Norway for more than seven years, in contrast to Sarangan who were born in Norway. However, time is not a guarantee or security from experience marginalization and othering processes in schools. Statistics and research show how Norwegian born youth with immigrant background, can end up in a subculture where street masculinity and acting tough may be an escape for low academic performance (Music & Godø, 2011). In this context, social class background is an important category in structuring minority student's self-understanding.

Students in schools are always coded by gender, ethnicity, social class and other social categories, and it is problematic to analyze social inequality in education without integrate many categories. Sarangan has, in addition to be a minority student and born in Norway, a middle class background with higher educated parents and siblings. Educational research (Bourdieu, 1991; Fekjær 2007, Chinga-Ramirez, 2015) argue that schools are positioned in a middle class understanding of the world, following middle class standards for acting, being and socializing. For Sundaran, the entanglement of both, his socialization in Norway, his knowledge of Norwegian rules and norms, as well as his middle-class background, contribute that he can feel at home in the Norwegian school. He says that he does not feel different Norwegian students at school, because he feels Norwegian inside. He manages to be Norwegian and normal in school, although he has a different ethnic background and a different complexion.

What is interesting in the empirical material of this study is that Stella, a 16-year old girl with an upper class background, from Rwanda, feels marginalization and othering experiences in the Norwegian school, despite her upper social background. Stella attend the minority class, and she has lived seven years in Norway. Here we can analyze the interweaving effect of time, ethnicity and social class as categories that create different conditions for the students' experiences in school (Bhopal & Preston, 2011). For Stella, the short time she has lived in Norway surpass her upper social class background, because she does not manage the cultural social codes and the language in the school context.

When it comes to an analysis of gender, it is interesting that Sarangan, due to his social class background and his socialization in Norway, he does not need to play out the street

masculinity mentioned by Music & Godø (2011). Nuanced statistical analyzes conducted by Statistics Norway (2016) show that boys with working class backgrounds are the big losers in the Norwegian educational system, while girls with both working and middle class backgrounds are the winners in the same educational system. Minority boys with working class background may face a double marginalization in school, due to both, ethnicity and class socialization. The only form for scape from this reality, is an over communication of tough masculinity in schools.

When it comes to minority girls with both working-class and middle-class background and their success in the Norwegian school system, Rosten shows, through her sustained fieldwork in the suburbs of Groruddalen in Oslo, that differences can be explained through parenting style and gender roles in youth subcultures (Rosten, 2017).

Although both boys and girls have a pressure from home to do well in school, there are different expectations towards sons and daughters in other areas. The girls are more at home after school and they are followed up more stringent, while boys often are allowed to hang out at the center and be long out in the evenings. For girls it is socially accepted in youth subcultures to be good at school, and girlfriends seem to influence each other in that direction. The girls at Groruddalen are often very ambitious and get higher education even though no one else in the family has it. This phenomenon, to succeed in school and higher education despite their parents' lack of education, often explained by the so-called immigrant drive (Leirvik, 2016). Immigrant parents motivating their children to go the extra mile to school to increase their life chances, define the immigrant drive. This can vary between ethnic groups, and it appears that this drive does not turn out the same way for boys and girls (Rosten, 2017).

For boys it is easier to see a distinction. Often is the boys who have parents who are keen to follow up on their schoolwork, or boys with parents who have higher education, who succeed. Sarangan belong to this category with high-educated parents. Rosten believes that it can be problematic for working class boys to be a school clever young man in the youth subculture often characterized by macho ideals - where the boys should be tough and cool (Music & Godø, 2011).

Many immigrant boys are actually interested in school, but they are not necessarily recognized because of it. Often they must under communicate this interest in order to fit into the youth subcultures. Moreover, it is not necessarily the youth subculture who expect these boys to be tough and cool; many minority boys from Groruddalen experience such

expectations from mainstream society all the time, often through the image created by them in the media (Rosten, 2017).

I have analyzed the possible reasons that minority girls are winners in the Norwegian education system, while boys with working-class background are the losers in the same system. As I have explored, the creation of the minority student's self-understanding depend on the entanglement of several social categories acting at the same time. It is not enough to focus upon one social category in order to understand the minority student's social experiences. Social analysis of time, gender and social class, are required to catch the complexity of social life that presents itself in different social contexts. Nevertheless, it is important for the Norwegian educational system to gain knowledge about the significance of the categories ethnicity and complexion, as social dimensions that also influence students' self-understanding in schools, even in the colorblind Norway.

### Conclusion – paradoxes in the polarized school system in Norway

The self-definition as a *foreigner* structures the experiences of minority students in the Norwegian school. The minority students state that the ethnic dimension is often made relevant in schools, even when it should be irrelevant, and moreover, ethnicity is often made relevant in an essentialist and negative manner (Said, 2003; Bhabha, 1994). Social and cultural discourses, as the Norwegian principle of equality understood as sameness and the invisible boundary between *the normal* and *the abnormal* are played out in school's context in such a way that these students encounter many situations, which marginalize them as *foreigners* (Gullestad, 2006; Seeberg, 2003).

In this article, I have analysed the complexity in the construction of the minority student's self-understanding, raising paradoxes and discussions of the significance of skin complexion and ethnicity for experiences of othering in the Norwegian school, focusing on the significance of time, social class and gender in structuring the minority students' self-understanding in schools.

The other paradox in the Norwegian educational system is that although the minority class was created according to political intentions of providing extra-adapted education for better integration of minority students; the argumentation in this article shows how minority students feel inferior and different in Norwegian classrooms, when they at the same time attend minority classes. The minority class functions as a social shield against an

uncomfortable external reality, where they feel defined as *different* from what is *normal* for Norwegian students.

The Norwegian educational system faces a major challenge when immigrant students with experience being inferior to Norwegian majority students. The Norwegian principle of equality is under serious pressure when a large group of students find themselves on the outside of the equity in school's social arena. It is fundamentally important that the Norwegian educational system acquire knowledge about adaptation processes for students with minority backgrounds in minority classes, and the recognition of the importance of time, parenting style, gender behavior and social class for the processes of cultural self-definition of this group of students. This knowledge can prevent the creation of ethnic divisions in educational contexts and prevent segregation and marginalization of groups of students who do not fit into the normality in the Norwegian school.

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