Multi-ethnic Girls' Social Positional Identities in Educational Transitions

Solveig Roth and Dagny Stuedahl

Abstract: In this article, we examine the case history of a young multi-ethnic Norwegian girl, whom we call Anna, from the age of 15 to 17 to show how her self-understanding of positionings within her educational transitions illustrates how gendered expectations in a Norwegian context influence girls' future trajectories. We use the concepts of social positional identities in figured worlds and performativity to explore self-understanding. Anna's case history illustrates how gender performativity comes about out of a complex web of family, school, and societal expectations. We discuss the tensions Anna experienced in her educational trajectory and the changes in her performative positioning when she entered upper secondary school. We consider the ways in which this had implications for her future life trajectory and offer suggestions to educators on how to understand and support the different learning trajectories of multi-ethnic students.

Keywords: educational trajectory, ethnography, gender equality, Norway, performativity, positioning

Introduction

Norwegian gender equality ideals are in line with those of the Nordic welfare state model; they seek to remove the gender divide in all aspects of society like family, education, and work life. However, these ideals are not yet fully realized. In addition, female students, particularly in vocational studies, tend to study the health-related topics thought suitable for them (Ministry of Children and Families 2015–2016). Over recent decades, Norway has become more multi-ethnic and this has led to an increase in gendered family practices and, in turn, to public interest in the ways in which young people, particularly those who have immigrant[1] parents, construct their lives within their families and how they view educational possibilities (Kavli and Nadim 2009). In this article, we explore ethnic-minority girls' identity processes and educational trajectories with a view to enhancing understanding of these so that schools can support them more effectively.

We consider the ways in which Norwegian ethnic-minority girls experience the complexity of gendered ideals and expectations during the transition between lower and upper secondary school. The transition presents possibilities for change in their positionings and future trajectories (Roth and Erstad 2015), so we need to know more about how girls understand these positionings and how they shape future orientations. In line with Sten Ludvigsen et al. (2011), we define learning broadly in that we encompass how resources in daily life and school can have implications for educational trajectories given that engagement in learning across formal and informal settings takes place, as Glynda Hull and James Greeno (2006) remind us.

We use the concept of social positional identities (Holland et al. 1998) to understand young girls' engagement in learning and their transformations and personal development. Using this concept alongside Judith Butler's (1988) perspectives on performativity, we focus on how girls change themselves performatively to shape future positions. We work with the question of how young girls understand themselves and perform their identities, and how these change in educational transitions.

The empirical material comes from a large-scale ethnographic project[2] conducted in a multiethnic suburb in Norway. Following Rachel Thomson (2009), we present the biographical case history of one young ethnic-minority girl, Anna, who was born into a Punjabi-speaking Sikh family in Norway. We investigate her educational trajectory and explore how she understands herself and how she changes her positioning regarding opportunities and constraints in the transition. Anna's case illustrates how gendered expectations influence identity formation in the complex web of family, school, and society.

Positional Identities and Performativity in Figured Worlds

We focus on biographic factors and social interactions regarding identity in process along with future orientations (Thomson 2009). In an Australian study, Julie McLeod and Lyn Yates constructed biographical case histories to show how educational ambitions are mediated subjectively and facilitated by family and hierarchy positions in the society. They found that young girls face educational expectations and politics in the work imperatives contained in statements such as "to be successful and to be their own persons" (2006: 107). These imperatives influence educational trajectories in school, and, in everyday culture, influence learning as these scholars point out.

We use the concept of positional identities and figured worlds (see Holland et al. 1998) to understand young girls' educational trajectories as outlined by Ludvigsen et al. (2011). Here, positional identities are understood as dynamic entities in and of social interactions between people in different contexts; through social interaction, individuals can position, form, and understand themselves as persons. Luis Urrieta (2007) argues that identity is constituted by the labels people place on themselves and on others, especially in school. For example, elsewhere, (Roth and Stuedahl 2017) we identify ethnic-minority girls who performed rebelliousness in school in response to feeling constricted by the Norwegian equality discourse. Here, we investigate how students position themselves and others, and the observed positionings in school.

Dorothy Holland et al. (1998) argue that individuals inhabit many incoherent self-understandings and changeable identities. Specifically, these are positional identities (experienced) and figured identities (self-made) that are performed in social contexts called figured worlds. These worlds are "socially produced, culturally constructed activities" (Holland et al. 1998: 40–41) during which people come to produce new self-understandings conceptually, materially, and procedurally. These "identities in practice" (171) form in relation to socially organized, historically situated spheres of activity within which practices are embedded. Furthermore, identity is not bound by prescribed categories such as gender or ethnicity. Rather, it is negotiated and socially produced *in situ*. Therefore, in figured worlds, people "figure who they are" (128) and produce personal and social identities through negotiation of positional identities. Urrieta specifies that when positioned, people engage less in self-making, focusing, instead, on accepting, rejecting, or negotiating the provided identities (Urrieta 2007). We are interested in how girls negotiate different provided positionings, respond, and position themselves accordingly.

According to Holland et al. (1998), even though identity is not bound by prescribed categories, positional identities can relate to categories across figured worlds. Markers (signs) that cross figure worlds can be associated with social categories. Different religious symbols, such as headscarves, can stereotype someone as a so-called oppressed woman within some figured worlds or as a woman who fears God in others. The associations (being oppressed or fearing God) between the marker (headscarf) and the category (gender) are practical and cultural parts of the reproduction of social divisions. People can also respond to positions that contradict their opinion, for example, of being "oppressed" (140). Hence, dominant hierarchies, such as the Norwegian majority equality ideals working against ethnic-minority family discourses, can also affect positional identities. In this way, positional identities involve the day-to-day social interactional structures of lived worlds; they are a person's apprehension about her or his particular social position that depends on others who are present. Thus, positional identities can relate to gender and gendered markers, power relations, and claims to social positions. Positional identities reveal how social interactions contribute to the formation of identity that leads to self-understanding (Holland and Leander 2004). In our analysis, we focus on the tensions that girls may experience regarding their social positions, gendered markers, ideals, and expectations that depend on others in their figured worlds and over time.

To understand how positional identities are mediated based on self-understanding, we are inspired by Butler's (1988) theory of performativity as discursive acts and constitutional positioning. Butler claims that persons are both constrained and enabled by the gendered discourses through which they emerge as subjects. Central to this are the ways in which gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and which possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts. Butler's perspective is, according to Claudia Ruitenberg (2007), suitable for understanding students as subjects whose actions and identities depend on and can change the contexts in which they take part. By applying Butler's perspectives on performativity to the social positional identities devised by Holland and her colleagues (1998), we seek to understand girls' performative responses to social positionings and how they may change. In using cultural resources, such as reading novels in response to present social positions of identity, people can act upon past experiences to reform their identity as "acts of the moment" (Holland et al. 1998: 139). (See, also, Wortham 2004.)

We use the concepts of positional identities and figured worlds to analyze the tension between young girls' non-academic and educational possibilities on the one hand, and the constraints they experience through family, friends, and sociocultural norms on the other. We are interested especially in identifying girls' social positional identities when they move between their families' figured worlds and those of others, and in the impact on their self-understanding and their performative response for their future orientations. For this reason, we can use Anna as a representative of these girls to investigate the interplay between social positional identities in educational trajectories and the academic and social performative responses that influence gendered future trajectories.

Research Context and Methodology

Norway's educational system has three different levels: primary; lower secondary; and upper secondary school. Primary school (for 6- to 12-year old children) and lower secondary school (13 to 16) are compulsory. Although upper secondary school (16 to 19) is optional, over 95 percent of students enter it immediately after attending lower secondary school.

We carried out our fieldwork in a multi-ethnic suburb of about 100,000 inhabitants in a town of 600,000 people that was populated originally by Norwegian working-class families. However, since the 1970s, many immigrant groups have settled there; in many neighborhoods more than 50 percent of the inhabitants are immigrants. Today, 17.3 percent of the Norwegian population is comprised of immigrants, of which 253, 483 are from Asia. For the students born in Norway to immigrant parents, 80 percent of the girls and 63 percent of the boys finish upper secondary school within five years (Statistics Norway 2018).

An Ethnographic Approach

We conducted an ethnographic study from 2012 to 2014, during which we explored young people's self-understanding, educational trajectories, and thoughts about education and the future, as experienced over time and across the contexts of home, school, and societal expectations. We collected the data as part of a large-scale research project, "Learning Lives," between 2009 and 2013 that focused on young people, in which we held 60 interviews with three cohorts of participants. The research topics included the implications of growing up in Norway, immigration, homeland situations, interests, friends, learning, education, and future prospects. The interviews elaborated recursively on these topics. This study consisted of data from cohort two that was made up of students chosen from two of the seven schools in the main project from grade 10 (15 years of age) to the second year of upper secondary school (17 years of age).

The research work started in each school, where the students received information about the research topics. Their parents had to approve their participation in the project, and approximately 80 percent of the students at each school were included. After we spent time getting to know these students through short interview sequences, we started the participant observation with a randomly selected group of ten boys and ten girls. They represented different ethno-religious groups and non-believers. The first author collected the data from Anna, which is central to this article.

As we know from Rachel Thompson (2009), longitudinal studies during which depth, contradiction, and trust are built up over time, meetings between informants and researchers have the potential to create important insights despite narrative limitations. It was therefore important to account for thematic and ethical guidelines in a way that allowed participants to anticipate the consequences of participation. They were informed that the data would be stored for five years, and that anonymized data could be published. The methodology was intended to ensure integrity through dialogue, so it was also important that the participants could speak freely without fear of any repercussions and our impression was that students and their parents saw the importance of talking about the research topics. Before we started the participant observations, the students were asked to withhold especially personal information, and they were told that they could withdraw information or quit the project at any stage. We followed the Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology for the selection of participants and research ethics by The National Committee for Research Ethics (NESH 2019).

The types of interviews and observations used for the 20 participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Timing of the interviews and observation types

Time	**End 2012 and Spring 2013** Lower secondary 10th grade, students aged 15			**TRANSITION**	**Fall 2013** Upper secondary 1st grade, students aged 16	**Fall 2014** Upper secondary 2nd grade, students aged 17	
Place	School	Leisure	Home		Leisure	School	Leisure
Activity and type of input	Participant observation School work Pictures Web pages Blogs, diaries Field notes	One-hour formal interview (individual) in study classes Audio Transcript	Participant observation and open-ended interviews Audio Transcript Field notes		One-hour formal interview during participant observation Audio Transcript Field notes Web page Blogs	Participant observation and open-ended informal interviews Audio Transcript Field notes	Participant observation and open-ended informal interviews Audio Transcript Field notes
Events	Classes Breaks Museum visits Cultural evenings	Sport activities Youth club Shopping Café Neighbourhood	Home visit Phone		Sport activities Youth club Shopping Café Neighbourhood Office	In the class (one girl only) Breaks	Sport activities Youth club Shopping Café Neighbourhood Office

Participant observations and recursive interviews provided insight into how the participants created meanings in the practices of self-understanding, learning, and future orientations. The field notes described the social positioning we observed.

Creating Case Histories of Identity in Process

To analyze how Anna understood herself and changed positions, we drew on Thomson's longitudinal biographical "method-in-practice" (2009: 13) to create case histories. The method is useful for approaching identity processes in temporal themes. In the field of biographical research, the life story is the data, whereas the life history, drawing on a range of data sources, is the analytical story that is told. A rich dataset becomes a case history only through emplotment, and researchers must negotiate, as it were, with one story with many events and senses of time and discordance and concordance. Transforming longitudinal data accounts into a case history entails inductive identification of the themes (family positionings, education, arranged marriage, educational trajectory, gender equality, inclusion, and performative responses to positions in school and beyond). Analysis of the data accounts in later material recalled earlier statements.

However, there is not a singular chronological story, but, rather, a series of partial narratives, each of which captures Anna's figured worlds over three years in the contexts of family, school, leisure, and society. These figured worlds, which represent the spaces through which Anna's project of the self is constructed, give rise to the narrative threads of a wider biography (see Thomson 2009)—her educational trajectory. The theme-based categories are organized before and after the transition to upper secondary school. Analyzing educational trajectories (see Ludvigsen et al. 2011) across contexts over time visualizes how resources in figured worlds play a role in changes in performativity and future trajectories. This case history is written in the past tense to show that each description was based on a situated observation; the descriptions are not intended to serve as timeless truths as Kris Gutierrez and Barbara Rogoff (2003) remind us.

Understanding Anna's Educational Trajectory

Anna lived with her parents and an older sister, while another older married sister lived in the neighborhood. Our early field notes indicate that Anna was an ambitious student, but her grades were somewhat below average. Anna attended Punjabi language classes at the Sikh tuition club. She wore Sikh dresses and a *bindi*.[3]

Family Positionings: Education, Marriage, and Gendered Expectations

We begin here with Anna's story within the family; this was an important factor in shaping expectations that affected how she articulated her self-understanding.

Education

It was clear that Anna's educational ambitions were embedded within a family culture of self-improvement influenced by their migration to Norway. In the state of Punjab (India), her family were farmers, and 15-year-old Anna explained that they saw that education was valuable for their daughters.

> My parents believe that money can be lost, while education lasts for life. I work a lot with school tasks and homework, but good grades do not come easily. I focus on all the subjects, and my sister assists me. She is a nurse. When a test is approaching, she prepares questions for me. I attend private tuition as well. …
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> In my family, girls normally choose health studies; one sister is a nurse, and the other is a medical secretary. [In these occupations] you have to be quiet, polite, and service-minded to help and respect people. That fits well with my upbringing. In my religion, it is important for girls to behave quietly and show respect.

And later, in the same interview, Anna said, "I want to apply to a vocational healthcare course to become a health worker, perhaps even a nurse, if my grades allow." Here Anna described a family culture in which the parents and their children are positioned in a collective educational project.

When she was 16 years of age, we met her again. We asked her about subjects connected to family expectations. She said,

> I must behave properly. And make good food, but Mom says it is not that important—it is up to me. If I do not respect those around me, my stomach starts to churn. It is a part of my upbringing. That is important to me.

We can see that important gendered positionings that Anna learned from her family's figured world include respectfulness and the value of education.

This made her take a social position from which she focused on a future occupation in the healthcare field, where respect is important.

Arranged Marriages

During the fieldwork, when Anna was 15, she was interested in reflections on different forms of marriage seen in relation to her sister's marriage. In a diary assignment she wrote, "My oldest sister lives nearby; she is married [in an arranged marriage] and has children. I visit her a lot and do occasional babysitting."

When she was 17 in upper secondary school, we met her again. She said that her other older sister had entered an arranged marriage.

> My sister has married a Sikh from Punjab, but things are not going well. He stayed indoors this winter even though his family said he was social. He is an engineer with a degree from India. My family is concerned. They may split up.

Later that day, during the participant observation, Anna said that she had a boyfriend. They had met at a Sikh function and kept in touch via Facebook. It was important to her that he was Sikh; Anna said she could not marry a person with another ethno-religious background. "I cannot be with a boy before I am married. We have high moral standards and expectations."

From this, we can see how Anna reflected on her family's past and current gendered positionings regarding forms of marriage. Drawing on her sisters' experiences, she seemed to have made a decision about choosing a boyfriend on her own. It might be a performative response to enter into a successful marriage in the future. However, she follows the family norms regarding refraining from being with a boy face-to-face before marriage.

Informal Influences: Gender, Equality, and Inclusion

Here we explore Anna's involvement in leisure activities, which can be understood as figured worlds giving rise to resources for realizing the self within one's educational trajectory.

Anna mentioned that she enjoyed talking to an ethnic Norwegian neighbor, an elderly woman. She said that they discussed topics such as women's rights, and that the woman lent her books. She said,

> My favorite novel is *Cry of the Peacock* [by Gina B. Nahai 1991]. This novel describes the history of women in Iran from Muslim and Jewish perspectives. It is about girls and their daily lives in forced marriages, equality in different cultures, and children's rights. Peacock was married off at the age of nine. Peacock is oppressed; she managed to run away.

Anna did not comment on feeling any prejudice from her neighbor such as an indication that she is not part of the equal, liberal, and modern Nordic culture.

During the fieldwork, when Anna was 16, we met her again after school during her first year of upper secondary school. She said,

> We were about to go to the cinema that day [22 July 2011],[4] back then but listening to the radio, we decided to head back home instead. I became more politically engaged after that. I pay attention to all relevant political stuff.

Anna added,

> I attended a meeting in the Workers' Youth League (Norway) where I met Prableen Kaur. She talked about her life experiences, like having been bullied and surviving the terror attack on 22nd of July. She promoted human rights and working 'for the better' in multiethnic contexts. Kaur encouraged me to engage in politics in order to improve our local community.

Here we can see that reading novels, talking about equality with her neighbor, and meeting Kaur functioned as resources that catalyzed her self-understanding, or, in other words, her social-relational positioning. Her performative responses were to engage in politics, learn about gender practices in different cultures, and desire to learn more about living in a multi-ethnic society.

Performative Responses to Positions in School and Beyond

Here we go on to explore Anna's gender performative responses to positionings and expectations in the figured worlds of family, school, and the modern liberal Nordic society.

In our earlier 2012 field notes, we can see that Anna's understanding of herself at the age of 15 was that she was an ambitious, hardworking student, in line with the family's expectations. The following excerpt is illustrative.

> Anna had received a D on her essay and wanted to do better. She approached the teacher and asked about how to improve. The teacher asked her to pair up with another student when they were going to look at the essays. Anna went straight back to her desk and began to correct the text on her own. The classroom was a little noisy, but Anna kept on working alone. Anna said, 'I will try to get help from my sister and then submit a new draft.'

We noted, "She did not approach classmates for cooperation, nor did they approach her. The teacher did not seem to notice."

The following excerpt, also from our 2012 fieldnotes, illustrates Anna's social positioning when she was about to present her interest in gendered issues.

> Anna was about to present her work on the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* [by Khalid Hossain, 2007]. She connected her laptop to the projector, but nothing happened. The class started to laugh while Anna was intent on solving the problem. One of the socially active boys in the class offered help. … Even though the class was noisy and seemed to neglect her presentation, she kept on presenting. … The teacher did not intervene in the students' behavior. He gave Anna a short and neutral response.

An academic performative response to expectations about succeeding in school was to be proactive in her approach with the teacher so that she could improve in school, a possible transgression of the quiet family position. Anna's social-relational performative positioning in her figured world of school was to be quiet; she did not approach other students for collaboration. Anna reverted to her family to solve tensions about academic and social challenges at school. The school's approach may have been to treat all students in gender-neutral and equality-based ways so that everyone receives her or his share of attention (see Honkasalo 2013). The teacher did not seem interested in the gendered topics in Anna's presentation.

When Anna was 16, she was accepted at the vocational healthcare program in upper secondary school. She said,

> I like my new class. We are only 14 girls, and everybody is very nice. Our teachers encourage us to be respectful in class; they emphasize that respect is an important skill in the healthcare system. Therefore, we have to be respectful in school, too.

During our 2014 fieldwork, when Anna was 17, we met her again after school. The first author commented,

> When I met Anna, I could not recognize her. She wore black jeans, a white blouse, and a wide belt around her waist. She wore sunglasses and talked on the phone. She waved at [me] while talking, and then she … approached [me]. … When we walked in the shopping mall, she chatted with many locals. Anna seemed to be socially confident.

Anna said that education was no longer her only focus area. She commented that her class had discussed who would be elected to the student council. After some classmates had encouraged her to be a candidate, she was elected. Anna talked about her aspirations.

> I have signed up to the student organization's county board as well. I will see how far I can get. The members of the county board members will vote. There are five vacant seats. I will have a speech before the vote takes place and tell them why I have chosen to go for a seat.

Later, in the same 2014 interview, Anna explained,

> My Norwegian side has grown stronger due to this. I even speak Norwegian with my sisters. We [Sikhs] are not usually allowed to use Facebook; now I can even use that. We have groups for the students' organization board.
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> . . .
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> I have read a lot of books—political stuff, social politics, and women's liberation. It is important to me because I am a woman. We work as much as men do; we do not have to follow an old-fashioned pattern where women take care of children.

After a short pause, Anna added, "In this new position, I must represent all the students [in the multi-ethnic class]."

These statements revealed Anna's belief that contributing to equality in the multi-ethnic community required her to be involved, to perform her Sikh and Norwegian identities, and to learn more about other cultures and equality so she could represent multi-ethnic students.

In the last interview, in 2014, when asked to describe herself, Anna responded,

> I am a Sikh with one leg in each culture; I am social, interested in politics, eager about schoolwork, and in the process of growing up. However, I want to become a health worker. … Without education, you will not get a job, and you will not manage to live properly. I like to show that I am an independent girl. I manage well on my own; to me, this is important. . . . Perhaps I am three-cultural or something in between. It really does not matter.

Later, in the same interview she added, "Sometimes my parents think I am too independent. They say: 'You should not do everything alone.' I do not like to ask for help; it is annoying. I like to be very independent."

At the end of this interview, we asked her where she would be in five years' time. She said,

> I want to contribute to a community rooted in equality and inclusion. However, I must prioritize education, which is necessary to get a job. I want to work with healthcare, earn my own money, and become independent.

Here we can see that Anna has changed her self-understanding. For example, she has gone from focusing on her education to taking a student council role. In order to achieve this as an ethnic-minority girl, she took the performative position of being knowledgeable about minority issues. Anna understood herself as a politically engaged citizen who wanted to contribute to society.

In this phase, she increasingly positioned herself as independent. From whence does this position stem? And to what is this a response? Anna refrained, for example, from using markers such as a *bindi*. Perhaps her performative position was a response to a Norwegian imperative about independence that may entail that ethnic signs should not be visible. Was this position chosen to avoid being categorized as oppressed—and, if so, by whom? We can see that Anna positioned herself actively in relation to the independent woman of the future.

Discussion: Connecting Past, Present, and Future Trajectories

Anna was positioned toward education and being an economic contributor, as were the other nine girls in this study. Interests such as different gendered practices, equality, and inclusion in a multi-ethnic society seemed to play an increasingly important role in defining her academic position in school. Anna developed and performed a socially engaged academic position in school in line with the Norwegian National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion in School (Ministry of Education 2018). Her future family, political, and work life positionings made her see future possibilities in her multi-ethnic suburb.

Our main interests lay in how Anna positioned herself academically across the figured worlds of the family, school, and leisure time, and how she used available resources in these figured worlds in terms of gendered trajectories. Tensions regarding confidence, social positioning, performative responses, and academic results were crucial to Anna's self-understanding, although feeling disempowered in grade 10, she gradually took control by accepting the student council position. Anna's initial position was as a student who did not receive additional help, and whose interest in equality across cultures was not recognized. In upper secondary school, however, she displayed positive views of her future life trajectory.

We can see that Anna drew on her interest in gender issues in the student council role. She felt comfortable taking on this role when the other students encouraged her in a respectful school environment. In accordance with McLeod and Yates (2006), for example, we found that societal ideals like, for example, what is known as being your own person that were negotiated by multi-ethnic Australian students, also influenced Anna academically.

Anna seemed to find her family trajectories and gendered positionings both inspiring and burdensome. She was positioned to be polite and respectful, anticipate having an arranged marriage, be educated in the field of healthcare, and contribute to the family. During the three-year duration of this study, we saw how she negotiated these family positionings, and how she positioned herself as increasingly independent and as a socially engaged citizen. This performative response may be a result of the idealized imperative towards being independent and equal found but not yet fully realized in Norwegian society (Ministry of Children and Family 2015–2016). For Anna, gender was explicit in her family and societal positionings, and she sought an education aimed at allowing her to make a contribution to society and give her independence. Anna developed as a person by taking responsibility for her educational trajectory using cultural resources available to her, such as family values, the 22 July 2011 terrorist attack, as well as reading about equality and support for education. These trajectories (Ludvigsen et al. 2011) inspired what Hull and Greeno (2006) think of as a motivated academic performative positioning.

The academic case history, as concept, shows the connection between cultural interests and positioning in a formal school context as Richard Edwards (2009), Ola Erstad et al. (2016), and Barbara Rogoff and Jean Lave (1984) all note and this is borne out in the case of Anna as we document here. We can see that different gendered social positions across figured worlds seemed to play an important role in defining Anna's academic positioning in school. In particular, the intersection of gendered family positionings, such as being respectful as a girl and the increasing focus on independence, were central in her learning trajectory. She did not problematize these different positionings, but we can see that she acquired knowledge about gender-related topics and stayed away from embodied symbols such as the *bindi*. Anna positioned herself actively to become an independent woman in the future.

This case history illustrates the importance of informal social and cultural resources in the development of positional identities. The use of positioning theory often implies that the researcher follows people in different activities to document how they position themselves academically (see Holland and Leander 2004). In this article, we have shown how participant observation of everyday and school activities can shed light on certain contradictory positions in figured worlds, such as the family and the school setting, as well as in leisure-time activities. The concept of figured worlds helps us explore how Anna imagined her future self while moving within and across those positions. To explore the responses given to gendered social positionings in figured worlds, the concept of performativity (Butler 1988) helps us understand how she performs new positions that imply transgressing norms in order to change her identity.

As we have shown in this article, the transition from lower to upper secondary school has important implications for students' academic positional identities. This transition presented new possibilities for Anna and reconfigured her figured worlds. Our study reveals the impulses and interests in students' orientations toward learning. This knowledge can provide families and schools with insight into students' educational trajectories, including how informal influences play a role in their positioning, as well as the resulting trajectories and implications. For example, the teachers in the two school levels were not aware of the trajectory Anna experienced in the transition phase. The teachers did not seem to be actively involved in daily school life, nor in how Anna was positioned socially and academically. The resulting implications for Anna indicate that family practices, interests, and academic and social positioning in school and beyond are important factors in decision making and gendered life directions. Anna had to navigate between positionings in the home, the school, and beyond. We can see that in a multiethnic society, the need to negotiate gendered positionings can create tensions that must be solved.

In line with Hanne Kavli and Marjam Nadim (2009) our study shows that school can be an arena in which gender equality, according to the Norwegian macro-narrative, family expectations, and self-understanding, can be discussed, We can draw on Veronika Honkasalo's (2013) study of youth workers in Finland to understand how learning trajectories in multi-ethnic classrooms can be supported. Her study approached multiculturalism and gender equality in the light of ethnicity, gender, and agency in an assumed gender-neutral and equality-based Nordic context. She found that the youth workers saw gender equality as an issue for immigrant girls but not for the population as a whole. In addition, she points out that equal treatment of students in a multiethnic context may not be the solution to every possible inequality. Honkasalo's findings can help teachers to shape school communities that acknowledge and address complex gendered expectations, create mutual respect, and make students feel confident in school and in their learning trajectories. When teachers understand the relationship between and among students' levels of identity, interests, and learning, they can help them to connect past, present, and future positionings regarding home, school, and society. This may help students to gain increased self-understanding and motivation in the process of reflecting on the future. These considerations seem particularly important when students transition between schooling levels.

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Notes

1. Drawing on Statistics Norway (2018), the concept of immigrant population describes either persons who immigrated to Norway or persons born in Norway to two immigrant parents.
2. This was led by Professor Ola Erstad, University of Oslo.
3. This is a decorative mark worn in the middle of the forehead.
4. This was the day that marked the terrorist attack by Anders Behring Breivik on the Workers' Youth League camp at Utøya, Norway.

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