

# **Duty, discipline and mental health problems: Young people's pursuit of educational achievement and body ideals**

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The last decades have seen an increase in mental health problems among young people in Western countries; this has been tied to increasing educational achievement pressure and body dissatisfaction. The purpose of this paper is to explore how young people talk about reaching educational and body ideals, whether there are shared cultural imperatives underlying youths' drive to reach educational goals and body ideals, and how such imperatives relate to young people's mental health. Based on interviews with 15–18-year-old boys and girls (n=53), this paper identifies a cultural imperative permeating boys' and girls' talk about how they work towards their educational aims and their ideal body: with duty, grit and self-discipline. What also unites the fields of educational achievement and body ideals is that the qualities deemed necessary to achieve their goals in either field seem to also be potentially harmful to some young people's mental health.

Keywords: youth, mental health, stress, educational achievement, body image

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## Introduction

Recent decades have seen a rapid increase of internalising mental health problems<sup>1</sup> among young people, especially girls (Collishaw, 2015; Hagquist, Due, Torsheim, & Välimaa, 2019). The effects of school stress on mental health problems have become stronger over the last decades (Högberg, Strandh, & Hagquist, 2020), and an increase in eating disorders contributes to explain the increase in mental health problems, and for girls, dissatisfaction with one's looks is closely correlated with the increase in mental health problems (von Soest & Wichstrøm, 2014). The two realms, school stress and body dissatisfaction, are similar in that they are potentially achievement-based, and our relationships with and perceived responsibility for our education and the way we look are increasingly individualised (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Markula & Pringle, 2006). However, despite their similarities, the realms of education and body image are rarely investigated together.

Cultural theorists and sociologists have argued that feelings are social, at the same time as they are experienced individually (Wetherell, 2012; Williams, 1965). The synchronicity of affective patterns is as much a matter of personal and embodied meaning as it is of interpersonal relations and the individual's interpretation of cultural signs and their emotional investment in them. This insight entails that seemingly individual, psychological reactions must also be seen in relation to larger cultural trends. However, there has long been a breach between the study of mental health and sociology, and the literature on mental health is mainly psychological and quantitative (Fitzgerald, Rose, & Singh, 2016; Youdell, Harwood, & Lindley, 2018). There is an urgency to listen to young people's own reflections on how they handle pressure and stress related to education and body image and to critically investigate their mindset.

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<sup>1</sup> Mental health problems are understood as internalising problems such as depressive symptoms and symptoms of anxiety and are not to be confused with mental *illnesses* diagnosed by qualified medical personnel.

Based on qualitative interviews with young people in Norway (n=53, aged 15-18), the purpose of this paper is to investigate how young people talk about reaching educational and body ideals, whether there are shared cultural imperatives underlying youths' drive to reach educational goals and body ideals, and how such imperatives relate to young people's mental health. The findings suggest that there are shared cultural imperatives behind youths' strategies of reaching their goals in education and appearance that may lead to increased experienced pressure and that for some, these strategies may be related to mental health problems.

### **Research on youths' changing relation to education and their bodies**

Considerable evidence has suggested that there has been a marked increase in educational achievement pressure in Western countries (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Klinger et al., 2015; Polesel, Dulfer, & Turnbull, 2012; Östberg et al., 2015). An expanding body of international research has documented that school requirements have had a growing impact on the amount of mental health problems experienced among young people – particularly girls – in recent years (Högberg et al., 2020; Phelps, 2006; Polesel et al., 2012; Sweeting, West, Young, & Der, 2010). Now, almost half of Norwegian girls and one out of four boys experience a high amount of pressure to do well in school (Bakken, 2019). There are clear indications that educational pressure has increased in the last few decades in terms of the culture of high-stakes testing and accountability measures, and this pressure is amplified as academic achievement is seen as crucial in defining how young people view their future life chances (Eriksen, 2020; Furlong, 2009).

Parallel to this development, there has been an increase in perceived pressure related to body image. Young people today experience greater body image and appearance pressure, as well as exposure to earlier sexualisation (Bor, Dean, Najman, & Hayatbakhsh, 2014; West & Sweeting, 2003), not the least through social media (Perloff, 2014). In Norway, 35% of

young girls and 10% of boys experience much or very much pressure to look good (Bakken, 2019). Young people's reasons for being physically active are changing too. For instance, female students have been found to reject the idea of sports in physical education as not being very useful, instead embracing the arguably new fitness discourse as a valid reason for PE (Walseth, Aartun, & Engelsrud, 2017). This shift can also be detected in youths' increasingly instrumental and individualistic perceptions of sports: in 2000, Norwegian youths saw 'having fun' as the most important reason for doing sports, along with staying healthy, getting mental recreation and socialising. At the start of the millennium, one of the least important reasons for doing sports was body appearance and competition, while some 15 years later, youths' main reasons for doing sports are for appearances and keeping weight down, and fewer youths state that they do sports for fun or socialisation (Seippel, 2017). The culture – particularly in youth populations – of enhancing and working towards 'the perfect body' has been theorised as a way of viewing the body as a project, something that is also linked to aspects of modernity (Larsson, 2014; Wiklund, E., Jonsson, Coe, & Wiklund, 2019).

Mostly, the two research fields of stress related to education and appearance are separate, and there is little knowledge about how these research fields interact. However, compartmentalising education and appearance stress is arguably an oversimplification of the causes of mental health problems. The same individuals often deal with more than one stressor (Eriksen, Sletten, Bakken, & von Soest, 2017). It is also likely that pressure in one area will affect individual vulnerability or pressure experienced in other areas; indeed, studies comparing young people's experiences with stress and pressure in school and body image have found that perceived pressure in one arena is related to perceived higher levels of pressure in the other (Bakken, Sletten, & Eriksen, 2018). In addition, experiencing pressure in more than one arena increases the probability of feeling that the pressure is too much to handle (ibid).

Most importantly, studies of mental health in the fields of education and appearance have rarely addressed whether the pressures experienced in these fields may be symptoms of similar pervasive and underlying causes. The extent to which the psychological literature takes on young people's achievement orientation is mostly in terms of a celebration of 'productive' character traits such as self-efficacy, grit and resilience, and the discussion of the role of society in these discussions has been largely absent (Tierney & Almeida, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Qualitative studies of young people's mental health, however, consistently have found that much of young people's experiences of mental health problems most commonly are stress and achievement related. One such study found that 16–19-year-old Swedish girls experienced more negative aspects of some of the key processes related to mental health when compared with boys, namely in the areas of social interactions, performance and responsibility (Landstedt, Asplund, & Gillander Gådin, 2009). A study of girls in affluent environments found that the impact of stress is related to pressure to gain admission to elite institutions and that not achieving this would compromise their possibilities in the future (Spencer, Walsh, Liang, Mousseau, & Lund, 2018). In a Norwegian study, young middle-class people's self-worth was shown to rely on their academic achievement (Eriksen, 2020). There seems to be a consensus in the current literature on the experiences of mental health problems, showing that mental health problems correlate to a large extent with experienced pressure, stress and achievement orientation.

Theoretically, the increase in mental health problems can be viewed as expressions of larger historic trends. Historically, the rise in young individuals' mental health problems can arguably be linked to an accelerating cultural shift in Western societies towards new 'freedoms' in education and work transitions, as well as in intimate relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). These new 'freedoms' are characterised by a tendency to fashion self-worth and identity from achievements and extrinsic rewards and to individualise failures

and one's lack of achievement. The recent decades have seen the processes commonly linked to modernity intensify and speed up with the emergence of new technologies and the unconcealed ranking of all aspects of life, from school performance to personal appearance and romantic potential (Rosa, 2003). As a growing school of research has argued, a cultural shift in Western societies that has included more individualistic values, competition and extrinsic goals has resulted in an increased level of achievement stressors (Hegna, Eriksen, Sletten, Strandbu, & Ødegård, 2017; Sørensen, Pless, Katznelson, & Nielsen, 2017). In exploring the question of how young people discuss goals in education and appearance, how these youth may struggle to reach them and the relation of this struggle with their mental health, the current paper thus addresses a larger issue of the increase and pervasiveness of mental health problems in the Western youth population.

### **Research design**

The study is based on qualitative interviews with 53 boys and girls. The participants were recruited via their schools, which were strategically selected to include both girls and boys and youths with different backgrounds in terms of social class and ethnicity, as well as geographic location (affluent and less-affluent areas, rural and urban sites) and school type (lower- and upper-secondary school). All participants were recruited via their teacher on a voluntary basis and were informed that the topic was 'stress and stressors'. Other than that, there was no particular selection of participants within the schools, and whether or not they struggled with mental health problems was not a selection criterion; however, the topic may have been particularly inviting for young people experiencing mental health problems.

The interviews were conducted in two phases. In the first phase, 29 15- and 16-year-olds were interviewed in groups (six groups with four to six participants in each group) during their final year of lower-secondary school. There were two groups with only boys and four groups with only girls. The participants in each group were recruited from the same school

class and/or social group. Three groups attended schools in the affluent and white majority area of western Oslo, and three came from the diverse area of east Oslo. A second phase was conducted as we also wanted to talk individually with young people due to the sensitive subject. Thus, additionally 24 17- and 18-year olds were interviewed individually (12 girls and 12 boys). These youths were recruited from three upper-secondary schools: one in a diverse area of Oslo, one in a rural, relatively low-income rural area and one in a very affluent residential area in the eastern part of Norway.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. All interviewees were asked to discuss whether they had areas in life that caused them worry or that they experienced as stressful, and they were asked about their plans and hopes for their own future. The participants were also asked questions about their mental health such as whether they had recently ‘felt everything is a hassle’ or ‘felt hopelessness about the future’,<sup>2</sup> eliciting personal responses in the individual interviews and more generalised accounts in the group interviews. After the interviews, we talked with the youths to assess how they had experienced the interview. There were a few youths we felt concerned about due to their responses in the interviews, and suggested they contact the school nurse or a psychologist afterwards. Following the recommendations of the Privacy Ombudsman for Research at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, the interviews were transcribed immediately, the recordings were deleted, and the students’ statements were kept confidential.

The topic was highly susceptible to change from the group interviews to the individual interviews. The group interviews yielded rich, emotional, personal narratives revolving around school stress in particular, whereas in the individual interviews, I was struck by the students’ openness to discussing a larger variety of problems. Both talking in front of peers

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<sup>2</sup> The questions employed are commonly used to measure internalising mental health problems. This is a version of the question battery of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974) commonly employed to measure depressive symptoms (though, importantly, not mental illness or depressive diagnoses).

and the common effect of agreeing with others in group interviews might have contributed to students sharing more stories about common issues, especially school stress, and censoring rarer and arguably more shameful subjects, such as experiences with bullying (Strøm, Aakvaag, Birkeland, Felix, & Thoresen, 2018) and relative poverty (Walker & Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2014). Nevertheless, reports about such subjects did infrequently emerge alongside the far more common reports of issues related to education and body dissatisfaction. However, due to the sparsity of such accounts and in order to focus the investigation in this paper, other emerging subjects are not discussed further.

When analysing the transcribed interviews, I started out by identifying the topics that the young people discussed as the main reasons for possible stress or mental health problems. The two main topics, stress related to education and body dissatisfaction, emerged inductively from the empirical data, rather than from a pre-constructed research question (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Secondly, I noticed that there were similarities in the way that the young people talked about both topics, in particular in the way they talked about setting and reaching goals in theory and practice. Based on the close reading of the interview data as well as insights from sociological studies in this field, I developed a template according to how each individual talked about their goals in these areas, how they experienced working towards their goals, and their perceived consequences of not reaching these goals, and applied this to the full data set.

A common conundrum is how one may discern whether the increase in mental health problems is at least partly caused by a culture where ‘talking about it’ becomes social currency. It is likely that the ‘therapeutic culture’ is a discourse that regulate young people’s subjectivity and, also, what they express (McLeod & Wright, 2009). Although the direct approach of asking the participants about mental health problems could have encouraged a possible exaggeration of any such problems, the direct line of questioning was deemed

necessary to be able to open up the discussion about their mental health, and to be able to gauge how their goals in education and physical appearance were linked to their mental health. Moreover, considering the existing evidence cited above, it is nevertheless likely that the majority of the increase in mental health problems is caused by stress – something which may still coincide with a therapeutic culture encouraging ‘confessions’.

## **Findings**

In the following analysis, I compare how young people talk about the subjects of education and their bodies. First, I examine how the young people discuss reaching aims related to education and personal appearance before I investigate what qualities they perceive as being necessary to reach their goals. Then, I explore how they experience working towards their goals in practice and, lastly, how they connect this to their mental health.

## **Identifying goals**

Having goals is an integral part of the young people’s discussion of their relationship with educational achievement and body satisfaction. In terms of education, most are working hard to get to the next level of education – good upper-secondary schools for lower-secondary students and university programmes for those in upper-secondary school – and they often aim at programmes with high admission criteria. Most have decided not only what they want to do in the next year, but also what they want to do for their work lives. The few who have not decided tend to ruminate over the matter. Aisha (17), for instance, regularly sees the school psychologist because she struggles with stress, poor sleep and feelings of hopelessness, which she relates to not having figured out what she wants to do when she graduates from upper-secondary school. She becomes especially stressed, she says, ‘When everyone starts to talk about what they want to be and having such-and-such plans. I feel that I haven’t managed to get that far. I don’t know yet what I want to be. ... Talk about the future stresses me’. Most,

however, seem to know exactly what they want to be and what it takes to get there: the highest possible grades.

Similar to educational goals, the youths rarely wonder what kind of body they want; these aims are even more clearly defined than their educational goals. Indeed, all of them know that one should work out to be healthy, but what they discuss in detail is mainly the appearance of their bodies. Many see exactly how the body ought to look as presented on social media such as Instagram – and not knowing what kind of body one should aim for is not an issue for most, although what they need to aim for is different for boys and girls. Several boys talk about the Instagram trend to follow fitness influencers and have even considered becoming fitness influencers themselves. As Mohammed (17) states, ‘It’s a trend, people switching their Instagram handle to [sound like] fitness influencers. ... You’re supposed to follow these famous body builders and fitness models, and you think that you want to become just like him. And then you have your goal there’. Although these goals are distant for most students, the fitness influencers on social media function as distinct yardsticks. For Martin, images on Instagram represent ‘how I want to look. It is not that I am influenced – or, of course, I am influenced by it, but it is not like I look at Instagram and get sad. It is more like, “OK, I want to improve this” in a way’. Kristian explicitly discusses the importance he and his mates attribute to what he calls ‘get[ting] strong and not go[ing] in the wrong direction’. He defines the ‘wrong direction’ as ‘to get chubby and to lose muscles. To sit still – that is absolutely not the goal’. Among these youth, there is little doubt about what their goals for their education and their bodies ought to be. There is also little *room* for doubt: having clear goals seems to take on a value of its own. In both fields, being candid about wanting to reach these specific goals seems to be not only socially acceptable, but the norm.

### **Reaching goals with grit**

How to reach these goals also appears to be rather clear – in theory. In both the fields of

education and appearance, the young people have clear opinions about ‘what it takes’. There is a scale between, on the one side, working hard to reach one’s goals with energy, enthusiasm and joy – which in popularised psychology vocabulary is often called ‘grit’ (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) – and, on the other side, to just work hard. At the more enthusiastic end of the scale is Josefine (18), who gets ‘a kick’ out of getting good results and making her parents proud. When she gets good grades, she feels ‘successful’:

You have achieved something, and what you do is not in vain. And you get this enormous hope for the future, that you are one who does well, and you are one who can go far. It is kind of that feeling I get, and I get really proud – and that Mom and Dad will get proud when they see it.

‘Success’, ‘kick’, pride and hope for the future are important drivers for Josefine. They are linked to having reached her goal without having to work hard in vain. For her, work and hope are deeply connected, and there is a strong impetus to be ‘the one who can go far’.

In contrast, other students perceive schoolwork as a duty that needs to be done diligently, but they seem to lack joy and enthusiasm about doing it. The demands on their self-discipline are all the greater. Janne (17), for example, states that she gets through subjects she finds ‘really dull’ by ‘just thinking it is like going out for a run. You just have to get going’. Kristian (16) finds motivation in competition:

If others are stressed, that means that others also have to work. It is like a competition to get the best grade. ... It gives a very healthy boost to the grades as I want to beat someone, and if I know that he reads that much, then, OK, I have to double that or even a bit more, right. Those who make it, they stress about it. ... You just have to pull yourself together and get a grip.

Similar attitudes to Kristian’s are seen in many of the young people who seem to lack having a joy in ‘grit’: Self-discipline and perseverance are vital qualities, whether joy and enthusiasm are present or not.

To make a strenuous effort at the gym can also be related to fun and enthusiasm; indeed, having fun and ‘doing it for yourself’ provides a strong impetus for reaching body goals. Ahmed, who exercises four or five times a week by playing football and lifting weights, states, ‘I want to look good but not for others – or – I want to look good for myself. Of course, it is good to know that others think that you look good, but I want to – I like to train, you see. I want to be fit. It’s my hobby to work out’. Although a few like Ahmed emphasise that they work out mostly for themselves, quite a few openly admit feeling pressure to look a certain way. Mohammed, for example, notes that he started lifting weights because he used to be ‘very thin and tall, more athletic, but I wanted to be bigger, so I started weightlifting’. He states that the gym and playing football have different purposes: ‘In the gym, you work out to make your body look better. You train for football to get better control of the ball’. The instrumentality in Mohammed’s training is apparent. He has also created a food plan and a training schedule so that he can ‘look bigger’. He draws a line, though, at taking steroids, which ‘most of the youths around these parts are on’. Acknowledging that there are no shortcuts, he says that what gives him the effects he is looking for is ‘working out more and more, eating more’. Most of the young people waver among various reasons for working out: from wanting to look good and being healthy to finding stress relief and socialising. However, above all, they share an instrumental ethos.

There is a common and well-established knowledge among these young people of what is demanded of them to reach their body goals. Their knowledge or assumptions come from talking among themselves or from the Internet and social media. For some of the young people, the recipe for reaching the body they think they ought to have is hazy, and in those cases, it becomes cause for concern – even stress. One group of 15-year-old girls discuss perceived pressure to be healthy and look ‘good’, and all the girls agree they needed more information to know what and how much to eat. One states, ‘The only thing we get to know is

how to diet for adults, but that is not what I need [to know]. I need to know more about what *I* need to eat'. Another girl states, 'I feel that there is a set limit for how much you are supposed to eat, ... but I don't know how much to eat if I also train. ... It is hard to find that balance on my own'. This ethos of duty, instrumentality and self-control suggests an individualisation of responsibility for life chances that appear vital to these young people, an ethos that also demands much knowledge to implement. Lacking this knowledge seems to increase these girls' insecurity. What all of them are clear about is that to reach their goals in both fields, what is needed in terms of personal qualities is grit: determination, instrumentality and self-discipline.

### **In practice: Netflix and guilt**

In practice, how do the young people experience working determined and dutifully towards their goals? Josefine embodies the ideal of duty in the areas of school and her body. She states that she has so much to do in school and her after-school job that she does not have time to work out, which makes her feel bad:

And then there is the pressure to work out. ... But I have actually just not had time for it. And then you just have to eat less to make up for it. ... I eat a lot less now than when I played handball as I don't have time to go to the gym. It isn't that I'm lazy as I'm doing something absolutely all the time. So I don't feel bad in that respect, but I am just stressed as I don't have time to work out because of the way my body looks. And that is why it is easier just to reduce my food intake. And when my head hurts, it lasts maybe four, five hours, and I just take two painkillers and that helps.

Interviewer: Have you considered just relaxing and taking a nap?

Josefine: No, I don't have time for that, so I just take some pills, and it gets better. If not, you just have to work on it. It is not an alternative to stop as everything else won't stop.

Whereas doing 'good' is doing one's duty with grit, discipline and, preferably, enthusiasm, Josefine views doing 'badly' as the opposite: relaxing and being lazy. Josefine reasons she should not be seen as lazy because she is relentlessly busy. The relationship between laziness

and busyness is clear: they are not only in opposition, but busyness is the medicine for laziness, and laziness is an obstacle to busyness. What Josefine refers to as ‘stopping’ – by which she seems to mean resting and not doing your duty – is a concept suffused with guilt and is evidently not an option. Josefine, along with many other of the young people, gives considerable praise to being busy and stressed: ‘I hear a lot that I am a very stressed person, which I am. ... While many others [her classmates] are very relaxed and take a two-hour long nap after school. I don’t have that opportunity. I haven’t watched Netflix since last summer as I haven’t had the time’. Josefine talks about ‘stopping’, relaxation, napping and Netflix as something she does not approve of – or allow herself to indulge in.

There are many temptations around the young people that they discuss as hinderances towards reaching their aims. Some have developed methods to avoid temptations. Janne (16), for instance, states, ‘after school, I go home and start doing schoolwork immediately as then you get into that zone. If you start watching Netflix, it is so much harder to start’. Ella (17) has perhaps the most extreme relationship with Netflix. A troubled period in her youth that was characterised by much ‘drama’ in school and an eating disorder led to her binge-watching Netflix, about which she still has very conflicted feelings. At one point, she was ‘addicted to watching series’, and now, she feels that that if she watches too much, she ‘loses her life, losing my spare time and experiences, but at the same time, I feel that I need to have it as therapy. It is really a love/hate relationship’. Watching Netflix was Ella’s response to a troubled time with overexercising and a problematic relationship with food. ‘Then’, she says, ‘it was lovely to just lay there with the series. The problem was that when I watched series, I ate so much – I basically binged, and then I felt bad because of that, and I made myself sick and went to the gym. And then that was a vicious circle.’ In the best case, Netflix works as code for relaxation, but in the worst case, it represents laziness, unproductivity and the loss of self-control and self-drive.

The struggle to discipline oneself to work can be hard, and not managing to do so is a real cause of worry. For example, when asked about his worries, Johannes (18) states, ‘I often worry that there is so much I need to get done, that I have to do, that I don’t have time for as I waste so much time’. When asked what constitutes wasting time, he replies with the following:

Johannes: When I get home from school, I’m tired, and I just end up sitting on the couch with my phone or playing the guitar, and suddenly, the hours have just passed. And just, ahh, I should have read, done my homework, been with friends, done something more productive than just have wasted time.

Interviewer: Are you wasting time when you are playing the guitar?

Johannes: Yes, because you aren’t doing anything.

Productivity is presented as the opposite of unproductive time wasting – such as playing the guitar. Some think of life differently, however. For example, Ola’s (18) main hobby is playing football with his mates. When asked what he does after school, he answers: ‘Nothing in particular. I don’t have any leisure activities. I watch a lot of football and play a lot of football with friends’. Perhaps not surprisingly, Ola is one of the least stressed participants.

Here, clear lines separate the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’ in the realms of both education and the body. Resting and doing unproductive things, such as playing the guitar and, worst of all, watching Netflix, are discursively placed in the ‘bad’ category of unproductivity. The identification of Netflix as a main activity to avoid captures the relation between temptation and guilt, between the need for relaxation and the fear of being unproductive. Netflix’s limitless possibilities for binge-watching push to the foreground the need for self-control and self-drive.

### **Your life is ruined: Daily hassles, life chances and mental health**

Particularly in terms of reaching educational goals, the young people report that consequences

of not reaching their goals have significant effects on their mental health, and for those who experienced high levels of mental health problems, education stress was mostly the main cause. The students relate education to mental health in two primary ways. One is through stress and daily hassles. Many feel that school work overshadows everything else in their lives, and they constantly struggle to adequately meet all their school demands. Hege (15), a secondary school student, states in a group discussion, 'I feel tired all the time ... when I think about all I have to do at school'. The ongoing, daily hassle of tasks that have to be done makes the students feel negatively about school. Lisa (15) articulates it even stronger:

I feel that we are wasting our lives. We go to school for a hundred years to get jobs we don't like. If I have kids, I feel sorry for them. ... If they will struggle as we do, I don't think that I want to have kids. ... The way it is nowadays, I think it is too much. When you guys were younger, my mum says, it wasn't such a big deal. You didn't think like that. There weren't that many schools, and you could get a bad grade. It didn't matter as much because you could do other things.

This excerpt expresses a sense of loss as she imagines a more fulfilling life that earlier generations experienced. Students who feel pressure to achieve in school but find no joy in learning, articulate a strong narrative of suffering related to school's daily hassles.

Yet more significant is *why* the daily hassles of school hold importance to them. When talking about the possibility of not achieving one's educational aims, they say what it would mean: to one girl, '*everything* is ruined'; to another, 'the end of the world'; to one boy, 'you're screwed'; and to another boy, 'your life is ruined'. Both girls and boys relate educational achievement to self-worth and possibilities in life to such an extent that they describe failure in education in terms of near existential ruin. Their worry about reaching long-term educational and career aims feeds into and increases the importance of everyday top performance.

To a lesser extent, this is also true for the aim of achieving the ‘perfect body’. Åse (16) states that the media ‘only focus on being thin’, while in another group, Trine (15) states that ‘all we see around us is super thin models, ... which shapes you as girls. We grow up with Barbie dolls as girls, while boys get cars—and that affects us’. Caroline (15) describes ‘standards for how you are supposed to look, and if you don’t measure up, you are not approved’. These generalised messages tap into a politicised discourse of unrealistic body ideals and body shaming that many girls seem to be critically aware of, but none of the boys, either in groups or individually, allude to as relevant. This is despite the fact that the boys’ own narratives testify to a clear, difficult-to-attain body image for them, too. Kristian, for example, states that if he does not think he looks good on a particular day, he feels ‘pretty run down’:

It is exhausting really. ... I was 130 kg when I was at my heaviest, in eighth grade. ... It was the worst period of my life. But when I start working out consistently, at least three times a week, then I feel that I can fight my way back and eat food again without feeling stupid or big. ... If you, for example, have been slack one week, perhaps swelled a tiny bit – a few hundred grams, but it feels like 1000 kilos – you know, the T-shirt doesn’t fit as well as it did last week—ah, shit, you know. Then I get up at a quarter past five to train before school and then after school again, just to get the mentality in place. ... You watch *The Biggest Loser* and see how they lose a lot of weight, but then they start to relax. You can’t relax, you know – you can’t eat bad food or snacks or not train. You have to keep eating healthily.

Kristian seems acutely aware of how tenuous his mental equanimity is and how strongly it depends on how he feels about his body, which is illustrated by how he exaggerates the ‘few hundred grams’ so that it feels like a thousand kilograms and how he constantly exercises to avoid feeling ‘stupid or big’. Kristian elaborates on the topic of his body more than most, perhaps partly because of bullying over his weight; here, most of the participants seem to have a healthy relationship with their bodies.

As with educational stress, the stress to reach body goals is both related to the daily hassles of working out, but also to the more existential feelings of worth because it is so intimately related to whether or not you are ‘approved of’ in the eyes of peers, as Caroline states above. The daily hassles seem particularly overwhelming when attempting to achieve the goals in several areas at once. As Anne (15) says, when describing her life as ‘very chaotic’, ‘You have to go to school but also train or go to many activities or just have a tonne of homework and hand-ins. You are exhausted and just can’t bear the thought of having to do all of that’. The combination of knowing exactly what is expected of you and what is needed to get there, along with experiencing how the goals still are unreachable, is a heavy burden for these young people.

## **Discussion**

This paper aimed to investigate similarities in how young people talk about reaching educational goals and body ideals and how this relates to young people’s mental health. In both fields, the goals the young people would like to achieve are easily identified with a seemingly universal acceptance, and when discussing what it demands of them to reach these goals, they talk about ideal qualities, such as self-drive, duty and instrumentality. Reaching these goals is hard – or even impossible – but at the same time, reaching them appears to be of the utmost importance to their future happiness. The everyday hassle to achieve their goals leaves the young people exhausted and with little time for rest or pleasure. The similarities between the fields suggest a cultural imperative permeating young people’s talk about how they work to achieve their educational aims and ideal body with duty, grit and self-control.

These findings show that although both goals and how to reach them are excessively clear for most young people, their practical experiences in reaching their goals are laced with a sense of duty and, for some, self-punishment. The discourse of reaching goals above all else – through grit, perseverance and self-discipline – may thus be related to the increase in mental

health problems among youth. This is suggested in the young people's valorisation of drive and persistence, often despite the physical and mental consequences, which permeates their narratives. What unites the fields of education and appearance is that the qualities deemed necessary to achieve success may also be harmful to some young people's mental health. Below, I will discuss how these findings may be understood in light of other research.

From a larger societal perspective, the rise of mental health problems among youths is parallel to the rise of the 'turn to character' (Bull & Allen, 2018), emphasising character traits such as optimism, resilience and grit. A recent cross-temporal meta-analysis found that 'perfectionism' observed in college students has increased over the last three decades, indicating that this generation of youths demands more of themselves as well as others than previous generations (Curran & Hill, 2019). The authors propose that there is a link between this observed increase in perfectionism and the increase we have seen in mental health problems, 'because perfectionism is a core vulnerability to a variety of disorders, symptoms, and syndromes' (Curran & Hill, 2019, p. 420). The ethos of perfectionism, including celebrated character traits such as duty, instrumentality and self-control, suggests an individualisation of responsibility for life chances in a culture where the possibilities appear innumerable, but reaching goals is entirely dependent on individual character traits (e.g. Farthing, 2016).

This recent discourse may be considered a continuation of the longer historic trends towards individualisation. In popular psychology, some researchers have argued that grit, which encompasses the qualities most commended by the young people in the current study, is the single character trait that determines success – more so than, for instance, talent and even genius (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit enables reaching one's potential, which accords with another cultural imperative – to 'flourish', which can be done successfully only in accordance with one's true and authentic self (Seligman, 2012). Grit is seen as one part of a

triad of grit, resilience and a ‘growth mindset’ (Webster & Rivers, 2019). Webster and Rivers argued that the latter, a growth mindset, is specific to education, while grit suffuses throughout the wider cultural context. The growing interest in grit is visible, however, in the UK’s education policy (Bull & Allen, 2018).

The young people’s valorisation of these qualities has a tangible impact on young people’s lives; they seem to some extent to live by the ideals of grit and perseverance – despite the fact that they recognise how the combined pressure and lack of rest has detrimental effects on their mental health. For vulnerable or marginalised youths who do have the resources to attempt the quest of perfectionism, a viable option then becomes to shelter oneself from society’s demands as to not having to take part (Eriksen & Seland, 2020). Other research confirms that both fields of education and body ideals are increasingly individualised and moving towards instrumentality, productivity, achievement and self-regulation (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Wiklund, M., Bengs, Malmgren-Olsson, & Öhman, 2010). The evidence presented here indicates that when considering the reasons for mental health problems among youth, clear-cut, compartmentalised causes may obscure the overarching ethos that permeates several fields. Today’s cultural landscape shapes young people through a larger discourse that cuts across fields, influencing how youth feel about themselves and their life chances.

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