

## PART I

# Young People's Trajectories and Agency



## CHAPTER I

# Young Citizenship

## Academically High-Achieving Middle-Class Students in Transitions Talk about Participation

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One of the overall goals of Swedish youth policy is that young people shall participate in political and social life in their local and wider community, being part of the democratic dialogue and being able to influence in educational, social, and political contexts (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010). However, young people's participation in local and wider communities is being challenged by extended, fragmented and uncertain school-to-work transitions that characterize modern societies with high unemployment and unstable employment conditions (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Uncertainty also characterizes the paths to higher education. Choosing the 'right' education is not an easy task, nor is qualifying for higher education—only a small and elite group is selected for the most popular programmes. Still, general expectations are high for effective transitions to and participation in further education and/or the labour market. Educational research has paid significant attention to certain groups of students who find it difficult to meet these ideals. This applies, for example, to

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students from working-class backgrounds (e.g. Tolonen, 2008), minority ethnic groups and refugee students (e.g. Irisdottir Aldenmyr et al., 2012; Youdell, 2006), students with special educational needs (e.g. Slee, 2001), and 'at risk' youth (Brunila, 2012). Young people in these 'high-risk' groups (see Lundahl, 2011) are more likely than others to experience a lack of participation in society, a phenomenon that is also reflected in transition patterns into labour and higher markets. But what about the academically high-achieving middle-class students who, at least from an outsider perspective, seem to act and behave in accordance with these expectations? How do they, in their local school context, live participation, how do they reflect on transitions and imagine future participation, and, not least, to what extent do they identify with these ideals?

This chapter explores how academically high-achieving middle-class students in their last years of upper secondary school talk about lived and future participation. What ideas do they express about themselves as student-citizens, and how do these ideas relate to dominant discourses on participation in society? Participation constitutes acts of citizenship, and the analysis includes participation ranging from 'giving voice to one's opinions' to 'sharing decision-making and implementation of action' (Hart, 1997) in educational, social and political contexts. The concept of participation is also strongly linked to democracy—participation and influence are important components of what constitutes democracy. However, in this text participation will be discussed in the framework of citizenship rather than in relation to democracy.

By focusing on a group of students that previously has attracted little attention in this respect, the aim of this chapter is to contribute to the discussion about subjectification and the fostering of citizenship in educational contexts and to discuss the ways school and education prepare young people for educational and work transitions. By 'subjectification', I refer to the process of becoming an individual, i.e. becoming a 'self'—a process in which individuals are subjected and through which they actively subject themselves (Davies, 1993). 'Citizenship' is used in its broad meaning: to be an individual (a self) in a community—and that this belonging requires certain desirable competences and subjectivities. By analysing participation in the framework of subjectification and citizenship, it is possible to highlight what kind of subjectivity and citizenship 'counts' in 'youth transitions'. As many researchers in the field have pointed out, some citizen-subjects are preferable to others. The kind of citizenship that is desired also has relevance for transitions, and within the idea of a 'good' or 'ideal' citizen-subjectivity lies the notion of smooth and fast school-to-work transitions. What such transitions require in many countries is creative and enterprising learners who monitor their education in order to become well-educated and employable citizens as quickly and effectively as possible (Beach & Dovemark, 2011; Carlbaum, 2012; Lundahl & Olson, 2013; Olson, 2010, 2012).

The analysis presented here draws on interview data with 11 Swedish upper secondary school students (three boys, eight girls). I met them in an earlier study (e.g. see Rönnlund, 2010, 2011), when they were in lower secondary school. I conducted ethnographic work at their schools for nine months—doing interviews and observing everyday school life, including classroom activities, student council meetings and other school-related activities such as the forming of two action groups and the actions taken by the students engaged in these groups. During my stay, a group of students distinguished themselves by acting in particularly participatory and engaged ways in school.<sup>1</sup> For example, they often took initiatives in influencing the teaching process in the classroom by voicing their opinions to teachers, and they participated in various councils and student-organized action groups. Three years after the first study, I contacted them again and conducted in-depth interviews posing questions about their engagement and participation during their upper secondary years—about their lived participation in school and during leisure time, including their thoughts about participation in the future. The tape-recorded interviews were conducted outside the school in a public café and lasted one to one and a half hours. Due to my earlier contacts with the students, the interviews gave rich data about their ideas about themselves as student-citizens. I was able to follow their reflections on their current, past and future social, educational and political life and ask follow-up questions about acts of citizenship (see e.g. Tolonen, 2008; Lahelma, 2012, on longitudinal studies).

The students, all of them from Swedish middle-class backgrounds, were 18–20 years old at the time of the interviews. They studied various programmes in four different upper secondary schools, and eight of them were in their final year. The majority had continued to study the programme that they initially had chosen, but one had changed programmes and another had studied abroad for a year and taken up studies in a different programme after returning to Sweden.

By analysing how the students talked about 1) participation in their present life in school and in leisure time ('the present'), 2) participation in the future ('the future') and 3) themselves in relation to participation ('the self'), the study sheds light on students' understandings of 'ideal subjectivity' (perceptions of the ideal student-citizen subject) and understandings of 'self-subjectivity' (perceptions of their own subjectivity, i.e. their 'self'). The students' statements about participation are seen as acts in which the students present and construct/produce themselves by negotiating different self-images. In that sense, their talk provides pictures of individual ambitions and perceptions of the 'self' in relation to dominant discourses on participation in society. Following Foucault (1972), discourses are understood as organized bodies of knowledge, i.e. practices that form the objects of which they speak. This means that the students' statements about themselves and about being a student-citizen build on the discourses that are available to them—they talk

in ways that create meaning for them. The students become subjected within different discourses, but they are not simply the bearers of knowledge produced by discourses and they also exercise choice, or agency, in relation to discursive practices.

However, before going into particulars about how the students talked about participation, I will give some details about the Swedish and Nordic context and how participation and citizenship is communicated in national policy documents.

### **Student participation and citizenship in a Swedish and Nordic context**

Historically, student participation has been a cornerstone of Nordic education.<sup>2</sup> This applies to a long tradition of coherent and unified comprehensive education—a ‘school for all’ where all children and youth have the right to participate—but also to democratic schooling in the sense that the school milieu shall provide students with possibilities to ‘give voice’ to their opinions and to influence and participate in decision-making (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Mikkelsen, 2004). This ‘democratic’ approach to participation and influence is a prominent part of Nordic citizenship education—the fostering of citizenship. By participating in everyday school life, like planning and evaluating the daily teaching and participating in committees and councils, the students are supposed to develop the ability to participate in decision-making and to exert influence. The basic assumption is that the students, with this competence, will grow into active citizens who participate in joint decision-making and take responsibility for their own life decisions and adult lives. The competences they acquire inside the classroom and the school are considered to be important citizen competences outside the school. A central premise in Nordic education has thus been that students learn democracy, participation and the ‘right’ kind of citizenship by practising or ‘living’ it.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, major policy changes took place in the Nordic countries as well as in other parts of Europe, signifying adjustments to neo-liberal and economic market-based ideas of education. In Sweden, school choice reforms led to increased marketization of the education system (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Lundahl, 2002, 2005; Lundahl & Olson, 2013; Olson, 2010, 2012). Due to this reform process, the understanding of participation has become loaded with additional values and participation has been extended even to taking active part in the education market. Students are supposed to navigate within the educational market and to monitor their education in relation to the goal of becoming a creative and enterprising subject, optimizing their chances of obtaining a good education and a good job or career (Beach & Dovemark, 2011; Carlbaum, 2012; Lundahl & Olson, 2013; Olson, 2010; Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006). This also relates to understandings of citizenship.

Analyses of Swedish policy documents from the time of this restructuring process reveal how descriptions of a nation-building citizen have lost ground to the idea of a citizen with a more market-oriented role, but also to the idea of citizenship as related to personal identity. The role of national education is to provide children with competences to meet market-oriented demands and to educate them so that they become employable citizens (Lundahl, 2005; Olson, 2010, 2012; Carlbaum, 2012).

These policy discourses on citizenship and participation are intertwined with discourses that dominate late modernity. As put forward by Fielding, the emphasis on student participation can be understood as part of democratic schooling (in line with the Nordic tradition) but also as part of an essentially neo-liberal project and/or as part of a Foucauldian furtherance of governmentality (Fielding, 2004, p. 198). With regard to the second perspective, education is increasingly viewed as an instrument for fostering participative citizens who can handle, and take increasing individual responsibility in, modern society. The autonomous and self-made subject is expected to be active rather than acted upon, and thus the individual is made responsible for his or her choices. One basic idea here is that the individual is governed not primarily by central directives or local regulations but instead through more sophisticated practices of self-regulation (Foucault, 1991; see also Bauman, 2001; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991). This late-modern framework of thoughts tends to nurture the vision of a citizen who is presumed to be active, competent and well educated and who can handle and take a growing individual responsibility in modern society. This also means that the individual is made responsible for his or her life choices, not least those in relation to educational and work transitions.

### **Analysis of the students' talk about participation**

The interviews revealed close and interwoven relations between individual students' current participation, how they imagined future participation and their self-understandings. However, for the purpose of the analysis, I have made a separation that forms the basic logic for presentation of findings. I first give an account of the students' talk about participation in school and leisure time, followed by their talk about the future and about themselves. In the final section, I discuss these three aspects in relation to each other.

#### *The present*

The students seemed to participate in their everyday school life in about the same active ways they had during lower secondary school. They monitored their education, for example the content, organization and conduct of the teaching, and, if they were dissatisfied with something, they gave voice to their opinions and tried to change it. This was expressed in statements such as 'I express my

opinion when I don't agree with the teacher', 'If there is something that I find wrong, I go directly to the teacher' and 'If I meet the head teacher in the hallway and I have something I want to put forward, I say it'. Still another comment of this kind was: 'I try to have an influence whenever I can. If I find a teacher acting in an unacceptable way, I raise my voice and tell my opinion, and if I find other things unacceptable in school I do the same thing.'

As indicated by the quotations, the students expressed an overall individually oriented approach towards participation in school. They focused on their individual educational goals and emphasized the importance of monitoring their own education to make sure it was of good quality—they wanted to get as much as possible out of it. Patrik<sup>3</sup> was a student who expressly stated this. At the time for the interview, he studied at a private upper secondary school. He wanted to become a doctor but had doubts about whether his grades would be good enough for qualifying for the medical programme at the university. He participated on a regular basis in the student council but had a rather individual approach to his engagement there:

Patrik: I mostly care about my own education and making sure it works in the best way, and if I can help out others with other things, yes, that happens sometimes, but that comes in second place.

This comment gives voice to a predominant 'selfish-individual' culture that other studies have also pointed out—a culture that nurtures the vision of a creative and enterprising student-subject who seeks to optimize his/her chances to obtain a good education and a good job or career. A general pattern in Sweden and elsewhere seems to be that political aspects of participation have increasingly been downplayed. Instead, there is a growing focus on individual performances (e.g. Beach & Dovemark, 2011; Lister et al., 2003). In this sense, the students' comments represented an understanding of participation that connects to late-modern subjectivity and the idea of students monitoring their education and becoming autonomous and self-made citizens.

However, the students' comments did not just represent an individually oriented agency and self-interest. There were also examples of collectively oriented participation and agency—a will and ambition to stand for and work for the student collective. For example, Susanne, a girl who during lower secondary school used to be vice president of the local student council, described herself as a lawyer, i.e. as someone who gives voice to one's classmates in discussions with the teachers: 'I am kind of like the class lawyer'. She explained: 'When the class needs to put forward something to the teacher, if we are unhappy with something and want to change something, they send me to discuss it with the teacher.' The collectively oriented agency where female students act on behalf of other students (see Öhrn, 1997, 2001) was mainly directed towards classmates, but in some cases it had a wider scope and included all students at the school. For example, when Isabelle, who used to be active in the student council at her



former school, found out that there was no functioning student council organization at her upper secondary school, she decided to rebuild it as she felt that all students had the right to have access to a local student council:

Isabelle: I believe that every school should have a student council, so when I realized that our school, which is a really big one, did not have a functioning student council I simply had to do something about it. I just had to do something about it.

When talking about participation outside school, the students mentioned social and political activities, with an emphasis on social activities. Participation in sports clubs, music and theatre groups—including both long-term involvement and activities of a more temporary nature—were some of the social activities mentioned. In general, they described their leisure-time activities as self-actualizing projects. Through engagement in clubs, associations, interest groups etc. they developed their interests and participated in decision-making of various kinds. Several of them had become involved in larger projects, like Johan, who participated in a skateboard club:

Johan: I participate in a skateboard club [he describes the club activities]. Through the club, I have been engaged in city committee work where we discuss the plans for building a new skateboard park in town.

When asked questions about political party engagement, the large majority of the students answered that they had no such interest. However, when discussing political participation in a wider perspective, they all considered themselves politically interested and they presented themselves as politically active through individualized and cause-oriented forms of participation (Ødegård & Berglund, 2008). Thus, they claimed interest in specific political issues rather than the overall programmes of political parties. Susanne mentioned being engaged in political activism on the Internet in the form of Facebook groups of various kinds. Below, she tells about her engagement in a Facebook group initiated to express disapproval towards the political party, the Sweden Democrats:<sup>4</sup>

Susanne: Once I joined an 'anti-Sweden Democrats' Facebook group, but mom got worried when some Sweden Democrats started to harass and threaten me on the net. So I had to quit. I have tried since then not to get involved politically with people I do not know because they can hurt me, but sometimes I feel like going back there.

This kind of political engagement is in line with previous research. Several studies have reported on a partly changed attitude towards politics and political work among young people. It is not interest in politics and faith in democratic processes per se that has changed, but rather how they prefer

doing politics (e.g. Henn & Foard, 2014; Ødegård & Berglund, 2008), and this appears to refer to all groups of students regardless of academic or socio-economic background. In Sweden, for example, the proportion of young members of political parties has declined steadily and relatively sharply since the 1980s (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010).

### *The future*

When the students were asked questions about how they imagined participation in the future, they claimed that giving voice to one's opinions and trying to exert influence would be important to them also in their future lives. This was expressed in statements such as 'I will probably continue arguing for ... I mean, if it is something that I find wrong, it probably won't take long until I want to do something about it' and 'I guess I will continue like this, I have a lot of things I care about, a lot of ideas I want to put forward'. The main pattern was to express a general desire for continuing being 'participative'. In some cases, this desire was about specific domain. One example relates to an interview in which the student envisioned herself as being a parent one day and being engaged in her children's education:

Interviewer: What about participation and engagement and trying to influence in the future then? Do you for example think you will be politically active in some way? In a political party? Doing activism of some kind?

Mia: Somehow I think I will continue being interested in school issues. If I have children, I guess I will be the kind of mum that is engaged in my children's education and that tries to have influence in the school.

Another example relates to working life from an individually oriented perspective:

Interviewer: What about participation and engagement and trying to influence in the future then? Do you think you will continue being this active and engaged?

Anna: In situations where I can see that I can change things, yes, I don't think it will take me long to try to change things in these situations, like, for example, at a future work place, if I have complaints about my salary, well, for sure I will try to change that.

A participative and agentic approach was also expressed in relation to their future careers. They all strove to make 'something out of their lives', and planned

for becoming a doctor, an architect, a teacher, an actress, an author, a veterinarian, a meteorologist, an entrepreneur and a physicist.

Overall, their talk about the future mirrored a strong will and determination to live a self-actualizing life—to develop their personal interests and competences. Their participative and agentic approach thus mostly concerned individual and personal issues, and this mirrors what has been described as ‘a culture of self-interest’ (Ball, 2006, p. 82). However, the students also brought up social and political activities of a collective nature such as engagement in human rights and environmental/ecological issues (see also Strandbu & Skogen, 2000). This applied in particular to girls in the study. Here, individual mobility permeated their talk, such as taking a year off in order to do volunteer work in far-off places before taking up higher education (Hjort, 2014; Holland et al., 2007). A desire to ‘help people’ was a recurrent theme when they talked about taking a year off, but also when talking about future occupational plans: ‘I want to work internationally with people, get to know and understand other cultures and people’s everyday lives in other countries in order to meet people and help people.’ Working with people in need of care in the public sector was mentioned (see Lahelma, 2012), as well as general statements about ‘helping’ people. This applied for example to Nellie, who during her lower secondary years was active in several school groups, and took the initiative to start a gender equality group at her school. With support from teachers and other students she organized a thematic day for all students at the school with a focus on gender issues (see Rønnlund, 2011). She was still engaged in gender issues, and participated in several groups and associations. When I asked her questions about the future, she expressed feelings of dedication to helping people and she was convinced that she would be participative and active also in the future:

Nellie: I want to do something for other people, for women and youth. I find it interesting to teach them and fill them with enthusiasm in order to make them feel valuable somehow. Give them a valuable leisure-time activity or something. I think I will do something like that.

In short, Nellie wanted ‘to make the world a better place to live’—a social and political ambition that included taking positions with respect to one’s personal life and lifestyle. For example, her environmental interest and concern had made her realize that ‘the political is personal’ and that she needed to take a personal responsibility and change her own way of living. She planned to live a more natural lifestyle: ‘I’m thinking of taking a course in how to become self-sufficient. I would like to live off the land, cultivating and things like that. I consider that to be a kind of political action.’

None of the students mentioned party politics. As has been discussed in the previous section, the younger generation has a weak commitment to traditional political participation (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Skolverket, 2010), and this was also reflected when the students talked about the future—they mentioned

‘non-traditional’ forms of political participation and a lack of interest in the parliamentary system: ‘Politics? No, absolutely not. Well, if I become interested in a specific political issue, yes, maybe. But party politics in general, no.’

When relating the results of this analysis to analyses of policy documents on student participation and citizenship, we see a mixture of understandings of participation (see also Fielding, 2004). We recognize participation as an individual and personal project including future educational and occupational success plans in line with neo-liberal and late-modern societal ideals (i.e. a ‘selfish culture’ celebrating individual responsibility, autonomy, self-regulation etc.). In this school of thought, the student is supposed to be an individually responsible, creative and enterprising subject who takes initiative to change things in order to optimize their chances of obtaining a good education and a good job or career (see Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006; Beach & Dovemark, 2011). However, we can also see that participation is understood in a broader framework: as social and political activities, such as volunteering in other parts of the world, engaging in human rights and environmental or ecological issues, and working with people in need of care (i.e. a ‘democratic’ culture celebrating social justice, collective thinking, a care for fellow beings etc.).

### *The self*

In general, the students presented themselves as active and agentic—as individuals who take part in various social and political activities, and as people who give voice to and argue for their opinion and take initiatives to change things: someone who makes a difference. This was expressed through general statements such as ‘I want to change, improve, and bring things on’. This was also expressed in the many ‘agentic’ plans, like plans for higher education and plans for doing volunteer work. It was also expressed in comments such as: ‘If you want change, you need to be pushy in order to make a change. You yourself need to make those changes real.’ They seemed to understand participation as a mainly communicative process, and themselves as communicatively competent. One student said, for example, ‘When discussing and arguing with the teacher in the classroom, I tend to be direct and clear.’

Altogether, being active, agentic, and communicatively competent were central themes when the students talked about their lived and future participation—and thus these were the central themes in how self-subjectivity was put forward. Overall, their self-presentations indicated that they experienced themselves as active agents in the construction of their lives, who have the resources to negotiate transitions and to achieve their life goals. Their plans for the future reflected open-minded ideas about what to do in the future and visions of limitless options (Holland et al., 2007).

One interpretation of this is that their everyday school life, family life, leisure-time activities etc., provided them with an agentic approach and

confidence to participate. As been demonstrated in previous research, students do enact agency in school and try to exert influence (Hjelmer, 2012; Rosvall, 2011; Öhrn, 1997), and from these processes they learn participative competence (Rönnlund, 2011, 2013, 2014). Their local participation—in school, in their family, in the community etc.—seemed to provide them with a generally positive attitude towards their future lives and towards individual mobility (see also Holland et al., 2007). Their experiences of local participation also seemed to make them think about themselves as participative in the future. In particular, participation in school groups and interest groups seemed to make them develop the skills necessary for political participation (Quintelier, 2008).

Another interpretation—which does not necessarily exclude the previous one—is that the students had taken up the way of talking (and thinking) about how to act and behave as active student-citizens that dominates modern society (e.g. Bjerrum Nielsen, 2009; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991). Being active, agentic and communicatively competent are key components of ideal subjectivity in the framework of neo-liberalism and late modernity as well as in the framework of democracy and democratic citizenship. This interpretation points to the ‘constitutive force of the discourses’ that leads the students to subject themselves within the dominant societal discourse (Brunila & Siivonen, 2014, p. 4). Following this idea, individuals become subjected within different discourses. However, they also exercise choice, or agency, in relation to discursive practices. In this way, they participate in producing knowledge about what it is to be an active and participative student-citizen and, by extension, how one thinks about oneself and one’s future life, what goals one sets for oneself, and what choices one makes.

There was thus an intertwining of self-subjectivity and ideal subjectivity in the interviews. However, when analytically trying to separate the two, marginalized discourses also emerged, for example in relation to education and career plans. Most of the talk about becoming a successful student and having a good career was presented as non-problematic. Nevertheless, there were also comments reflecting uncertainty, anxiety and doubts about transitions in their future lives (see Borlagdan, 2014). This included anxiety about making the ‘right’ choices and if their marks would be good enough to qualify them for their desired programme in higher education, but also a general uncertainty about what to do in the future. This applied for example to Johan, who during lower secondary school had participated actively in the student council but felt socially excluded in his school class. He had experienced the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school as a release as it meant a new school environment and new classmates, but after a term he realized that the programme was not what he expected so he quit and changed to another programme. He was satisfied with the new programme but dissatisfied with some of the teachers’ teaching methods. From the first day, he tried to give voice to his critique, but did not experience great changes, and consequently he had lost interest in school and started to skip lessons. At the time of the interview, upper

secondary school was coming to an end, and he worried about his grades and felt uncertain about the future, saying that he did not know what to do in the coming years or what career would suit him.

Johan: I will have to study up some subjects, that's for sure, but also, I have no idea what to do next, it's like three years ago when I was about to quit grade 9 and decide on a program in upper secondary, I did not know what to choose.

Another sub-discourse was self-criticism. In general, the students presented themselves as active and participative and gave the impression of being confident. In parallel, some of them described themselves as not being sufficiently active or participative. This was especially characteristic of comments where the students compared their present participation in school with former participation, saying that they had been more active in collective actions and in councils of various kinds in the past and that their participation had decreased. Their talk on this issue mirrored an understanding of individual and collective participation as a student-citizen requirement, and they related to what they communicated as 'not being active enough', to 'lack of energy' or 'lack of time', saying that they wanted to prioritize and concentrate on their schoolwork. This applied for example to Sebastian:

Sebastian: I did not want to put extra time into something that would take time away from my studies. I did not join the student council. I enjoy that kind of work, but it takes time, and I did not want to put extra time into that.

In a similar spirit, Andrea talked about her non-engagement in the school council at her school:

Andrea: I don't know why I did not raise my hand when we were asked for volunteers to represent the class in the student council. I guess I hesitated because of the heavy workload we had at the time. I did not want to miss any lessons.

As we can see in the students' comments, not participating in the school council was a result of rational consideration and an active choice. However, when they talked about not participating, it was instead presented as an individual shortcoming. This part of the analysis indicates that the students had a relatively clear idea of what was expected from them as participants in school and society, but also that they had strategic (individual) choices to consider—in this example, participating in student council or in classroom activities. As shown by Beach and Dovemark (2011, p. 207), middle-class students in particular seem to 'act in ways that they believe will maximize returns from invested time and effort, or at least does not endanger good grades'. However, from these

interviews it seems that how one can make the ‘right’ choices and maximize returns is not always obvious.

Furthermore, some students expressed self-criticism and concern when talking about everyday classroom practices. On the one hand, they felt expectations to participate in discussions and to give voice to their opinions in the classroom. On the other, they felt expected not to take up too much space—not talking too much or too loudly. This applied for example to Andrea. At lower secondary school she had got comments from teachers and other students which she interpreted as her being ‘too loud’ and taking up too much space. As a consequence, she tried to take a more passive role in the classroom:

Interviewer: Do you participate in discussions in the classroom, arguing for your opinions?

Andrea: Maybe too much sometimes.

Interviewer: Has anyone told you that?

Andrea: No, but it would sometimes be better to let others talk.

Andrea’s self-criticism captures the existence of complex communicative norms in the classroom, and the challenges to meet these in order to become an ideal student-subject. These and other comments about not being active enough and talking too much and taking up too much space indicate that, even though the students on a general discursive level positioned themselves within the dominant discourse, they struggled to fit into the notion of the ideal student-citizen—to act ‘the right kind’ of participation. This part of the analysis also points to the discursive power that lies within educational practices and how this power shapes young adults’ subjectivities—how they were emphasizing certain aspects of subjectivity and withholding other aspects. This is representative of how, according to Brunila (2012, p. 484), ‘discursive constructions take hold of the self’. It also points to the multifaceted nature of ideal subjectivity and citizenship. From the interviews, it seems as if the students had to position themselves against a complex ideal. They needed to be agentic and communicative in terms of ‘giving voice’ to oneself and others *and* be an academically high-achieving student who attended all lessons, focused on their studies and adapted to communicative norms by not talking too much or too loudly. As previous Nordic research has pointed out, this is a challenge to live up to in practice (Arnesen et al., 2010), both in their present student-citizen lives and in their future lives.

### Concluding remarks

The analysis has shown how discourses of ideal subjectivity and self-subjectivity mainly harmonized, empowered and normalized each other. On a

general discursive level, the students positioned themselves within the dominant institutional and societal discourse on what it means to be an active and participative student-citizen when expressing self-subjectivity. They presented themselves, and seemed to view themselves, in ways that harmonized with late-modern and neo-liberal subjectivity. For example, when they talked about the future they expressed an ambition to realize and fulfil themselves educationally, socially and politically—to become a well-educated, autonomous, responsible, agentic, enterprising and mobile self-made citizen. Included in some of the students' notions of what it means to be a citizen was also commitment to democratic values and to collective social and political activities such as volunteering and engaging in human rights and environmental/ecological issues. Thus, they identified—at least on a general level—with subjectivity and citizenship within the framework of late-modern, neo-liberal and democratic thinking.

The analysis suggests that these academically high-achieving middle-class students differ from students who are categorized as 'culturally different', 'disadvantaged' or 'at risk'. The latter often feel they need to suppress their own subjectivities in order to meet with these ideals and position themselves as subjects outside of ideal active and participative student-subjectivities (e.g. Beach & Dovemark, 2011; Brunila, 2012; Irisdotter Aldenmyr et al., 2012; Tolonen, 2008). As these and other researchers have suggested, schooling is a middle-class project, which means that young people from advantaged backgrounds with access to strong social, economic and cultural resources have fewer problems adjusting to these ideals and fitting into the expected student-citizen role than, for example, young people from working-class backgrounds. They are also better able to manage the anxiety and risks arising from uncertain life choices and transitions.

As has been demonstrated throughout the chapter, the ideals that young people are facing are composite and complex. Even though the students at a general discursive level subjected themselves within the dominant discourses on ideal subjectivity and citizenship (being participative, autonomous, enterprising etc.) and talked about transitions with confidence, they also gave expression to worries and uncertainty about the future. At this point, the analysis indicates a strongly reflexive attitude towards transitions and that even this 'low-risk' group of students struggles to respond to the complexity of being a 'good' and successful student-citizen. Striving to be an active and participative student-citizen who navigates within the educational market in order to realize and fulfil oneself and to become a successful citizen in social, democratic and labour market aspects thus seems to be a significant challenge even for this group of students.

So what does this analysis tell us in a wider perspective? What are the implications with regard to the students' future educational, social, political and working lives? Drawing on the analysis presented here, I argue that the complexity that lies in being a 'good' and successful student and citizen is challenging



to young people. In this Nordic context, we found a mixture of neo-liberal, late-modern and 'democratic' ideals to live up to. Furthermore, participation in everyday life during adolescence and the experiences linked to it such as self-confidence but also anxiety and doubts about one's participative competence are likely to affect how one thinks about and deals with transitions in one's future life. In particular, I want to highlight the comments that included self-criticism (e.g. not being participative enough) because they tend to indicate underlying structural patterns related to gender. It is relevant to discuss how young people envision their future paths and transitions from a gender perspective because female paths to adulthood are often bordered with ambivalence (Lahelma, 2012). In this context, important research on gendered subjectification and citizenship processes should also be mentioned (e.g. Arnot, 2009; Walkerdine, 2003). As argued by Walkerdine and Ringrose (2006), the 'feminine' and the 'masculine' are defined in new ways in the 'neoliberal subject formation'. While some of the qualities that lie in the neo-liberal subject, such as being autonomous and assertive, are traditionally associated with male subjectivity and others are associated with female qualities, subjectification in neo-liberal contexts involves 'new' ideals in relation to gender (Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006). In the study presented here, statements about engagement in environmental/ecological issues and helping people in need of care were gendered in the sense that they referred to interviews with girls. It is not possible to draw conclusions from the present small-scale study in which only a few students were addressed. However, the broad ambitions of participation that these girls expressed—strong ambitions to choose demanding high-quality professions, to become an engaged 'mum' *and* ambitions like volunteering and engaging in political and social issues that go beyond occupational and family-related ambitions—are likely to put extra pressure on these individuals in their everyday lives and in their future lives.

Furthermore, there was a tendency among the students to understand participation in school and society and successes and adversities in relation to participation as something essentially personal and psychological (Walkerdine, 2003). The extended, fragmented and uncertain educational and work transitions that young people are facing today are part of societal, economic and cultural structures. Understanding participation as something personal and psychological obscures this fact. To understand one's position in a personal framework obscures the economic and political processes that frame our lives and turn structural patterns into matters of self-esteem and individual agency (see also Lundahl, 2011). When not being participative enough in school and society is regarded as solely a personal 'shortcoming' and 'failure', there is a risk that young people's future educational, social and working lives—even in this group of students with advantaged backgrounds, open-minded ideas about the future and visions of limitless options—will contain trajectories that they consider as personal failures. It is therefore important that young people are provided with tools to see and reflect on their own participatory practices and transitions in a wider societal context.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the ethnographic study, 20 students were identified as being especially 'participative' and 'engaged', and all 20 were contacted for follow-up interviews. Eleven students accepted. The gender balance within the group of 11 students—three boys and eight girls—roughly reflected the balance that characterized the group of 20 as well as the gender pattern in participation in the studied secondary schools.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Nordic' refers to Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Iceland is not discussed here.
- <sup>3</sup> The students have fictional names. These do not correspond to the names used when reporting results from the study when they were in lower secondary school.
- <sup>4</sup> The Swedish Democrats or the Sweden Democrats (in Swedish, Sverigedemokraterna, SD) is a far-right political party that has had parliamentary representation since the 2010 general election.

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