



Adolescent identity at school: Student self-positionings in narratives concerning their everyday school experiences

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3 **Adolescent identity at school: Student self-positioning in narratives**
4 **concerning their everyday school experiences**
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Adolescent identity at school: Student self-positionings in narratives concerning their everyday school experiences

Abstract. Identity, as a common way of thinking about ourselves and experiencing ourselves, begins to be explored and stabilised during adolescence. According to the narrative psychology, identity development occurs through self-positioning and the simultaneous positioning by others, within the discursive positions available in the present context, one of which is the school environment. The aim of our study was to explore student self-positioning in the narrated accounts of their everyday school experiences. The participants were primary school students that provided us with written accounts that represented their view of the school and of themselves. Data were analysed in line with the principles of narrative and positioning analysis, which resulted in emergence of four types of events/experiences student accounted for: academic achievement and discipline, peer relationships, relationships with teachers and general school experience. Within these themes we further identified subthemes, the prevailing emotional tone and student self-positioning. Our findings suggest that positioning as a valuable and accepted friend was the prevailing one. We identified peer conflicts as the potential space for the further exploration of identities, and the position of the rejected student as a particularly restricting one. Interventions proposed include altering the structure of the positioning network by widening the space of accessible positions and altering its dynamic properties, so that mutual exclusiveness of some positions is removed.

Keywords: adolescent identity; self-positioning; primary education; students; narrative analysis.

Introduction

Identity, as a common way of thinking about and experiencing ourselves, begins to be explored and stabilized during adolescence. Adolescents' communication with their environment is based on social contracts and achieving mutual agreement in which they establish and build their relationships with other people (Erikson, 2008). The normative task of an adolescent is to engage in exploring the social field of possible roles and beliefs, and to come out of this exploration with an answer to the question *Who am I*. Identity is traditionally conceptualized as a stable internal structure that enables an individual's actions to be coherent, recognizable and predictable to others (Erikson, 1968).

Although identity formation is theoretically conceptualized as a process, typical operationalization via closed-ended questions provides "a snapshot" of the current state of identity development (Marcia, 1980; Meeus, 2011). An alternative way of theorizing about and empirically examining identity development has been offered within the metatheoretical framework of constructivism and, particularly, within narrative psychology. Advocates of this approach argue that individual identity is co-constructed while sharing narratives about autobiographical events with others in everyday social interactions (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Nelson, 2003a, 2003b; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Reese, Jack, & White, 2010).

Children, when sharing their experiences with adults, first talk about what happened to them in detail, and then the event is jointly evaluated and interpreted – on the basis of which conclusions are drawn about the child's personality traits. Hence, all narrative researchers agree that psychological processes are shaped by

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2
3 the way people tell stories (Sarbin, 1986), and that one learns how any story,
4 including the story about oneself, should be told through social interactions and
5 exposure to culturally permissible narratives (in films, cartoons, books, etc.).
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8 Given that stories have an inherent structure and predefined theme/morale, this
9
10 process enables individuals to frame their experiences – to structure their flow and
11
12 to give them meaning (Bamberg, 2008; Bruner, 1990, 1991, 1995, 2003; Pavlović,
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14 Džinović, & Milošević, 2006).

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19 From this point on, identity research within narrative psychology diverges,
20 forming two distinct approaches. Advocates of the *big story approach* focus on
21 self-narrative, a coherent autobiographical story with selected, temporally and
22 thematically organized, causally linked events and experiences that are essential
23 for one's sense of self (Bruner, 2003; Bruner & Kalmar, 1998; Habermas &
24 Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1993; 2003; Reese, Yan, Jack, & Hayne, 2010). Based
25 on self-narrative, general conclusions about one's personality traits, values, etc.
26 are drawn, which then go on to become part of one's abstract *self-concept*
27 (McLean et al., 2007; Singer, Blagov, Berry, & Oost, 2013). This abstract self-
28 representation becomes relatively stable knowledge about oneself and the feeling
29 about oneself as a unity which extends across time and different situations.
30
31 Identities are specific aspects of the abstract self-concept which are more salient
32 in some contexts and less so in others (Birnhaupt & Lipka, 2002). Eriksonian and
33 narrative theories under the *big story approach* have, in different terminology,
34 emphasized the same effect of stabilization, i.e. achieving a coherent and united
35 identity in adolescence (Erikson 1968; Habermas & Bluck, 2003). Through the
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3 structural model of self (Singer et al., 2013), offered within this approach, the
4
5 stability and coherence dimensions of the self are both theoretically and
6
7 empirically illuminated.
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10 As a useful complement to autobiographical studies developed within the
11
12 *big story approach*, during the past two decades a different approach that
13
14 highlights the dynamic processes of self co-creation and change has been
15
16 articulated. Within sociolinguistic studies, recollections about everyday
17
18 autobiographical events were narratively analysed, thus forming the basis for the
19
20 development of positioning theory (Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg &
21
22 Georgakopoulou, 2008; Deppermann, 2013; Davies & Harré, 1990;
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24 Georgakopoulou, 2013; Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009;
25
26 Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). A few years later, narrative psychologists posed
27
28 practically the same theory of identity co-construction (McLean, Pasupathi &
29
30 Pals, 2007), with these two frameworks being merged into the *small story*
31
32 *approach*.
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38 The key concept originating in this framework is *positioning*, which Harré
39
40 et al. (2009) defined as clusters of beliefs about how rights and duties are
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42 distributed in the course of an episode of personal interaction, prescribing what a
43
44 person can and cannot do. This process entails both self-positioning and the
45
46 simultaneous positioning by others, within the discursive positions available in the
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48 present context (Bamberg, 2008), or the local moral landscape (Harré et al., 2009).
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50 The positions assumed imply moral and personality traits – the position is firstly
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52 assumed within moral discourse and then, once that is exhausted, personal
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3 characteristics are then constructed (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Every
4 position has an accompanying storyline, i.e. narrative – once a person assumes a
5 position, he or she interprets themselves, others and the world in accordance with
6 that storyline, simultaneously holding appropriate emotions (Davies & Harré,
7 1990).

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10 The main thesis arising from this empirical tradition regarding identity
11 development is that (self-) positioning in personal accounts of everyday events is
12 the mechanism for identity co-construction. Narrating an autobiographical event
13 will not only have proximal, but also long-lasting consequences for the self
14 (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). If repeated, (self-) positioning merges with the long-
15 term sense of self, where one defines him/herself as a specific “kind” of person. If
16 life unfolds as a narrative, with interlinking storylines, then the positions assumed
17 then-and-there influence the positioning in the here-and-now context (Harré et al.,
18 2009). Small everyday stories are thus a developmental precondition for eliciting
19 self-narrative in the *big story approach* (Bamberg, 2008). The minor, but
20 important twists that small story researchers added to the theory of identity
21 development are that the positions (and accompanying narratives) assumed in
22 different contexts could be mutually contradictory and incoherent, rather than
23 unitary, and that the assumed positions are not completely stable, but could be
24 challenged and changed in new interactions or self-reflections (Davies & Harré,
25 1990; McLean et al., 2007; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Pasupathi, 2006).

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28 The main change in adolescent relational dynamics is the move away from
29 parents, spending more time with friends, and deepening friendships (Scharf &
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3 Mayseless, 2007). Conversations with friends are mainly concerned with personal
4 identity (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Parker & Gottman, 1989). The events that
5 adolescents narrate in their peer circle are spontaneously linked to the self, even
6 when they are not particularly significant or emotionally saturated (McLean et al.,
7 2007; Pasupathi, 2006; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007), which suggests
8 that interaction with friends becomes an important part of identity exploration
9 (McLean, 2005). While interacting with adults, young people are focused on
10 learning moral lessons (Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010), whereby interactions with
11 friends become the space where the self can be viewed from a new perspective,
12 representing an important opportunity for learning broader social norms,
13 developing self-representation skills, trying out new identities, and developing
14 intimacy (McLean & Jennings, 2012).

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31 The identity development process takes place, to a large extent, in the
32 school environment. Research which connects the school system and adolescent
33 identity development is, however, scarce, and mainly limited to generalized
34 quantitative measures of school climate or similar constructs and identity
35 development (Verhoeven, Poorthuis, & Volman, 2019). Such studies show that
36 those aspects of perceived school climate consisting of caring teachers, teachers as
37 role models, and nurturing the whole student were positively associated with
38 students' identity confidence and exploration and mediated by a sense of agency,
39 personal meaning in academic studies and positive social relations (Rich &
40 Schachter, 2012). A significant contributor to students' identification with their
41 school is school image (social prestige), even though some students strongly
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3 identified with their schools in spite of having a negative image (Marcouyeux &
4 Fleury-Bahi, 2011). Other authors indicated positive relationships between
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6 students' perceptions of the school climate - social and school connectedness,
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8 affirming diversity and an orderly environment - and positive identity
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10 development and healthy adjustment outcomes (Smith, 2015), as well as ethnic
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12 and moral identity (Aldridge, Ala'i, & Fraser, 2016; Riekie, Aldridge, & Afari,
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14 2017).
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19 A review of studies with different theoretical backgrounds reveals that the
20
21 school environment has both intentional and unintentional effects on adolescent
22
23 identity development (Verhoeven, Poorthuis & Volman, 2019). The majority of
24
25 studies have focused on identifying the *unintentional* effects of the school
26
27 environment on adolescent identity development, showing that such effects are
28
29 achieved through differentiation and selection processes, teaching strategies,
30
31 teachers' expectations, and peer norms. Low-performing students are motivated to
32
33 begin identity exploration by their fear of unfavourable life outcomes, but
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35 describe themselves as bolder and willing to resist authority, unlike their high-
36
37 achieving counterparts. Teaching strategies based on teacher directivity, with brief
38
39 individual assignments, are less conducive to identity exploration than those
40
41 which allow self-expression and group learning. Teachers who have low
42
43 expectations offer their students less favourable identity positions, although their
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45 students do not necessarily have to accept them. Peers may deny their classmates
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47 certain identity positions or stigmatize particular positions, which may also serve
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49 to discourage exploration. The *intentional* effects of the school setting on
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3 adolescent identity development are more modest, and they take place through
4 providing opportunities for the exploration of new identity positions or the
5 rethinking of previously formed identities. Such activities usually occur outside
6 the regular teaching process, and their contribution rests on the practical
7 engagement of students and on the identification with those teachers who students
8 perceive as experts.
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17 Research into the identity development of young people undergoing the
18 educational process in Serbian schools is sparse and most often associated with
19 their school achievement. Some aspects of self-concept and other relevant
20 characteristics of primary and secondary school students have been examined,
21 such as the self-perceptions of secondary school students from gifted and regular
22 programs, the effects of academic self-concept on differences in achievement
23 between academically gifted students and others, and the socio-cultural and
24 educational specificities of adolescent Roma students (Grbić, Ristić, &
25 Tomašević, 2018; Maksić, 2000; Maksić, Vesić, & Tenjović, 2017). All of the
26 aforementioned studies confirmed the importance of different aspects of self-
27 concept for the school achievement of both children and adolescents and their
28 stance toward school. The findings of several studies with low-performing
29 secondary school students suggested that while they value education, they
30 position themselves as rebels critical of the education system, resisting the
31 pressure to be successful at school and building their sense of self-worth by
32 investing their efforts in extracurricular activities. Negative messages from
33 educators to rebellious students may limit identity exploration and can lead to
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3 self-fulfilling prophecies and are highly inadvisable (Gutvajn & Džinović, 2019).

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5 A rare study which tackled student self-positioning in daydreaming activities
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7 showed that the positions the students assumed could be widely conceived as the
8
9 preferred self (related to desirable situations and positive emotions), with the rest
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11 of the positions classified as the future self and actual self. The main functions of
12
13 self-positioning were acquiring respect and admiration, gaining control over
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15 nature and life and exploration of the unknown (Pavlović, Šefer, & Stanković,
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17 2010).
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20
21 On the whole, school is the place where adolescents spend a considerable
22
23 part of their time, participate in new activities and get acquainted with new ideas
24
25 within a plethora of social interactions with both teachers and other students. As
26
27 such, school life undoubtedly influences students' self-image, although teachers
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29 may not be aware of the extent to which this occurs (Gutvajn & Džinović, 2019;
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31 Verhoeven et al., 2019). School practices conceived as common and acceptable
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33 can unintentionally affect adolescents in significant, at times beneficial and at
34
35 other times adverse, ways. Depending on the different aspects of the school
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37 community, the positions left for students to explore could be limited in number,
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39 offering affirmative or disadvantageous storylines and provoking pleasant or
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41 undesirable emotions. In our study we wanted to take a closer look at how
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43 students themselves account for their school experiences and the positions that
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45 they assume for themselves vis-a-vis others in their narrated stories.
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51 Our choice of narrative framework in the study of student self-positioning
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53 was grounded in several arguments. First, the aforementioned evidence suggests
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3 that everyday experience is structured and interpreted via the narrative means and
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5 is later inherently available in the narrative form. As evidenced, these narratives
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7 are particularly important for long-term self-understanding, giving the narrator
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9 “raw” material for constructing the answer to “Who am I” and, at the same time,
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11 providing the audience with a window into the content and atmosphere of the
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13 everyday life which determines the availability and shapes the selection of the
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15 narrator’s self-positions. The scarcity of research that explicitly connects the
16
17 school context and identity-positioning among students, and the lack of studies
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19 that offer us insight into how the school setting looks from the students’
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21 standpoint led us towards a qualitative analysis of this kind which privileges
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23 student unique perspective.
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28 ***Purpose of the study***

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30 The main aim of our study was to explore student self-positioning in the narrated
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32 accounts of their everyday school experiences. We wanted to capture how the
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34 everyday world of schooling, as seen by students, via its complex network of
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36 relations and particular school atmosphere allows for certain identities while
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38 prohibiting or limiting others, shaping, in turn, the choice of self-positions that
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40 students assume. Informed by narrative psychology, we posed the following
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42 research questions:
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46 (1) What kind of school experiences and general impressions did the students
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48 deem relevant to include in their written accounts of their school life and how
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50 are these experiences and impressions represented?
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53 (2) Which positions do the students assume for themselves vis-a-vis others in
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55 relation to their narrated school experiences and impressions?
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3 We chose students' retrospective accounts of their school experiences, which
4 revealed the students' self-positioning on a referential plane: how students present
5 themselves as heroes surrounded by other actors in a *told world*, unfolding in the
6 "then-and-there" (Bamberg, 2006). We adopted the dichotomy described by
7 Davies and Harré (1990), focusing on reflexive positioning – the students'
8 accounts of themselves, while maintaining the presupposition proposed by Van
9 Langenhove and Harré (1999) that reflective positioning implies simultaneous
10 interactive positioning – the positioning of others in narrated accounts.
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21 ***Research context***

22 Primary education (ISCED 1 and ISCED 2) in Serbia is comprehensive,
23 compulsory and implemented in two cycles: class teaching from Years 1–4 and
24 subject teaching from Years 5–8, starting from the age of 7 (Spasenović, Hebib &
25 Maksić, 2015). Classroom teachers receive education at a teaching faculty, while
26 subject teachers are trained at faculties for their respective academic disciplines.
27 Most of the teachers are female. The average teacher salary is slightly higher than
28 the average salary in the country (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia,
29 2019), which does not make the teaching profession attractive (Spasenović, 2012),
30 but findings are inconclusive since teachers also reported that the advantages of
31 being a teacher clearly outweigh the disadvantages, opting to choose the teaching
32 profession if asked to decide again. Nevertheless, every fifth teacher would like to
33 change their job (OECD, 2014).
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51 According to recent research findings, most students estimated their school
52 life as fairly stressful (Popadić, Pavlović & Mihailović, 2019). Positive school
53 experiences, good relationships with teachers and peers, and students' engagement
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3 in school activities could raise their resistance to violence in childhood. On the
4
5 other hand, the adults who had adverse childhood experiences rarely have
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7 memories that refer to enjoyment at school or having at least one teacher who
8
9 cared about them (Pejović, Milovančević & Tošković, 2019).
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12 The research was conducted at a public elementary school on the outskirts
13
14 of Belgrade, the country's capital city. The school has a total of 870 students,
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16 making it an average sized city school in Serbia. The school employs 64 teachers
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18 and two school counsellors (one is a psychologist). In addition to the regular
19
20 curriculum, different extra-curricular activities, such as sports and cultural events,
21
22 are organised within or outside the school. The school has strategic documents
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24 and action plans that prescribe protection against discrimination, bullying and
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26 neglecting students; a team for supporting students from vulnerable groups; a
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28 school security team; a team for protection against discrimination. According to
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30 the school authorities, the parents' attitudes toward the school are „mainly
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32 positive“.
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37 **Method**

38 *Participants*

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40 The sample consisted of eighth grade students from all four eighth grade classes
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42 who were in school at the time of the data collection (93 out of 117). There were
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44 slightly more girls (57%) than boys (43%) among the participants. At the time the
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46 questionnaire was administered, most of the participants were 15 years old and the
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48 remaining participants were 14 (15%). According to self-report measures, the
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50 participants had high marks from the two main subjects at the end of the first
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52 semester (on a scale from the lowest 1 to the highest 5: Serbian language M=4.16;
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3 Mathematics M=3.55).

4 5 ***Instrument and Data Collection***

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7 The questionnaire was developed based on the results of a pilot study conducted
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9 in another school with eighth grade students (N=47), who wrote narratives about
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11 who they are as individuals. The narrative analysis of the written stories showed
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13 that the school was among the most central contexts they described in their
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15 attempts to present themselves.
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19 In the following study (i.e. the study at hand) we used a questionnaire with
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21 open-ended questions intended to tackle different aspects of student self-
22
23 positioning in the everyday school context. In this paper we present the data
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25 pertaining to the participants' answers to the following questions:
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27

28 *Please recall an event that happened at school that faithfully portrays*
29
30 *what you are like at school. What happened? What were your thoughts and*
31
32 *feelings at that moment? How did you behave? Who else was there? How did they*
33
34 *behave? How did it all end? Why does this event best describe you as a person*
35
36 *when you are at school?*
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40 The participants were given written and oral instruction, where we
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42 explained our interest in finding out how young people see themselves and their
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44 day-to-day school life. Furthermore, we emphasised that if they were unable to
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46 recall a particular event, they could describe their general experiences, feelings
47
48 and behaviours at school. We stressed that the participants' written accounts
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50 would not be available to anyone except researchers and nor would they be
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52 subjected to grading, with the expectation that this would encourage them to be
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54 more open in the experience sharing and self-positioning process. The students
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3 were invited to participate on a voluntary basis and only a few of them left the
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5 questionnaire blank.
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8 We carried out the survey near the end of the school year, in what was the
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10 participants' final year of compulsory education (April 2019). The data were
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12 collected at school during regular classes, with the whole class period available
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14 for writing. We were able to use the last lessons of the school day. In some classes
15
16 the teachers were present, while in others they were not. Most of the students
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18 were forthright and active while completing the questionnaire and seemed to be
19
20 interested in the topic and willing to share their experiences. Some students asked
21
22 questions about the purpose of the research and wanted reassurance that their
23
24 stories would not reach their teachers. The most striking comment made by the
25
26 participants to both authors was that no one had asked them anything similar
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28 before.
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32 33 ***Data Analysis***

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35 The written accounts of everyday school experiences were analysed in line with
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37 the principles of narrative analysis (Hiles & Čermak, 2008; Popadić, Pavlović, &
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39 Žeželj, 2018; Reissman, 1993; Vilig, 2016), where particular attention was paid to
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41 identifying the students' self-positioning (e.g. Bamberg 1997, 2008;
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43 Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2013). Narrative analysis rests on the following
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45 assumptions: (a) the autobiographical experience, when verbalised, is structurally
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47 and thematically organised in the same way as any story, and (b) persons aspire to
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49 form such a story that fits well into their general self-understanding. Each
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53 situational story reflects some aspect of stabilized identity, or the way in which
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3 new identity positions are currently being tried out (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg &
4 Georgakopoulou, 2008; McLean et al., 2007).
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8 After multiple readings of the students' written accounts, we started the
9
10 analysis with an initial thematic structuring of the narratives, and this open-coding
11
12 level consisted of identifying the types of events/experiences and impressions
13
14 regarding everyday school life that the students had mentioned. The following
15
16 themes emerged in this process: (a) the students' own academic achievement and
17
18 discipline, (b) the students' relationships with other students, (c) the students'
19
20 relationships with teachers, and (d) the students' general school experience. As a
21
22 unit of analysis, we chose to code as much continuous text within each narrative
23
24 as possible under the same theme. Different parts belonging to the same narrative
25
26 could be subsumed under different themes, and this applied both to accounts of
27
28 specific school events, as well as general impressions about everyday school life.
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30
31 For example, the first part of the narrative would be coded under the theme
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33 "discipline", while the rest of the same narrative would fall under the theme
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35 "relationships with other students". We then described the structural features of
36
37 the narratives for each theme: the position of the given theme in the overall
38
39 narrative, the length and detail of the description, and whether the descriptions
40
41 were stereotypical and repetitive or appeared to reflect the unique subjective
42
43 experience of the participant.
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49 After structuring the accounts thematically, we worked our way down
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51 towards smaller units of meaning (Hiles & Čermak, 2008). Within each of the
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53 four constructed themes we further identified: (a) subthemes, (b) the dominant
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3 emotional tone, and (c) student self-positioning. While within the constructed
4
5 subthemes our aim was to identify variations in the way a particular theme was
6
7 represented among the students, with some variations having a particularly
8
9 prominent emotional tone, the core part of this coding stage was to determine the
10
11 positions the students assumed for themselves vis-a-vis others in relation to each
12
13 event/experience for which they had given an account. Our analysis focused on
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15 positioning in the then-and-there content of the story (e.g. who the active agent,
16
17 victim or perpetrator in the story is), and how the narrators positioned “themselves
18
19 to themselves”, offering us the answer to the question: "Who am I?" (Bamberg,
20
21 1997; Georgakopoulou, 2006). While structuring the accounts thematically and
22
23 constructing subthemes helped us to answer the first research question dealing
24
25 with the students’ selection and representation of relevant school experiences, the
26
27 second question focused on student self-representation was answered by
28
29 subsequent positioning analysis performed in relation to each of the identified
30
31 subthemes, which will be further discussed in the results section.
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37
38 After the initial reading of all the material, we coded 30% of the content
39
40 together, identifying the types of events and impressions regarding everyday
41
42 school life the students had mentioned. We then coded the remaining two-thirds of
43
44 the narratives independently, relying on a previously developed coding scheme,
45
46 discussing the differences until agreement was reached in their interpretation.
47
48

49 **Results**

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51 A total of 89 narratives were obtained from 93 students, ranging in length from
52
53 one to 217 words ($M = 50$ words). Most of the students ($N = 73$) wrote a narrative
54
55 that could be analysed in the context of the posed research question. One fifth of
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2
3 the participants described a specific event (N = 15) as requested, while the
4
5 majority (N = 58) write about their general school experiences and self-
6
7 understanding in the school context. Approximately two-thirds of those students
8
9 whose answers were analysed were girls (N = 46) and one-third were boys (N =
10
11 27). Out of the 16 students whose narratives could not be analysed within the
12
13 context of our research question, eight said they could not think of a specific event
14
15 that would present them as a person at school, four wrote that they would rather
16
17 not respond, and four gave humorous answers (e.g. "I can't answer because I'm
18
19 currently at a dead end"). Most of these 16 answers were given by boys (f=12).
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23

24 The accounts of specific events provided us with a deeper insight into the
25
26 relations among the students themselves and between the students and their
27
28 teachers, shedding light on the co-implicative positions that these actors assume in
29
30 the students' stories. On the other hand, the general impressions regarding the self
31
32 in the educational setting and day-to-day school life provided us with a better
33
34 understanding of the general school atmosphere and the positions the school
35
36 context routinely makes available to the students, at the same time prohibiting
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38 others.
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42 A brief summary of the findings for each of the themes the students
43
44 deemed relevant to include in their accounts is given in Table 1.
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47 INSERT TABLE 1 HERE
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51 ***Self-positioning with Regards to School Achievement and Discipline***

52 The students typically commented on their own academic achievement and
53
54 behaviour as the first information they used to introduce themselves in their
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3 written accounts. The descriptions of achievement and discipline were usually
4
5 brief, unelaborated, and unemotional. This theme was stereotypically addressed —
6
7 these parts of the narratives authored by different students were very similarly
8
9 described. Such accounts were given without any distinct emotional tone or
10
11 explicit identity implications. Two subthemes emerged: Average in every way and
12
13 Avoidance of rule breaking and physical violence.
14
15

16
17 *Average in Every Way.* The students typically positioned themselves as “good
18
19 students” or “average”, but even those students who described themselves as
20
21 underperforming typically pointed out that they were “not problematic” (“I’m not
22
23 a very good student, but I avoid problems”). The girls more often presented
24
25 themselves as calm, polite, obedient, quiet, silent and attentive listeners, although
26
27 some appear to be loud, willing to break the rules with peers, but still rather
28
29 successful in school. Being only moderately successful, in this context, was
30
31 shown to be the preferred position, with only a minority being brave enough to
32
33 openly stick out as extraordinary or as wishing to be so. The few students who
34
35 openly stated their above average achievement were quick to “compensate” for
36
37 their deviation from the others with simultaneous self-positioning on the
38
39 discipline dimension as not so obedient, hence placing themselves alongside the
40
41 rest of their less than extraordinary peers (“At school, most people see me as an
42
43 organizer and a smart girl who always has good grades, hangs out with everyone
44
45 ..., but it’s not a problem to skip classes”).
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51 *Avoidance of Rule Breaking and Physical Violence.* The boys typically positioned
52
53 themselves as those who avoid problems (“At school I act appropriately and avoid
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3 getting into trouble”). While the girls rarely showed deviations from the attentive,
4
5 “good girl” position, the boys seemed to have access to wider spectrum of
6
7 positions in this area, rule-breaking being one example, when they wrote about the
8
9 situations in which they did not behave appropriately (“My friends and I have
10
11 been grounded many times because of chatting and joking”). Some of them also
12
13 tackled the topic of physical conflict, explicitly positioning themselves as
14
15 someone who avoids fighting and reconciles the disputed parties (“Mostly when
16
17 someone is arguing and I see that it will escalate into a fight, unlike the others, I
18
19 try to calm them down and separate them”), to those who find it important to
20
21 emphasise their aversion to physical violence and delegitimize the value of the
22
23 bully position (“Is it a lack of intelligence, aggressiveness? ... I really don't
24
25 understand”). Adhering to the wider social norm of non-violent behaviour, the
26
27 boys who offered an account of their unacceptable conduct did that from a
28
29 repentant self-position, expressing remorse and promising not to repeat the
30
31 behaviour (“I was naughty in Physics [class], I did something stupid, I don't know
32
33 what got into me... After that, I apologised to the teacher”).
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40 *Self-positioning in Relations with Other Students*

41 Relationships with other students was the most elaborated theme in the study.
42
43 Such accounts were often emotional – spanning from the positive affects related
44
45 to mutual friendship and loyalty, to the fairly negative feelings connected to
46
47 disputes with peers, mockery and rejection. Four distinct subthemes emerged in
48
49 the accounts of this theme, which will be discussed separately: the importance of
50
51 mutual friendship, valuing peer acceptance, the role of conflicts and relationships
52
53 with other students and school attachment. Self-positioning vis-a-vis others in
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3 these stories was rather explicit and mostly served the function of maintaining
4 positive self-understanding by means of changing the position of peers and
5 adopting a particular value frame, with several cases being rather self-derogatory
6 and hence demanding additional attention.
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11 *The Importance of Mutual Friendship.* After reporting their achievement and/or
12 discipline status, that information was often contrasted with the students' self-
13 perceptions in the friendship domain ("I'm a successful student, but also a great
14 friend"), and this rings true for students from both ends of the achievement
15 continuum (both the most and the least successful). This proved to be the most
16 widely represented and most elaborated subtheme overall, showing that the most
17 prominent need for our participants was to have good friends, inextricably
18 intertwined with self-positioning as a valuable friend ("If [my friends] get into
19 trouble, I always cover their backs"). The students typically positioned themselves
20 as helpers, striving to help those who find themselves in trouble, if need be
21 ("Once, a friend of mine hadn't learnt the material for the lesson, and I raised my
22 hand to answer the question so that he wouldn't get a bad mark"), assuming the
23 role of the defenders and protectors of their friends ("A boy started insulting my
24 friend. She started crying, and I became furious, telling him to leave her alone. He
25 grabbed my hand and I reflexively slapped him across the face ... I would do the
26 same again"), or as peacemakers between the disputed parties who, as a
27 reconciliation strategy, convey to their peers the relative value of friendship in
28 comparison to other goals (My two buddies were fighting because of a girl. I was
29 caught between two fires and I had to choose a side...I told them that girls come
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3 and go and that friends stay forever”). A friend is, thus, implicitly positioned
4
5 either as a victim, somehow weaker than the narrating actor, or as a trustworthy
6
7 and valuable person, with both types of other-positionings implying that personal
8
9 effort or sacrifice ought to be made in the name of friendship.
10
11

12 *Valuing Peer Acceptance and Identity Changes.* Being accepted is a
13
14 commonly expressed and important issue, especially for girls, who stated their
15
16 willingness to change and adapt to peer expectations so as not to “stick out”.
17
18 Sensitivity to peer norms of appearance and behaviour are particularly prominent
19
20 in the presence of the ridicule they are exposed to personally or that which they
21
22 witness (“There are kids in the school who like to tease some students ... When I
23
24 go to school I try to dress nicely, fix my hair and I’m more open now, so others
25
26 want to hang out with me”). Experiencing or observing teasing is narrated along
27
28 with hurt feelings, lower self-esteem or at the very least a less “relaxed” attitude
29
30 (“When I was little I had more confidence, but that changed in the fifth grade
31
32 when they started teasing me”), and this finding holds whether peer conduct is
33
34 condemned or just accepted “as it is”. When they mock, peers are sometimes
35
36 negatively positioned as mean and as such explicitly criticized, but more
37
38 frequently no moral judgement is placed on them, and instead the focus is on
39
40 gaining their approval and reinstating the self as an accepted member of the
41
42 group. In that aim the students are willing to hide some aspects of their identity
43
44 (“For my own good, I try to look average”), position themselves very differently
45
46 in and out of school (“When I’m at school, I’m a different person”), sometimes
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3 claiming to even lose the “real” self in the peer environment (“I often can’t
4 recognise myself in some of the things I do”).

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8 *The Role of Conflicts with Peers.* Conflicts with other students are
9
10 amongst the most frequently discussed subthemes in the students’ accounts of
11 their school experiences, having several important functions in the identity
12 exploration process. Discerning “true friends” from those who show “their real
13 self” in conflicts appears to occupy an important place in the students’ lives.
14
15 Those students who unwillingly find themselves in conflicts, who have a
16 controversial social status among their peer group, and who are therefore at risk of
17 stronger negative self-assessments, position those with whom they are in conflict
18 as unethical, “two-faced” and rude. This can be an important strategy for
19 protecting a positive self-image and maintaining self-esteem (“I don’t try to prove
20 to those students who I am as a person because I have enough real friends. The
21 fact that some students have prejudices towards me already shows what they are
22 like”). This is aided by positioning some peers as “genuine friends”, which is
23 further reinforced by propelling them to the top of the values hierarchy in
24 everyday school life.
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42 While some disagreements with peers were described as situations in
43 which the students found themselves due to an unfavourable set of circumstances,
44 which consequently turned out to be an unpleasant experience, a minority of them
45 enter conflicts deliberately, viewing them as the opportunity to show their social
46 dominance and consolidate their high status in the social hierarchy (“I don’t like it
47 when the younger classes show off, so I like to put them in their place”). Conflicts
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3 serve as a form of social competition in which they can demonstrate their
4
5 superiority, validate themselves as more powerful and position other students as
6
7 weaker and morally problematic. Behaviour in challenging situations, such as
8
9 public conflicts, can nevertheless become disinhibited and go beyond what is
10
11 acceptable. The exploration of a certain loss of control in conflicts calls for a
12
13 reconsideration and rejection of unfavourable identity positions (“I don’t know
14
15 what got into me”; I was rude and vulgar and I never want to do that again”).
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19 *Relationships with Other Students and School Attachment.* The finding
20
21 that being attached to school depends on having a positive relationship with other
22
23 students was particularly relevant. Having close friends is vital for a good mood in
24
25 the school context (“I only go to school because of my friends”), while lack of
26
27 peer acceptance (“Every day at school used to be marked by the boys and some
28
29 girls belittling or harassing me”) makes some students anxious and insecure.
30
31 Experiences of rejection, without the support and friendship of at least some
32
33 schoolmates leave adolescents without the means to regulate the negative affects
34
35 which emerge as a consequence of disputes and mockery and to maintain a certain
36
37 degree of positive self-positioning. This double negative positioning – assigning a
38
39 negative identity both to their peers and to themselves, without the mechanisms to
40
41 change either or to repair peer relationships, gives rise to a strong desire to leave
42
43 school. Students then resort to the only route left for them – wishing to change the
44
45 environment in the hope of forming new relationships with a clean slate (“What I
46
47 like most at school are the breaks. I’m glad to finish school and meet new friends.
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49 I don’t have any nice memories from school”).
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Self-positioning in Relations with teachers

While only about a quarter of the students addressed their relationships with teachers, those accounts were typically fairly elaborated and highly emotionally charged. We were able to identify two subthemes in this area: unfairness and inappropriateness by teachers and reasonable and considerate teachers, where the students reflected either on teachers' unequal treatment of students and their improper behaviour, or alternatively, on the disrespectful conduct of their classmates in disputes with teachers. The students habitually assumed one of the two positions – victims and rebels against injustice or well-mannered youngsters condemning the uncivilized behaviour of their peers.

Unfairness and Inappropriateness by Teachers. When it comes to teachers, the students mentioned inconsistencies in their teachers' demands and the unequal treatment of students, favouring some at the expense of others ("We all wanted the test to be on Tuesday, but the teacher's pet wanted it on Friday. When we voted, everyone said Tuesday except for the pet, but the teacher decided to listen to her pet. I started yelling"). The students see such positioning of teachers as a legitimate reason to enter into conflicts with them, which sometimes go beyond the current argument and grow into permanently troublesome relationships ("We agreed [with the teacher] that there could be one book shared between two students, and now he says that the rule no longer applies. He punished me but I said that I didn't care because that's unjust, and we repeat the same argument in every class"). A co-implication thus arises, where the students position themselves as the victims of biased treatment and rebels demanding an even-handed approach.

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3 Inappropriate teacher behaviour is a particular source of frustration for the
4
5 students, who develop an aversion towards the subjects taught by the teachers to
6
7 whom they assign negative positions (“Honestly, I don’t like Physics because of
8
9 the teacher. She’s not herself really”). In extreme situations, the students question
10
11 their teachers’ professional competences and personal qualities, challenging their
12
13 place in the school. Such a disrespectful attitude towards teachers often grows into
14
15 a generalised, all-encompassing negative evaluation of the school (“I don’t really
16
17 like the teachers. And the students just get worse along with the teachers. The
18
19 lessons are awful, the marks are awful, knowledge is awful”). The students’
20
21 positioning is then reduced to that of entertained spectators or passionate and
22
23 objecting participants, with every other identity considerably suppressed.
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28 *Reasonable and Considerate Teachers.* Fewer participants assigned their
29
30 teachers neutral or positive positions and not many described good teacher-student
31
32 relationships (“I’ve never had any reason to complain about the teachers. Most of
33
34 them show understanding when needed, both to me and to my classmates”). Such
35
36 positioning of teachers often went hand-in-hand with positive self-positioning in
37
38 the discipline and achievement dimensions, when the students regarded
39
40 themselves as well-behaved and high-achieving.
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42
43

44 Simultaneously, classmates were regularly criticized for their conduct by
45
46 students who enjoyed good relations with their teachers (“They should be
47
48 punished because they skip classes”). When in return, they are positioned as
49
50 toadies by their classmates, those participants double down on their counter-
51
52 positioning of others as lazy and impolite, downplaying the relevance of their
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3 peers' judgement ("In school I am well behaved and I study, which is why the
4
5 teachers love me. Some children who don't study and misbehave say I'm a
6
7 crawler, but I don't pay attention to it"). This becomes amplified when classmates
8
9 explicitly express dissatisfaction with those students who are unwilling to enter
10
11 into conflict with a teacher, who in response then maintain the moral high ground
12
13 by positioning their classmates more generally as ill-bred, again dismissing their
14
15 negative judgement ("When some classmates started yelling at the teacher, I tried
16
17 to calm them down ... but they started yelling at me too. It didn't shake me
18
19 because it only show their upbringing and respect for their elders").
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21
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23 ***Self-positioning with Regards to the General School Experience***

24 One third of our participants expressed their overall evaluation of their school
25
26 experience, which we further split into two separate subthemes: monotony in daily
27
28 school life and criticism of the school system. The former concerned the students'
29
30 habitual emotional state in their day-to-day schooling and the latter reflected on
31
32 the many shortcomings of formal education from their standpoint. Aside from a
33
34 few passionately written commentaries, this theme was marked by a uniform
35
36 sense of repetitiveness, lifelessness and emotional flatness with the students'
37
38 prevailing assumed positions being those of disinterested but obliged
39
40 participants and unsatisfied critics.
41
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45

46 *Monotony in Daily School Life.* Both high and low achieving students
47
48 reported a habitual sense of dullness, describing the days at school as all alike and
49
50 non-engaging ("At school I'm happy sometimes, but I'm mostly miserable. I have
51
52 high grades so that's some comfort and the reason why I still go to school. It's
53
54 very boring"). Only positive interactions with friends can partially brighten the
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3 stale atmosphere (“I don’t skip classes and I am an exemplary student, but
4 honestly I don’t like school. Only my classmates fulfil me”). The participants
5
6 assume positions of detached, dispassionate actors who accept their ill fate,
7
8 though in an apathetic and unmotivated manner. A minority of those who tackled
9
10 the general school atmosphere provided an account of experiences of good
11
12 humour and entertainment related to having good friends with whom
13
14 opportunities arise to talk to and joke (“At school I’m often cheerful and happy
15
16 because I’m with my classmates”), which in turn, as already noted, strengthens
17
18 their attachment to school. They positioned themselves as jokesters, slightly
19
20 mischievous but able to make themselves and others around them have a good
21
22 time.
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28 *Criticism of the School System.* Assessments of the role of education in the
29
30 students’ personal development are in general less unfavourable, with the students
31
32 rarely completely disparaging the importance of successfully finishing school,
33
34 however troublesome that might appear. A minority of the students articulated
35
36 that they highly value education and hence study hard. Regardless of their
37
38 achievement status, the participants, nonetheless, predominantly voiced their
39
40 opinion that schooling consists of learning meaningless content unusable in
41
42 contexts outside of school (“I try to listen to the teachers, although I think the
43
44 curriculum is often not challenging enough or outdated and inapplicable in real
45
46 life”). Very critical attitudes were asserted disputing the soundness of the current
47
48 organisation of the school system, with the estimations being that a high price is
49
50 paid for working hard to obtain high grades, while the amount of future profit
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3 compared to the sacrifice made is highly questionable. With this representation of
4 schooling, the students positioned themselves as the displeased party, who despite
5 seeing the importance in completing their education, at the same time critique the
6 substantial value of going through school.
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11 **Discussion**

12 We conducted research into students' self-positioning in the written accounts of
13 their everyday school experiences, aiming to cast light on adolescent identity
14 positions assumed within the possibilities and constrains of the school
15 community. Our focus was twofold: one was to identify which school events and
16 experiences the students deemed relevant to report, and the other was how they
17 position themselves within the representations of school life they described. We
18 identified four major themes that reflected the students' positioning in pre-existing
19 discourses within the education system – achievement and discipline, in
20 interactions with the other main school actors – other students and teachers, and
21 also in the context of their general impressions of everyday school life. The most
22 frequent self-positions the participants assumed were of those an average and not
23 problematic student, a valuable friend, a rejected person, a rebel against injustice,
24 a well-mannered youngster condemning their peers' poor conduct, a disinterested
25 participant and an unsatisfied school critic. Such positions were inextricably
26 intertwined with the way the event/ experience was represented, with some
27 positionings being mutually exclusive in important ways, which will be further
28 discussed in greater detail.
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53 We interpreted positioning that includes information about (not) causing
54 trouble and about achievement as a central part of the school narrative — students
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3 are expected and obliged to position themselves on these two key dimensions,
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5 which implicitly determines their value in the educational context. Starting the
6
7 story about themselves with these data is, therefore, the participants' response to
8
9 the expectations they have formed regarding what is relevant about them for their
10
11 microsocial setting, as well as on a wider macro-level context. The "average"
12
13 position the students typically occupied could be a compromise solution arising
14
15 from the tension between the somewhat contradictory requests adolescents find
16
17 themselves caught between, which are imposed by distinct referential and values
18
19 systems – their peer circle condemning "nerds", while the grown-ups around them
20
21 push for excellence. The frequent "I'm not a trouble maker" self-positioning
22
23 related to the discipline issue might also reflect the fact that the students
24
25 experienced an event at school as excessive, leading them to begin writing their
26
27 accounts about themselves with a negative statement, thus assuming a defensive
28
29 stance which could serve to move them away from the problematic position.
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35 The students' positioning regarding the discipline issue is hard to interpret
36
37 independently of their need to belong. The girls are either "all good" or
38
39 extraordinarily high achievers, but maintain their group belonging through their
40
41 willingness to break certain rules. As with the girls, the boys are also mostly "not
42
43 problematic", aside from some cases were they, along with their friends or
44
45 encouraged by them, flout the rules and therefore earn their peers' respect. This
46
47 brings us to the question of the limitations imposed on the students' self-
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49 positioning by the school context – we should find ways to permit performance
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3 excellence without the students' need to succumb to rule breaking conduct in
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5 order to maintain the acceptance of their peers.
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8 Our finding that the universally assumed position for our participants,
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10 outweighing all others in terms of significance, that of a valuable friend, was
11
12 interpreted in line with data that points to the immense importance of developing
13
14 symmetrical relationships for positive self-evaluation in adolescence, highlighting
15
16 previously discussed evidence (Scharf & Mayseless, 2007) that places having
17
18 "real" and close friends as the central normative task of the adolescent period.
19
20 From this point of view, some of the discipline-related issues that certain students
21
22 face and the accompanying identities assumed could be closely linked to the
23
24 overriding need not to deviate from the position of a loyal and valuable friend.
25
26 Observing or experiencing mockery places additional stress on students to find a
27
28 way to avoid being ridiculed and made an outcast. When other students "deprive"
29
30 a person of a certain identity position, or stigmatize certain positions thus making
31
32 them undesirable (Verhoeven et al., 2019), students are ready to go a long way to
33
34 protect their reputation and to remain accepted by their peer group members. This
35
36 is in line with previous research suggesting that one of the main functions of self-
37
38 positioning in students' daydreaming is to acquire respect and admiration
39
40 (Pavlović, Šefer, & Stanković, 2010), which we expanded by demonstrating the
41
42 positioning strategies students employ in real life to achieve that goal, which
43
44 include concealing aspects of one's identity and giving up on the exploration of
45
46 certain identity positions. While this is certainly expected (McLean & Jennings,
47
48 2012), we should remain cautious in differentiating between the desirable learning
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3 of contextually specific norms on the one hand, and censoring certain identity
4 positions while pushing students to assume others which are less desirable and
5 potentially self-derogatory on the other.
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10 In contrast to those who positioned themselves as the victims of ridicule,
11 preserving the positive positioning of their peers while changing their own self-
12 view and/or presentation, the students who asserted themselves as equals in
13 disputes with their peers protected their self-positioning and even assumed a
14 higher personal moral stance by changing the positioning of the opposing peers
15 and assigning them negative identities. Rather than being “all bad”, our study
16 suggests that conflicts with peers provide some of the most valuable opportunities
17 for students to explore their self-positioning. From the exploration standpoint they
18 offer an incentive to reflect on played-out roles which either strengthens their self-
19 view, asserts their social dominance and illuminates the importance of having
20 supportive friends, or challenges them to modify those aspects of their positioning
21 that have proved to be unfavourable.
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38 Taken together, these findings indicate the crucial role of the peer group in
39 regulating and normalising the behaviour of adolescents, which might have more
40 lasting consequences on self-understanding in the process of identity exploration.
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42 As we can see, success in developing mutual friendship with their schoolmates
43 along with avoiding prolonged negative peer relations critically determines the
44 quality of the time students spend at school. The students’ statements that despite
45 all the shortcomings of their school they still like being there because of their
46 friends could explain earlier reported findings showing strong place identification
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3 regardless of negative school image (Marcouyeux & Fleury-Bahi, 2011). The
4
5 thesis that a key part of the identity work — the exploration of different identity
6
7 positions — occurs in adolescence within the peer circle (McLean, 2005; McLean
8
9 et al., 2007; McLean & Jennings, 2012) is supported by our findings. The students
10
11 have a strong urge to be accepted, and peer rejection appeared to be the most
12
13 disturbing experience within the school environment. Expanding on previous
14
15 findings about stress at school from the student's perspective (Popadić et al.,
16
17 2019), these data further lead us towards the significance of posing the question of
18
19 how schools promote or hamper identity exploration specifically in the friendship
20
21 domain and which compromises students are sometimes pushed towards making
22
23 in order to validate themselves in this paramount developmental role.
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28 This becomes particularly significant when some students are singled out
29
30 and bullying then takes place. If the perpetrators are not explicitly negatively
31
32 positioned and instructed to change their conduct within the school system, the
33
34 bullied students are left without any strategies to gain the approval of others and
35
36 do not have any other choice but to accept the derogatory self-view imposed on
37
38 them. Our data expands on findings linked to the relevance of positive school
39
40 experiences and good relationships with teachers and peers in raising resistance to
41
42 violence in childhood (Popadić et al., 2019), suggesting that the absence of a
43
44 protective school environment threatens to hamper students' long-term identity
45
46 positioning and wellbeing. Building on data which shows that adults who
47
48 experienced adversity in childhood rarely enjoyed their schooling or had caring
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50 teachers (Pejović et al., 2019), the point can be made that after long exposure to
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3 such harmful circumstances, even changing the environment is no guarantee of
4 improving their self-view and mental health status. Despite having strategic
5 documents for violence prevention (as this school had), school stakeholders are
6 strongly advised to intervene and regulate detrimental student relations, given the
7 frequency of such reports and the critical impact these circumstances have on
8 student identity development.
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17 Even if we note that at least some students were likely to have understood
18 the term “event” as an exceptional and negative circumstance in school, which
19 would render neutral or positive episodes involving teachers irrelevant to report
20 on, the fact remains that almost all the written accounts where teachers are
21 commented on are negatively emotionally charged. For those participants who
22 have good relationships with their teachers, usually with the concurrent
23 positioning of themselves as well-behaved, tension arises between them and their
24 classmates, who interactively position them as adversaries to the other students or
25 as the privileged ones. Alternatively, adverse feelings are directed towards
26 teachers, whose conduct is then evaluated as partial and inappropriate. While
27 previous research has shown that perceived school image affects students’
28 identification with their school (Marcouyeux & Fleury-Bahi, 2011), we
29 demonstrated that this could occur through the highly negative interactive
30 positioning of teachers, which could give rise to rather severe consequences.
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3 unpredictable and chaotic plot, where the very essence of education is dissolved
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5 and whose status is, thus, considerably degraded.
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8 While certain divisions between youngsters and grown-ups is to be
9
10 expected in adolescence and may perhaps even be beneficial in terms of identity
11
12 exploration (Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010), the reported state of affairs could be
13
14 considered as a sense of dividedness within the school community, a polarisation
15
16 which splits students and teachers into opposite camps. Students are obliged by
17
18 their peers to choose a side, whereby pledging loyalty to one group excludes the
19
20 chance of simultaneously belonging to another. Our research added to findings on
21
22 the importance of perceived school climate defined as caring teachers, teachers as
23
24 role models, and nurturing the whole student (Rich & Schachter, 2012) by
25
26 specifically indicating that such intense and prolonged conflicts serve to strictly
27
28 limit the choice of identity positions the students can take for themselves, given
29
30 that assuming one position will almost inevitably cost them the opportunity of
31
32 trying out another. For our participants who recounted their relationships with
33
34 teachers, what is lacking is a feeling of togetherness where all stakeholders are
35
36 seen as belonging to the same group and working towards a shared goal within a
37
38 supportive teaching and learning environment, which would promote the free
39
40 exploration of various identity positions and the eventual stabilisation of the most
41
42 favourable ones. What is also worth mentioning is that extracurricular activities
43
44 and identification with teachers perceived as experts, previously discussed as the
45
46 intentional aspects of schooling on positive identity-development (Verhoeven et
47
48 al., 2019), were not present in our participants' accounts. Suggesting a lack of
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3 teachers' awareness regarding the extent to which their conduct impacts on
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5 students' self-development (Gutvajn & Džinović, 2019; Verhoeven et al., 2019),
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7 both previous research and our findings point to the importance of educating
8
9 teachers on this matter and helping them develop more conducive activity
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11 patterns.
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15 Adolescent norms push students towards voicing the widespread notion
16
17 that formal education is boring, with criticism of school possibly being used as the
18
19 means to express their age-appropriate resistance to the world of adults. Given
20
21 that the majority of our participants did not parrot back their parents' positions,
22
23 emphasizing their nonconformity to the adult value system (which typically
24
25 presumes holding education in high regard) might be an exercise in autonomy and
26
27 a symptom that points to the exploration phase in adolescent identity development
28
29 (Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010). From their peers' perspective, friends could be the
30
31 only legitimate reason for forming attachment to school, and by positioning
32
33 themselves accordingly adolescents assert their place as an accepted member of
34
35 their peer group. However, these suppositions do not delegitimize the genuineness
36
37 of the students' statements. Rather than interpreting them as generic and
38
39 instrumental, we understood the students' accounts of monotony and
40
41 disengagement as an expression of authentic sentiments, with arguments
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43 regarding deficiencies in the school system not to be easily nullified, but worthy
44
45 of further consideration. While low-achieving students might employ strategies of
46
47 devaluing education in part to protect their positive self-view (if the system within
48
49 which they are not successful is broken, then their self-worth could be preserved),
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3 which is in line with data showing that they are more likely to assume the rebel
4 identity and maintain a positive self-image by engaging in out-of-school activities
5 (Gutvajn & Džinović, 2019), the reports of the uninventiveness and uselessness of
6 school given by the high achieving students cannot be simply seen as just a means
7 to avoid regressing to their peers' standpoints. Given the previously reported
8 importance of a sense of agency and finding personal meaning in academic
9 studies for identity exploration (Rich & Schachter, 2012), the convergences in
10 perspectives among all the participants makes them highly relevant. As implied by
11 our findings, it is worth making an effort to legitimize other possible reasons for
12 developing school attachment, aided by investments in creating a more favourable
13 atmosphere and the implementation of more engaging activities.

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28 Finally, we would like to mention some limitations. While a small number
29 of students gave an account of a specific event, the majority provided more
30 general impressions regarding their day-to-day school life, and few students left
31 the questionnaire blank. This could be due to the fact that the school routine is
32 typically recounted in terms of problems or conflicts, and the word "event" was
33 understood correspondingly, which the students wanted to distance themselves
34 from; additionally, the request to recall a specific event on the spot and reveal
35 aspects of themselves while the teachers are present was more difficult than
36 offering more general statements or opting not to answer. Our research focused on
37 reflexive self-positioning, drawing on the idea that proximal positioning is likely
38 to have long-last effects on the identity (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). Following the
39 principle of iterativity (Georgakopoulou, 2013), we would suggest that future
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3 studies expand on the number of reflexive accounts per student and add records on
4 here-and-now interactions, in order to provide better grounds for theorizing about
5 the change and stabilisation processes of contextually assumed positions.
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10 Based on positioning theory and starting from the students' perspective,
11 we hoped to lay out some of the structural and dynamic properties of identity
12 positioning network in school, shedding light on how the network works in a
13 particular educational environment. Our findings suggest that school communities
14 should work toward destigmatizing certain positions (e.g. that of a highly
15 performing student), allowing students to assume positions that are currently
16 mutually exclusive (e.g. that of a student accepted among classmates who does
17 not oppose teachers), and legitimizing taking up new positions that could unite
18 previously conflicted ones. Special attention should be paid to ameliorating the
19 unfavourable school climate and non-engaging atmosphere which affects the
20 frequency of certain positions, as well as reducing the highly critical stance
21 towards school that undermines its legitimacy when implementing interventions
22 from which students may benefit.
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40 **Conclusion**

41 In our study we aimed to gain a better understanding of which positions students
42 tend to assume for themselves in stories regarding their school life, uncovering
43 how these positions are related to and shaped by perceived circumstances of
44 everyday schooling and the interactional positioning of other school actors. Our
45 study added to research on the unintentional effects of schooling on identity
46 positioning in adolescence by specifying the ways in which the perceived nature
47 of relationships, the school atmosphere and other aspects of day-to-day education
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3 as seen by the students contributed to their self-positioning, driving them towards
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5 some identities and restricting their access to others. We have shown how wider
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7 norms of performance excellence and non-violent conduct, the normatively
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9 important task of peer acceptance, valuing and connecting with teachers and the
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11 cognitive and emotional evaluation of everyday schooling can produce various
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13 identity positions that may be either closely related or mutually exclusive. Our
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15 findings suggest that positioning as a valuable and accepted friend was the
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17 prevailing one, tending to restrict performance supremacy and uniqueness and
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19 creativity, at the same time promoting the positions of the average student,
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21 sometimes restrained and at times disobedient, teacher's opponent and school
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23 critic. Alternatively, the participants assumed the position of extraordinarily
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25 successful, well-mannered and respectful students who value school highly, but
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27 are often driven towards the position of their classmates' opponent. The
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29 idiosyncratic appropriation of the narratives and emotions attached to each
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31 identity position produced various outcomes between the two outlined types (e.g.
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33 a high-achieving rule breaker). In addition, we identified peer conflicts as the
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35 potential space for the exploration of identities, and the position of the rejected
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37 student as a particularly restricting one. Key interventions we propose can be
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39 summed up in the idea that effort should be put in changing the structure of the
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41 positioning network by widening the space of accessible positions, and, more
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43 importantly, in altering its dynamic properties, so that mutual exclusiveness of
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45 some favourable positions is removed. Hopefully, this could provide wider space
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3 for our adolescents to explore their possibilities regarding who they can become
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5 vis-a-vis others in school as they prepare to enter the world of grown-ups.
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Adolescent identity at school: Student self-positionings in narratives concerning their everyday school experiences

Tables

Table 1: Represented School Events/Experiences and Characteristics of Their Narrativization

Themes: Represented school events/ experiences	Number of narratives	Structural aspects of the theme	Subthemes: variations in the theme representation	The most frequent self- positioning	The prevailing emotional stance within the theme
School achievement and discipline	49 (67%*)	The first and most frequently mentioned, but shortly described	Average in every way; Avoidance of rule breaking and physical violence	“Good students” “Unproblematic”; Occasional non-violent rule breakers	Cannot be deduced
Relationships with other students	36 (49%)	The longest and the most detailed parts of the narrative	The importance of mutual friendship; Valuing peer acceptance; The role of conflicts	A good friend, a helper; Someone who seeks acceptance; Morally superior opponent of	Attachment to school exists because of relationships with friends

				peers; Mocked and rejected student	
Relationships with teachers	17 (23%)	The most emotionally charged parts of the narrative	Unfairness and inappropriateness by teachers; Reasonable and considerate teachers	Victims and rebels against injustice; Well-mannered youngsters condemning peers' conduct	Aversion to school exists because of aversion to teachers
General impressions regarding everyday school life	25 (34%)	Stereotypical, similar parts of the narrative given by different students	Monotony in daily school life; Criticism of education system	Disinterested but obliged participants; Unsatisfied critics	Boredom, lifelessness, emotional flatness

* Percentages represent the portion of the number of analysed narratives (N=73)

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