

**This is a Magazine Article****Learning to stay in school**

*Selection, retention and identity processes in a Danish vocational educational training programme of basic health and care*

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*In Denmark, as in other countries, education is seen as the most important way to make the country competitive in a global world and to solve problems relating to the welfare state. Many efforts are made to retain students in the educational system, but at the same time the system remains selective. In this paper, we present analyses that shed light on how a double agenda of selection and retention is played out within a school of studies in basic health and care and on how different groups of students respond to that. We find that the double agenda is handled in a manner where one agenda is reserved for one group of students and another for a different group of student. Our theoretical point of departure is the British tradition of Cultural Studies and particularly Paul Willis' study on working class boys' resistance towards school.*

**Keywords:** Vocational education, school culture, student identities, Cultural Studies

**1. Introduction**

In Denmark, as in most other countries, education and knowledge have become the two most important resources in the global economy – compared to e.g. land and capital (Korsgaard 2002, Kristensen and Larsen 2008; Boltanski and Chiapello 2002). This puts new pressure on the national education system and on vocational educational training in particular. Since 2006, shifting Danish governments from across the left-right spectrum have made it a political objective that 95 percent of the 2015 generation of young people should complete at least an upper secondary education (Statsrevisorerne 2012; Regeringen 2011). At the moment, the success rate is approximately 90 percent (Nørby 2012).

The vocational educational programmes are assigned a key role in relation to the fulfilment of the 95 percent objective: they normally recruit students who are tired of going to school and want a direct way through to an occupation, but now they are also expected to recruit and retain the students who not so long ago would not have taken any education whatsoever (Koudahl 2004; Larsen; Ploug and Koudahl 2003; Jensen and Larsen 2011). Based on these relatively new developments, the 'problem of school' seems to have altered: the problem no longer appears to be one of *selection*, i.e. getting everyone into his or her 'right' place, but rather one of *retention*. Everyone must learn to stay in school, and individuals who are not able to do so of their own accord must be helped, guided, counselled and so on by professionals such as counsellors, teachers, psychologist, etc. (Tanggaard 2011; Hansen 2014).

However, this does not mean that selection processes no longer take place. In the Danish vocational education programmes, the greatest problem seems to be the number of internship that is required (Koudahl 2011). Unlike in Sweden, but as in Germany, Austria and partly Norway, the vocational education programmes are organized according to the so-called sandwich principle, which means that the students alternate between studying at school and taking up internship in a private

company or, as in our sample case, a public institution (Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening 2009; Jørgensen 2011). During the recent financial crisis, the number of available internships has dropped dramatically (Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd 2009) and one of the consequences of this is a tougher selection process for the students within the vocational education programmes, namely according to whether or not they are able to find one of the now rather few internships to be had. The logic is simple: not everyone can get an internship, hence selection must take place.

The double agenda of selection and retention is not easy to understand for the students. New possibilities arise, but also new problems. A new complexity must be handled and new 'games' of education can be expected to take place. But the question is: What actually does take place?

- *What culture of education unfolds when teachers and students must negotiate the double agenda of selection and retention?*
- *What identities become possible for which groups of students?*

The specific vocational education programme we wish to study in this article is a programme of basic health and care. It covers four tracks: 1) GF, a foundation course (grundforløb) of 20-40 weeks' duration, 2) SSH, a main course for social and health care helpers (social- og sundhedshjælper) of one year and two months' duration, 3) SSA, another main course for social and health care assistants (social- og sundhedsassistent) of 18 months' duration (the SSH course has to be passed before admission), 4) PAU, a third main course for pedagogical assistants (pædagogisk assistent) of two years and three months' duration.

This vocational education programme is organized according to the afore-mentioned sandwich principle. The programme is predominantly chosen by women who make up some 80 percent of the total number of students. However, in recent years the amount of men has increased, and in 2012 they constituted 38 percent of the students on the pedagogical assistant track (internal calculation made by the school). Students with ethnic minority backgrounds constitute 10-20 percent. The typical student age is generally higher than it is for students in upper secondary school; it averages between 17 and 50 years.

The fact that it is a vocational education programme and not an upper secondary school, which is more academic in nature, is important to most of the students. They choose this path because the other path is not open to them, because they want a straight route to an occupation and because they see themselves as people who are 'good with their hands' or, as in our sample case, who are 'good at taking care of other people' (Liveng 2007, Hansen 2006, Dybbroe 2006). The students who follow the three main tracks are employed by the local municipality, and as such they are paid wages which are noticeably higher than the state-funded maintenance grants for students (SU). This is also very important to the students who often start a family at an early age or who are older and have already founded a family.

The article will be structured as follows: First, we describe our theoretical inspiration and the methods we have used to produce and analyse our data. Next, we begin our analysis by describing the school culture within which the double agenda of selection and retention unfolds. Finally, we will sum up our conclusions and use them to address a discussion on the ambiguities of class, gender and ethnicity in today's post-industrial/pro-education society.

## **2. Theory**

In our work, we are inspired by the British tradition of Cultural Studies (Thompson 1980; Hall and Jefferson 2006; Hall 1996; Skeggs 2002; Mac and Ghail 1988) and, more specifically, the work of Paul Willis (1977; 1978) and the recent discussions on and revisions of his work (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004; Willis 2004; Trondman, Lund and Lund 2011). Generally, we will use Willis' seminal work, *Learning to Labor*, as a historical contrast to understand the situation of today – as also

Arnot (2004), Apple (2004) and Weis (2004) have done. At the same time we will attempt to update Willis' class analysis by focusing on a context and on examples which differ significantly from the situation described by Willis in the 1960s and 1970s industrial Britain.

Willis' study focuses on working class "lads" who reject the official ideas of learning in school and are attracted to a counter-cultural identity strategy. The cruel point of Willis' work is that, by rejecting school and education, the lads at the same time acquire a working class identity, prevent themselves from the possibility of social mobility and prepare instead for a life as unskilled workers or even as unemployed. The latter soon proved to be the case since the industrial context of the 1960s and 1970s, which framed Willis' work, declined rapidly during the 1980s – in the UK as well as in the rest of the Western world (Arnot 2004; Weis 2004). Instead, service industry, high technology and new knowledge economies have arisen, leaving no room for the kind of identity strategy realized by the "lads".

These changes create a totally different situation for not only the "lads", but also the "ear'oles" (the lads' – and Willis' – slang designation for conforming middle class students), "spice girls", and new immigrants who must make their way through today's educational system. By including some of these latter examples in our analysis, we wish to expand the analysis performed by Willis and adjust it to today's situation and, more specifically, a Danish context for vocational training. *First*, it is important to note that we are describing, not an elementary school as was Willis' context of study, but an upper secondary youth education. On the face of it, this seems to imply that the processes of resistance and selection described by Willis cannot be found in our context of study since here the students are already selected. However, in today's education system these processes are continued into the higher levels due to the increase of students at all levels. For historical reasons, it thus seems possible to both apply and adjust/update Willis to a context that is quite different from the one he himself studied. *Second*, we will attempt to update Willis by including examples of student identities which were not relevant or even existing when Willis performed his analysis. In Willis' context, class relations were rather straightforward: they were between working men (or lads) and owners of the – industrial – means of production. Women could be omitted from the analysis and referred to the sphere of social reproduction. Today, the economy is changed, it is no longer industrial or strictly masculine, and therefore women are imperative for understanding class relations and class identities (c.f. Skeggs 2002, Weis 2004, Hjort 2012). In our analysis, we will describe not only modern lads, but also female class identities in relation to the specific educational programme. Furthermore, we will describe immigrants as a new type of 'vagabonds' in the knowledge economy (Bauman 1996). In our specific context, they seem to play a role as a new 'precariat' (Standing 2011), i.e. someone who is 'foreign', 'dangerous' and often excluded from the educational programme. *Third*, we will attempt to update Willis' conception of culture and in particular his idea of a counter-school culture. As mentioned, this phenomenon is less likely to occur today since the rejection of school and the strategies pursued by the lads no longer seem to be an option. This does not mean, however, that resistance towards school no longer takes place or that class no longer matters (Faber et al. 2012). We see it as more likely that such phenomena have changed form, are expressed with greater ambiguity, and have become individualized in line with neoliberalism as an ideology (Dean 1999, Willig 2008). In our analysis, we will therefore not look so much for a counter school culture, but for individualized responses to what we see as a dominating school culture produced by mainly the school leaders and teachers.

Understanding student responses to school culture in this way means giving priority to questions of whom or what students may become *in* school culture, thus regarding school culture as a relatively autonomous meaning-universe (Willis and Trondman 2000). Their becoming is seen as dependent upon matches/mismatches between their social class and school culture, but also upon matches/mismatches between school culture and gender and ethnicity as other social categories. As Willis has vividly shown, class identity can be expressed as a particular masculine identity. Through their rejection of school, the lads learned to labour as *tough, hard, unbreakable* and often *sexist* men. Their class and gender constituted each other mutually, i.e. they interlocked, as a more recent phrase

would word it (Razack 1998). In our analyses, we will look for ways in which class seems to interlock with feminine, masculine and migrant identities.

### 3. Method

The data in this paper derive from the aforementioned action research project, which we are currently conducting in collaboration with one of the Danish schools of basic health and care. The article serves a function within that project, namely as a first step to analyse some of the challenges that the school is facing. The next step will be to try to overcome those challenges by means of organizational learning and new forms of didactics. Our method of producing data falls into the frame of ethnographic fieldwork. We have made participant observations, conducted interviews with students and teachers, held conversations, produced photographic material and carried out a survey on the students' backgrounds and preferences. In this article, we will mainly use data from our observations and from interviews with students.

The idea of doing ethnographic fieldwork is essentially to “get into the inside of other people’s world” (Hastrup 2003: 402). The goal is to see the world as they see it, to understand what is implicit and what the unwritten rules are; in short, to become a member of an unfamiliar culture. By carrying out ethnographic fieldwork within the vocational education programme, we were able to notice what kinds of language were used by teachers and students. Who spoke politely, who spoke rudely, what jokes were made by whom, which types of humour were present, etc. As Willis also noticed, humour is a cardinal point for observing living cultures (see also Hansen 2010). In humour, a certain way of portraying one’s own group can be detected (as when we use our “insider-language” and celebrate its qualities), and at the same time a certain degrading attitude towards ‘strangers’ (being weird, decadent, without ‘spirit’ etc.) can likewise be observed. Through ethnographic fieldwork, we were also able to observe the teachers, their way of teaching and their curricula. Moreover, we analysed physical signs of the culture, such as pictures, posters, buildings and architecture. We were able to sense the atmosphere of the place and the feelings of students and teachers with our own bodies. In short, doing ethnographic fieldwork enabled us to produce a great variety of mostly qualitative but also quantitative data on the phenomenon we wished to study, namely school culture.

Our method of reading, selecting and analysing data has been to read across with the purpose of constructing themes that could illustrate ways in which the double agenda of retention and selection affects the school culture and unfolds within it. This, of course, happens a bit differently in each of the four tracks mentioned above, but at the same time many similarities are found. In this article, we will focus on the similarities and disregard the differences.

### 4. School culture

Describing a school culture is not an easy task. We regard school culture as a specific form of culture with similarities to the cultures described by Willis, but which also differs from these in some respects. Based on previous work (Beck et al. 2013), we will define school culture as a complex phenomenon that includes both organizational culture, in which teachers and leaders are the central agents, *and* student culture wherein the students’ identity processes are the driving forces. These two dimensions of school culture are closely related in the sense that organizational strategies are based upon approaches to students and, conversely, student strategies are based upon what kind of student it is possible to become within the school context.

In the following analysis, we will emphasize the organizational side of the matter – how teachers and leaders define the school culture. The students’ perspectives, contributions to and interactions with the school culture will be described in the subsequent section on identity processes.<sup>1</sup>

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3. <sup>1</sup> We realize that this analytic tactic is inappropriate for studying culture as a living, dynamic and emerging phenomenon. *If* our aim were to study culture in such a fashion, we could not use a similarly sharp

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Our description of the school culture will include three dimensions: (1) organization of everyday life, (2) explicit values and (3) rules and regulations.

### *Organization of the everyday*

The school's organization of everyday life seems to be based on a conception of the students as 'weak' or 'vulnerable', be it academically, psychologically or morally. In response to that notion, the school works with rather *tight frames* (Bernstein 1977) when it comes to the organization of the everyday. The philosophy seems to be that under-structured students need very visible outer structures.

Classroom lessons take up 6 hours a day and teaching takes place according to a fixed timetable where every clock hour is divided into 45 minutes of teaching and a 15 minute break; the students are taught in small classes (between 10 and 20 approximately) and in the class group's 'own room' where it is possible to get to know each other intimately; the students have very few and constant teachers; there is little homework and the students are often given time *at school* to do their homework, an organizing principle which possibly reflects a working class life-style (Højrup 1983) where work is finished at the job location (here: at the school) and where spare time is time completely free of work. Furthermore, the teachers' preparation factor does not exactly set the stage for lecturing students at a high academic level: the teachers are given 45 minutes preparation for one contact hour of teaching. This in itself indicates that something other than lecturing is to take place.

The special time frame (compared to e.g. upper secondary school and the professional bachelor programme for preschool teachers) for 'weak' or 'vulnerable' students is particularly pronounced in the specially designed foundation course, which we sat in on during our fieldwork: here, the students have 40 weeks to learn the same as other and less 'vulnerable' students learn in 20 weeks. Thus, the pace is slower, there is more time for doing recreational activities (such as walks, city visits, going to the gym and making Christmas decorations) and there is more time for students and teachers to get to know one another.

The students have various possibilities when it comes to receiving help and counselling. There is a designated "contact teacher" with whom the students can discuss various problems of academic as well as personal nature; the school provides a "career advisor" with whom the students can discuss more complicated matters regarding e.g. admission to one of the three main courses; the school also provides a "special advisor" whose job it is to help if, for example, a class group experiences more serious problems of communication and/or cooperation; and finally, the school makes a professional psychologist available for a certain amount of time per week. In this way the school creates a system of care and support designed to retain students who might otherwise have dropped out.

### *Explicit values*

Rooms are decorated with poster that convey, among other things, safety, intimacy and care. This may be in the shape of a poster-size birthday calendar where the students' names are plotted in with different colours. Or it may be quotations from humanistic thinkers or famous health care workers, e.g. a Danish nursery home leader who is quoted for saying: "Why can't we include in this society something that is old, something that is new, something that is small and something that is big?". Wall posters also take the form of suggestions for how the class can maintain a good spirit of cooperation. Some of the suggestions are:

- Show respect towards each other

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distinction between organizational culture and student culture, but would rather investigate the two as preconditions for each other and preconditions for the emerging culture. However, this is not our aim in the present article. Our aim is to describe school culture as a relatively inert phenomenon and to describe the students' identity processes *within* the school culture – which exists before they enter it.

- We must take responsibility for one another
- We must trust each other
- Good atmosphere in class
- Solve problems before we go home
- Homework must be given with caution
- Extra breaks must be agreed upon
- Speak slowly and listen to others

These statements may be interpreted both as a sign of everyone's good intentions and qualities as human beings and as a sort of contract whereby actions and reprisals are mentioned in case not everyone is already a good, caring person.

### *Rules and regulations*

Other rules and regulations may come into play if a good and caring self does not seem to present itself. These rules are e.g. to show up at school for an appropriate amount of time and in an appropriate way, including handing in given assignments on time. An example of this is that a rigorous registration of attendance is the norm on all course levels based on the idea that the under-structured students need to acquire the discipline needed to be a proper worker who shows up on time and does not skive off work. Furthermore, the following regulations are written on 'cold' posters that are put up on classroom walls next to the 'warm' posters mentioned earlier:

- All smoking takes place outside, in the smokers' shed
- No coffee machines or kettles may be placed in classrooms Chairs must be put up on tables at the end of each day
- No coffee, cake or sweets are allowed in classrooms
- Class groups are required by turns to clean the canteen and sweep the outside school areas

The point about this rule-system is that it only becomes important if a teacher finds that any one student is *not* a good, caring and responsible person. *If*, on the other hand, such a character is evident, the rule-system is less important and the teacher may ignore or look kindly at some minor transgressions of the regulations.

### *A culture of caring*

To sum up this description of the school culture, it can be characterized as a *culture of caring*. Care is given to students by the school and its teachers while the students are encouraged to develop mutually caring relations and a caring self, e.g. by agreeing on how one must behave in class. In that way, care is omnipresent as both an expectation to students and a way of helping, guiding and structuring the lives of supposedly under-structured students. However, there is a close affinity between care and discipline to the extent that care sometimes takes the form of discipline – e.g. in the case of the registration of attendance. If the 'right' attitude does not present itself, the school has a variety of rules and techniques to put to use in order to develop the preferred attitude. In classrooms, these forms of discipline are mentioned on 'cold' posters that are placed next to the 'warm', more encouraging posters.

This much can be said about the school culture when looking at it from an organizational point of view. When looking at it from the students' point of view, the presentation of a good and caring self also becomes a criterion for selection and identity processes in the school culture. In the following, we will describe some of these processes.

## **5. Identity processes between compliance, resistance and withdrawal**

In our description of these processes, we will use conceptualizations produced by the Swedish sociologist, Mats Trondman, who like Paul Willis works in the tradition of Cultural Studies. In his conceptualization of subjectivity and identity of individuals, Trondman talks about *structures of feelings* (Trondman 1998). He defines a structure of feeling as a 'total' feeling of your present possibilities in the light of earlier experiences and hopes for the future. Structures of feeling are 'models of solution' defining the individual's engagement in the social world and mediating between individual identity, group identification and overall interaction with 'others'. They are bodily embedded sets of values and self-images which are not necessary consciously and cognitively available for the individual herself. The structure of feeling of an individual or a group is a deep-structure of emotions, self-pictures and experiences from which actual problems are defined and solutions are sought out. In this respect the concept is close to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977). In the school context, structures of feelings determine the way students relate to learning, teachers and other students: some students act with passion or recognition towards the rules and regulations of the school, and the learning-goals of the lessons, because it in some way or another meets their structure of feeling. Other students have more trouble making a match between their structure of feeling and school. The point is that you become *someone* by the way you either identify or not identify with the roles or social repertoire possible within the school culture: identity is a matter of relations (Trondman 1998, Hall 1996, Jenkins 1996). Using Trondman's vocabulary we may say that the lads in Willis' study used their structures of feelings to react to the dominant school culture in certain ways and to create their countercultural working class identity in direct opposition to the school and its learning culture.

In the following we will present different matches and mismatches between students' structures of feelings and school. Of course we cannot analyze student identity in a first-person-perspective, as we have no access to the inner life of the single student. But by analyzing our observations, interviews and informal conversations with students, we can indicate central features of their structures of feelings and thereby their efforts to find a place for themselves in the school culture,

For most of the students in our study, going to school is not difficult as there is a match between their structure of feelings and the school culture. To be a student is not something they must learn, but rather something they already know how to perform and are comfortable with. They meet the requirement of possessing a caring self by showing up at school, doing their homework and contributing positively to a caring atmosphere in class. Furthermore, they show an interest in the academic aspects of school life. They know the academic terms, they know how to put the 'right' question to the teacher and they know how to get positive feedback. They take an active part in group-work and they do their best to include group members who are not as active as themselves. Some even act as a kind of assistant teachers by discussing difficult matters with their teachers in class and by supplementing the teaching with relevant examples from their own previous work experience. These students 'only' need to be selected – they do not need *also* to be retained by the extensive system of care and support.

For other students, however, going to school is more difficult due to some kind of mismatch between their structures of feelings and the demands of the school; they actually have to learn how to be 'good' students and therefore they are more likely to be exposed to various forms of institutional care and discipline. In the following, we will focus on some of these students by portraying their

identity work within the school culture. We have chosen four examples, which display some degree of mismatch between the school culture and the structure of feeling represented by the student. We want to stress that our analysis does not say anything about the number of students belonging to any ‘type’, category or the like. We are not making a psychological calculation, but rather a cultural analysis wherein identities as before mentioned are seen as relational and always in the making. Our examples are chosen on the basis of what seems to be mismatches between the school culture and different students representing diverse social categories, such as class, gender and ethnicity. At the end of the article, we will discuss the scope of our examples by returning to the questions raised at the beginning.

### *Becoming a student with special attention*

As mentioned at the beginning, most of the students within the vocational education programme do not see themselves as particularly academic by nature, but rather as people who are ‘good with their hands’ or, as in this case, ‘good at taking care of other people’. That is not necessarily a hindrance for participating in the school culture, however. As long as a person is *willing* to learn, he or she can still be fully accepted as a member of the school culture. The school provides special care in the form of e.g. personal guidance, courses and special examinations and a person willing to accept these arrangements of care can become a “student with special attention”.

Sanne is a woman in her mid-twenties who has always had academic problems. Since her early teens, she has been in segregated classes for people with special needs. She refers to those classes sometimes fondly, other times with mixed emotions, for example saying that: “We were all equally stupid”. She has since finished two other educations in this way. Now she is taking the SSH Course on normal terms. She is very positive towards the school and happy to get the extra help she needs without having to be put into a separate class with other academically weak students. Sanne is very proud of this achievement and she refers to the process as a big challenge. She receives good evaluations from her internships and seems confident, competent and at ease when we observe her in that setting. By presenting a traditionally feminine, caring self she comes through as the good and caring person she is expected to be. Although Sanne has always had academic problems, she has never seen herself in direct opposition to her schools. In some ways, she regrets being put into special needs classes, but on the other hand she has come to see it as inevitable. It has become part of her identity and it is an integrated part of her value-system to accept help and to consider herself as a person who needs help. The SOSU school’s system of support presents her with the opportunity, due to her identity as a “student with special attention”, to take an ordinary education without being segregated. And Sanne seems to use that opportunity in her identity work.

Sanne’s mismatch vis-à-vis the school culture is therefore not particularly extensive. As a Danish woman with recognized school-related problems, she does not stand out. She matches both the expectation of care and the system of care and support. To bring back the discussion to Willis and to the question of class identity, we may say that Sanne is one of those students – like so many others – whose aim is to attain social mobility via education – and who seems to get it. Through a caring attitude and at the same time a certain *willingness* to learn the academic content, she seems to become what Skeggs (2002) has described as a ‘respectable’ member of the middle class.

### *Learning Danish*

Women with ethnic minority backgrounds, however, stood out rather more in relation to the school culture and they became very visible in the everyday. In the following, we will give an example of that.

At the school, we met several students with ethnic minority background. It is often the language centres, which in Denmark are the first institutions to meet immigrants, that hand over these students to the school. In many cases this happens because the immigrants cannot get a transfer of



their educational credits from their home countries and because a vocational education programme is seen as easier to pass than e.g. upper secondary school. By not accepting immigrants' educational merits, they are de facto declassified and transformed into a kind of vagabonds in the knowledge economy (Bauman 1996). We met several students who had university exams from their home countries, but who still had to 'start all over' in the vocational programme of basic health and care.

Some of these students did not have difficulties with the Danish language while others, like Chinatsu, did. When we first met Chinatsu, she presented herself as a person with a handicap and in many ways she was treated as such by her peers. She was not verbally active during lessons and in group-work she took a peripheral position, fetching and fixing things for the others or looking things up in a book when others in the group did not feel like it. Having finished the short main course (SSH), she was, however, expecting to become something more than a language learner. This was clear when we met her in school and it became even clearer when we met her in her internship.

Chinatsu has an education from her East Asian home country where she lived until she was 37 years old. Twelve years ago, she married a Danish man and moved to Denmark. In Denmark, she found work at a factory and stayed there until it closed five years ago. After that, she was forced by the threat of unemployment to start an education. In her new school, Chinatsu seems to be motivated and she has a special interest in dementia since this is a disease that is widespread in her family and poorly treated in her home county. Chinatsu describes herself as a slow reader and for that reason she employs a very straightforward learning strategy that inclines her to study fiercely:

*Interviewer: Do you think you would take out your book during your internship and say 'hey here is that model, I will use that'.*

*Chinatsu: Now it is Christmas holiday and I will repeat, like this subject: What have I learned, that subject: What have I learned.*

*Fellow student: You want to use the holidays for that? Are you not going to celebrate Christmas?*

*C: One day, two days, just...*

*I: The rest of the days you want to do this?*

*C: Yes.*

The fact that she is going to use the school holiday for studying baffles her fellow students in the group interview; they say that they never do that. She also says how she is sometimes lucky to find a book in her mother tongue, which makes things much easier for her. Even though she acquires a lot of knowledge in this way, it is sometimes difficult for her to get to use it in school, as it can be seen in the following observation:

Chinatsu is collaborating with three other students in her main group (put together by the teachers and always working together). She is reading a book and not really participating while the others are working together on a diet plan. When Chinatsu makes a suggestion for changing the plan by adding a piece of dark bread with sardines instead of eggs, to meet the dietary needs of the fictive man their teacher has made up, it leads to a discussion about Danish food traditions instead of dietary needs. She makes no more suggestions. When the teacher comes by to instruct the group, Chinatsu does not take part in the discussion. When the three other students turn their attention to the teacher, she keeps her focus on the computer and has her back to the teacher.

The observation shows that it can be difficult for Chinatsu to use her knowledge because she is not in a position to do so. Rather, her position is that of an outsider. This becomes visible when, for example, her suggestion for a dietary plan clashes with Danish food traditions. In her internship, it is even more difficult for Chinatsu to find a legitimate position. According to our observations, she

seems very nervous in that setting. During a break, Chinatsu tells us that she plays the part of someone who needs help from everyone in the sense that everyone tells her what to do all the time, which makes it difficult for her to concentrate on her work. She describes how her co-workers sometimes give her conflicting orders and how her language ‘deficit’ and impulse to show respect to more experienced people makes it difficult for her to put her foot down.

In school, this problem is more subtle, but nonetheless still evident. In both places she becomes ‘the incompetent one’. Her lack of language is turned into a lack of everything and she is not recognized for her attempts at becoming a good learner. She is aware that these mismatches between her own culture and the school culture are influencing how others perceive her, but it is impossible for her to change that. Her only hope is to learn the language well enough and eventually become more than just a language learner.

Compared to Sanne, Chinatsu’s divergence from the school culture therefore seems more substantial. But like Sanne, her response and structure of feeling seems to entail an acceptance, albeit reluctantly, of the institutional care offered by the school – in this case a position as a language learner instead of a position as a student with special attention. Thus, Chinatsu failed her internship, but instead of being expelled from the programme, she was offered the possibility of prolonging her education by 3 months and start over in another internship – which Chinatsu accepted. In relation to Willis and our discussion on class, Chinatsu is not just declassified compared to her position in her home country (where she had acquired an education), but declassified to an extent that she almost becomes a member of what Guy Standing (2011) calls a ‘precarariat’: an excluded, insecure and therefore dangerous group of people who fall below the normal web of class relations. At the moment, Chinatsu is retained in the educational programme, but as indicated by our analysis it is not unlikely that she at some event will drop out.

### *Learning to speak in a professional language*

Also some women with ethnic majority background, i.e. ‘Danish’ women, had quite substantial problems with the school culture. In these cases, the problem could often be interpreted in terms of women who did not as clearly as Sanne aim for social mobility via education, but who rather expressed a high degree of resistance and class ambiguity. .

A woman who did not match the school culture very well was Joy. Her acts of resistance were highly visible in class. Along with her friend, Laura, she was a very talkative, some would say noisy, person in class. She was not heard for her constructive questions and comments, but for her outbursts when things got too much: “Arhh, I have to go outside and get a drink”. Or: “When do we get a break? I have to take a piss”. Furthermore, she quite openly broke the rules set by the school when she e.g. ate her breakfast in class. No food, sweets or coffee were allowed in classrooms, according to school regulations, but Joy ate her breakfast right in front of her teacher, Hanne – who let her do it. When questioned about her actions, Joy said: “No one says anything about it, only if you do it in the corridor”.

As already indicated, Joy often spoke in a rude and offensive manner, ‘having a laugh’ while doing it (see Willis 1977: 29). At one point during class, her teacher leaves the room to get some materials for an upcoming lesson. Meanwhile, the students start talking:

They discuss some drawings they have made of each other’s bodies on pieces of paper placed on the floor. Laura (Joy’s friend and ‘allied’) has drawn a penis on the outline of Karsten’s body. She says: “It’s fucking ugly. I don’t know how to draw a dick”. Joy replies: ”Have you never seen one”? Laura laughs and says: “Yes, but I have never drawn one”. More students gather round and they have a laugh at Laura’s drawing. Joy says: “It could be the bartender at our local disco. He’s a Paki, but maybe he has a big dick?” Thum and Chaweewan, who come from Burma and Thailand, respectively, are sitting next to Joy. They do not comment on Joy’s racist remark.

As a result of this class-based language, a good deal of Joy's – and her fellow students' – education appears to revolve around giving her a 'proper' and 'professional' language and thus make her 'respectable' (Skeggs 2002). According to her teacher, Hanne, she cannot become a professional – or for that matter be admitted onto one of the main courses – if she uses rude and unprofessional language. Clients and employers will not tolerate that, according to Hanne. In the following observation, we will try to show what an attempt at teaching students a professional language may look like and how different students, including Joy, react to it. The teaching takes its point of departure in an exercise carried out by the students and their teacher in the school's gym – the so-called 'pulse room'. Here, they play dodgeball with the purpose of learning the exact terms for the different body parts hit by the ball. Hanne makes a circle on a drawn figure each time a student is hit by the ball and afterwards they return to the classroom to discuss the marks.

Hanne sums up the exercise and explains why it is important to learn to express oneself with precision: "You have to use exact language in order to become a professional". Hanne asks the class how they would describe the different body parts hit by the ball. She points to her circles on the drawn figure. No one says anything, but nor does anyone make any other noise. Then one of the students says: "Solar plexus", and Hanne responds: "Okay, but that is really an everyday expression. It's not professional language". Joy says: "Hanne, can I ask you something"? Laura starts laughing even before Joy puts her question. Hanne ignores her and talks to some other students. Joy waits a while and then she says: "Can I ask something although it sounds completely disgusting"? Hanne invites her to ask. Joy: "Why is it that we eat all different sorts of things that have different colours, when we shit it all out in the same brown colour"? Laura laughs out loud now. Other students start laughing. Hanne: "Well, Joy, that was today's good question". She gives Joy a scientific explanation of the gastrointestinal system, digestive processes, colourings of food and faeces, etc.

This observation may be interpreted as yet another offense aimed at the teacher: Joy speaks rudely while the agenda explicitly is to teach her – and others – to speak in an exact and professional manner. Joy does not seem to succeed in provoking the teacher, however. Rather than letting Joy set the agenda, Hanne turns the incident into an opportunity for lecturing on the gastrointestinal system, digestive processes, etc. It therefore looks as if Joy is *retained* within the education rather than *excluded* from it – possibly in spite of her own intentions. On the other hand, Joy might also to some extent be genuinely interested in participating in the school culture. Her provocation *could be* interpreted as an almost sincere question concerning the digestive process. The point is that the incident is shut down by Hanne's way of handling it, which is formed by her institutional care for her students. The element of resistance, reluctance and loathing is shoved aside and not allowed to develop.

Compared to the two previous portraits of Sanne and Chinatsu, Joy's class-based deviation from the school culture involves much clearer acts of resistance. Still, her rejection of the school culture is not absolute. For Joy, as for most others in today's post-industrial/pro-education society, saying no to education is not an option. Hence, her identity construction becomes complex and tangled, stretched between rejection and resignation. Compared to Willis' lads, she both resembles them and differs from them. On the one hand, changes in the economy seem to make it possible for a woman like Joy to express herself in ways that three decades ago would only go for a lad; on the other hand, changes in the economy do not allow a woman like Joy to become fully masculine in the traditional fashion of the lads and reject the element of education.

### *Living backstage*

Our final example concerns mismatches between men and the school culture. As mentioned at the beginning, men are clearly a minority within this educational programme. They constitute about 20 percent of the students, though almost twice as much on the track for pedagogical assistants. Generally, men are few and far between in this sort of care work. Historically, they have always been

few and so they remain (Hjort 2012). Recently, however, the financial crisis seems to have ‘pushed’ more men into this type of work (Nielsen and Weber 1997, Nielsen 2011). Their former places of work – farming, fishing, industry, construction, the army, etc. – are diminishing and as a result especially the ‘new’ men must tread new paths. They cannot remain lads but are forced like everyone else to make it in the education system. As our example shows, however, this does not come easily.

Our male example is called Henrik. He was originally educated in the army where he reached the level of sergeant. He tells us that, because of a decline in the need for soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, he was fired from the military, which was where he really wanted to be. Now he wants to become a nurse in order to work in war-zones. So this is his reason for joining the programme of basic health and care. Judging by the way in which Henrik tells his life story, it seems clear that he wants to use his education to somehow re-create important aspects of his former life as a soldier.

In many ways, Henrik seems to know what he wants, but his problem is that he “hates school”. From our observations during lessons, it is clear to us that he has a rather negative approach towards the activities that take place: he yawns in a very visible way, he stands hand in the pocket and watches what is going on instead of participating, and generally he withdraws from the official agenda of the school. Instead, he is often seen in the smokers’ shed adjacent to the school. In a conversation taking place in the smokers’ shed, he tells us that he would never even think of taking upper secondary school and that there is “too much school” also at the SOSU-school. He wants “action” and school is the exact opposite of that. Frequently he skips school, but at the same time he makes sure he is doing his “stuff” (such as assignments) in order not to be expelled.

Henrik’s identity formation at the school is no simple task. For whatever reason he has been fired from the army and now Henrik is struggling to maintain a positive self-image and handling his rather ambivalent feelings towards his present situation. This seems to involve telling two stories about himself. The *first* story is that he wants to recreate his original identity by returning to war as a nurse. His present strategy at the school is to maintain a quite traditional masculine identity where such values as toughness and courage are central. To support and maintain this project, his friendship with another man, Karsten, seems to be important. Henrik and Karsten have their own little clique. They are always together, having their own laughs, insider-language and a lot of friendly competition. By maintaining a masculine project together with his friend, Henrik seems to be able to uphold a masculine identity in the feminine world of care. The *second* story is that he needs this education in order to return to the military by the backdoor, so to speak. This story is not easy for him to handle and through his behavioural gestures and explicit comments he makes clear that the school “treats me like a child and it’s not a place for me” and that he is only enduring it because it is a means to reach his goal. In that way, he tries to avoid the institutional care, which he finds disempowering.

Compared to the earlier examples, Henrik’s mismatch with the school culture is perhaps the most profound since it involves the construction of a radically different biography. Becoming a war-zone nurse can be a way of mediating between traditional masculine and feminine values and this is exactly what Henrik is trying to do. So far, the masculine values seem to dominate, but at the same time Henrik knows that if he is to have a future where his masculine identity is re-created, there appears to be no other way than to stay in school, put up with it and as best he can appropriate traditional feminine values of care. In that way, his identity project becomes conflictual and whether or not it will be successful seems to depend on his ability to narrate and combine positions of warfare and of care. Compared to the lads in the 1960’s and 1970’s, he is in a much more difficult but perhaps also promising situation. Unlike the lads, the construction of his class identity is an individualized project and a project in which education is allowed to play a role, albeit reluctantly. Thus, the knowledge economy seems to present new challenges to men like Henrik but also new opportunities. Henrik may seize those opportunities if he manages to combine feminine and masculine values.

## 6. Conclusions

When Paul Willis produced his seminal work in 1977, there was still an alternative to school and there were still working class identities to be proud of. Today, the economy has changed, class identities have changed, and higher education has become almost mandatory if one is to avoid living off social benefits. This article has been an attempt to address the double agenda of selection and retention in today's post-industrial/pro-education society and more specifically in a vocational education programme of basic health and care. We have argued that the vocational education programmes are prone to become the ones to solve the double agenda of selection and retention since they take in especially those students who a few generations ago would have left the education system after primary school and earned their living by unskilled work. We have asked these questions: What takes place when the vocational education programmes must handle a double agenda of selection and retention? What culture of education unfolds? And what identities become possible for which groups of students, with different structures of feelings?

In our sample case, the double agenda of selection and retention is unfolded within a culture of care where the traditionally feminine values of caring become omnipresent. Here, different criteria of caring become a means of both selecting the students and retaining the ones who do not remain within the system of their own accord. First, the students are selected according to how well they match the school culture. The 'good' students who match the school culture are positively selected and the under-structured, academically weak or in other ways 'difficult' students are negatively selected. Second, the negatively selected students are exposed to the agenda of retention where contact teachers, counsellors, psychologists, language lessons, etc. perform actions of institutional care. Thus, the double agenda of selection and retention is handled in a way where one agenda – selection – is fundamental and where another agenda – retention – is complimentary. The 'good' students only experience selection while the 'weak' or 'difficult' students *also* experience retention.

In our analyses of the students' responses to the school culture, we have focused on students who are exposed to the agenda of retention. Sanne represents a group of students with academic challenges who we found to have only a small degree of mismatch to the school culture. As long as the ability to match the culture of caring is present, the special academic needs can be met by the system of care and support. The other three are students who in one way or another do not match the culture of caring and who must handle their class identity in new and innovative ways. A migrant student such as Chinatsu is declassified at the arrival to Denmark because she cannot get a transfer of her educational credits from her home country. Furthermore, it is difficult for her to make it in the vocational programme of basic health and care which she is forced to enter. She does not match the school culture very well because she lacks the language and the cultural codes to present herself as a competent – Danish – student. As a result, she risks being excluded from the programme and dropping into a new precariat. A student such as Joy does not match the school culture due to her rude language and class-based perception of care work. She shows clear signs of resistance towards the school culture, but is nonetheless retained by means of cunning pedagogical tricks. Her class identity resembles the one pursued by the lads, but on the other hand she differs from them in some respects. Apparently the new knowledge economy makes it possible for a woman like Joy to express herself in ways that three decades ago would only go for a lad. Still, the new economy does not quite allow Joy to become masculine in a traditional fashion and reject the element of education. Finally, a student such as Henrik does not match the school culture due to his background as a soldier. He struggles to construct a narrative of the war-zone nurse, which can combine his past with the future he wants. In the meantime, he attends school as little as possible. He yawns in classes, looks passively at what is taking place around him and withdraws for a life backstage in the smokers' shed. The construction of his class identity is presented with both new challenges and new opportunities compared to what were the case for the lads in the industrial economy. Unlike the lads, he cannot assume a traditional and collective working class identity, i.e. an identity that appropriates him as much as he appropriates it. He must do complex work of identity construction, accept a certain degree of education, and assume

traditional feminine values of care. If, on the other hand, he manages to do so, he may seize opportunities which were not available to the lads in the 1960s and 1970s industrial Britain.

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, our ethnographic study is a part of a two year action research project. Our methodology builds on a dialectical and “emergentist” approach (Greenwood and Levin 1998, Argyris m.fl.1987, Nielsen 2005) where the analysis of structures – for instance the social background of students or the school culture – is important, but is supplemented with an agency perspective highlighting the ways agents – leaders, teachers, students – may change their situation by solving problems and form new individual and collective identities. From an action research perspective, humans are not (only) the victim of structures outside their reach, but also reflexive beings with the capacity to analyze and finally use their creativity to change structures for the better. Our analysis of school strategies and students’ structures of feelings is the first part of the action research project to be followed by the involved teachers’ inventions in order to work with inclusion and the relation between theoretical learning in school and the practice in real job situations – a link which we find to be central to the success of many students at the school. In our cooperation with leaders and teachers the link between the analysis-part and the intervention-part is that our ethnographic work, which is close to the analysis of this paper, will be presented to and discussed with teachers and leaders in order to qualify the teachers’ transformative interventions in the daily learning environment. The intervention part of the project is still in progress, and it is our plan to evaluate this second step in a new paper.

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