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# **Verbal abuse in school**

## **Constructing gender and age in social interaction**

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Stockholm 2007

**Verbal abuse in school. Constructing gender and age in social interaction**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to describe and analyze gender and age patterns of verbal abuse among students, and how it is used in identity construction by girls and boys in social interaction in school.

Two sets of data were used: a school-based survey (study I) and an observation and interview-based qualitative study (studies II-IV). The survey encompassed all 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in a medium-sized Swedish city (n=1 006), and served to assess the gender and age-based prevalence of verbal abuse, and its effects on well-being. The qualitative study was conducted among 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at two schools in the Stockholm area (127 hours of observations and 10 interviews). Through discourse analysis, it explored the role of verbal abuse in gender and age construction between same-age students in everyday interactions and examined students' own understanding of verbal abuse.

The survey showed that verbal abuse is prevalent, more pronounced among 8<sup>th</sup> graders, that boys experienced insults and threats to a greater extent, and girls sexual name-calling (e.g. "whore"). Boys most often used verbal abuse against other boys as well as girls, indicating that it was especially significant for masculinity construction. Being exposed did not have to be frequent, repeated or combined with other kinds of harassment to be negatively related to school satisfaction and well-being.

The observations and interviews demonstrated that verbal abuse was a cultural resource to which boys had greater access. Often with sexual content, it contributed to "toughness", a central component of hegemonic masculinity in the schools. While generating most of the verbal abuse, tough, popular boys were not necessarily regarded as verbally abusive. Responsibility for the bulk of verbal abuse was instead attributed to "rowdy" boys. Whereas boys largely benefited from using verbal abuse, such practices mostly reflected unfavorably on girls.

Verbal abuse simultaneously ordered masculinities and femininities, structured heterosexual relations, and contributed to age construction, intertwined with that of gender. For boys, using verbal abuse constituted them as appropriately (hetero)sexual teenage males. Discourses of immaturity, development, and school year used in the meaning-making of verbal abuse positioned genders differently, and contrasted teenagers with adults. Verbally abusive girls were associated with a negative "fjortis"-femininity, indicating that they displayed the wrong kind of sexuality, femininity and social age.

What constituted 'verbal abuse' was jointly constructed by students and sometimes also by teachers in interaction. Speaker intent was a main point of students' understanding, in turn modified by a number of permissive discourses, such as "joking", friendship or pejoratives having "lost their meaning". Students came to interpret use of pejoratives and insults especially by tough popular boys as "jokes", rather than being offended and hurt. This suggests that students, using and investing in such discourses, reduced the practice of being verbally abusive to acceptable everyday interactions because it was part of how dominant masculinity is constructed in school at this age.

It appears that verbal abuse influences power relations between conversational participants to the advantage of the speaker, and can have positive social consequences for those who learn to use it the "right" way. Power implications of verbal abuse go beyond the particular interaction and conversational participants. Orders of status and power repeatedly produced through verbal abuse based on e.g. gender, age, and sexuality, create part of the social context of school in which students live their everyday lives and form their identities.

**Keywords:** verbal abuse, gender, age, sexuality, students, insults, masculinity, femininity, well-being, school

## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

The thesis is based on the following four articles, which will be referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

- I. Eliasson M.A., Laflamme L. & Isaksson K. Verbal abuse, gender and well-being at school. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health* 2005, 17(4), 367-378.
- II. Eliasson M.A., Isaksson K. & Laflamme L. Verbal abuse in school. Constructions of gender among 14-15-year-olds. *Gender and Education*. (Accepted)
- III. Eliasson M.A., Isaksson K. & Laflamme L. Verbal abuse among same-age students. Age, gender and sexuality in school. (Submitted)
- IV. Eliasson M.A. & Laflamme L. Meanings of verbal abuse among same-age girls and boys. Exploring discursive practices of 8<sup>th</sup>-graders. (Submitted)

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Swedish media has reported extensively on verbal abuse between students, often focusing on boys' sexual verbal abuse of girls, and that this has become a normal and everyday occurrence in schools. In this reporting, "language use in schools" has become a code for the use of harsh language and pejoratives, and the word "whore" in particular has been constituted as a symbol of how (gender) relations between students are formed. In these discussions of students' language practices, verbal abuse has been established as one of the problems of contemporary schooling. While periodically the media debate on the subject has been intense, research is scarce about such language practices in school, but a few studies on bullying and sexual harassment indicate that verbal abuse is indeed common (Witkowska 2005). The framing of the problem hints at gender issues as one of the main parameters. School is a key arena for the production of gender, and as school is compulsory, children have no choice but to participate in the gendered relations produced there.

In contexts other than school, verbal abuse has been investigated somewhat more, in a number of different disciplines. Verbal abuse is increasingly recognized as a form of interpersonal violence and included in definitions of violence. For instance, Kelly (1988 & 1990) introduced verbal abuse as part of the continuum of sexual violence almost twenty years ago, and the World Health Organization now also endorses including forms of violence other than merely physical abuse (WHO 2002). However, despite this recognition, both in the fields of violence and aggression research, the number of studies dealing with verbal abuse is small. For instance, while aggression in children is a large research field, the vast majority of studies conducted concern physical aggression. Of the 2989 studies between 1967 and 2001, a mere 91 even include verbal aggression as a keyword (Underwood et al. 2001). The concept of "verbal aggression" is closely tied to theories of personality within aggression research (Burr 2003). As the focus of the present study is the social construction of identity and the social relations established through verbal abuse, rather than personality traits, "verbal abuse" is used instead. Compared with other types of aggression or violence, verbal aggression is socially more acceptable and often considered less damaging (Epstein & Krakower 1974, Tremblay 2000). The threat of physical violence is often considered the most damaging form of verbal abuse, and is thus the form of verbal abuse most often included in studies of violence (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention 2003). Contrary to the notion that verbal aggression is used *instead* of physical violence, verbal aggression is associated with physical violence; if physical violence occurs it is often preceded or accompanied by verbal abuse (Infante 1995, Hydén 1995, Perry et al. 1988, Stets, 1990, Davis 1996). Interpersonal violence is also a highly gendered phenomenon. The key to understanding violence in intimate relations has been to introduce gender, which despite seeming a

crucial aspect was initially overlooked in research (Eliasson 2002). Similarly, gender theoretical approaches have proven fruitful in studies of violence in other contexts such as between adolescents (see e.g. Messerschmidt 2000 & 2004, Hearn & Parkin 2001). The increasing conceptualization of verbal abuse and violence as parts of a whole indicates the relevance of gender theory for also studying verbal abuse.

Verbal abuse can also have both short- and long-term negative consequences for the well-being and health of the targeted person. Persons exposed to verbally aggressive messages may feel embarrassed, inadequate, humiliated, hopeless, desperate or depressed (Infante 1987). In settings like the workplace, marriage or family, repeated verbal abuse has been related to negative health outcomes, including both psychological and physical harm (Kinney 1994). Verbal abuse has been correlated with low self-esteem, cynicism and unhappiness, higher levels of depression and anxiety, hypertension and increased heart rate, and later posttraumatic stress symptoms (Solomon & Serres 1999, Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2006, Kinney 1994, D'Augelli et al. 2002). Some studies have considered children or the school context. In studies of children, verbal abuse is related to lower levels of satisfaction and trust in sibling relationships, as well as lower levels of school achievement and positive feelings for school (Martin et al. 1997, Mottet & Thweatt 1997). Victims of sexual harassment, of which verbal abuse is the most common form, report sleeping problems, problems paying attention in school, and loss of appetite (AAUW 2001, Dahinten 1999). Verbal abuse is also the most common form of bullying. Associations between bullying and sleeping problems, head and stomach ache, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and even suicide have been reported (Rigby 1999, Williams et al. 1996, Bond et al. 2001, van der Wal et al. 2003, Carney 2000, Rigby & Slee 1999). Increasingly, there is a realization that there is a causal connection between verbal abuse and negative health outcomes, rather than a mere association or reverse causality.

However, to understand verbal abuse among youth in school, and the importance of gender for such interaction, an in-depth analysis is needed. The growing interest and attention to verbal abuse has until now not resulted in a lot of research in this field itself. Rather, to grasp the problem, one has to look to different bodies of research that partly include verbal abuse in school in a number of ways as a result of their focus on related aspects.

## **VERBAL ABUSE, GENDER AND AGE IN SCHOOL**

### **Verbal abuse and gender**

In the field of gender theoretical educational research, investigations on how gender is constructed in school have localized verbal abuse, especially sexual verbal abuse of girls by boys, as a common feature of gender relations between students that contributes to producing and reproducing inequalities between genders. This research shows how schools contribute to the creation and maintenance of the prevailing gender order (Eder et al. 1997, Walkerdine 1990, Thorne 1993, Davies 2003, Connell 1989, Mac an Ghail 1995).

Similar gender patterns of teasing, insulting and sexual verbal abuse have been found in ethnographical studies of gender in schooling (Thorne 1993, Renold 2002, Eder 1997). Thorne (1993) in her ethnographic fieldwork in a U.S. elementary school found cross-gender teasing to be part of the “borderwork” between genders, helping to establish gender separation. Teasing, framed as humorous but with an aggressive component, worked as a common form of criticism that had powerful emotional and behavioral consequences and impacted on gender relations. Boys bond through verbal aggression against other boys positioned as weaker, calling them “sissies”, “girls”, “fags”, and through teasing girls, thus creating a distance between themselves and the other groups. Girls and boys involved in the same cross-gender interaction often had differing interpretations of the same events, girls defining them as violation and boys as “play”. Davies (2003), studying gender constructing among preschool children, explains teasing primarily as ‘category maintenance work’ used to police gender-deviant children for the purpose of maintaining gender categories as meaningful.

Eder et al. (1997) examined speech activities such as teasing, gossiping, storytelling and insulting in the informal talk of white, American 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students during recess and the social hierarchies produced by such speech. They found that teasing and insulting were common, targeting the lowest-status students with ridicule and sexual insults such as “faggot” and “queer” aimed at boys, and making fun of the perceived sexual unattractiveness of girls. By 8<sup>th</sup> grade, girls’ use of direct ridicule was increasingly replaced with gossip, due to other girls challenging such actions and labeling them as insensitive. Boys questioned the appropriateness of ridiculing low-status, isolated students much less often, and boys’ insulting did not show the same decrease over age. High-status boys, especially those engaged in sports, often used insults between themselves to convey the importance of masculine toughness, and demonstrating superior status. Sexual insults of girls were pervasive and girls also used homophobic

verbal abuse against boys considered feminine. Thus, teasing and insulting helped produce certain social hierarchies between groups of students.

Lees (1986 & 1993), studying how masculinities and femininities are constituted by adolescent boys and girls in school, found that girls were labeled “slags” or “sluts” not only for sexual behavior, but also if they exceeded the borders of appropriate feminine behavior, or if a boy did not like them or was angry at them. Boys also could be derogated using words such as “poof”, indicating that they were not masculine enough. Girls were often rendered powerless against boys’ sexual verbal abuse and responded by trying to prove that they did not fit into the category ascribed to them, rather than contesting the use of such words. Thus, the category “slag” was legitimated for certain girls, and girls also used it to exercise power over other girls. The power implications thus go beyond boys’ use of sexual verbal abuse against girls and constitute the patterns of meaning connected with male and female sexuality respectively (Lees 1993). Investigating sexual harassment in primary school (age 10-11) Renold (2002) observed that boys used sexual verbal abuse toward girls and homophobic verbal abuse toward other boys to establish a normative order of gender and sexuality, which echoes findings from higher school levels.

Kehily and Nayak (1997), exploring the role of humor in the production of working-class masculinities in secondary school in the U.K., found that boys engaged in “cussing matches” which involved the giving and taking of ritualized insults without reacting emotionally, often involving references to their mothers’ sexuality (see also Labov, 1972). These insult competitions provided opportunities to decide which boys were hard or soft, creating clear-cut masculine identities. Boys claimed that outside school, among friends, mother insults could also be used to generate humor, but this was not the case within the educational setting. Girls and subordinate boys were also targeted with “joking” harassment often focusing on girls’ sexuality or calling boys “gay”. Kehily and Nayak conclude that such styles of humor are techniques for regulating the enactment of heterosexual masculinities. Frosh et al. (2002), interviewing 11-14 year old British boys, point to jokey “cussing” as characteristic of boys’ communications with each other.

Not only has sexual verbal abuse been analyzed as an element in the production of gender and gender relations, but also in that of heterosexuality in the school context, primarily in studies from the U.K. (Nayak & Kehily 1996, Kehily & Nayak 1997, Renold 2002, Chambers et al. 2004, Thurlow 2001, Lees 1993). Terms of abuse with sexual connotations have been shown to be elements in the production of gender and heterosexual sexuality in school (Ambjörnsson 2004, Renold 2002, Nayak & Kehily 1996, Thurlow 2001, Lees 1993, Frosh et al. 2002).

Due to the function of homophobia in constructing heterosexual masculine identities, boys risk being called a "fag" or something similar, as found by Nayak and Kehily (1996), analyzing the construction of masculinity in schools in the U.K. "Weak" boys were targeted with homophobic verbal abuse in order for other boys to present themselves as heterosexual, powerful and masculine. Similarly, Epstein (1998) studied dominant constructions of masculinity in compulsory schools in the U.K., and argues that academic achievement, or at least working to achieve, is gender marked as feminine and therefore undesirable conduct for boys. Boys who concentrate on school work rather than taking part in rough and tumble play and other practices constituting more macho forms of masculinity are exposed to misogynist and homophobic verbal abuse.

The body of knowledge focused on the construction or "doing" of gender in school incorporates verbal abuse as a pervasive part of gender relations between students, thus contributing to an understanding of verbal abuse. However, few studies focus specifically on verbal abuse in itself. Studies of children and youth tend aim at understanding narrower concepts such as teasing, name-calling, insults, threats (Blatchford 1998, Tannock 1999, Eder et al. 1997, Evaldsson 2005, Benoit 1983), sexual verbal abuse (Duncan 1999, Lahelma 2002, Larkin 1994, Lees 1993, Mahony 1989, Witkowska 2005, Ambjörnsson 2004), or the long-term harassment of individual students in the context of bullying (Olweus 1992 & 1997, Rigby 2000, Laflamme et al. 2003), rather than looking at aggressive communication between students as a whole.

Bullying is usually characterized through different forms of intentional aggressive behavior (verbal, physical and indirect), repetition and a power imbalance between involved students. The literature on aggression and bullying occasionally analyzes verbal behaviors separately and indicates the prevalence of verbal abuse in school. Studies from Australia, Canada, Estonia, the U.K. and the U.S. that do, find that verbal harassment or teasing is the most common kind of bullying (Rigby 2000, Bentley & Li 1995, Peets & Kikas 2006, Branwhite 1994, Boulton & Underwood 1992, Perry et al. 1988). In a Canadian study, verbal aggression was nearly twice as frequent as physical aggression in bullying episodes (Craig et al. 2000). Likewise, studies from Finland, Estonia, the UK, Spain, the U.S. and Canada report quite a high prevalence of verbal abuse in various target populations of students (Rauste-von Wright 1989, Branwhite 1994, Mooney et al. 1991, Perry et al. 1988, D'Augelli et al. 2002, Toldos 2005). Bullying is mainly conceptualized as aggression between individuals. Most definitions include criteria such as repeated behavior directed at one individual, and imbalance of strength or power between bullying and bullied students, and are aimed at capturing the most serious cases of harassment among students (Olweus 1997, Rigby 2000). Thus, occasional verbal abuse is excluded, as is verbal abuse not directed toward one specific individual. The power imbalance is seldom further specified, but seems to connote a rather rigid concept of status or physical strength. It is also unclear how this power imbalance is related to power inequalities between groups, for instance based on gender,

age, class or ethnicity. Generally, theoretical conceptualizations of power are lacking in the bullying research, with a few exceptions (Fors 1993, Duncan 1999). Therefore this definition is rather problematic, since bullying is in itself a part of the power imbalance, an aid in its creation and maintenance. Although relations of power between participants by necessity are involved in the interpretation and negotiation of teasing episodes, they are often overlooked in traditional research on bullying (Renold 2002).

Furthermore, gender is generally neglected in studies on aggression and bullying except as gender differences. Studies mainly find that boys use sexual verbal abuse, teasing or verbal aggression against other students, both girls and boys, more frequently than girls (Roberto et al. 2003, Lees 1993, Mottet & Thweatt 1997, Salmivalli et al. 2000, Mahony 1989, Toldos 2005, Peets & Kikas 2006). A few investigations have not found gender differences in this regard (Björkqvist et al. 1992, Tapper & Boulton 2004, Xie et al. 2002).

Studies of aggression and bullying that analyze verbal aggression separately generally do not find differences between genders in the frequency of experiencing verbal aggression in school (Rauste-von Wright 1989, Boulton & Underwood 1992, Perry et al. 1988, Bentley & Li 1995, Branwhite 1994). However, gender differences seem to be related to the form of verbal aggression. Studies of sexual harassment and gender relations in school point to girls more often being targeted by verbal abuse of a sexualized content (Lees 1993, Mahony 1983 & 1989, Thorne 1993). Girls have been found to be most likely to be verbally harassed because of how they look (unattractive or physically well developed), while boys instead are targeted if they fail to “act like boys” (Shakeshaft et al. 1995). To better understand the gender dynamics involved in verbal abuse among youth, it is necessary to use in-depth studies.

### **Verbal abuse and age**

Whereas the formation of gender has received a lot of attention, that of age has not. While verbal abuse seems to take on different shapes and patterns at different ages and age is also clearly relevant for school-related practices, research into age remains scarce. Sociolinguistic studies find that slang, of which the use of pejoratives is part, is a characteristic of youth language (Kotsinas 1994). The small amount of research performed has been mainly based on a developmental perspective. The prevalence of verbal aggression at school, based on studies of aggression and bullying, is highest between ages 11-15 (Björkqvist et al. 1992, Toldos 2005, Perry et al. 1988, Osbeck et al. 2003). Direct physical forms of aggression are seen to be replaced increasingly by direct verbal and indirect forms, which have been interpreted as requiring more developed verbal and social skills (Björkqvist et al. 1992, Laflamme et al. 2003). According to Björkqvist et al. (1992) girls start this transition earlier than boys, but at

the age of 15, verbal aggression is the most commonly used aggressive strategy among both girls and boys.

Kotsinas (1994) writes that the use of slang by teenagers works as a signal of group identity and informality. Thinking along the lines of a developmental perspective, she places such language use in the adolescent period of opposition against and liberation from adult dependence. She interprets swearing and pejoratives as a part of becoming adult, a way for teenagers to show that they are no longer “nice little children”, but becoming independent of adults. The developmental view of children has been criticized for its assumptions that children universally go through a linear process of hierarchical stages toward becoming adult which also entails seeing children as incomplete and not full social actors (James et al. 1998, Lesko 2001, Thorne 1993).

### **Swedish studies**

Swedish studies have only sporadically brought up the issue of verbal abuse in school, and knowledge in the area in the Swedish context is limited. Two main lines of research can be identified: psychological research into bullying; and gender theoretical studies dealing mostly with sexual verbal abuse. In Sweden, the study of aggressive language in schools has been dominated by Olweus’ research on bullying among Swedish and Norwegian students (Olweus 1992 & 1997, Eriksson et al. 2002). Olweus initiated the empirical study of bullying in schools and numerous researchers have adopted his conceptualization and methods, which Eriksson and colleagues (2002) describe as the “bullying paradigm” within research. Within this paradigm, personality traits or characteristics of bullies and bullied students are seen as decisive for the origin, form and maintenance of bullying. While bullying is mediated through interaction, this interaction is itself dependent on the traits of involved students, and thus little focus is placed on the interaction itself. Rather, the main interest is to establish the prevalence of bullying in different populations, and its variation depending on the characteristics of the actors (Eriksson et al. 2002). Also significant for the main features of bullying research is the lack of interest in the context of the interaction, and actors’ own experiences, as well as the absence of gender perspectives.

Since definitions of bullying are quite narrow, the Swedish National Agency of Education instead uses “offensive treatment”<sup>1</sup> in their surveys. In the most recent national report on attitudes toward school from the Swedish National Agency of Education, eight out of ten compulsory school (grades 1-9) students agree with the statement that coarse language and swearwords are often used at their school (Swedish National Agency of Education 2004a). Half the teachers in such schools agree. A national report on offensive treatment of students in school found that ten percent of

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<sup>1</sup> “Kränkande behandling” in Swedish.

compulsory school students had both experienced and felt offended by sexual verbal abuse, six percent by insults regarding weight, and 13 percent of students with minority background had been offended by insults related to ethnicity (Osbeck et al. 2003). Repeated verbal violations were especially common in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, with 22 percent of girls and 15 percent of boys reporting feeling offended by verbal abuse. Boys more often experienced such insults, but reported lower levels of feeling offended than girls. In the interview part of the study, most students argued that sexual pejoratives such as “whore”, “cunt”, “fag” and “dyke” generally were not aimed at someone specific and used seriously, but rather were used as swearwords or as general pejoratives without meaning (Osbeck et al. 2003).

Related issues emerge in Svahn’s (1999) analysis of gender stereotypes in Swedish pejoratives collected by means of questionnaires to young adults. Pejoratives for women most often target sexuality (prostitution, number of sexual partners, attractiveness) whereas for men they concern not being appropriately masculine (e.g. homosexual, impotent, immature, effeminate). These words frame desirable femininities and masculinities and also reveal the differences in what are seen as proper gender identities.

In the first national study of sexual harassment during senior high school, sexual verbal abuse turned out to be the most usual kind of harassment, with girls reporting high levels of being exposed to demeaning comments on gender (77 percent) or sexuality (56 percent) and sexual name-calling (37 percent) (Witkowska & Menckel 2005). Swedish ethnographic studies have established sexual verbal abuse as part of the gendered social dynamics in junior high school (age 12-15, Lundgren 2000) and senior high school (age 15-18, Ambjörnsson 2004). In Ambjörnsson’s study of senior high school girls, sexual verbal abuse became a marker of social class. Middle class, academically oriented girls considered such language styles as belonging to girls in lower social groups, such as working class or immigrants, and would not use them themselves. Working class girls on the other hand did use sexual insults between themselves and also saw them as a sign of intimacy. Even if actual use of the word was not so common, the risk of being called a “whore” by boys or other girls was present and sufficiently manifest for girls to adopt strategies to avoid it (Ambjörnsson 2004). Lundström (2006) examined Latina girls’ (ages 16-20) experiences of being called “whores” in the context of ethnicized femininities in Sweden, and suggests that the varied meanings of the term interact with local constructions of Latina girls as sexually liberal. Girls also associated “whore” with toughness, attempting to dissociate themselves from rigid discourses of “immigrant girls” and from “white, middleclass, respectable” femininity.

Analyzing how insults are produced and responded to in conversation in school among 7-9-year-old Swedish boys with immigrant and working-class backgrounds, Evaldsson (2005) shows how these insulting sequences are used in the construction of a local masculine order. Insults were routinely staged by boys and directed at other boys, and

functioned to regulate behavior and re-establish particular masculine norms by tying the recipient to negative characteristics such as the wrong kinds of possessions or clothes, age, poverty, or lack of skill in the Swedish language.

### **The Swedish school system**

In Sweden, a great majority of students (94 percent) attend public-sector schools close to their homes (Swedish National Agency of Education 2004b). The school system encompasses nine years of compulsory schooling, from age 7 to 16 years old, followed by three years of senior high school. In grades 6 and 8, the focus of this work, students are 12-13 and 14-15 years old respectively. The school year starts in August and ends in the beginning of June, comprising two terms with a break in between. At the end of the fall term in grade 8 students are given written grades for the first time, marking an achieved maturity within the school system. The compulsory school years were traditionally divided into three levels of three years each, where the last level corresponds to junior high school (grades 7-9). Though the level system has been changed, parts of it still remain in the educational organization. Thus, changing schools and starting in a new class with new teachers in 7<sup>th</sup> grade is still common.

### **Defining verbal abuse**

Verbal abuse, then, is not a unified research field, but fragmented into several different disciplines each focusing on special parts. To summarize, previous research indicates a lack of studies focusing specifically on verbal abuse in school, and a gender identity perspective as relevant. To investigate verbal abuse in school and the identity formation accomplished through such practices, a definition of verbal abuse is needed to conceptualize these practices somewhat differently than traditional research on verbal aggression (e.g. Infante et al. 1992, Björkqvist et al. 1992, Kinney 1994). While ethnographical and gender theoretical studies avoid treating students as objects, taking care to represent their understanding of particular practices, this is seldom seen in the literature on bullying and aggression.

Central components commonly considered in definitions of verbal abuse include the intent to harm and the target's interpretation. Infante (1995) uses the concept "verbal aggression," and defines it as "message behavior, which attacks a person's self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain". Similarly, definitions of bullying also often emphasize the intent of the perpetrator. Basing the definition on the intent to cause harm is built on a problematic assumption of the rational agency of the speaker. It requires the speaker to consciously use language, rather than do so out of habit or to regard the words as "how one talks" on a certain occasion. It also downplays contextual constraints of linguistic usage (Davies & Harré 1990, Bucholz & Hall 2005). Rational notions of agency have been widely criticized (Bucholz & Hall 2005). Such definitions

exclude jargon like name-calling, for instance, and the use of pejoratives by students that is claimed to occur among friends or as jokes. As this seems to be part of the pattern of verbal abuse in schools, an intent-based definition of verbal abuse can not encompass the complexities of such practices. Additionally, there is the problem of how a speaker's possible intent would be determined; through considering her/his own statement about the conduct, the action or the respondent's perception of intention (Tremblay 2000). Even studies that employ intent-based definitions often do not pursue that part of the definition in their empirical material.

A speaker uttering something that might be considered offensive will often deny negative intent. Boys using homophobic verbal abuse were most often found to disavow serious intent, instead claiming a cuss or a joke (Phoenix et al. 2003). Also, participants involved in verbally aggressive interaction often do not interpret it the same way. For instance, while a teaser often considers his or her motives benign, friendly and humorous, the targets instead often see the teasing as hostile and painful, especially when the target is a young child (Shapiro et al. 1991, Kowalski 2000, Georgesen et al. 1999). Verbally aggressive persons are prone to believing verbal aggression to be justified (Martin et al. 1996) and less aware of hurt caused by verbal aggression (Infante et al. 1992).

Research on sexual harassment finds that while the harasser, who is most often male, most commonly claims that the harassment (verbal or physical) is playful or for fun, the target, most often female, often sees it as intrusive or offensive (Robinson 2005). Power relations are central for whose interpretation will be accepted (Henley & Kramarae 1991). Verbal sexual harassment of girls (Loredo et al. 1995, Larkin 1994, Kehily & Nayak 1997, Renold 2002) as well as other types of verbal harassment (Shakeshaft et al. 1995) are often dismissed as joking. But, jokes are not always for the equal pleasure for everyone involved. They may be for the benefit of an audience rather than the amusement of the targeted person (Martlew & Hodson 1991). Kochman (1983) argues that whether an insult is interpreted as play or not ultimately depends on how the recipient chooses to take the insult. Eder (1997) also found in boys' insulting that it is up to the respondent to treat insults as if they are inoffensive, and an emotional response can lead to an escalation and even more serious insults.

Instead of focusing on the intent of the speaker, others, researching sexual harassment, have chosen to emphasize the recipient's interpretation of a conduct in order to prioritize children's own interpretation rather than a preconceived notion of the researcher (Renold 2002). The respondent's interpretation of an event is clearly important and removes the defining power from the speaker. However, the respondent's interpretation is also dependent on discourses and power relations surrounding a particular practice. Thus it excludes any conduct a person has come to understand as harmless, normal or natural through these discourses. Meanings of verbal

abuse are interconnected with situation and context. The context for an interaction is also produced through the social interaction. What would be considered highly inappropriate in certain contexts is acceptable in others, depending on how the situation, action and participants are understood, which in turn is negotiated through the actions in the interaction. Solely relying on recipient interpretation appears insufficient to capture the diversity of practices that constitute verbal abuse, especially when part of the aim was to investigate how such an understanding comes about among students. Basing the definition on the intent of the speaker or on the recipient's interpretation result in to narrow a focus, and a broader definition is required.

### **Definition used in these studies**

Verbal abuse includes name-calling, teasing, ridicule, taunts, insults and threats (Infante 1995). It can be practiced in several ways, not only through the use of pejoratives, but also via indirect wordings or paralinguistic cues, like tone of voice, body language or gestures accompanying the utterance. Here, verbal abuse is defined as a speech act with derogatory consequences for the respondent or for the group she/he is ascribed to, regardless of intent to hurt. This definition does not require verbal abuse to be intentional, but it allows for the possibility. Instead, the discursive consequences, the separation and hierarchization of subject positions, are in focus, consequences that can be unintended (Davies & Harré 1990). The derogatory effects depend on discourses within the frame of which the speech act is performed. Hence, power relations generated by verbal abuse are of central importance.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Social constructionism**

Social constructionism is described by Burr (2003) as a theoretical orientation which is the common core of a number of alternative approaches to the study of people as social beings. While these approaches differ among themselves, Burr identifies four broad key assumptions, although not all of these characteristics are shared by the different approaches. Firstly, a critical approach to taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world is central, challenging the idea of traditional research that knowledge is based on objective, unbiased observation of the world. Secondly, ways of understanding the world and the concepts and categories used to that end are bound to historical and cultural contexts, rather than being universal. Thirdly, knowledge is seen as being constructed in social interaction between people. Truth, then, can be thought of as the current accepted way of understanding the world at a particular time and place. Lastly,

different constructions of the world entail certain patterns of social action while excluding others. Since they imply acceptability and appropriateness of actions for different people, these constructions are bound up with power relations.

## **Discourse analysis**

Discourse analysis is one of the social constructionist approaches. In discourse analysis, language is an integral part of social interaction. Language is not perceived as merely reflecting reality, but rather presents the world in a particular manner. A discourse can be defined as “a certain way of talking about and understanding the world, or a segment of the world” that produces power relations and also has material effects (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 1999, Parker 1992). Discourses are historically and culturally situated, and thus vary with contexts. Also, discourses are multiple and conflicting, and arranged hierarchically, so that some are dominant at the expense of others, which are marginalized. Discursive practices are practices within which meaning is produced. In the studies in this thesis, discourse analysis influenced by discursive psychology has been used (Walkerdine 1990, Parker 1992). In discursive psychology, the studied material is often everyday conversations in their natural contexts (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 1999).

## **Constructing identities**

### ***“Doing” gender***

Rather than being an inherent property that governs social interaction, identity can be seen as an outcome of such interaction (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). Gender identity is created and recreated continuously, “done” in the words of West and Zimmerman (1991), in everyday social interactions between people. Through speech and actions, gender identities – masculinities and femininities – are formulated and reshaped, rather than being fixed properties. Thus, girls and boys are active participants in the production of their gender identities, and not only the passive subjects of socialization into gender roles through institutions like the school and family (Thorne 1993, Davies 2003). The doing of gender is a continual undertaking and requires the repetition or re-enactment of identities over time, in different situations, using the particular resources present (Butler 1999). This repetition helps produce the impression of coherent identities, but also enables variation and change, since the enactment of gender is never done exactly the same. Particular femininities and masculinities are produced not only in relation to each other, but also in relation to other femininities and masculinities (Connell 2002). Thus “good girl” femininity can be construed in relation to other groups of girls, like “sluts”, as well as to “unruly boys”. Here, focus shifts from differences between genders to relations within and between genders. Gender identities

are hierarchically ordered in relation to one another; overlapping with other identities, e.g. age, sexuality, class and ethnicity, which also constitute orders of power.

Here, verbal abuse is seen as a cultural resource for the construction of gender identities during adolescence. Connell (2000) argues that boys in school use sexual, homophobic and racist harassment and bullying against girls and “weaker” boys in order to construct masculinity, as well as differences between groups of boys and girls. Through this practice, meanings are created concerning how a boy should be and how to live up to that ideal.

Davies and Harré (1990) introduced the concept of ‘positioning’ to theorize how children both actively position themselves and are positioned by others through social interaction. In conversation, girls and boys position themselves discursively, and become positioned and re-positioned in many different and contradictory ways (Davies & Harré 1990). In Walkerdine’s (1990) widely cited analysis of two four-year-old boys’ sexual verbal abuse towards their female preschool teacher, the boys use a discourse of male sexual oppression. The teacher, rather than resisting this positioning and re-establishing teacher authority, responds by constituting them as children in a pedagogical discourse, where such ‘silly’ behavior is represented as a natural development phase. The boys could temporarily achieve power in the interaction through the sexual verbal abuse and position their teacher as relatively powerless, despite their age difference, since the subject positions offered by discourse differ with regard to power and scope for action (Burr 2003). Identities are not coherent and stable systems, but are fractured and shifting in the multiple discourses active at any given moment in conversation. Power is relational, and seen as created and negotiated in interaction between people and groups, more or less intentionally (Parker 1992). Thus, verbal abuse simultaneously constructs gender and produces power relations.

The meaning of gender – like other identity-creating practices – varies situationally and contextually. Construction of gender is reformulated when children grow older, and expected behavior for one gender and age does not necessarily stay the same (McGuffey & Rich 1999). The “doing” of gender can thereby also be a “doing” of age. School is a major and compulsory part of the lives of children and young people, and thus a central arena for the production of identities (Epstein & Johnson 1998). Other identities, such as age or sexuality, combine with gender, or have greater significance than gender depending context or situation (Thorne 1993). In Thorne’s U.S. investigation of the play of girls and boys in school, and work in maintaining gender boundaries, gender was more important in school than when playing at home. Also, Thorne argues that age and gender separation enhance each other. Through institutionalizing age divisions, schools simultaneously structurally enhance the conditions for gender separation.

### ***“Doing” age***

In general terms, age has a special significance in school, since this is an institution stratified through age: adults are separated from children (Epstein & Johnson 1994) and children are separated according to age. School also creates a formal equality between same-age students (Kelle 2001). Whether and how verbal abuse can be a resource for the construction of age has not received much attention in identity construction studies. Neither has the interconnectedness between age and gender construction through verbal abuse been studied in any great detail. The construction of gender is dependent on age, and is re-formulated as one grows. Thereby, whether a behavior is considered age-appropriate is also gendered (McGuffey & Rich 1999). Similarly to the concept of “doing” gender, age can also be viewed as something “done” in social interaction, rather than as an inherent trait or developmental phase.

The theorizing of age has mostly been done within a developmental psychology perspective, but less attention has been paid to cultural meanings of age categories and relations, age as difference and as power relations (Thorne 2004). The sociology of childhood is emerging as a new field in the theorizing of age and its social meaning, where children are studied as competent cultural agents in their own right. For instance, Solberg (1990) uses the concept of ‘social age’ to analyze how children’s ages are seen in relation to their participation in housework. Children of equal age are considered to be of different social ages depending on how age is conceptualized and organized in their families in terms of responsibilities in the household.

Sexuality is one of the dichotomies which create differences between children and adults. Teenagers are thought to preside somewhere between these main age categories, and adolescence represents a phase when the child, mostly thought of as asexual, becomes sexual (Thorne 1993, Epstein & Johnson 1998). Relations between genders are continually reorganized at different ages, and part of the transition from “child” to “adolescent” is constituted by an increased discursive sexualization of the relations between girls and boys (Kelle 2001). Both the entrance into the category “adolescent” and the subsequent transition into “adult” is a gradual process (Thorne 1993). Drawing on Rich, Thorne writes that the transition into adolescence can be seen as an entry into the institution of heterosexuality. This period entails girls and boys starting to see themselves and be seen as sexual actors, but girls are more sexualized than boys (Thorne 1993). Sexuality is a central part of students’ gender identity and is given special significance in this age group (in relation to puberty) (Epstein 1997). In school, what Epstein and Johnson (1994) call “the heterosexual presumption” prevails, which means that heterosexuality is presupposed and normative in relation to other sexualities. The heterosexual order is present throughout school, obtaining special significance towards the end of compulsory school (ages 13-16). Although students generally are not yet as sexually aware or active as in senior high school (Epstein 1997), sexual relations are

considered to take on a specific importance during junior high school. Studies on sexual harassment, although mostly concerned with older students (Witkowska 2005), place sexual verbal abuse together with other kinds of unwelcome sexual behaviors as part of the gender relations in school also during junior high school (McMaster et al. 2002).

## **AIMS**

The overall aim of the studies in this thesis is to describe and analyze gender and age patterns of verbal abuse, and how verbal abuse is used in identity construction by girls and boys in school. Students' use of verbal abuse in social interaction and meaning-making of such verbal practices are the main concerns.

Given the present state of research on verbal abuse in school, this project was designed with a multiple method approach. The initial part consists of a prevalence study, while the main part employs qualitative data collection methods. In comparing girls and boys of different ages through statistical analyses, they are treated as quite homogenous groups, while other differences within these groups are necessarily ignored. However, the aim is not to describe girls and boys generally, but to through the group divisions find patterns that are of importance to verbal abuse in school and to interpret potential differences between the studied groups of girls and boys in a gender theoretical framework that acknowledges differences also within genders. This quantification serves to provide more general knowledge on patterns of verbal abuse in school as well as a background to the following in-depth study, in which students' practices and meaning-making of those practices are examined in context. The specific aims are to:

- Assess the prevalence of verbal abuse according to gender and age and the effect it has on students' well-being
- Examine how and why girls and boys in school use verbal abuse in constructing gender and age
- Explore students' meaning-making of verbal abuse in this context

Objectives for each article:

- I. To assess the prevalence of students' experience of verbal abuse and its effects on school satisfaction and well-being according to gender and age.
- II. To understand how and why same-age girls and boys use verbal abuse in the school context.
- III. To understand how girls and boys in school use verbal abuse in constructing age and how this is intertwined in constructions of gender and sexuality.
- IV. To examine students' own understanding of what constitutes verbal abuse in school.

## **METHODS**

The thesis comprises four studies, based on two sets of data, one of which originates from a large school-based survey in a Swedish city (study I) and the other one from an observation and interview-based qualitative investigation (studies II, III, IV).

### **SURVEY**

The survey aimed at highlighting how prevalent various forms of verbal abuse are, their distribution by gender and age and consequences for well-being and school satisfaction.

#### **Data collection procedure**

The data collection was conducted by means of a self-administered questionnaire, supervised locally by each main class teacher and filled in during class. Data collection took place toward the end of the school year, during two weeks in late April and early May, 2001. The questionnaire was pre-tested in two classes the previous year, and adjusted thereafter. All students present at school on the day of data collection were asked to participate.

#### **Participants**

The study population consisted of all students enrolled in grade 6 and 8 (ages 12 to 15 years) in the city of Uddevalla (49 000 inhabitants). The survey was a joint venture between the Board of Education in Uddevalla and a research group based at the National Institute for Working Life (Eliasson & Menckel, 2003). Contact with the schools was established through the Board of Education which supported the study and distributed written information to the schools' principals.

Sixteen schools of different sizes (mean number of students=341) encompassed 52 classes and 1211 students in grades 6 and 8. The average class size was 22 students in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 26 students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The percentage of students participating in the study was 84 percent (n=1 006) (Table 1). Eight students did not state their gender and were excluded from the analysis. Absent students were counted as non-participants (n=197). Three classes of the total of 52 (4.5 percent of the students) did not participate, but belonged to schools that were represented through other classes participating in the study. Data collection coincided with one of the most intense study periods of the

school year, which may explain why the teachers of these three classes decided not to participate.

*Table 1. Group size, response rates, and gender and age distributions. Survey in the Swedish city of Uddevalla, school year 2000-2001*

	Girls n=568	Response rate (%)	Boys n=643	Response rate (%)	Total N=1211	Response rate (%)
Grade 6	254	85	301	87	555	86
Grade 8	212	79	239	80	451	79
Total	466		540		1006	

## Instrument

The questionnaire was constructed specifically for this study and consisted of 39 questions covering four main areas: background information; well-being; school satisfaction; verbal abuse and physical violence. Most items were forced-response rating scales. The reference period chosen was the ongoing school year.

Three questions, one general and two specific, addressed verbal abuse. These were in turn:

- (1) "Has any other student said things to you that you found mean or nasty?"
- (2) "Have you been called 'whore' by another student?"
- (3) "Has any other student said threatening things to you?"

Those three questions had four response alternatives, ranging from "almost daily," "once or twice a week," "once or twice a month," to "never."

The gender of the perpetrator of verbal abuse was addressed by the question "Who most often has: ...said things to you that you found mean or nasty/...called you a 'whore'/...said threatening things to you?" Five mutually exclusive response alternatives were given: one girl, several girls, one boy, several boys, and both girls and boys.

School satisfaction was assessed through five questions: "I feel safe at school," "My classmates accept me as I am," "I am satisfied with my class," "I feel lonely at school," and "I am very satisfied with my life right now." The four response options ranged from "agree" to "disagree."

Four questions dealt with well-being: "Do you feel tired without direct cause?," "Do you feel unable to concentrate?," "Do you feel worried or nervous?," and "Do you feel

sad or depressed?” Responses ranged from 1=almost daily, 2=once or twice a week, 3=once or twice a month, to 4=rarely or never.

### **Data treatment**

The response options to the three main verbal abuse questions were re-coded on a scale from 1=never to 4=almost daily, indicating the frequency of the experience. The items “whore” and “verbal threats” do not specify either the speaker’s intent or the receiver’s interpretation, and thus it is possible for a responding student to say “no” to the question about insult and “yes” to the question about being called “whore,” if she/he has been called “whore” but did not find it offensive.

Answers to the questions of the gender of the perpetrator were combined into three categories: one for girls and boys, respectively, and one last category for both girls and boys.

Two indexes were computed, of school satisfaction and well-being respectively. The school satisfaction index was computed as a mean value of the answers to the five questions on school satisfaction. The four response options ranged from “agree” to “disagree.” In order to place all statements in the negative, all but “I feel lonely at school” were re-coded onto a scale ranging from 1=disagree to 4= agree, with “I feel lonely at school” retaining the scale where 4=never. Thus, the higher the mean value of the scale, the higher sense of satisfaction in school. Factor analysis was used to construct the index for satisfaction, and questions with the highest factor loadings (higher than 0.60) were included. Estimation of reliability in terms of internal consistency was 0.74 (Cronbach’s alpha).

A well-being index was computed as a mean value of the responses to the four questions. A higher mean value was an indicator of a better sense of well-being. Factor analysis was used to construct the index for well-being, and items with factor loadings of 0.70 or more were included. An estimation of reliability was 0.72 using Cronbach’s alpha.

For the analyses, school year was used as an approximation for age, with grade 6=12-13 years of age and grade 8=14-15 years of age. A slightly larger proportion of students belonged to grade 6 (55 percent). Grade 6 was coded as 1, and grade 8 as 2. For each study question, gender and age (grade 6 or 8) differences in experience of verbal abuse were tested by means of ANOVA, analysis of variance. Since the verbal abuse variables were strongly correlated, hierarchic regression analysis was used to test the effect of different forms of verbal abuse on school satisfaction and well-being. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 10.0.

## **OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEW STUDY**

### **Participants**

This part of the investigation consisted of a combined observation and interview study in schools during one school term (half a school year in Sweden). Participants were students in two grade-8 schools and their form teachers. The schools were located in the Stockholm area, one inner city, the other suburban. The inner-city school was large, with 900 students (grades 1-9 and a preschool). The suburban school was smaller, accommodating 500 students (grades 1-9). The schools were chosen so as to provide a broad foundation for observations and interviews, but not with the aim of analyzing differences between them.

Each class had two main teachers, responsible for the class and teaching their own subjects, and a number of other teachers for different subjects. The individual participating classes were suggested by their main class teachers after hearing about the study. In the suburban school, the class was selected by their teacher partly because it was pleasant, outgoing and enjoyed participating in different projects. The class was described by its class teacher as “a nice class” in which the students cared about each other, where girls and boys intermingled and socialized with each other in their spare time. At the inner-city school, the class was instead selected partly because there were some conflicts in social relations between the students in that the class was strongly segmented into groups, and that some of the girls had had problems with some of the boys the previous term. It was described by one of its class teachers as very segmented, with no intermingling between genders, and a tough atmosphere.

One subject teacher at the inner-city school felt uncomfortable with the presence of an observer, and her lessons were therefore excluded from the study. Another day of observation was added to compensate for this. All students in both classes agreed to participate. For the suburban school, all parents but one gave their consent, while consent was lacking for four students in the inner-city school (only the parents of one student explicitly refused, while the others did not return the consent form even after being reminded by the form teacher). Students whose parents who did not give their consent were excluded from the documentation.

Most of the students were 14 years old, some were 15, and some had their 15th birthday during the observation period. The students had one year of compulsory school left before entering senior high school. The observation period constituted the fourth term together for these classes, and thus the study was done in established social groupings.

Some students had been in the same class longer, and a few students had even been together since preschool. In both classes there were more boys than girls (13-7 and 15-11). In the class in the inner-city school, 5 girls and 11 boys took part in the observation study, and in the other class 11 girls and 13 boys, making a total of 40 students.

Students belonging to different groupings in the class were asked to participate in the interviews, so as to provide a broader base for the analysis. They were also selected to obtain dispersion with regard to status and a mix of more withdrawn and more dominant students. One girl and one boy in the inner-city school did not want to be interviewed, and were replaced by other students. Two girls and two boys plus one of the main teachers were interviewed in each class. Both interviewed teachers, as well as the other two main teachers, were female.

## **Observations**

A total of two school weeks were spent in each class, distributed over the spring term of 2004 (from January to May). In total, there were 127 observation hours in the two classes, of which 62 comprised 11 school days in the inner-city school and 65 observation hours constituted 10 school days in the suburban school.

Observation days were distributed over five months, aiming for the same amount of time in both classes, switching between them, covering all days of the week, and on a number of occasions two consecutive days. A template was developed for observations, to provide the observer with an instrument for capturing the more significant interactions between students, and between students and teachers. One introductory day in each class was devoted to the development of the documentation procedure for the observations. The observation template covered the patterns of gender relations in students' interactions; how the verbal interaction was shaped, focusing on conversations where gender or power relations were particularly obvious, and more specifically on situations of conflict or where verbal abuse was heard; teachers' roles in these interactions were also included. The template was used as mental support rather than a checklist for noting events. Observations were documented consecutively in notebooks, focusing on verbal interactions between pupils where gender or power relations seemed to be particularly prominent.

During class, taking notes usually went smoothly as the students were also writing. In a few instances, when writing became too obtrusive with regard to the situation, the observer memorized events and waited until later to put them down on paper. The observer aimed to distance herself from teachers and other school personnel, avoided expressing judgments on students' conduct, avoided visiting the staff room, or fraternizing with the teachers to any great extent, but also did not try to blend in with the students. Conversations with students during observations were minimized, since

speakers modify their talk according to whom it is directed (Goodwin 1990). In the suburban school, the observer was given an empty locker next to the students' to keep her things, which provided good opportunities for brief conversations with students between lessons. In order to observe all student groups, the observer changed position within the classroom between lessons. The intention was to document conversations in as detailed a manner as possible, alongside other aspects of the social context such as situation, location, point in time, tone, gestures, facial expressions, relations between involved students and so on.

During recess, observations were conducted in the hallways, where the classes usually socialized, or during shorter breaks, outside the classroom where the next lesson would take place and the class was gathering. At other times the observer followed a particular group of students and during lunch breaks she occasionally had a meal with them in the cafeteria to observe social relations there.

## **Interviews**

After the observation period, a total of ten interviews were conducted: with eight students and two class teachers, at the end of term. Interviews with teachers came last. The length of the interviews was adapted to the students' schedules, and tended to last for just under an hour. Also, the interviews were aimed at not being too tiresome for the 14-15 year olds. The teacher interviews lasted on average one hour and 15 minutes. Interviews took place in smaller school rooms designed for group-work.

A guide (or template) was used for the interviews, covering question areas, including possible follow-up questions. The observations were used as a frame of reference for the interviews, and question areas were based on them. The interview themes encompassed social patterns in class and in school, relations between boys and girls, including friendships and hierarchies, jokes, verbal aggression, and conflict and violence between students. Corresponding themes were covered in the teacher interviews, but then from the adult perspective of teaching this particular group of students, and also comparing them with other classes, rather than as personally experiencing the themes. Questions were kept as open-ended as possible, introducing topics in ways meant to encourage respondents' own narratives, interpretations and explanations. All question areas were touched upon in all interviews, but to a varying degree according to time and interest of the interviewee. Also, the interviews were adapted in stages to some extent, so that themes of interest that had come up earlier were returned to in later interviews. Student interviews generally obtained a somewhat more formal character. In a few interviews this seemed to be due to a certain discomfort with the interview situation on the part of the interviewee.

## **Analytic method**

Interviews were audio-taped, with the subjects' consent, and transcribed verbatim in accordance with a fairly simple template, where repetitions, discontinuances, pauses and periods of silence were marked. All participants were given fictitious names, while the interviewer is referred to by her initials in all excerpts. To simplify the organization of data, the observational and interview materials were arranged in a software program, NVivo 2.0.

Information about social and gender arrangements and the school setting, as well as verbal abuse in everyday student interaction was provided by the observations. These were used to establish context and details in interaction with regard to the discursive practices, in addition to how students used verbal abuse in positioning themselves and others and the repetition or recurrence of such positionings. Through the observations, it was possible to follow how individual students repeatedly took up and were positioned in certain subject positions rather than others and thus contributed with knowledge as to how particular gender or age identities were realized over time, something that was not accessible through interviews alone. As an analytical tool, it was then possible to talk about groups of boys or girls using students' own labels, for instance "tough" or "swotty", and relating those positions to the use of verbal abuse. This was not done with the intent of indicating any essential trait of these individuals, or to give the impression that these were fixed, clearly defined groups of students, but instead used to summarize the observation of reoccurring similar positionings.

The interviews provided detailed accounts of the students' experiences and understanding of those practices and were primarily used to examine their meaning-making of verbal abuse and how different subject positions were taken up through talking about it. Teacher interviews were mainly used for background information on the classes, and also provided an adult perspective on verbal abuse among the students.

The analytic method used was discourse analysis (Walkerdine 1990, Parker 1992). Initially, transcripts of observation notes and interviews were coded, using key concepts in the texts as well as theoretical concepts. The codes, such as "grade", "whore/slut", "insecurity", structure the material and text segments with the same codings were analyzed together for the purpose of understanding the meaning given to them by participants. This involved a search for subject positions, patterns of meaning, contradictions, inconsistencies and metaphors, with the aim of identifying the content of the discourses and the relations between them. As a final step, social consequences and functions of discourses were examined (Winther Jørgensen and Philips 1999). While the observations provided the framework for the interviews during the data collection, discrepancies between information obtained through these two methods were used as an analytical tool.

## Transcription template

...	short pause
(pause)	long pause
=	overlapping speech
-	interrupted speech
[...]	material edited out
<b></b>	stress
( )	comments on tone of voice, characteristics etc.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Survey

The pen-and-paper questionnaire was distributed by teachers and filled in during class. Students and their parents were informed about the aim of the study, that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that all information would be treated confidentially. Information on agencies to contact in case of a respondent experiencing negative emotional reactions to issues raised in the questionnaire was provided. Completed questionnaires were identified only with a code for school and class, thus individual responding students could not be identified either in the questionnaire or the database.

### Observations and interviews

Permission to perform the studies was given by the principals of both schools. The students and their teachers were informed about the study and that participation was voluntary and that the obtained material would be treated with confidentiality. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, they were given fictitious names before analyzing the material. The study was presented as concerning students' language use and social interaction in school. Students and teachers were also informed about the obligation of the researcher to bring any knowledge of students being severely mistreated or harmed to the attention of school personnel. Requests for participation were made to all potential subjects both verbally and in writing. If consent was not acquired, the teacher or student was excluded from the observations. Students gave their consent in writing, and the teachers in either written form or verbally. Parents were informed of the study by the observer for the suburban school and by the class teacher for the inner-city school, and then gave written permission for their children's participation. Separate requests for participation were made to the students selected for interview. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher re-emphasized that participation was voluntary and could be broken off at any time, during the interview or retrospectively. Also, students were asked for permission to audiotape their interviews.

## SUMMARY OF MAIN RESULTS

### STUDY I: Verbal abuse, gender and well-being at school

#### Gender and age patterns of verbal abuse

The results from the prevalence study showed that verbal abuse in school was common in the age group 12-15 years (grades 6 and 8) (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of exposure to verbal abuse among girls and boys and by school grade (grade 6 and 8). Adapted from Eliasson & Menckel 2003.

	Girls (%)	Boys (%)	Grade 6 (%)	Grade 8 (%)
<i>Insult</i>	n=463	n=526	n=550	n=452
Almost daily	4.8	8.4	6.7	8.0
Once or twice a week	12.1	14.8	14.0	12.6
Once or twice a month	31.5	27.6	28.0	29.6
Never	51.6	49.2	51.3	49.8
	(x <sup>2</sup> =7.77; df=3; p<0.05)		(x <sup>2</sup> =0.52; df=3; ns)	
<i>Called "whore"</i>	n=459	n=531	n=545	n=451
Almost daily	2.4	3.2	0.9	5.1
Once or twice a week	5.7	3.8	4.4	4.9
Once or twice a month	21.8	6.2	12.8	14.4
Never	70.1	86.8	81.8	75.6
	(x <sup>2</sup> =66.07; df=3; p<0.001)		(x <sup>2</sup> =8.99; df=3; p<0.05)	
<i>Verbal threat</i>	n=465	n=534	n=551	n=454
Almost daily	0.6	4.7	0.9	5.1
Once or twice a week	1.9	6.2	3.8	4.6
Once or twice a month	11.0	22.3	17.6	16.3
Never	86.5	66.9	77.7	74.0
	(x <sup>2</sup> =53.69; df=3; p<0.001)		(x <sup>2</sup> =12.55; df=3; p<0.01)	

This verbal abuse showed a clearly gendered pattern, with boys overwhelmingly being presented as the perpetrators of all forms of verbal abuse; insults, sexual name-calling and threats, directed at both girls and boys. The figures for insult are included as an example (Table 3).

Table 3. Gender of abusive student (%) and gender of target for insult

	Targeted student			
	Girl (n=223)	%	Boy (n=249)	%
<i>Abusive student</i>				
Girl/girls	34	15.2	13	5.2
Boy/boys	115	51.6	166	66.7
Both girls and boys	74	33.2	70	28.1

( $\chi^2=17.37$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<0.001$ )

Forms of verbal abuse were also gendered with girls more frequently experiencing sexual name-calling (“whore”) and boys more often experiencing verbal threats. Girls had a somewhat lower, but significant, overall level of experience of verbal abuse than boys, with the exception of sexual name-calling. Experiencing verbal abuse was also age-related and more common among 14-15-year-olds (grade 8), than among younger students (Table 4).

Table 4. The influence of gender and grade on insult, being called “whore,” and verbal threat (ANOVA)

Source of variance	Insult (d.f.=989)			Called “whore” (d.f.=986)			Verbal threat (d.f.=992)		
	MS	F	Sig	MS	F	Sig	MS	F	Sig
Gender	4.6	5.4	<0.05	11.3	26.3	<0.001	25.0	62.9	<0.001
Age	6.1 10 <sup>-2</sup>	0.1	n.s.	2.3	5.2	<0.05	2.0	5.0	<0.05
Ge x Ag	4.1	4.8	<0.05	0.7	1.7	n.s.	8.2	20.5	<0.001

### Verbal abuse, school satisfaction and well-being

All forms of verbal abuse were negatively related to students’ school satisfaction and well-being (Table 5). No moderating effects of gender and age were found, meaning that the negative associations were similar for boys and girls across the age groups. Verbal abuse did not have to be frequent, repeated or combined with other kinds of harassment – such as is the case with bullying – to be negatively associated with well-being.

Table 5. School satisfaction and well-being as dependent variables in relation to gender, age and form of verbal abuse (hierarchical regression analysis)

Predictor steps	School satisfaction				Well-being			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
<u>Step 1:</u> Gender (girl=1, boy=2)	.13***	.10**	.15***	.17***	.19***	.15***	.19***	.21***
Age	-.05	-.03	-.05	-.04	-.20***	-.18***	-.19***	-.19***
<u>Step 2:</u> Being called “whore”		-.21***	-.07*	-.05		-.24***	-.12***	-.11***
<u>Step 3:</u> Insult			-.42***	-.38***			-.35***	-.32***
<u>Step 4:</u> Verbal threat				-.11***				-.08***
R <sup>2</sup> Adjusted	.02	.06	.21	.22	.08	.13	.24	.24
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.02***	.04***	.15***	.01	.08***	.06***	.11***	.01

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## STUDY II: Verbal abuse in school. Constructions of gender among 14-15-year-olds

### Boys' identity construction through verbal abuse

During observations, boys in both schools employed verbal abuse much more often than girls, and they were also positioned as the initiators of such communication in interviews, indicating a practice specifically relevant to masculinity construction. In the interviews, most students did not agree with the media image that verbal abuse was common. However, in both classes, a few boys were very visible in the classroom, taking up space and claiming attention, being loud, verbally abusive and funny. These boys were generally considered popular and of high status by other students, and generated a substantial part of the verbal abuse heard during the observation period, targeting each other as well as other boys and girls with various forms of aggressive communication, often with sexual content.

Against other boys of similar positioning, verbal abuse often took forms described in the interviews as friendly or jocular. Verbal abuse was presented as reciprocal, and the correct response was not to take offense, but to laugh and return the insult. Between friends some degree of verbal abuse was expected and described as not hurtful and even enjoyable by everyone involved. Being verbally abusive to each other and thus being funny became a way of both being a “tough” boy and participating in male friendship. Tough boys' aggressive communication was often described as humorous, or excused in

other ways. That verbal abuse contributed to toughness was a fundamental understanding expressed by students during the interviews. However, boys' use of verbal abuse to appear tough was a difficult balancing act and exaggerations could instead be interpreted as signs of insecurity and lack of self-confidence.

The link between masculinity and verbal abuse was such that a boy who did not use terms of abuse, threats or insults became something of an anomaly. Boys who did not want to or failed to engage in verbal abuse were considered not properly masculine; but instead nice, humorless, "swotty" – all characteristics with feminine connotations. In several students' descriptions of who used verbal abuse, it was connected with "rowdy" boys in other classes, who were not well liked, not performing well academically, occasionally cutting class, members of gangs, and "going around acting tough" in school. In the interviews, responsibility for "real, serious" verbal abuse was placed on such "rowdy" boys, perceived as deviant also in other ways.

Girls were also targets of tough boys' verbal abuse. Both interviews and observations demonstrated that boys not only employed sexual terms of abuse, but also attacked girls' perceived (hetero)sexual attractiveness – e.g. by saying they needed to diet, should shave their mustaches, or could be used as "car crushers" due to their size, thereby evaluating girls' femininity.

### **Girls' identity construction through verbal abuse**

As for boys, for girls being verbally abusive was also associated with being tough, although toughness did not have the same positive meaning for femininity as it did for masculinity. Neither class had girls who were often verbally abusive; instead, popular girls achieved desirable femininity mainly through other means, such as heterosexual attractiveness and relations with the tough boys. Verbal abuse directed at boys was very rarely *initiated* by girls, but rather came as a response to boys' disturbing, teasing, shoving them, or taking their things. In those cases, it was often one of the more assertive girls who retaliated. Girls' verbal abuse constituted exceptions to expected behaviour and was often mentioned in negative contexts, such as conflicts or fights. In contrast, boys' verbal abuse was often described in terms of joking or fooling around with a friend.

Interviewed girls and boys agreed that boys more often employ verbal abuse, but some girls were careful to point out that girls also make use of it in conflict situations. Through this they positioned themselves as strong and assertive. The discourse of "good girl" femininity, where girls are situated as nice, following rules and performing well in school, ran alongside a discourse of the air-headed, slutty "fjortis"<sup>2</sup>. "Fjortisar"

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<sup>2</sup> The word "fjortis", derived from the Swedish numeral *fjorton* "fourteen", is quite specific to Swedish. It refers to a girl who is brash, dumb and immature, and designates being or acting like a 14 year-old who wants to seem older.

took up too much space, running around shouting dirty words at each other, using too much make-up, and being too sexually blatant. Being verbally abusive as a girl carried connotations of vulgarity and sexual promiscuity and was associated with undesirable “fjortis”-femininity. Thus, verbal abuse was riskier for girls than for boys, and not an accessible strategy for status increase or demonstration of positive femininity. While none of the interviewed boys bothered to assert that they were not verbally abusive, interviewed girls described their own use of verbal abuse in ambivalent terms. The close connection to masculinity also seemed to render some of the verbal abuse between girls invisible.

In sum, verbal abuse is a cultural resource to which boys have greater access than girls. In particular, boys who aspire to hegemonic masculinity can gain from the exercise of verbal abuse. This functions in a structuring and hierarchy-creating manner between different masculinities and femininities. For boys, showing oneself able to handle the giving-and-taking of verbal abuse contributes to toughness and popularity. But, whereas boys largely benefit from being verbally abusive, such practices mostly reflect unfavorably on girls.

**STUDY III:** Verbal abuse among same-age students. Age, gender and sexuality in school

### **Gendered maturity**

In addition to gender, meanings of age, age categories and relations between people of different ages were central in students’ explanations and interpretations of verbal abuse in school, both in observations and interviews. Verbal abuse was a practice which was related to social age and a behavior considered appropriate for some ages, but not others.

Age as a hierarchy was sometimes employed in actual verbal abuse between students, such as e.g. calling someone “fucking immature”, “damn fjortis”, “brat”, etc. For boys, especially sexual verbal abuse combined important aspects of toughness, gender, age and sexuality, constituting them as appropriately (hetero)sexual teenage boys.

Some interviewed students, girls as well as boys, implicitly argued against the toughness discourse of verbal abuse by presenting alternative interpretations of the use of insults and pejoratives, which could be seen as counter-strategies. Verbal abuse was then inserted into narratives of age and maturity, where abusive “speech styles” instead implied immaturity, especially sexual, and unwillingness to grow up, thereby “moving on”, “growing out of it” and learning other ways of conducting oneself in relation to other students. Such accounts

drew heavily on a developmental discourse, where different ages constitute stages to be passed through and connected to different behaviors. The subject positions in this discourse favor girls and could be used by them to attempt to shift power relations with regard to some of the boys' frequent verbal abuse.

While the discourse of boys' immaturity was used when referring to boys who made efforts to claim hegemonic masculinity, it was never used about "swotty" boys. These boys, who did not display their sexuality through verbal abuse and other such actions, were rather seen as asexual and not properly masculine. The tough boys, despite being positioned as immature at times, succeeded in presenting themselves as sexual. Verbal abuse, primarily sexual, could thus be used to create a positive developmental process of sexuality.

Verbally abusive girls were described in some interviews with the negative label "fjortis", similar to "slut", used to position girls within an undesirable and immature femininity. Their way of acting entailed trying to be tougher and grown-up beyond their years. Through different attributes and certain actions interpreted as sexual, such as clothing, make-up, verbal abuse, going out with boys, flirting, drinking alcohol, some girls were seen as trying to attain the role of young adults. A "fjortis" fails to attain a self-representation perceived as authentic, and is instead seen as self-conscious and insecure. In contrast with the positive connotations verbal abuse had in general for masculine sexuality, feminine sexuality did not benefit from it.

### **Verbal abuse over time**

Interviewed students often described verbal abuse as an integral part of what was commonly called "junior high school" (grades 7-9), and as a practice that started in grade seven or sometimes in lower grades. Although observations showed verbal abuse was common in their own year (grade 8), students often situated the most intense use of insults and name-calling to lower grades, last year or even last term, rather than in the present. Even those who perceived it as still common regarded it as a transitory practice that would change when they went to senior high school in twelve months' time. Sexual pejoratives and other verbal abuse would not be used as much as in junior high school because it would be seen as behavior associated with a younger age and therefore not cool. At the same time, another discourse was also visible when the students' talked about verbal abuse. This discourse was distinguished by difference – rather than being something that everybody did, verbal abuse was seen as a deviation, which only certain individuals, "rowdy" boys, used.

In the interviews, being adult and being teenager was contrasted through the use of verbal abuse. Adults were described as not verbally abusive. This was sometimes framed in a developmental discourse where adults were described as not verbally abusive. When

growing and maturing, one learns to control one's temper, and thus ceases to use such language. This was not only a difference between adults and youth, but also a difference between historical generations, as in the discourse of "today's youth", used by some of the interviewed boys to explain why verbal abuse is exercised by teenagers. Talking about "youth" hid verbal abuse as a gendered practice and created a collective contrasted with adults. This discourse was strongly entwined with a more liberated view of sexuality, which youth were seen to embrace.

The narratives of time regarding verbal abuse produce verbal abuse as a stage to be passed through, that in practice is mostly relevant for boys. Students produce and negotiate social age together with gender and sexuality through verbal abuse and position themselves and others in relation to the discourses surrounding these practices. In that sense, verbal abuse, besides being used to create hierarchies among students and of genders or for positioning oneself against adults, is also a resource in the definition and of one's own and others' age and level of development.

**STUDY IV:** Meanings of verbal abuse among same-age girls and boys. Exploring discursive practices of 8<sup>th</sup>-graders

### **Joking or hurtful verbal abuse?**

What was understood as verbal abuse in school was jointly constructed in conversational episodes between students, and sometimes also involved teachers. Often, the construction of meaning in such episodes involved implicit as well as explicit negotiations of how an utterance should be interpreted – accepted as a joke or judged as mean and therefore unacceptable. Verbal abuse and joking were often tightly intertwined, and humor was a condition for the verbal abuse. Students' main interpretation of verbal abuse in school was "jokes", which supported its use by tough, popular boys towards other boys and to girls. The unacceptability of verbal abuse was coupled with the intention of hurting someone's feelings. This was seen mainly when interviewed students talked about the use of pejoratives and insults in the classes. They often dismissed it by saying that the speaker "*didn't* mean it". Thus it did not constitute utterances that were inappropriate or required some sort of reaction. "Joking" verbal abuse was seldom challenged by any of the students. Speakers also denied the hurtful intent in their own use of pejoratives by using phrases such as "the words just come out", "pop into my mind" or "fly out of my mouth", which removed the agency from the speaker and hence the possibility of intentional harm.

Not all students' use of verbal abuse was similarly tolerated. In contrast, verbal abuse with the intent to hurt was generally attributed to "rowdy" boys in other classes, who

also displayed other characteristics of undesirable masculinity such as lacking a sense of humor. This emphasized the accepted view of the tough popular boys' verbal abuse. Interviewed students dissociated themselves from "rowdy" boys' verbal abuse.

However, students did not always manage to create a clear and simple distinction between jokes and hurtful verbal abuse. When labels for different kinds of verbal abuse were introduced (name-calling, picking on, bullying etc.) distinctions were not as clear-cut and became much more problematic. The work to create a distinction between "joking" and "unacceptable" verbal abuse was necessary because of the fluidity and ambiguity of this very practice.

### **Verbal abuse constituting friendship**

Friendship as a relational context for verbal abuse came up repeatedly in the interviews and seemed to constitute a key node for the understanding of verbal abuse, closely associated with the discourse of "joking". Within a close relationship to a peer, verbal abuse was interpreted as a game or joke. Friendships were organized along gender lines and mixed-gender friendships were rare. Typically, recurrent verbal abuse was seen as a part of male friendship, even though girls also claimed to be verbally abusive with friends. Verbal abuse was used to establish and mark closeness of the relationship. At the same time, closeness of a friendship legitimized verbal abuse. No hurt was assumed to be the result of such friendly verbal abuse, only positive social consequences such as amusement and strengthening of the relationship. The terms of friendship were assumed to be mutual and equal. However, intimate friendships such as the ones invoked in the descriptions of friendly verbal abuse did not account for most of the verbal abuse observed, where insults and pejoratives were also targeted at other boys and girls.

### **Loss of meaning**

Talking about verbal abuse as a language practice particular to school, where pejoratives have lost their original meaning, and students learn to handle or "take" verbal abuse, also functioned to legitimize such practice. Pejoratives were also described as having become part of everyday conversation and more or less had "lost their meaning" among teenagers, setting this practice apart from adult contexts in which they are used. In this discourse, boys and girls constituted a collective subject with common interests, veiling the gendered patterns of verbal abuse and diversity among students in regard of who said what to whom.

### **Learning not to be offended**

Some students describe a process of becoming accustomed to verbal abuse, learning to disregard it, not be offended or take it as a joke. Not being offended by verbal abuse was mentioned by several students as a situation when verbal abuse was acceptable. In talking about “not caring” and “not being offended” by it, students separate verbal abuse from its consequences, framing the consequences as a choice that is up to the targeted student. “Caring” about verbal abuse could imply that there was some truth to the negative statements made, thus acknowledging a reason to be verbally abused and accepting the hierarchical power relation created by the verbal abuse. Interpreting a statement as a joke (with the implication of friendly joking as a practice between equals) can be used to avoid overt power implications of verbal abuse and a demonstration of victimhood. For boys, “caring” about verbal abuse could suggest that they are weak, emotional and not able to control their feelings, contrary to expectations of masculinity.

## DISCUSSION

Research on verbal abuse between students is fragmented, encompassing several disparate approaches and disciplines. Earlier gender research has had a wider focus on the production of gender and sexuality in school, rather than verbal abuse in itself. Verbal abuse has also been compounded with other kinds of aggressive practices in school, such as in bullying and sexual harassment studies, or examined through narrower concepts such as teasing or insults. The present research focuses on gendered and age-related practices of verbal abuse in everyday interaction with the aims of exploring students' meaning-making of verbal abuse, assessing its prevalence as well as effects on well-being, and understanding how and why students use verbal abuse in constructing gender and age in school. Through the perspective applied here, the focus on verbal abuse is broadened, examining verbal abuse in itself and in-depth. Through this approach, students' own interpretations of verbal abuse in school have been emphasized, but with the intention of problematizing them with regard to gendered and age-related power relations.

### **Girls' and boys' meaning-making of verbal abuse in school**

Students understand verbal abuse in school as a practice that is both gendered and age-based (Study II & III). Agreeing with studies that emphasize the various meanings of teasing, insults or calling someone a "whore" (e.g. Nayak & Kehily 1996, Alberts et al. 1996, Shapiro et al. 1991, Evaldsson 2005, Ambjörnsson 2004, Robinson 2005), the results provide support for the claim that verbal abuse is ambiguous and fluid and surrounded by contradictory discourses each fixing its meaning differently (Study IV). With regard to verbal abuse in school, the dominant discourses were mainly positive. While the observations provided rich examples of verbal abuse in the two classes; the way students treated these incidents when they took place, and explained such practices in interviews often worked to trivialize and justify such actions (Study IV). This was accomplished especially through the "only joking" discourse, which mainly supported the verbal abuse of the tough, popular boys and the construction of hegemonic masculinity through such practice. This is in line with previous studies finding that verbal abuse, in particular that by boys, is often seen as joking (Larkin 1994, Kehily and Nayak, 1997, Renold 2002, Frosh et al. 2002, Geiger and Fischer 2006). Intent to harm was often attributed to the "rowdy" boys' verbal abuse, which helped support the hierarchization of masculinities and preserve the popular boys' verbal abuse as the norm. This suggests that students "defined away" verbal abuse because it was a part of how hegemonic masculinity is constructed in school at this age (Study IV). Descriptions of the "rowdy" boys were implicitly class marked and associated with working class;

they failed school, cut classes and hung out in gangs. Connell interprets this as a subordinated masculinity in the school context (1989).

The joint construction of what constituted verbal abuse, or unacceptable verbal actions, took place through negotiations between students (Vavrus & Cole 2002), where students who challenged benign interpretations often had problems establishing their perspective. In students' own explanations, verbal abuse was also situated as a practice that students learned how to handle, indicating that it was not in itself unproblematic, but rather *becomes* less problematic through certain patterns of action and concomitant regulating of emotions (Study IV). Others have found similar processes (Frosh et al. 2002, Kochman 1983). The use of both observations and interviews allowed such discrepancies to come to light and to be analyzed as part of the production of meaning of verbal abuse in school, which a single-method approach would have missed. Defining verbal abuse solely through the perceived intent of the speaker, or respondents' interpretation (Infante & Wigley 1986, Renold 2002) would have considerably limited the scope of practices studied, and excluded the possibility of gaining a deeper understanding.

An additional discourse framing verbal abuse as a language practice particular to schools and youth was that the words "had lost their meaning" (Study IV). Verbal abuse was seen as so common that the effect of pejoratives has declined because of their frequent use (Ambjörnsson 2004). According to this reasoning, the power of the expletives hinges on use in special situations, not frequently and not everyday. Sexual name-calling being so frequent that "the words have lost their meaning" is a discourse also observed by Lundgren (2000) in her junior high school ethnography. This interpretation enables students to keep using such words in establishing and reinforcing power relations with other students. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that the words have *not* lost their meaning. In the process of learning to deal with the verbal abuse present in school, it comes to be construed as a common, trivial practice. All students need to deal with verbal abuse and the meanings produced by it, whether using it themselves, being exposed directly or observing other students engaging in it, to avoid being situated as bullied, or being targeted with something they do not want to be confronted with. Students' meaning-making of verbal abuse contributes to reducing "actual" verbal abuse in school. Such understanding finds an echo in discourses that legitimize bullying in school (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli 2003) or render sexual harassment invisible (Kitzinger & Thomas 1995).

The trivialization of verbal abuse accomplished through some of the discourses, such as "only joking" and "the words have lost their meaning", was also contradicted in students' accounts of particular pejoratives. In addition to being jokes, "whore" and similar terms of abuse were presented in interviews as most common when boys wanted to be nasty to girls. The terms were then aimed at girls they dislike or are angry at (see

also Lees 1993, Mahony 1989), and thus used more frequently to regulate gendered actions than to describe actual sexual practice (Nayak & Kehily 1996). Actions that are ambiguous, or breaching expected gender meanings, are reorganized through the use of pejoratives (Davies 2003). “Fag” was mentioned by several of the interviewed students as one of the most common mean things to say to a boy, but only a couple of instances were recorded during the observations. Rather, it occurred when talking about someone not present, or as an adjective when commenting on clothes, music or hairstyles. Thereby it functioned to mark the boundaries of proper heterosexual male behavior (Nayak & Kehily 1996, Renold 2002, Thurlow 2001). To use the word “dyke” to indicate homosexual girls works to demonstrate one’s own heterosexuality (Nayak & Kehily 1996). But “dyke”, according to students, did not have the same resonance for girls as “fag” does for boys, and was not employed as a general term of abuse aimed at girls. This contrasts with Lee’s (1993) finding that being called a “lezzie” was the worst insult, however for somewhat older British girls.

### **Exposure to verbal abuse**

As expected, verbal abuse in different forms: insults, verbal threats, sexual name-calling, proved to be usual in the examined schools. It also showed clearly gendered and also age-related patterns (Study I). Mostly it was boys who use verbal abuse against girls and other boys, which is in line with results from other studies (Roberto et al. 2003, Lees 1993, Mottet & Thweatt 1997, Salmivalli et al. 2000, Mahony 1989, Toldos 2005, Peets & Kikas 2006). In the survey conducted in this study (Study I), girls had a somewhat lower overall level of experience of verbal abuse than boys, with the exception of sexual name-calling. This is similar to results in other studies (Larkin 1994, Mottet & Thweatt 1997) and shows how different kinds of verbal abuse are employed for targeting the genders. The difference between boys and girls in levels of using verbal abuse was rather large and could be interpreted as an expression of masculinity construction as suggested by Connell and others (Connell 2000, McGuffey & Rich 1999, Epstein 1997). The finding that girls more often experienced sexualized name-calling and boys verbal threats supports this notion. Verbal abuse was somewhat more common among students in grade 8. The age-related effect on levels of verbal abuse indicates that verbal abuse is a more prominent feature of masculinity construction for older boys (14-15 years) than for younger ones (12-13 years). Because of the frequency, all students have a relation to verbal abuse, which goes on around them in school. Even though not all students experience it directly themselves, or use it toward others, they all learn from it.

Not surprisingly, verbal abuse was negatively related to both well-being and satisfaction in school. Results suggested a strong significant negative relationship between verbal abuse and students’ well-being, a finding consistent with previous studies on bullying (Rigby 1999, van der Wal et al. 2003). Levels of negative association between verbal abuse and well-being were similar for both boys and girls. The results show that it does

not need to be frequent, repeated or very serious. They also highlight that verbal abuse is not neutral and needs to be handled by students.

### **Constructing gender and age**

Adding to previous studies that have discussed verbal abuse as a prominent feature of gender relations in school (Eder et al. 1997, Thorne 1993, Davies 2003, Connell 1989, Mac an Ghail 1995, Walkerdine 1990, Lees 1993, Nayak & Kehily 1996), an additional finding of this study is how verbal abuse is used in constructing masculinity among Swedish junior high school students (Study II). What has been observed herein is that a central discourse of verbal abuse in the school context for 14-15-year-old students is that it shows toughness, which has a special significance for the construction of hegemonic masculinity (Frosh et al. 2002, Connell 1995). Verbal aggression research has also identified appearing tough and enhancing status as reasons for using verbal aggression (Infante et al. 1992, Rauste-von Wright 1989). This main understanding of boys' verbal abuse, which often had sexual content, enabled some boys to position themselves as powerful, active evaluators of others. Verbal abuse, used in the correct way, separates hegemonic masculinity from less desirable forms such as "swotty" (who were not verbally abusive) or "rowdy" boy (who were too verbally abusive and not humorous enough) masculinity.

Both verbal abuse (Connell 2000, Evaldsson 2005) and joking (Frosh et al. 2002, Kehily & Nayak 1997, Ohlsson 2003) have been found to be central to boys' constructions of masculinity. Many of the interviewed boys in Frosh and colleagues' study (2002) constructed humor as a clearly gendered practice and implied that girls were not tough enough to be able to take part in "joking banter". They also found that such jokey "cussing" was characteristic of boys' communication with each other.

Further, girls being verbally abusive were sometimes labeled "fjortisar", which was a strategy adopted by their peers, both male and female, to re-positioned them unfavorably, indicating that they displayed the wrong sexuality, femininity and social age. Calling someone a "fjortis" is to label them immature. It also helped to disqualify girls' efforts at achieving toughness. Thus, verbal abuse is riskier for girls than for boys, and not a self-evidently accessible strategy in the same way. Similarly, in Ambjörnsson's (2004) study, girls using words like "whore" and "cunt" ran the risk of being regarded as sluts and lower class. Negative connotations of girls' verbal abuse, like sexual promiscuity, contribute to the explanation of why girls, during observations, used verbal abuse nowhere near as often as boys, and also explained their ambivalent descriptions of employing verbal abuse in the interviews. Corresponding to differences in how verbal abuse of girls and boys is understood, sociolinguistic research shows that women and men are evaluated differently for the same verbal behaviors. For instance, women using assertive language can be seen as aggressive (Kendall & Tannen 1997).

According to Butler (1999) gender identities need to be established over and over again in social interaction, and in that way give the impression of stability. Such a theoretical approach can help explain the pervasiveness of masculine practices such as homophobic name-calling in school (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). As verbal abuse can be interpreted as a resource in the production of masculinity in school among 14-15-year-olds, and also as a means of upholding friendship relations (Study II & IV), the repeated resort to verbal abuse would be expected.

Age was central to students' understanding of themselves and the practices they engaged in. Students construct age through verbal abuse in school in a number of ways. While verbal abuse was seen as something teenagers engage in as opposed to adults (Kotsinas 1994), positioning oneself as the holder of higher social age could be accomplished through dissociation from verbal abuse by labeling it childish, immature or as a practice of lower grades. A lot of the students' talk about verbal abuse was framed by a developmental discourse, which echoes Aasebø's (2005) conclusion that the idea of linear development is deeply rooted and meaningful in children's daily lives.

Age discourses were sometimes used in the actual verbal abuse between the students, as has also been noted in multiethnic groups of younger Swedish boys (Evaldsson 2005). Such discourses were also combined with discourses of gender and sexuality (Study III). Through these, other students were positioned as childish, immature and therefore less powerful. Gendered hierarchies were created between students based on actions that were understood as indicators of a certain social age and sexual maturity.

Some of the boys were the main initiators of verbal abuse, which often had sexual connotations. For boys, sexual verbal abuse combined the aspects of toughness, age and sexuality. Sexuality is one of the dichotomies which create differences between children and adults. Teenagers are thought to reside somewhere between these main age categories, and adolescence represents a phase when the child, mostly thought of as asexual, becomes sexual (Thorne 1993 & 2004, Epstein & Johnson 1998). Through such verbal abuse and talk about sex, boys could show themselves knowledgeable about sexual matters and thus claim a higher social age. It served as a way of distancing oneself from childhood, since children are expected not to have sexual knowledge and experience. Nayak and Kehily (1996) suggest sex talk can enhance the status and masculine power of some boys, but may be risky for those with non-macho reputations. Boys considered "swots" mostly did not use verbal abuse and their form of masculinity was likened to girls and had asexual connotations (Study II). They did not use displays of sexuality, such as sexual verbal abuse, to construct age identities distanced from childhood or adulthood.

As an explanation for why verbal abuse is present in junior high school, students describe how relations between girls and boys are expected to change during the progress to junior high school (Study III). Differences in these relations, with increased focus on heterosexual relations, constitute the foundation for the verbal abuse. In school, what Epstein and Johnson (1994) call “the heterosexual presumption” prevails, which means that heterosexuality is presupposed and normative. Girls and boys cannot any longer be friends in the same way and just have fun and play, which was fine earlier when they still unambiguously were children. Kelle (2001) shows how children create developmental steps discursively using particular situations and settings as resources and reposition themselves in relation to these steps. A new set of consequences of being girls and boys should be acknowledged, and behavior changed accordingly. This interpretation is related to the discourse of the “innocent child”, where children are thought of as asexual and thus able to engage in activities with the other gender that at other ages would be interpreted as “romantic” or sexual (Epstein & Johnson 1998). The relations between the genders are re-organized according to the new social age and heterosexuality is given more weight in those relations. Being “tough” becomes increasingly important in this context, especially for boys, and verbal abuse can be used to establish this desired toughness (Study II & III).

Conflicting with the discourse of tough boys’ verbal abuse was the interpretation that it was a sign of boys’ immaturity – implicitly in comparison with girls. In interviews, girls used this counter-discourse to try to destabilize the subject positions claimed by boys through verbal abuse, and re-position them as of a lower social age, childish and thereby less powerful. The discourse of boys’ immaturity also contains an explanation as to why girls don’t use verbal abuse as much - they are more mature. Geiger and Fischer (2006) also observed that 6<sup>th</sup> grade girls use such a discourse of boys’ immaturity in explaining boys’ use of verbal abuse and their own abstention from using it. Such a discourse has been observed in earlier studies (Frosh et al. 2002, Chambers et al. 2004). Even though tough boys’ verbal abuse could be countered with accusations of immaturity, using aggressive communication at one point in time provided the potential for producing a more mature masculinity and being less verbally abusive later on, thus materializing a process of emotional and sexual development. This opportunity was not seized upon by the “swotty” boys, who rarely used verbal abuse. The discourse of boys’ immaturity was never used about them, rather, they did not even qualify as sexual. Presenting oneself as a sexual person is one important dimension of popularity (Duncan 1999, McGuffey & Rich 1999).

While “fjortisar” (for girls) were interpreted as trying to put themselves ahead of their age, boys’ verbal abuse was sometimes also interpreted as an unwillingness to grow and develop, and stop trying to be cool. The discourse on boys’ immaturity also functioned to distance girls from the non-desirable “fjortis”-femininity and to claim a more mature, reflecting femininity. In the discursive formation of verbal abuse in school, a positive

discourse of girls' verbal abuse, corresponding to the toughness/masculinity discourse is missing. It is possible that such a positive discourse would have been found if there had been more verbally abusive girls in the classes. However, if it had been a dominant discourse it would most likely have been possible to trace it even in other girls' and boys' explanations of girls' verbal abuse. Ambjörnsson (2004) found a positive discourse of girls' use of sexual verbal abuse among working class girls, a discourse was subordinate to the middle-class discourse of girls' verbal abuse as a sign of low social status and "sluttiness".

### **School, verbal abuse and power**

Verbal abuse in school creates power relations between conversational participants (Walkerdine 1990), often through discourses of gender, age and sexuality (Study II, III & IV). Insulting, threatening, ridiculing or using pejoratives separates and hierarchizes subject positions occupied by them in discourse. Also, it establishes the target as someone the speaker can choose to treat that way, which has a number of social meanings. It can be interpreted as victimization or a sign of a friendly relationship, but in both cases represents an exercise of power, closely tied to gendered and age-related discourses (Study IV). While the respondent can resist these power relations, her/his options are limited by the social meanings of verbal abuse. For instance, if verbal abuse is taken as a sign of friendship, feeling offended jeopardizes participation in such social relations. Interpreted as age- and gender-specific joking (Study II & IV), not finding verbal abuse humorous excludes the respondent from the collective youth culture (Witkowska 2005), and may also establish a boy as representing an undesired non-hegemonic and asexual masculinity (Study III). Discourses surrounding verbal abuse help support the hegemony by concealing orders of power. Using and investing in such discourses, students reduce the practice of being verbally abusive to acceptable everyday interactions precisely because it is part of how hegemonic masculinity is constructed in school at this age.

Another aspect of the power relations created, the tough popular boys, by using verbal abuse among themselves as well towards other boys and girls, created a sense of anyone potentially becoming a target. Since they continuously practiced and displayed their skills in this area, other students, rather than engaging with them and risk demonstrating their lesser command of such practice, ignored or disregarded it, labeling it immature (Study III).

But the power implications of verbal abuse go beyond the particular interaction, conversational participants and other students present, since they produce normative meaning regarding gender, age and sexuality that constitutes part of the school context (Study II & III). Through verbal abuse such as teasing, name-calling, and even threats, identities are also regulated by other students by marking deviance from expected norms

(Davies 2003, Lees 1993, Thorne 1993, McGuffey & Rich 1999, Thurlow 2001). Orders of status and power repeatedly produced through verbal abuse based on gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, intellectual ability, etc., create part of the social context of school in which students live their everyday lives. The acceptance of verbal abuse of some students, in particular some boys, is part of these power relations.

### **Intersections with other identities – ethnicity and class**

The focus of the present investigation has been verbal abuse in gender and age construction, but of course verbal abuse can also be used in the construction, hierarchization and intersection of other identities, such as ethnicity, social class, etc. Insults related to ethnicity were rare in both classes, especially when compared to sexual verbal abuse, and because of this evidence is mainly anecdotal (Study II & IV). In the inner-city school, a possible explanation was the ethnic homogeneity of the students, with three students having one foreign-born parent. In the suburban school, the number of students with minority backgrounds was quite large, and three students in class had such background. While being “Swedish” or “immigrant” was clearly visible in the organization of students’ groupings and friendships at both schools, and would seem to provide a meaningful context for racial/ethnic verbal abuse, this was not evident in the fieldwork (Study II), and was not considered very usual in either school by interviewed students (however only one interviewed student had ethnic minority background). In the Swedish national report on ‘offensive treatment’, 13 percent of students with an ethnic minority background had felt offended by ethnically related insults, while 10 percent of students had been offended by sexual verbal abuse (Osbeck et al. 2003). These figures are difficult to interpret, since it might be that sexual verbal abuse is more accepted, and thus not found as offensive. Racist name-calling is more likely to be directed at students with characteristics such as dark hair or skin, than used as a general form of abuse toward a disliked peer as is the case with sexual and homophobic verbal abuse (Epstein 1998), which can explain why racial verbal abuse was quite rare in the two classes.

However, the examples that did occur in the present studies (Study II & IV) indicate that a further exploration of how verbal abuse is used in constructing ethnicized femininities and masculinities is motivated. In this vein, Lundström (2006) has shown how young Latina femininity is constructed in relation to being called “whore”. Whether *using* verbal abuse is central to construction of ethnicized gender identities needs to be pursued in other studies.

The results of the studies of how gender, age and sexuality is constructed through verbal abuse (Study II & III) also raised the question of how these identities were class-marked. While the students had both middle- and working class backgrounds, this was not specifically addressed. The descriptions of “rowdy” boy, verbally abusive

masculinity had working class implications, possibly indicating hegemonic and swot masculinity as middle class with regard to how verbal abuse was used. Similarly, an examination of verbal abuse with regard to “good girl” femininity contrasting with “fjortis” femininity might yield class as a relevant dimension. For instance, Ambjörnsson’s study (2004) indicated how class and sexuality combine with the production of gender among senior high school girls in Sweden. Ethnicity and class are of course also tightly linked, a point made by Lundström (2006) in relation to sexual verbal abuse.

## **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

The focus of these studies has been an in-depth investigation of gendered and age-related practices of verbal abuse in the school context. This was achieved through a combination of methods, including a large-scale survey and observations in school, followed by a series of interviews with students and teachers. The main analytical method was that of discourse analysis, which provided a focus on meaning-making of verbal abuse.

### **Survey**

The survey offered full coverage of students from school grades 6 and 8 enrolled in one entire medium-sized Swedish city. The very focus of the survey was on verbal abuse, the questionnaire was self-administered and filled in at school and the response rate was high. Although the results may not be generalizable as such, there are good reasons to believe that they are quite representative of the situation in other medium-sized Swedish cities. The reference period chosen was that of the whole school year, giving a kind of “average for the whole school year” exposure information. Though this may yield recall bias, the aim was to capture the situation during that school year, rather than at a single point in time.

The length of questionnaire had to be adapted to time restrictions from the schools, and so the total number of questions on forms of verbal abuse used was limited. In that vein, the question on sexual verbal abuse was narrow and limited to one pejorative (“whore”), since this particular pejorative has become something of a symbol of the verbal abuse in school in Sweden. The single item of “whore” certainly does not capture the total level of exposure to sexual verbal abuse in total. Thus, it would be erroneous to pose that girls generally experience less verbal abuse in school than boys, based on that question. Given the opportunity, a longer questionnaire could include a larger number

of questions, and ask explicitly for racial and homophobic verbal abuse as well as including a more encompassing question on sexual verbal abuse.

In line with the definition of verbal abuse proposed in the first part of the background, the intention to hurt was not used as a criterion for verbal abuse in the survey. Using such a definition in the survey would have considerably limited the focus, from students' verbal abuse as a diversity of language practices in school to only the most aggressive and clear-cut actions, from the respondent's point of view. While establishing speaker's intent through the respondent's perception is in itself methodologically problematic, such a definition may be adequate in studies of e.g. bullying, which aim to deal with the most severe cases of verbally aggressive actions, but this was not the aim of this study.

Further, when analyzing survey data, gender is often handled as a binary variable and comparisons between boys – as a group – and girls – as a group – are made. A study like this first one allows general patterns to be highlighted and examines whether these patterns vary between age groups and whether associations with well-being and school satisfaction differ. But boys and girls are not homogeneous groups. The findings were interpreted within the theoretical framework of gender as something “done” rather than a fixed characteristic, and also emphasizing differences between groups of boys. Against this background, the observation and interview study enabled a deeper understanding of what those patterns mean and also an exploration of their internal heterogeneity.

### **Observations and interviews**

Employing both observations and interviews made it possible to analyze the relation between the students' understanding of verbal abuse and their practice in the everyday school context.

To date, using observations in the study of verbal abuse is unusual in research on aggressive behavior in school in Sweden. As the interviews followed the observations, it was possible to ask about particular practices and events in the classes, and greatly furthered the understanding of social relations, narratives and practices. These methods enabled more direct information on such practices in context, and thus was a very valuable complement to the information obtained through students' reporting in the questionnaire and interviews. Observations of two entire classes documented in notebooks were chosen over selecting a few students in each class and audio- or video-recording their interactions, in order to capture the social dynamics of the entire classes. The observations were not limited to classrooms, but also covered other settings of student interaction such as hallways, the school gym, cafeteria and student lounge.

It ought to be underlined that for a single observer, conducting observations in classes of twenty students, the capacity of observing the numerous simultaneous interactions going on in the classroom is naturally limited. Verbal interactions in class can be seen as taking place on several conversational floors, ranging from ‘official’ to increasingly private interactions. The main interaction in class that includes the pedagogical work of the teacher addressed to all students takes place on the official floor, posing and answering questions etc. At the other end of this hierarchy are whispered conversations between students sitting close to each other, carried out under the cover of other classroom interactions. As a consequence, in the material at hand there is a bias towards the louder and more easily observable “official” interactions on or close to the conversational floor of the class. Students differ in the degree to which they claim time on the “official” conversational floor. Some students were quiet and mostly participated in muted conversations with the students sitting next to them covered by the louder official goings-on in class. Such quiet conversations were frequent but also much harder to capture for the observer – unless placed immediately beside the talking students. Thus, the observations are somewhat biased toward the loud students’ (almost exclusively boys) verbal abuse. On the other hand, this verbal abuse was equally noticeable to all the other students as well as the observer, and thereby represented a discursive practice all students had to relate to, and could not avoid. Any other verbal abuse would then be put in relation to these boys’ practice of it. The aim was not to follow a number of students and document all cases of verbal abuse experienced by them in various social contexts, but rather to start out from the social interaction in the classes and observe what went on there. Also, using the observation method for verbal abuse contains a bias towards name-calling and pejoratives, since more subtle ways may well be overlooked by the observer. However, once again, verbal abuse of this kind may more easily be overlooked also by the students and teachers.

As is the case for observational studies, it often proved difficult to obtain full portrayals of the inter-student interactions, partly because they shifted extremely quickly. Moreover, in both schools, the students showed great mobility within the classroom, often moving between seats, and even in and out of the room, which provided other opportunities for interaction than if they had remained in their seats. Observations in the classrooms were necessarily more easily managed than those during breaks, where students split up into smaller groups and went to different parts of the school, and also interacted with students in other classes and grades, who were not part of the study.

The interviews with students allowed them to give their own explanations to verbal abuse in school. Care was taken when selecting interviewees to attain a diversity of students with regard to their observed use of verbal abuse, status in their classes, choosing quieter as well as more dominant students.

Despite being asked and freely accepting to take part, interviewed students potentially interpreted the questions concerning verbal abuse as an “interrogation” by an adult (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli 2003). The interviewer met this by emphasizing her interest in students’ own views and explanations as experts on their own realities, aiming to dissociate herself from a judgmental adult position. In addition to being age-dependent, interviews are also gendered contexts (Messerschmidt 2004). Some boys were not comfortable saying (mainly sexual) pejoratives and insults out loud in the presence of the female interviewer in the interview situation. Even those boys who used them in class to other students clearly did not feel that those words were equally appropriate to utter out loud in the other context. In a few cases the boys instead felt more comfortable with writing down the pejoratives and then discussing them while referring to the written list.

Because of the lack of an encompassing informal term for verbal abuse in Swedish, sometimes “swearing” or “swearwords” was used by some students in the interviews to be able to talk about such language practice. Due to this terminological lack, it was not possible to directly ask about students’ definitions of verbal abuse. The interpretations had to be based on students’ actions during episodes containing verbal abuse in the classes and also how they talked about threats, name-calling, pejoratives, ridicule, sexual verbal abuse as well as narrated such classroom episodes in the interviews.

Teacher interviews were used mainly as a source of background information on the classes and verbal abuse as a student practice. While teacher discourses in a number of cases corresponded to those of the students, and provided an additional dimension to them, in the end this aspect was dropped from the analysis in favor of focusing exclusively on students’ meaning-making. Another reason was that teachers were also more easily identifiable, being only two.

Both participating classes had a predominance of boys, and neither of the classes contained girls who were particularly verbally abusive. While this seems to be fairly representative for patterns of verbal abuse when looking at both genders (also based on the results from the survey), a study of verbal abuse focusing exclusively on the construction of femininities would further the understanding of girls’ use of aggressive communication.

Finally, social identities such as class and ethnicity were not the focus of the study. Yet, some of the results indicate that these dimensions too are intertwined in students’ meaning making of and identity constructions by means of verbal abuse. Therefore this would be of great interest to develop in future research. In the field work conducted, the two schools, one inner-city and one suburban, were chosen to enable a diversity of students’ social backgrounds, including class and ethnicity. Since a comparative study was not the aim, the two classes were not chosen to represent contrasting social settings.

The study did not attempt to address contextual differences of verbal abuse between the two schools or classes, but instead aimed to explore commonalities of students' language practices (Kehily & Nayak 1997).

## **Implications**

Verbal abuse has implications for individual girls' and boys' identities and well-being as well as for the gendered and aged patterns of social relations and norms in school. Students strain to manage such consequences through complex interpretations and negotiations of the meaning of verbal abuse.

When observing students in school and listening to the descriptions of verbal abuse in their own words, these practices seem to be deeply embedded in the everyday production of meaning and identities in school. From the school perspective aiming to regulate such practice, awareness of the multiple functions of verbal abuse is essential. Simply trying to handle it through school rules such as banning pejoratives is unlikely to have a long-lasting profound effect. Instead, awareness of how verbal abuse contributes to orders of power, such as gender, age and sexuality – eventually even ethnicity and class – and thus makes sense to students themselves is crucial for any intervention. These orders of power are supported through a number of other pervasive practices in school, involving both children and adults, and will not easily be changed (Walkerdine 1990, Connell 1989, Epstein & Johnson 1998, Thorne 1993). As with sexual harassment in schools, intervention strategies need go beyond the actions themselves and also deal with the gender identities, primarily masculinities, constructed through them, suggesting alternative ways for boys to create their gender identities (Robinson 2005).

Adults in school also contribute to the construction of verbal abuse. Yet, as they are immersed in the same gendered power relations as students, although differently positioned, it gives them little direction in addressing such practices. In what has been seen and heard during the fieldwork, teachers occasionally intervened in verbally abusive exchanges between students, arguing that “one shouldn't talk like that”, but often they did not. While students of course had a general awareness that verbal abuse was not considered entirely acceptable by adults, their teachers could not supply adequate support in trying to resist or destabilize power relations and norms created by the discourses used, or help in establishing alternative ways in understanding and responding to verbal abuse, for lack of tools.

Issues of importance for future research are to examine whether masculinity construction by means of verbal abuse is relevant also during other school phases, both younger and older students, and how it then plays out in relation to other identities. Observations of verbal abuse could be used to follow classes over several years and at different ages in school and investigating whether not being verbally abusive and

concentrating on school work has the same meaning for boys in senior high school, where students have actively chosen their study concentration, academic or vocational. As already mentioned, another line to pursue is if and how verbal abuse is used as a resource in constructing other identities, such as class and ethnicity, and how they interact with gender, age and sexuality. A deeper investigation into how teachers and other adults in school contribute to the construction of verbal abuse has implications for prevention and warrants another line of investigation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Verbal abuse between students is not only a common aversive language practice in school. The results of this study suggest that it also has other implications and is especially significant for masculinity construction, and more pronounced among older (14-15 year-old) students. This practice is negatively related to school satisfaction and the well-being of both boys and girls and does not have to be frequent, repeated or combined with other kinds of harassment to have this effect.

Verbal abuse is a cultural resource to which boys have greater access than girls. In particular, boys who aspire to hegemonic masculinity can gain from exercising it. For them, showing oneself able to handle the giving-and-taking of verbal abuse, often with sexual content, contributes to toughness and popularity. While tough, popular boys may generate most of the verbal abuse, they are not necessarily regarded as verbally abusive; rather, responsibility for the bulk of verbal abuse was attributed to “rowdy” boys in this study. Further, whereas boys largely benefit from using verbal abuse, this research indicates that such practices mostly reflect unfavorably on girls. It appears that verbal abuse in school simultaneously orders masculinities and femininities, and structures heterosexual relations between the genders.

Verbal abuse also contributes to the constructing of age, intertwined with that of gender. For boys, using verbal abuse combines important aspects of toughness, gender, age and sexuality, and constitutes them as appropriately (hetero)sexual teenage boys. According to the study, discourses of immaturity, development and school year used in the meaning-making of verbal abuse position the genders differently, and contrast teenagers with adults. Being verbally abusive as a girl is associated with negative, immature “fjortis”-femininity, indicating that they displayed the wrong kind of sexuality, femininity and social age. Verbal abuse is also a resource in the negotiation of age and maturity, in relation to other students as well as adults.

What constitutes ‘verbal abuse’ is jointly constructed and negotiated by students and sometimes also teachers in interaction. The speaker’s intent with an utterance is a main point of students’ understanding of verbal abuse as unacceptable, which is modified by a number of permissive discourses, such as the use of pejoratives and insults being “only jokes”, part of (same-gender) friendship relations or pejoratives having “lost their meaning” and thus no longer being offensive. Students come to interpret use of pejoratives and insults especially by tough popular boys as “jokes”, rather than being offended and hurt. This suggests that students, using and investing in such discourses, reduce the practice of being verbally abusive to acceptable everyday interactions precisely because it is part of how dominant masculinity is constructed in school at this age.

Verbal abuse discursively creates a separation of meaning between subject positions, and a hierarchy or power relation between these positions, where the targeted person is put down. Thus, it can have positive social consequences for those students who can learn to use it the “right” way. The power implications of verbal abuse go beyond the particular interaction and conversational participants, producing normative meaning in the school context. Acceptance of the verbal abuse by some students, in particular boys, is part of these power relations. Orders of status and power repeatedly produced through verbal abuse based on e.g. gender, age, and sexuality, create part of the social context of school in which students live their everyday lives and form their identities.

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