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### Multi - girl - culture : an ethnography of doing identity

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# **Part II**

## **Contexts of Performances**







## Chapter 5

# Life at Primary School

### 5.1 Introduction

In this first results chapter, I explore the specific setting of the school as a context for identity performance. Girls mostly interact with friends and other peers at school. Much of girls' social life outside school is also connected to the school. Most girls had known each other all their lives, and most of their friends were children they knew from school. In this chapter, I investigate how the schools positioned pupils, and which spaces existed for identity performance at the two schools. These questions are answered by approaching the schools in three ways. First, I analyse how the Gunningschool and the Kantlijn present themselves to the general public, both on an abstract level relating to certain images, and on a more material level, in the form of a physical building. These presentations, or the schools' performances of their respective identities, structured the space in which the girls from the respective schools performed their identities. Second, I consider the school as a set of routines that shape much of girls' everyday life. Here, I provide a comprehensive view into these routines and rituals, and I describe how they influence identity performance. Third, I approach the school as a junction of actor relationships: teachers & parents; teachers & pupils; and pupils & pupils. Taken together, this chapter, and the one that follows, also set the context in which the remainder of this dissertation is framed.

## 5.2 Schools' self-presentation

The Dutch school system is still characterised by the pillarisation that segregated Dutch society according to religious and ideological pillars (Lijphart, 1968). Thus, a main distinction between schools is the denomination, which distinguishes Catholic, Christian, and neutral (or public) schools [openbare scholen]. In recent decades, this distinction has also come to include Islamic schools as well as schools with particular educational methods (e.g. Montessori, Steiner). Parents are free in their choices of school, providing it is within their postal code district. A substantial number of parents' decisions are based on religious denomination (Karsten, Ledoux, Roeleveld, Felix, & Elshof, 2003: 455), but many others do not care about the religious identity of the school. Schools, therefore, also aim to be attractive in other ways, 'advertising' a certain profile and facilities<sup>1</sup>. In section 4.4, I briefly introduced the two primary schools. In this section, I elaborate upon these introductions by analysing the images the two schools intended to present to the outside world. Primary schools have several means to present their profile or identity: the official school guide, newsletters, and website.

### *Missions and visions*

The Gunningschool presented itself as a Christian, multicultural school. The school profiled itself in its guide as a "meeting place" where "equivalence" is a central value: "Equivalence means to us that 'being different' is allowed, and that 'being different' is respected. Equivalence also means to us that we learn to take each other into consideration" [School guide Gunningschool: 5]. The difference referred to in this quote also refers to differences in educational needs, and the school aspired to offer "education to size" [onderwijs op maat], which means offering each individual pupil the education s/he needs. The emphasis on difference was further reflected in the school's motto 'Colourful with an eye for difference'. The school communicated with parents and pupils through monthly newsletters. The news here consisted of announcements about school personnel (e.g. who is leaving, who is sick). Other news items included new rules, or information about road works in the school's surrounding streets. Interestingly, the newsletters did not feature news about the pupils. The school's website contained mostly general information about the school and the school's name sake, and was rarely updated. For instance, in the summer of 2007, when the school year 2006-2007 had ended, the site still contained information about the 2005-2006 forms.

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The Kantlijn profiled itself in its school guide as a neighbourhood school that emphasises children's own experience. The school believed this is important "because the world pupils learn about, is their own world, that means family – neighbourhood – school" [School guide Kantlijn: 7]. The school was working in collaboration with several organisations in the neighbourhood, such as after-school care clubs and the library. In September 2006, the school officially became a so-called Community School [Brede School]. The weekly newsletter was produced by parents, and consisted of announcements and reports about school activities. Pupils usually created these reports, writing about special projects or museum visits. The newsletters provided a detailed insight into what had been going on at school. Parents also maintained the website. Next to general information, the site consisted of photos of pupils, an archive of newsletters, and an active discussion board.

The two schools thus profiled themselves in different ways. At the Gunningschool, the faculty was central in the communications, rather than the pupils, or indeed the school as a community of teachers, parents and pupils. The advertised eye for difference was lacking in the school's other communications (e.g. the newsletter). In the Kantlijn's communications, pupils and parents played an active part, and community was highlighted over the school's faculty. As a consequence, I contend that the Gunningschool was 'owned' by its faculty, and the school was a place where pupils were guests. The Kantlijn was 'owned' by parents and pupils, where teachers were also part of the community at large.

### *The buildings and classrooms*

A school building and playground, as well as a classroom, provide spaces for identity performance. These material spaces address pupils in a specific way, and promote specific subject-positions over others. Furthermore, the layout of the class enables (or disables) opportunities for identity performance. The two buildings and respective classrooms had distinct looks and feels.

The Gunningschool stood in a quiet, residential area. The school shared the grounds and the gymnasium with a special education secondary school. The school grounds were fenced, and only opened when school started or ended. There was one large playground with a sandbox. The school installed a slide at the end of the 2005-2006 year. Steps led up to the main entrance, providing a podium overlooking the playground.

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The building had two levels: the younger children were upstairs, and the older pupils downstairs. Downstairs was also a larger, open area known as 'de ruimte' [the space] that functioned as an auditorium. Staff members not responsible for teaching a form had their own small offices throughout the school.

The Kantlijn's original building was renovated in my fieldwork year. The building reopened in June 2006. The temporary building was located at ten minutes walking distance from the original location, in the same neighbourhood. Both buildings were just off busy streets, bustling with traffic and shoppers. The temporary building was an old-fashioned school building, with a small playground at the back of the school. The renovated building, attached to a public library, gymnasium, and after-school facilities, had two unfenced playgrounds. The large playground had football nets and a playhouse. In both buildings, older years were upstairs, with the younger pupils downstairs. The new building had several small spaces, where pupils could work in groups outside the classroom. Non-teaching staff members also had their own offices throughout the school, in both the temporary and renovated buildings.

At the Gunningschool, the 8<sup>th</sup> form teacher Thomas's classroom had clearly been in use for a while. Many items in the room appeared to have been there for quite a time. The posters' duct tape was coming off the walls; bookshelves had boxes with never used booklets; the linoleum was worn-out; at the back of the room was a table with four stacked computers, of which not even Thomas knew whether they worked; dusty, wooden games rested on top of the cupboards; one of the TL-lights was broken; and along one side of the room were stacks of old paper. The tables and chairs were old and used, and none were alike. Some were light brown, others almost black. Each table had a sticker with the pupils' name on it. Chairs were numbered, and lists with corresponding names hung on both sides of the room. Pupils always found their own chair and refused to use someone else's. Each table had two plastic drawers that held pens, paper and other small things. Pupils rummaged in them a lot, which drove Thomas crazy. In addition, every inch was occupied, which made the room feel cramped. Next to the pupils' own tables, two tables stood at the back where they could sit to correct their work. There was another corner with three functioning computers. At the front was a washbasin, and at the back an aquarium. The function of this classroom was to provide an educational space. Tables were grouped in three rows of two tables each, facing the three-

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pane blackboard. One pane had been made into a week schedule with red tape, and Thomas wrote down homework assignments here. On the back wall were two large, hanging cupboards where all text and notebooks were kept. Nine printouts hung on the inner windows, featuring the “golden rules” of the Gunningschool. A sign by the blackboard instructed pupils to “stop the bullying”. Less space was available for the pupils’ own input, as there were two series of self-made artwork.

As stated, the Kantlijn returned to the renovated building in June 2006. By then, the pupils were practicing for their end-of year play and the classroom was hardly ever used. I therefore focus on the classroom in the temporary building. Tables were grouped in sets of five or six, and these groups were positioned around the teacher’s desk in the centre. The pupils faced each other. At the back was a little corner with a bookcase and pillows on the floor. The room had a small blackboard upon which pupils did drawings and Luck seldom wrote. The only educational element in the room was a skeleton used for a project on the body. The room had a stereo, a television with DVD-player and one computer. Around the blackboard on the wall was a drawing of two candles and a Christmas wreath. There were three large frames with photomontages of Luck’s former pupils. One wall featured professional photographs of this year’s pupils, framed in yellow cardboard. Pupils used the walls near to their tables to put up notes, like their tasks for the week. Tables did not belong to pupils, instead pupils ‘owned’ their drawers. When they changed seats, they only changed the drawers.

The buildings and classrooms described in this section positioned pupils in different ways. The closed playground of the Gunningschool versus the open, community building of the Kantlijn correspond with the different images the schools conveyed, where ownership of the school laid with faculty and the community respectively. Likewise, the classroom at the Kantlijn was less of an educational space than it was a meeting place, where pupils and teacher Luck lived together. As the temporary building was old, it was permitted to draw upon the walls. Through this, the pupils appropriated the room. Conversely, the classroom at the Gunningschool addressed the pupils as students with duties. The tables were aligned in sets of two, and girls and boys did not sit together (Thomas informed me that due to their religion, girls and boys should not be mixed). Furthermore, the room was Thomas’s domain: it contained items he had gathered over the years. As a result, students clung to ‘their’ space: their table and chair.



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### 5.3 Routines and rituals

A pattern of breaks and extra-curricular activities structured life at both schools. With a strong focus on conventional learning, the climate at the Gunningschool is best described as an educational culture. The Kantlijn, on the other hand, is best typified as a convivial culture [gezelligheids-cultuur] (Te Poel, 1982). Routines and rituals in class differed correspondingly and influenced opportunities for identity performance. At the end of each subsection, I discuss the consequences of the differences between the two schools.

#### *Before school*

Both schools started at 8.30. At the Gunningschool, pupils of all years gathered in the schoolyard. The two janitors supervised from the top of the stairs, and sometimes shouted instructions to pupils and parents. The pupils were not allowed in the yard before 8.15; early arrivals needed to wait outside the fence. The pupils could only enter the building when the bell rang. Most juniors were brought by their mothers or the occasional father. Seniors, and especially eight-formers, came alone or with their friends. Two bells signalled the start of school. The first was the cue for the juniors, the second for the seniors. As the pupils entered the class, Thomas stood by the door and welcomed them. Thomas started lessons straight away.

The girls of the 8<sup>th</sup> form avoided being the first one in the yard, preferring to wait by the fence until they spotted a classmate. The girls never joined their male classmates, and the social outsiders were avoided. They had to wait by themselves until an ally entered. Who stands with who was important. The before school rituals revealed a hierarchy between the girls. Standing alone was to be avoided, but when a 'better' classmate arrived, a girl swiftly moved across the yard to stand with her. Usually, the more popular girls reigned over the conversations, whereas the less popular girls kept an open face and nodded a lot. The girls stood closely together, almost on top of each other, but made room for newcomers to enter the circle. The schoolyard was a vast space, and the girls' behaviour indicates how well they knew the other girls were watching them.

At the Kantlijn, the pupils immediately entered the building and waited in their classrooms. Most parents brought their children inside the classroom, and some parents (an equal amount of mothers and fathers) even accompanied their eight-formers. Some parents waited for Luck to arrive, to ask questions or give instructions. When they left,

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they kissed their offspring, who were greatly embarrassed about that. Luck usually arrived after 8.30, which the pupils happily remarked upon. When he entered, pupils took their assigned seats and waited. Luck started the day with a class conversation. On Mondays, this was a discussion about the weekend, and on other days he discussed other matters at hand, such as who had already applied for secondary school; whose parents could drive to school football; what was happening with Max (a pupil who had undergone a foot operation, due to which he missed much school).

Before school, the Kantlijn-girls took a seat or stood together talking, and often mixed with boys. As this class was more inclusive, no one was left out, although some had their preferences. Here too, the girls stood close and they often touched each other. Sometimes the pupils turned on music, or practiced a dance. When Luck started the day with a class discussion, the pupils aimed to stretch these discussions out for as long as possible, to avoid having to start work. The time before school started provided ample space for identity performance, in the form of talk (both individually and in the class discussion), but also in the form of media use in class.

### *Working*

At the Gunningschool, the curriculum almost exclusively consisted of arithmetic and reading. Thomas usually gave a collective instruction, and the pupils worked individually or in small groups on their tasks as Thomas moved through the classroom to answer questions. Through a rotating schedule, two pupils functioned as classroom assistants for a week, distributing and collecting the books and notebooks when Thomas changed from one lesson to the other. The pupils considered this to be break time and started chatting. Thomas aimed to keep the class quiet at all time, except during fun activities, like drawing or handicrafts<sup>2</sup>. To accomplish this, he punished pupils who broke the rules through an intricate punishment scheme where each incident landed the offender five minutes of detention after school. As verbal communication was hindered, pupils communicated with each other through passing notes<sup>3</sup>.

At the Kantlijn, Luck hardly ever taught the group collectively, and instead, pupils who were at the same level sat in groups and helped each other. Luck introduced tasks by connecting them to the pupils' lived experiences. For instance, a reading comprehension assignment about gusts of wind was introduced by asking who had ever encountered

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such a gust. The pupils often worked on dissimilar topics, almost as in the Montessori method. Luck set out the tasks for the week, and the pupils decided for themselves which task they did first, with Luck available for questions and corrections. Whilst working, the class was noisy and instead of collaborating, the pupils often just chatted. Moreover, Luck often left the class. At these times, the pupils were loud for a bit, but settled to their work after a few minutes. Punishment was rare at the Kantlijn, and Luck preferred either talking to the violator or a frivolous solution instead. For instance, pupils kept going to the toilets in groups, causing a nuisance in the hallways. Luck repeatedly warned against this and announced that if two or more girls, or two or more boys, were caught together in the toilets, the other sex was to make a childish hat for the others. The pupils took this warning seriously, but in the end two girls got caught together. The boys made them a silly pink hat they needed to put on if they went to the toilet.

The different styles of working offered different opportunities for identity performance. The Kantlijn's regime provided ample room for talk, whereas at the Gunningschool the pupils resorted to order disturbances or note passing. Next to different opportunities for talk, the different styles of working also show the different positioning of the respective teachers. The time between tasks was a way for the pupils at the Gunningschool to enforce time to talk. As tasks sometimes only took ten minutes, Thomas continuously needed to regain order. As such, he struggled with the pupils, positioning himself as their opponent. Luck, on the other hand, positioned himself more as a counsellor, endowing the pupils with responsibility when he left the class. I discuss the relationship between teachers and pupils further in section 5.4.

### *Opening of the week at the Gunningschool*

The Christian Gunningschool opened the week with a bible story. Each Monday, principal Wouda summoned the teacher to bring his pupils to 'the space'. The pupils of the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> forms had to wait and enter separately. Wouda, or one of the teachers, read a story from a children's bible, after which the pupils sang up to three biblical songs, accompanied by Wouda on the piano. The teachers of the three forms stood at the side to police the event. The pupils misbehaved in every way they could, from purposely choosing the wrong seat, kicking the seat in front, to singing too loudly. The teachers had a hard time keeping order, which resulted in sending pupils back to class as punishment. Often, the opening of the week resulted in the collective punishment of shortened playtime.

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This fifteen-minute opening of the week was a traumatic event for pupils and teachers alike. The students wore awkward expressions during the reading, as mine often was when this majority of Muslims was forced to listen to Christian bible stories. The pupils' misbehaviour looked to me like a form of sabotage or resistance to this ritual. On an occasion when lip-synching was punished, the pupils reverted to singing very loudly. Wouda once responded to this: "enthusiasm is nice, but it cannot get too disorderly". This sentence is typical of the Gunning-school regime, where fun was dosed and controlled. The confrontation between religions reminded the pupils that they were different to the faculty, adding to a continuous opposition of us versus them. The week opening was one of the times where year 8 embodied their senior position at primary school. They had the coveted seats at the back of the auditorium and they were often the first to start the mischief. At the same time, the opposition between teachers and pupils about religion also bonded the pupils from the different years.

### *Discussing the weekend at the Kantlijn*

The week was ritually opened at the Kantlijn by discussing the weekend. Luck asked the class if anyone 'had been up to something' over the weekend. The pupils volunteered their stories and the others listened intently. A typical discussion about the weekend lasted over half an hour. The stories often connected and seemed to have been thought up associatively: when one mentioned redecorating her bedroom, others volunteered comparable stories. Below is a summary of the stories told on Monday 6 March 2006:

- Ramin went to see his grandfather and played outside.
- Lars visited the garden house and played in the snow.
- Sophie slept over at Roos's on Friday. On Saturday she went with her parents and their friends to a bungalow park and swam.
- Odecia slept over at her grandmother's and went to the movies, she saw *Nanny McFee*. Sunday she went out for dinner at a Chinese restaurant.  
[Luck starts a discussion about Chinese food, and pak-choi cabbage in particular.]
- Katia went to see Max with Maud.
- Sophie went to see Max with Roos.  
[Discussion moves to Max's recovery from his operation.]
- Thijs' older brother came for dinner.
- Björn's mother had her birthday yesterday and people came to visit.
- Marisol slept over at Mickey's. They talked about out-of-body experiences the whole time and that was scary.

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- Noa went to the movies with her neighbour and saw *The Pink Panther*. It was fun. Noa's grandfather died last week.
  - Mickey saw *The Pink Panther* with her mother. At first she thought it wasn't a nice movie, but later it was.
  - Maud took photos for the project, but not many.
  - Thirza went horseback riding, and afterwards to a friend in Friesland.
- [Luck starts a discussion about feeling bad for the horses. He plays dumb.]
- Mehmet went to Arabic school on Saturday. [Field notes Kantlijn, 6 March 2006]

This storytelling provided excellent opportunities for identity performance. Expressing friendships ties in a weekend experience reconfirms these ties. Furthermore, as the pupils listened attentively, they also bonded as a class, adding a sense of collectivity. Moreover, the stories the pupils offered up are unmistakable performances of middle-class identities. Likewise, the Kantlijn's efforts to let the pupils engage in self-reflective talk also point to the middle-class ideal of self-awareness.

### *Break/playtime*

At 9.30 at the Gunningschool, and 10.15 at the Kantlijn, it was time for break. Before they went outside to play, the pupils enjoyed food and a drink. During the break inside, the pupils formed little groups. Again, at the Kantlijn these groups were mostly mixed, whereas at the Gunningschool four groups usually formed, based on the axes of gender and popularity. Food was often shared as a token of affection or friendship. After ten minutes, the pupils went outside to play. At the Gunningschool this was clear-cut: the boys played football and the girls skipped. At the Kantlijn, the playground was small and most pupils flocked together. They played catch, shot marbles, or just stood and talked. When year 8 was outside at the same time as the small children, the pupils often played with them, pushing them around on their small bikes.

Morning breaks were also the times when birthdays were celebrated. Birthday celebrations had been ritualised since kindergarten and consisted of treating the classmates and teachers. Teachers usually got treated to something different to the pupils, for instance chocolate versus a bag of crisps. The birthday boy or girl chose two friends and they went round the other years together. At the Gunningschool, teachers stuck a sticker on a card provided by the principal. At the Kantlijn, teachers gave a small present, like a hair clip or a notebook. In class, the other pupils sang a birthday song before they enjoyed their treat.

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Playtime was an important part of the day. Considered 'their' time, the pupils were in a sense free to do as they pleased. Groups sitting together or standing outside together performed friendship ties and popularity. For instance, the outsider group at the Gunningschool rarely joined in with the skipping. Although they claimed they did not want to when I asked them about it, the decision was never theirs. Instead, they were forced to stand by themselves or play with the 7<sup>th</sup> formers. The girls that were allowed to join the game found themselves performing as well. As there was much shouting and cursing at each other, the game caused both pleasure and pain. During break, hierarchies between the different years at school showed. The pupils of the Kantlijn perhaps played with small children, but here also only the outsiders played with the 7<sup>th</sup> formers. Birthday celebrations were important performance practices, as classmates judged the choice of treat and the birthday boy or girl needed to pick two friends. In my eight months at the Gunningschool, only two pupils from year 8 celebrated their birthday. At the Kantlijn, everybody celebrated his/her birthday in class and therefore it happened rather often. This difference might be ascribed to financial reasons.

### *Lunchtime*

In the Netherlands, most primary schools close for lunch. For children who cannot go home, schools arrange a special lunch programme, known as *overblijven* [ $\pm$  stay on]. This programme, carried out by volunteers, exists outside school regulation but nevertheless takes place at school. At the Gunningschool, only two or three 8<sup>th</sup> form pupils participated in this programme, the others went home. Most mothers (and some fathers) stayed at home and had lunch with their children, other pupils spent lunch by themselves. At the Kantlijn, the majority of pupils stayed on at school during lunch. When school ended at twelve, Luck left the pupils in the care of two, semi-permanent, 'stay-on workers' [*overblijfkrachten*]. The pupils had their brought in lunch, after which the group went outside. At the renovated school, the pupils used the school's playground during lunch. In the temporary building, the junior pupils used the schoolyard, and years 7 and 8 usually went to a nearby public playground with a street-football field and playground equipment. Often some pupils refused to go outside, wanting to stay in the classroom to listen to music or hang out. Playing sometimes got out of hand and accidents happened, for instance, one girl broke her arm when she was pushed off the merry-go-round.

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Lunchtime breaks up the day for pupils at Dutch primary schools. Most pupils from the Gunningschool went home – a setting not included in my fieldwork. Lunchtime at the Kantlijn provided similar performance opportunities as playtime in the morning. The pupils understood lunchtime to be their time, free from the control of the school. The stay-on programme at the Kantlijn suffered the problems that Van Daalen (2005) described well in her ethnography of staying-on at Dutch schools. As the programme is organised outside of school, i.e. by volunteers, these workers had no formal authority over the pupils. Since they lacked means of punishment, they lacked control over the pupils. The pupils often defied the stay-on workers: they were habitually rude and did not follow instructions. The stay-on workers could only report incidents to Luck. He would then reconstruct the story by talking to the pupils and subsequently urged them to be more respectful and obedient. However, as Luck was never present during lunchtime, and the pupils acted very differently around him, he never fully grasped what had taken place. The pupils looked down on the volunteers and granted them low social status.

### *Afternoons*

The Gunningschool resumed at 13.15, the Kantlijn at 13.00. Waiting for school to start in the afternoon functioned similarly as the above reading of waiting in the morning, with the exception that the Kantlijn-pupils who had stayed-on entered together. Afternoons had no formal breaks and the two hours were a long time for the pupils. Thomas solved this problem with a fun activity, like drawing or crafts. Luck often let the pupils go outside for extra playtime. Afternoons were generally more relaxed than mornings, with fewer tasks and hence more opportunities for talk and fun. Many afternoons at the Kantlijn were filled with changing the ways the pupils sat in class (i.e. a different clustering of tables). Luck frequently changed the clustering. This had two functions. First, Luck separated people without having to punish them. Second, it fostered a sense of community in the class, including between sexes. As Luck once stated, “only girls is horrendous”. Luck let the pupils work out a new arrangement themselves, which centralised experience, choice and agency for them.

School ended at 15.15 at the Gunningschool with a bell. After that, classroom assistants stayed behind to clean the room, whilst pupils with detention stayed in class to read. Outside in the schoolyard, the janitor sent lingering students home. Friends walked home together. The Kantlijn stopped at 15.00, which was announced by the noise coming out of

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other classes. Detention and class duties did not exist and the pupils left the classroom, although some hung around to ask Luck questions. Many pupils cycled to school, and they left in groups of two or three or with small brothers or sisters and/or parents.

### *Special activities*

On Tuesday and Friday afternoons, the pupils at the Gunningschool had physical education; at the Kantlijn it was on Wednesday mornings. A separate teacher, as is nowadays compulsory in the Netherlands, taught physical education. At the Kantlijn, special teachers also taught handicrafts and English, and a special music teacher taught for several weeks, as part of a music project. This school also participated in a photography project of a local youth theatre. All Amsterdam primary schools participated in a museum project known as *Museumles* [museum lessons]. The municipality organised weekly visits to the city's diverse museums, where a guide showed the pupils around. The Gunningschool only participated once every two years and clustered years 7 and 8 together. As the Kantlijn was located closer to the city centre, we often walked to the museum without extra supervision<sup>4</sup>. The Gunningschool's two forms always went by bus, accompanied by volunteer parents and teachers to keep the groups in check. Furthermore, both schools participated in the yearly *Kunstschooldag* [Art school day], when concert halls, theatres and museums have a special programme for children.

The end of primary school is celebrated in most Dutch schools by an end-of-year play or musical, when pupils play for their fellow schoolmates and parents on the last day of school. Thomas started practice in March, but cancelled the musical in May because the pupils continuously misbehaved during rehearsals. Preparations for the Kantlijn's final play started in June and took up most of the school hours until the end of year, in other words, during this period the pupils received hardly any education (in the strict sense). The play was conceived by Luck with much input from the pupils.

The strong emphasis on special activities at the Kantlijn corresponds with the school's emphasis on experience and learning about the world. It also shows the convivial atmosphere of the school. Obviously, projects outside school and plays inside school offer more opportunities for identity performance than doing arithmetic. At the Gunningschool, the faculty assigned less time for such special activities. Thomas told me he needed all the time he had to teach the basic skills<sup>5</sup>. Luck, on



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the other hand, once remarked that his pupils did not need his teaching, as most came from privileged backgrounds. He noted a strong contrast with the pupils he had taught ten years earlier, when the school population at the Kantlijn resembled the school population at the Gunningschool now. As we often discussed the differences between the two schools in my fieldwork, Luck added the Kantlijn has always emphasised pupils' experience and has always been involved in many special programmes. Perhaps this was the reason why the Kantlijn attracted so many white pupils. Though the neighbourhood was whitening, other schools in this area were not as white as the Kantlijn.

### 5.4 The teacher, the parent, and the pupil

In this section I approach the school as a junction of actor relationships. Again, I investigate which identities the two schools are performing, and how these school identities set the space the girls had to perform their own identities. The identity of the school is a matter of presentation, as analysed in section 5.2. The Gunningschool presented itself as a meeting place, and the Kantlijn as a community school. It is also a matter of behaviour (rules, routines, rituals), which I investigated in the previous section. The Gunningschool underlined conventional learning, and the regimes at the Kantlijn focused more on social learning. Finally, the identity of the school manifests itself in the relationships between its faculty and the other actors involved. Relationships between pupils are analysed in section 5.5, but here, I focus on relationships between teachers and parents, and teachers and pupils.

#### *Who is in control? Teachers versus parents*

The Gunningschool was situated in a neighbourhood with many allochthonous inhabitants, and this was reflected in the school population. Originally a white school, the school has had to adapt to societal changes. One of the problems signalled in the multicultural society is a lack of contact between autochthonous Dutch and allochthonous newcomers, and a lack of knowledge of the other's culture, especially when it concerns Muslims (Kanne, 2004). The relationships between the teachers and parents at the Gunningschool support this observation. Note that my interpretation is based on the conversations of the teachers, school communication and observation at school. Integration and understanding is a two-way street, but since I did not interview parents, I write here solely from the teachers' perspective.

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The relationship between the Gunningschool and parents is at best described as difficult and patronising, caused by misunderstanding. First, religion is a cause of misunderstanding. The Gunningschool actively expressed its Christianity and the parents were, at times, uncomfortable with this. For instance, at the graduation ceremony, principal Wouda read from a bible and pupils received a bible as going-away present. Only eight mothers were present at this ceremony and all looked visibly uncomfortable. In the faculty lounge, teachers often expressed their lack of understanding of Islam. For instance, the arrival of the new moon marks the end of Ramadan, *Eid ul-Fitr* [Suikerfeest], and therefore the date differs in different countries of origin. The Gunningschool teachers repeatedly expressed their annoyance with this. As such, they failed to show respect for difference, whilst at the same time demanding respect for their Christianity. Second, some teachers showed ignorance about developmental differences. When Nazli got a very low score on a CITO practice test, one teacher demanded to know 'why allochthonous are always so dumb'. The explanation another teacher offered involved heredity and not being hugged enough. The teacher then said he did not understand why the government did not do more about this [Field notes Gunningschool, 14 November 2005]. For a teacher teaching underprivileged pupils, the remark stood out, not only for its embedded racism, but also because he was looking for an external explanation.

As well as ignorance about the Other, some teachers also employed a patronising stance towards parents. For instance, when parents were needed to coach the school football teams, Thomas questioned their ability to manage this task. Furthermore, the school assumed Turkish and Moroccan parents spoke poor or no Dutch, and that mothers stayed at home. All the mothers of children who entered Pre-school<sup>6</sup> were obliged to take Dutch lessons, regardless of their level of Dutch. Principal Wouda often made remarks like "helping your mother to do the groceries", passing on traditional views of gender roles. In school communications about parent-teacher night, parents were advised to bring an interpreter. Although this was based on previous experiences, it positioned (all) parents as distant Others. The patronising stance of the school towards parents manifested itself very clearly when some pupils needed to undergo psychological evaluations to determine whether they needed special education. The pupils and their parents were informed that it involved an additional test [aanvullende toets]. The Dutch *toets* has the connotation of a school exam, and lacks the connotation of evaluation or experiment that the English *test* contains. This was one of the events

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at this school that I was extremely uncomfortable with. Perhaps it is unwise to tell children they need to be psychologically evaluated, however, parents need to consent and have the right to know what is happening to their children. The argument that parents possibly do not understand this is beside the point.

At the Gunningschool, the faculty actively positioned themselves in opposition to the parents, whom they not only failed to understand, but at times also failed to show respect. In section 5.2, I quoted from the Gunningschool's official guide, where it profiled itself as a "meeting place", where "'being different' is allowed, and that 'being different' is respected". However, in the teachers' relationships with the parents, these notions were lost.

Teachers at the Kantlijn faced the opposite problem. Most of these parents were (upper) middle class and put their children on a pedestal. Luck sometimes complained parents were too involved (see also Smit, Driessen, Sluiter, & Brus, 2007). For instance, parents contested the secondary school advice Luck gave their children, on the grounds that they felt they deserved better. Parental involvement was also manifested in the informal conversations they had with Luck before school started. For school football, parents volunteered to car pool their children, and on the field many parents supported the teams. On graduation night, the parents collectively bought a present for the teachers. Girls often played at each other's houses and had sleepovers. Parents, then, knew their children's friends and knew their parents. This adds to the idea of school as a community that stretches beyond the school doors. Parents wanted to be involved in school policy and they participated in the parent council [schoolraad] and advisory board [medezeggenschapsraad]. Parents closely followed the procedures of becoming a community school and when the school got a new name, parents initiated a protest. There thus was a tension between the school as an independent entity and the parents' involvement in the school.

### *Friend or foe? Teachers versus pupils*

Pupils had the same teacher for a year and developed a relationship with him. Year 8 is an important year, because it means both saying goodbye to the familiar primary school, and taking the CITO-test. The relationship between Thomas and Luck and their respective pupils is described throughout this dissertation. Here, I want to briefly note Luck and Thomas's reputations amongst their pupils. As the year progressed, the pupils liked Thomas less and less. First, they claimed he held them

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back. They disagreed with their assigned arithmetic levels and they did not concur with their secondary school advice (see chapter 6). Second, they resented him for punishing them too often and too severely. The pupils were extremely disappointed when Thomas cancelled the traditional farewell musical at the end of the year, and viewed it as an emblematic act. The pupils' dislike for Thomas was connected to ethnicity. They claimed he favoured Bianca, the only native Dutch in class, and they called him racist. Bianca summarises an indicative incident:

Bianca: But so the teacher said to me. No, wait. I'll say it differently. You know I've been feeling a bit withdrawn? And then the teacher said like you can just kick someone if someone kicks you and Nazli kicked me under the table, so I kicked back. Then Nazli said that to the teacher, 'mister she's kicking me'. Then I said 'no, you were kicking me too'. Then the teacher said 'sometimes it's also good to kick back' and then someone said, I think it was Said, said like 'because she's *tata*' [slang word signifying Dutch people], you know. But then the teacher said 'yes, kicking is not allowed'. While she started it first. [Interview Bianca, 29 June 2006]

Thomas often expressed his concern about Bianca's position in class and had probably told her it was okay to kick someone back to make her more assertive. However, this did not go as planned and the pupils interpreted his special treatment of Bianca as racism. Although I have ample evidence of Bianca being favoured, labelling Thomas racist is definitely undeserved. However, the school's continuous opposition of *us* (the autochthonous school faculty) versus *them* (the allochthonous school population and parents) reverberated in the classroom, and by the end of the year, the pupils not only regarded Thomas as their opponent, they saw him as their enemy.

Luck, at the Kantlijn, was conversely very popular amongst his pupils. Some girls told me they liked his educational regime (i.e. working individually over collective instruction). Luck endowed the pupils with a sense of responsibility by often leaving the class alone. Other teachers at the Kantlijn did not do this and some pupils remarked to me they found this 'weird' yet nice. Although Luck hardly ever punished them, he did get angry when pupils misbehaved, and pupils did not want Luck to be angry with them. He thus managed to walk the fine line of being authoritative yet friendly. Where the stay-on volunteers had no authority or control over the pupils whatsoever, a severe telling off by Luck kept them in check for a while. Pupils did not want to disappoint Luck, and I believe this was related to his approach to them as individuals with personality and agency.

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### 5.5 Friends, cliques, and hierarchies

In the previous section, I described the school as an alliance of relationships between teachers, parents and pupils. The central focus of this dissertation lies with the interaction of girls in the context of school. The relationships between girls thus form a context within a context. These relationships, which had formed over the years, set boundaries for identity performance. This section investigates which different cliques (groups of friends) existed, and how cliques and friends were connected. Related to this is the notion of popularity. Friendships were important and cliques dominated school life, however, the girls did not talk about popularity as a coveted goal. The second subsection shows how the girls understood popularity whilst in primary school.

Classmates were the most important source of friendships, and the girls' social lives consisted mostly of school friendships. Yet this does not imply a steady group of friends. Over the years, some pupils had moved, thereby turning into distant 'friends' or pen pals. Furthermore, the class constituting year 8 at the Kantlijn in 2005-2006 had been split into two years 7/8 in 2004-2005. Friendships and alliances are dynamic, and therefore any description of them is never more than a snapshot in time.

#### *Cliques*

Most girls had three close friends in class, and friendships varied in intensity and duration. In addition, some cliques were more popular than others. I ran the self-reported friendship ties in a small social network analysis<sup>7</sup>. Figure 5.1 graphically shows how at the Gunningschool, these ties cluster into two main cliques. The direction of the arrows represents who named whom, so Bianca (left top corner) named Dilara as her friend, but Dilara did not mention Bianca. The arrow between Bianca and Amisha has two heads, meaning they both named each other as friends. The balls are bigger when girls were named by more people, and the different grey scales indicate clusters.

Two coloured clusters appear. On the right we see the popular girls' clique, which clustered around Consolacion. Close to the core of this clique were Naoul, Chemaie and Beyhan. Indeed, the four of them always sat together and picked each other in gym class. Related were Laila, Romeysa and Radia. The second clique visible in the figure clusters around Gülen, Dilara, Nazli and Aliye. Gülen and Dilara were sometimes named as a separate group. Betty, Amisha and Bianca are outsiders,

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although Amisha's position within the group improved when she took off her headscarf (see chapter 9). Bianca was bullied by most pupils in class, and when she fell out with Nazli, her position became almost untenable, culminating in a fight wherein Consolacion's clique cornered and slapped her.

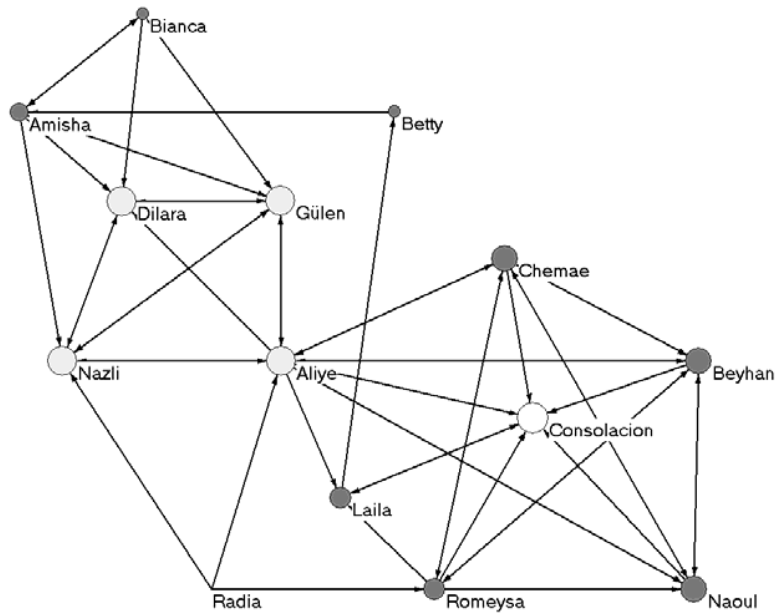


Figure 5.1: Cliques at the Gunningschool

Groups are often defined by what they are not, and the borderline cases thus provide insight into what constitutes the group and what not. Both groups chose Aliye, who managed to move between the two cliques and had many (superficial) friends in class. Betty joined the class in the autumn and counted herself into the Consolacion-clique. None of her classmates agreed with this classification in the interviews, although in practice she did join in the clique's activities (such as the hockey game described below). Radia's position was especially contested, and she knew this. In the interview, she was reluctant to talk about cliques.

Linda: Are there many cliques in class? Can you describe them?

Radia: Yes, well, a few yes. Like er, girl group. And the boys group.

Linda: Yes, and between girls and boys, are there groups again as well? Are there groups amongst the boys and amongst the girls?

Radia: No.

Linda: No?

Radia: No.

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Linda: They all belong together?

Radia: A few girls are alone, so, er, so a group of girls, two groups of girls.

Linda: Yes, so who's in those?

Radia: Er, Aliye and Consolacion and Naoul and Beyhan and Romeysa and Chemaë and Laila and sometimes myself. [Interview Radia, 8 June 2006]

Consolacion, the 'leader' of the clique, mentioned in her interview that Radia was "a close call", because "we don't actually like her". Radia struggled to stay in the clique, which meant she sometimes took abuse from the others in the cliques.

At the Olympic Day [a sports event] one group of girls participates in street hockey on inline skates. The team consists of Consolacion, Naoul, Chemaë, Beyhan, Aliye, Betty, Laila, Romeysa and Radia. Seven girls play, while two others wait on the bench to be substituted. Radia doesn't know how to skate and the other girls make sure she stays on the bench. Thomas and gym teacher E. notice this and force the team to substitute a player for Radia. The girls don't like this and in fact, Thomas and E.'s intervention aggravates them. Radia herself calls to be put back on the bench as well. Although Consolacion clearly isn't the team's best player, all girls make sure she plays constantly. At a certain moment, she's too tired and I advise her to take some rest. This only works for a moment, as all girls call back for her: "Consa back in, Consa back in". [Field notes Gunningschool, 16 June 2006]

Radia knew her poor skating skills threatened further devaluation of her position in the clique. To help the team win, Radia decided to stay on the bench. The teachers' intervention, understood as a 'pity call', worsened the situation, and Radia took the side of the girls against the teachers. At the same time, Consolacion's treatment was a manifestation of her status as leader of the clique.

At the Kantlijn, alliances were more complex and most pupils said everybody in class was friendly with everybody. As shown in figure 5.2, the visual representation of friendship ties shows less distinguishable clusters. Although boys and girls mixed more at the Kantlijn, friendships mostly existed between the same genders. Again, there were a few exceptions and Caruna, Noa, Sophie and Esther named boys as their friends in class. To themselves and their classmates, Caruna and her male friends Ramin and Jessy stood out as a group. They rarely socialized with their other classmates. The remaining girls formed a large group together and they found it difficult to name cliques within this larger group. Likewise, from my observations I could not distinguish cliques amongst the girls. The girls in the middle, e.g. Noa, Madelief, Mickey, and Maud were nodes that connected several friendships.

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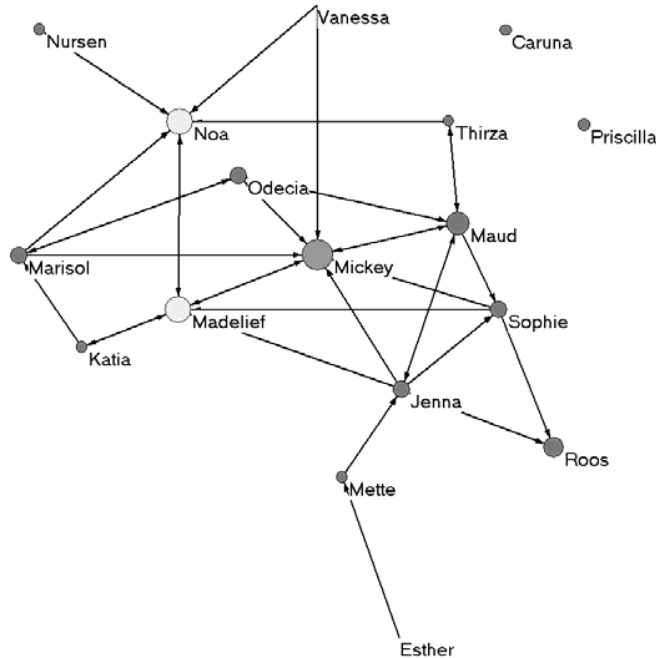


Figure 5.2: Cliques at the Kantlijn

Friendship was sometimes one-sided. In the interviews, one girl named three girls as her friends, but none of them (or the others) named her as friend. In one case, a girl listed Mickey as her best friend, yet Mickey named three friends, none of which was this girl. Rather than being singled out, this has to do with the cliques. Those at the core of a clique had many friends, and were named as a friend as well. Those at the outer limits of a clique belonged to the clique, but the friendship ties were not always reciprocal. The two networks convey little information about the hierarchies between cliques, or in class. I now discuss the girls' understanding of this.

### *Being popular*

In chapter 2, I discussed American self-help literature like *Revoiving Ophelia* (Pipher, 1994). Secondary schools are approached as jungles where popularity is all that matters. In the interviews, the girls did not subscribe to this idea at all. Cliques and friendships were not necessarily a popularity contest. Some girls were content with having just a few good friends, whereas others had many friends but were not necessarily considered the most popular. For instance, five girls at the Gunning-school named Dilara as a friend and six named Consolacion. When asked



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about the most popular girl in class, the Gunning-girls almost unanimously named Consolacion, followed at a great distance by Naoul (who named herself). Figures 5.3 and 5.4 visually represent the girls' answers to my interview question on who was most popular in class. Again, dynamics between the girls are less straightforward at the Kantlijn.

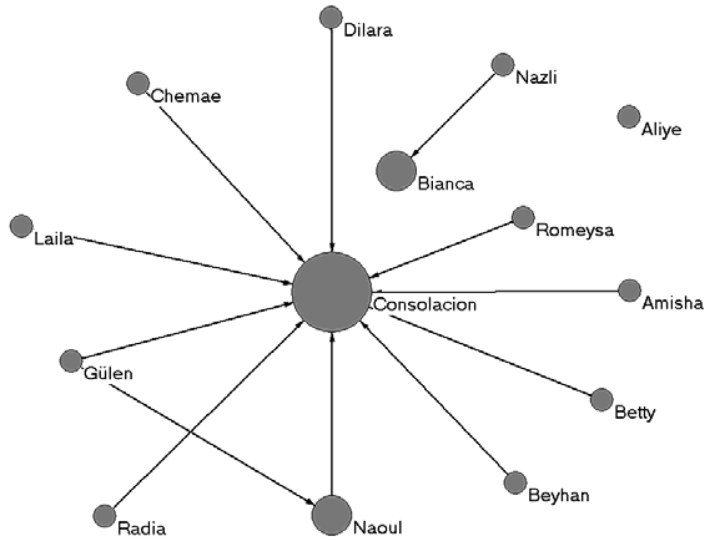


Figure 5.3: Popularity at the Gunningschool

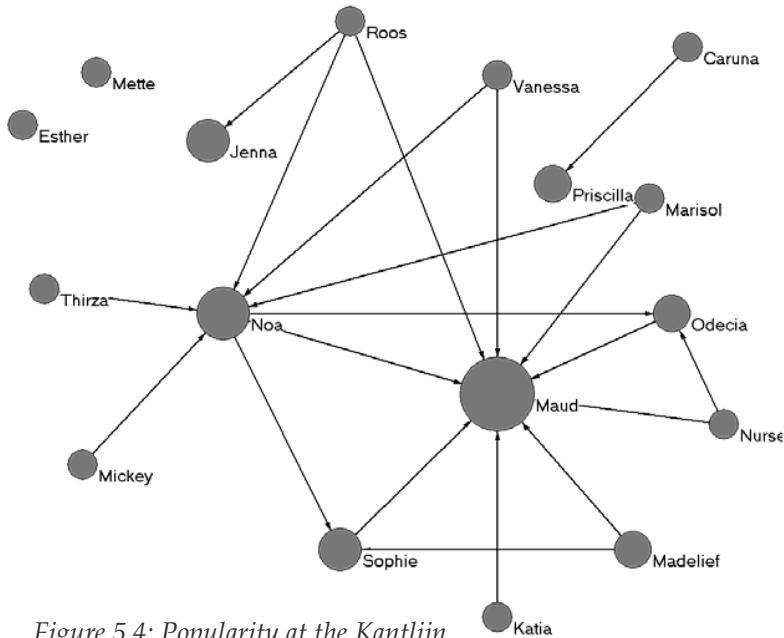


Figure 5.4: Popularity at the Kantlijn

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What constituted popularity was a matter of interpretation and discussion. In the interviews, the girls defined popularity in two ways. First, being popular was equated to having many friends. This way of defining popularity is observational: one can see who is always invited to birthday parties; who is offered candy; who gets chosen in gym class. The girls related having many friends to being friendly and nice, or to being funny. However, girls from the Gunningschool also related popularity to being tough or physically strong. Those who are strong can win fights, and subsequently get more respect. Those who are tough are more daring, and consequently get the attention of the others:

Gülen: Because they dare the most and when they dare something, really people have their attention with them.

Linda: And that's the same for boys and girls?

Gülen: Yes, actually it is. [Interview Gülen, 9 June 2006]

Being nice and being strong were the two ends of one dimension, and popularity thus seemed a matter of the carrot or the stick.

A second way of defining popularity was through appearance, like being pretty or having nice clothes. Popular kids had nice clothes, but the girls were unsure about the direction of this association. The girls of the Gunningschool also mentioned being fat as a factor that impeded popularity:

Consolacion: And also when you look different you know, like when you're fat, then people hold this against you even though it's not your fault.

Linda: Is it bad when you're fat?

Consolacion: No, not really, but that is how other people see it.

Linda: Yes...

Consolacion: And when you think 'it's not bad' and other people start to think differently than you, then they think 'you're not popular, go stand at the back', they think. Radia is a close call because she's fat. [Interview Consolacion, 8 June 2006]

As the body is an aspect of self that girls believe they have a certain level of control over, they also hold themselves and others accountable for it (De Waal, 1989: 156). Consolacion indicated that although one might have a different self-image, others will hold your body against you. Because Radia was "fat", she was on the outskirts of Consolacion's clique. Earlier in the interview, Consolacion remarked Radia was not liked and that was why she was a part of the clique, but only as "a close call". Later, Consolacion said it was because Radia was "fat". Radia felt she had friends in this clique, and she indeed 'belonged' to it, but others in the clique did not name her as a friend and she was not popular.

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Belonging [erbij horen] is not the same as being popular. Consolacion explains:

Belonging is just that you're there, that you put in a word... but when you're popular, popular with the populars, then you're higher than belonging. Then it's just that you're the most popular. Belonging is just different, just a different topic. Look, the difference between Radia... she's a close call in belonging and I am kinda the most popular of all girls, so we're really different. Because she's not so strong and not so funny, but she does belong. Sometimes she can make a funny remark, but then when you look at me and her, then you see a lot of difference. [Interview Consolacion, 8 June 2006]

Other girls (of both schools and differing popularity) shared this idea. They said popularity is less important than having (at least some) friends. The girls talked about this in an interview setting and they were well-aware of the 'correct' answer to such a question, as they are raised and educated to be nice to others, to not judge on appearance, and that bullying is wrong. In their responses to my questions about popularity, the girls used the repertoires of political correctness and authenticity, which I discuss in detail in chapter 10. Three girls argued popularity is not so desirable, because being popular is much work. Many people want to hang out with you and it might involve telling some lies. Interestingly, one of these three girls was quite popular.

This section introduced the different cliques in the two primary schools and showed how the girls understood popularity. Friendships and popularity materialised through performances, and these performances varied per context. In the interviews, the girls used certain repertoires to talk about this topic, and these repertoires do not unequivocally predict behaviour. For instance, although the Gunning-girls agreed bullying is bad, they did bully Bianca. Although the popular girls did not name Betty as part of their clique, I observed she did partake in their clique activities. The performance of friendship and group identities needs to be investigated in context, and researchers in this field need to account for the differences between norms and actual behaviour.

### 5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I approached the school context in three ways. This analysis of the schools' self-presentation, routines and rituals, and actor relationships not only provided a detailed look into the girls' most promi-

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ment social setting, it also identified considerable differences between the Gunningschool and the Kantlijn. The two different approaches at these schools had consequences for the contexts in which the girls from the respective schools performed their identities.

First, the two schools had different ideas about the nature of a school. As the Gunningschool performed the school as a place of learning and discipline, the girls there had less space and time for social interactions. The Kantlijn performed the school as a place for social relationships, where learning is connected to broader society and formal education is part of larger socialisation into that society. Furthermore, the Gunningschool and the Kantlijn were 'owned' by different actors. As parents at the Kantlijn felt they owned the school, this sometimes led to tensions. An obvious explanation for these differences would be differences in the ethnic descent of the pupils' parents. However, social economic status of the parents matters. Parental involvement is stronger amongst the upper, middle classes, that is, the parents of the Kantlijn. Another explanation for the differences lies in the specificity of these two research settings. Not all 'black' schools are as strict as the Gunningschool, nor were all teachers at the Kantlijn as easygoing as Luck.

Second, the two schools approached and positioned their pupils in different ways. The Kantlijn actively encouraged the pupils to take on different subject positions and to reflect on their subjectivities. The Gunningschool addressed the diverging ethnicity and religion of the majority of its pupils, and positioned them as Others, *reducing* them to their ethnicity (Bettie, 2003: 25). This led to animosity between faculty and pupils, and created difficulties for, for instance, Bianca who was of Dutch descent.

Third, the two schools provided different opportunities for identity performance. The Christian Gunningschool banned headscarves, thus disabling this performance practice. Furthermore, the strict regime, with less time to talk or play, limited the number of times when the girls could engage in identity performance. The Kantlijn accommodated popular media use in class more than the Gunningschool, thus providing the girls with greater means for identity performance.

Fourth, friendship and cliques in a specific class form and develop from kindergarten. These ties only change slowly and enable/disable the availability of certain identity positions. As I show in the next chapter, the transition to secondary school sometimes offered an 'escape' from this.

