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Between skipping rope and Eid ul-Fitr: Everyday youth culture in 8th form¹

Linda Duits

Abstract

Youth culture studies are becoming increasingly rare and the little theorizing that is done consists mostly of conceptual discussions. This article addresses these theoretical and empirical gaps by ethnographically investigating the relationship between context and content of youth culture. It answers the central research question 'How do how specific, varying school contexts affect the routines and rituals that constitute everyday youth culture at school?' This article provides an *thick description* of life in 8th form (groep 8). The study is based on prolonged ethnographic fieldwork at two Amsterdam primary schools: a 'black' (predominantly Muslim) and a 'white' school, comprising 55 girls from diverse ethnic backgrounds aged 11-13. The results show how the specific structure of a context (manifested here in the school buildings, the rules, etc.) is a decisive factor in the content of everyday youth culture. These stable strategies create stable tactics, promoting historical and generational continuity rather than change.

Youth culture studies are becoming increasingly rare. In the 1980s, many Dutch scholars investigated youth cultures (e.g., Ter Bogt 1987; Van Duin 1983; De Waal 1989), an interest to which the then thriving academic journal *Jeugd & Samenleving* (Youth & Society) also attested. In the 1990s, this interest declined and the cultural perspective on youth culture was replaced by a psychological perspective on individual adolescents.² *Jeugd & Samenleving* ceased publication and was replaced by a more policy-oriented professional journal focusing on problems. In this perspective, less attention is paid to cultural differences, and, perhaps as a result, Dutch youth cultures were no longer studied. The move from a collective to an individual perspective is also evident in the international literature on youth cultures. After the almost tremendous amount of research on youth cultures at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (e.g., Hebdige 1979; Hall and Jefferson 1976), criticism of this original approach led to a reformulation of youth cultural theory. Informed by feminist, postcolonial and postmodern insights, the focus shifted from attention to collective expressions of resistance to individual

expressions of consumerism (see Muggleton 2000; Bennett 1999; McRobbie 1990). Although some empirical work is still being done (e.g., Thornton 1995 on club cultures in the UK), most of these current studies on youth culture focus on conceptual discussions such as the applicability and usefulness of the term ‘sub-culture’ (see Hesmondhalgh 2005 for an overview). The critique of the CCCS is repetitive and hinders further theorising based on concrete new youth cultures. For example, youth studies acknowledge the importance of location (e.g., Perho 2000; Spaaij 2006; Holt and Griffin 2005) yet they fail to theorise the relationship between context and content. To sum up, the literature on youth cultures suffers from both an empirical and theoretical gap.

In this article, I aim to investigate how the context affects the content of youth cultures. I investigate youth culture in the specific context of the school, which, simply in terms of time spent, takes precedence over leisure time contexts such as sports, meetings or parties. Furthermore, the social circle of most youngsters consists of mostly school friends (Duits 2008). I chose to investigate 8th form, when pupils are on average twelve years old. The period of youth has expanded over the last decades (Kehily 2007) so that twelve-year olds are now already considered to be youths. This age group is remarkable because puberty with all its biological changes has just begun or is around the corner. In the Netherlands, 8th form or *groep 8* is the final year of primary school, after which pupils leave the familiar primary school womb. The year is marked by the CITO test and other preparations for secondary school.³ The central research question is: How do specific, varying school contexts affect the routines and rituals that constitute everyday youth culture at school? Before explaining the methods employed to answer this question, I discuss the notion of everyday life, in order to frame this research question and to formulate two sub-questions that further guide this study.

Everyday life

The study of everyday life requires a micro perspective. In the nineteenth century, social and historical researchers developed an interest in ‘ordinary’ people moving away from a macro perspective on society (Löfgren 2002). As Löfgren rightly remarks, the study of everyday life is more a research ideology than a perspective, analytical tool or empirical field. Theorists of everyday life argue that studying the banal and the ordinary can produce great insights into larger social and cultural issues, and they have therefore focused on the interactions between the micro and the macro (see Sandywell 2004 for an overview of perspectives). Here, I use the framework that Michel de Certeau developed in his *The practice of everyday life* (1984).

De Certeau wanted to produce methods and conceptual tools that would allow the articulation of everyday practices. Strategic and tactical entities are central to

his framework. Strategics are places of power and authority, such as an institution. They operate by imposing order in certain spaces. In his reading of De Certeau, Fiske discusses a landlord to explain the strategic:

The landlord provides the building within which we dwell, the department store our means of furnishing it, and the culture industry the texts we 'consume' as we relax within it. But in dwelling in the landlord's place, we make it into our space; the practices of dwelling are ours, not his (Fiske 1989, 33).

The landlord is a subject of will and power that, in a way, 'sets the scene' for the individual users, who then have to make do with this space (De Certeau 1984, xix). These uses/users are called tactics. They have no power, no space, but instead 'insinuate' themselves into strategic spaces. A study of the everyday must thus start with an investigation of space. My first sub-question is: What are the kind of spaces in which 8th form everyday youth culture takes form? De Certeau believes that many everyday practices (he gives the examples of reading, shopping, cooking) are tactical. Investigating daily practices has long been the domain of ethnography. It involves one's submergence into a particular culture, absorbing traditions, habits, routines and rituals.⁴ My second sub-question is: What are the routines and rituals of 8th form youths?

Method

Dutch society is becoming increasingly multicultural. In 2005, about fifteen per cent of Dutch youngsters between 11 and 13 were of non-Western origin (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2004). I conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study at two Amsterdam primary schools with 55 pupils from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The two schools had distinct populations, where one school qualified as 'black' and the other as 'white'.⁵ The multi-site approach allowed me to approach native and non-native Dutch pupils not as distant others, but as equal parts of contemporary Dutch culture (Marcus 1995; Wacquant 2004). Furthermore, adding one or more sites to an ethnography provides extra empirical grounding for a study (Nadai and Maeder 2005).

Participant observation at the Gunningschool⁶ started in November 2005 and lasted eight months. The observation at the Kantlijn started in February 2006 and lasted six months. I spent two days a week in class at each school. I attended the Gunningschool on Mondays and Tuesdays, but switched days when I started attending the Kantlijn to sample days and events. I positioned myself as a helpful and friendly 'grown up girl': not exactly one of them, but not a teacher either (cf. Mandell 1988). I arrived with the students and left when they did, participated in all of their activities and entered into their conversations. I openly took notes, which I elaborated upon after school hours. In June and July 2006, I conducted

in-depth interviews with all 55 pupils. Asking informal questions was part of the participant observation, but the more formalised interviews allowed for a different perspective. The interviews were fully transcribed and, together with the field notes, subjected to qualitative data analysis based on the coding guidelines of the grounded theory approach (see Duits 2008 for an elaborate discussion of the methods employed). Together, the analyses provide a *thick description* of everyday youth culture in 8th form, meaning they give a detailed account of a specific social setting that can be transferred to other findings (Geertz 1973; see also Bryman 2004).

Spaces

The Gunningschool was a Christian primary school in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in one of Amsterdam's western garden cities. The school profiled itself in its school guide as a 'meeting place' where 'equivalence' was a central value. The emphasis on difference was further reflected in the school's motto 'Colourful with an eye for difference'. The school indeed had a colourful, yet homogeneous population. In 8th form, all but two pupils were of non-Western descent (one Dutch, one Portuguese). All of the Turkish and Moroccan pupils indicated they were Muslim, making seventy percent of the class Muslim. The advertised eye for difference, however, was missing in the school's other communications. For instance, the monthly newsletters did not feature news about the pupils or multicultural holidays such as *Suikerfeest* [Eid ul-Fitr]. Instead, the teachers expressed their annoyance over the varying dates of this festival. The arrival of the new moon marks the end of Ramadan, and, therefore, the exact date differs in the different countries of origin. This meant teachers did not know when pupils would be home for celebrations. Their annoyance signaled a loss of strategic power.

The second school, the Kantlijn, was a public school in one of the late-nineteenth-century neighbourhoods. Although it was considered a black school up until about ten years ago, the school is now whiter, like the neighbourhood itself. Only five pupils in 8th form were of non-Western descent (two Turkish, three Indian/Surinamese-Indian). The Kantlijn profiled itself in its school guide as a neighbourhood school that emphasizes the children's own experiences. The school believed this was important 'because the world pupils learn about, is their own world, which means family – neighbourhood – school'. The school collaborated with organisations in the neighbourhood, such as after-school care clubs and the library, and in September 2006, it officially became a *Brede School* (Community School). In the Kantlijn's communications, pupils and parents played an active and central role, and the community was highlighted.

Buildings and classrooms

The two buildings and respective classrooms had distinct looks and feels. The Gunningschool was located in a quiet, residential area. The school shared its grounds and gymnasium with a special education secondary school. The school grounds were fenced in, and the gates were only opened before school started and after it 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. It was a two-story building: the younger children were upstairs, and the older pupils downstairs. An open area known as *de ruimte* (the space) located downstairs functioned as an auditorium. Staff members not responsible for teaching a class had their own small offices throughout the school.

The Kantlijn's original building was renovated in my fieldwork year. The temporary building was located ten minutes walking distance away from the original location, in the same neighbourhood. Both buildings were located just off busy streets, bustling with traffic and shoppers. The temporary building was an old-fashioned school building, with a small playground in the back of the school. The renovated building, attached to a public library, gymnasium, and after-school facilities, had two playgrounds that were not fenced in. The larger playground included football nets, a sandbox and a playhouse. In both buildings, the older students were upstairs. 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.

At the Gunningschool, the 8th-form teacher Thomas's classroom had clearly been in use for some time. Every inch of the space was occupied and many items in the room appeared to have been there for some time. The posters' duct tape was coming off the walls; the bookshelves were full of boxes of booklets that had never been used; the linoleum was worn-out; there was a table with four computers stacked up in the back of the room. Thomas had no idea whether these computers actually worked. Moreover, there were dusty, wooden games resting on top of the cupboards; one of the fluorescent lights was broken; and, along one wall 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 a pupil's name on it. The chairs were numbered, and lists with corresponding names were found on both sides of the room. Pupils always took their own chairs and refused to use anyone else's. Each table had two plastic drawers that held pens, paper and other small objects. Two extra tables stood at the back where pupils could sit and correct their work. There was another corner with three functioning computers. In the front of the classroom was a washbasin, and in the back an aquarium. Girls and boys did not sit together. Tables were grouped in three rows of two tables each, facing three connected blackboards. One black-

board served as a weekly schedule with red tape; this is where Thomas wrote down homework assignments. Two large, hanging cupboards on the back wall is where all of the text and notebooks were kept. Nine printouts were taped to the windows, which featured the Gunningschool's 'golden rules'. A sign next to the blackboard implored pupils to 'stop the bullying'. There were two series of pupils' artworks.

At the Kantlijn,⁷ tables were grouped in sets of five or six and these groups were positioned around the teacher's desk. Boys and girls sat together and pupils faced each other rather than the teacher. There was a corner in the back with a bookcase and pillows on the floor. The room had a small blackboard upon which pupils drew but teacher Luck seldom used. The room had a stereo system, a television with a DVD player and one computer. There was a drawing of two candles and a Christmas wreath on the wall surrounding the blackboard. There were three large frames, which showed photomontages of Luck's former pupils. Another wall featured professional photographs of this year's pupils, framed in yellow cardboard. Pupils used the walls near their tables to post notes. The tables did not belong to the pupils, instead the pupils 'owned' their own drawers.

Routines and rituals

The 8th-grade pupils at the Kantlijn primary school usually went to the toilet together. Being outside of the classroom afforded an excellent opportunity to escape teacher's supervision. Teacher Luck repeatedly forbade this and announced that if two or more pupils of the same sex were caught together in the bathroom, the other sex would make a childish hat for the others. Although the pupils took this warning seriously, in the end, two girls did get caught. After extensive deliberation, the boys decided to make a long, conical hat out of pink cardboard, decorated with strands of toilet paper. The hat was topped by a cut-out pink pig with the text 'I am Miss Piggy', and a brown turd with the text 'I am a toilet princess'. While the boys were making the hat, the girls felt awful about the prospect of having to wear it, admitting that they definitely did not want to be seen wearing it. However, when the hat was finished, one girl volunteered to wear it. She showed it to her seven-year-old sister and made fun of herself. After that, the girls made a complete show out of wearing the hat to the toilets. One girl in particular waited until right before school ended, so that parents and pupils in the hallways could have, in her words, 'the time of their lives'.

Eighth-grade pupils occupy a transitional position between that of the child and teenager. Their sentimentality about leaving primary school and their preparation for secondary school are incorporated into the 8-grade routines and rituals. This is addressed in the following description of a normal day.

Before school

Both schools started at 8.30. All of the pupils at the Gunningschool would daily gather in the schoolyard. The 8th-grade girls usually waited back by fence until they spotted a classmate so they wouldn't be the first one in the schoolyard. The boys' behaviour was more straightforward; they would just start playing football. The girls never joined their boys, and social outsiders were avoided. They usually waited alone until one of their allies approached the entrance. Who stood with whom was important. Although most of the girls had three close friends in the class, cliques did exist. The Gunningschool pupils distinguished between the popular and unpopular pupils. The popular girls often bullied a particular girl classmate because she – in their words – had snitched on them to teacher Thomas. The before-school rituals revealed a hierarchy among the girls. They avoided standing alone, but, when a 'better' classmate arrived, a girl would quickly move across the schoolyard to stand with her. The popular girls usually dominated the conversations, while the less-popular girls were subservient and nodded a lot. The girls stood close together, almost on top of one another, but made room for newcomers in the circle. Two janitors supervised the schoolyard from the top of the stairs and sometimes shouted instructions to pupils or parents. Pupils were not allowed in the courtyard before 8.15; early arrivals had to wait outside the fence. Pupils could only go inside after the bell rang. Most of the younger pupils were brought by their mothers or the occasional father. The 8th graders, however, came by themselves or with their friends. Two bells signalled the start of the school day. The first was the cue for the younger pupils, the second for the older ones. As the 8th formers entered their classroom, Thomas would stand by the door and welcome them. Lessons began immediately after they sat down.

At the Kantlijn, the pupils entered the building immediately and were allowed to wait in their respective classrooms. Most of the parents brought their children, even eighth formers, into their classrooms. Some parents waited for Luck to arrive, to ask questions or give instructions. When they left, they kissed their offspring, who were usually very embarrassed. Before school, the Kantlijn's pupils usually took a seat or stood around talking together. Girls often mixed with boys. This class was more inclusive, so no one was left out, although some had their preferences. Here too, the girls usually stood close together and often touched each other. Sometimes the pupils turned on some music, or practiced a dance. The pupils kept several of their own mixed CDs in class. The music ranged from top-40 hits to pop classics (e.g., *California Love* by Tupac Shakur feat. Dr. Dre). Luck was usually late, which the pupils would gleefully comment upon. He usually began the school day with a conversation about current matters such as whose parents could drive to the school's football match.

Working

The curriculum at the Gunningschool mostly consisted of arithmetic and reading. Thomas usually gave instruction to the entire class, after which the pupils would then work individually or in small groups on their tasks as Thomas walked around the classroom to answer questions. The pupils were divided into A, B and C levels, where C stood for a level in math equal to 5th form. Only a few pupils were A level, the math level equal to 8th form. Pupils were addressed by their levels, and they constantly nagged teacher Thomas to promote them to a higher level. A lesson lasted approximately twenty minutes, after which another subject was started. Two different pupils each week functioned as classroom assistants (*klasse-assistant*), distributing books and notebooks for the next lesson. Pupils considered this as break time and they usually started chatting. Thomas preferred quiet in his class at all times, except during recreational activities. He used an intricate punishment scheme where each incident landed the offender five minutes of detention. Because talking was frowned upon, pupils often communicated by passing notes to each other. This was a secretive and dangerous operation, although the messages were usually innocent ('how are you?').

At the Kantlijn, Luck seldom taught the entire class together, instead, pupils at the same level sat in groups and helped each other. Luck introduced tasks by connecting them to the pupils' life experiences. For instance, a reading comprehension assignment about gusts of wind was introduced by asking who had ever encountered such a gust. The pupils often worked on dissimilar topics, somewhat similar to the Montessori Method. Luck established the tasks for the week, and the pupils decided for themselves which task they performed first, with Luck available for questions and corrections. Whilst they worked, the class was usually noisy and, instead of collaborating, the pupils often just chatted. Moreover, Luck often left the class. During his absence, the pupils were loud for a while, but settled down to do their work after a few minutes. Punishment was rare at the Kantlijn, and Luck preferred either talking to the violator or coming up with a frivolous solution instead.

Opening of the week

The Christian Gunningschool opened each new week with a story from the Bible. Each Monday, after they had worked for about half an hour, principal Wouda summoned the teacher to bring his pupils to 'the space'. The 6th, 7th and 8th form pupils had to wait to enter separately. Principal Wouda or one of the teachers would read a story from a children's Bible, after which the pupils sang as many as three Biblical songs, accompanied by Wouda on the piano. The three teachers stood along the wall to monitor the event. The pupils misbehaved in every possible way, from purposely choosing the wrong seat to kicking the seats

in front of them. On one occasion after some lip-synchers had been reprimanded, the pupils reverted to singing very loudly. Wouda's response was: 'enthusiasm is nice, but it shouldn't get too disorderly'. The teachers had a hard time maintaining order, which usually resulted in the pupils being sent back to class as punishment. This weekly opening event often resulted in the pupils being punished by having a shortened recess.

The week at the Kantlijn began with a discussion of what the pupils did over the weekend. Luck usually asked if anyone 'had been up to anything special' 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 were often related and seemed to have been brought up by association. For instance, after one pupil mentioned that she had redecorated 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 to dinner at a Chinese restaurant.
- (Luck started a discussion about Chinese food, and pak-choi cabbage in particular.)
- Katia went to visit Max with Maud.
- Sophie went to visit Max with Roos.
- (Discussion turned to the subject of Max recovering from his operation.)
- Thijs's 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.
- 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 didn't like the movie, but eventually she did.
- Maud took photos for the project, but not many.
- Thirza went horseback riding, and afterwards, to visit a friend in Friesland.
- (Luck started a discussion about feeling bad for the horses.)
- Mehmet went to Arabic school on Saturday.

Break/playtime

The morning break occurred at 9.30 at the Gunningschool, and 10.15 at the Kantlijn. Before they went outside to play, the pupils had a snack (e.g., cookies or a

sandwich) and a drink (e.g., juice). During the snack break, the pupils formed little groups. Again, at the Kantlijn these groups were mostly mixed, whereas at the Gunningschool the usual four cliques formed. 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. The unpopular girls were rarely allowed to join in the skipping rope games of the others. 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 7th formers. At the Kantlijn, the playground was small and most pupils flocked together. They played catch, shot marbles, or just stood around and talked. Some games were popular for a while, such as the movie-title-guessing game. The person designated as 'it' provided a letter of the alphabet, to which the other participants had to shout out a movie title starting with that letter before being allowed to cross. When the 8th formers were outside at the same time as the small children, the older ones often played with them, pushing their small bikes. However, here too only *outsiders* played with the 7th formers.

Morning breaks were also reserved for birthday celebrations, which had become a ritual since kindergarten and consisted of treating the classmates and teachers with sweets. The birthday boy or girl chose two friends to go around to the other classes 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. In my eight months at the Gunningschool, only two 8th-form pupils celebrated their birthday. At the Kantlijn, everybody celebrated his/her birthday in class.

Lunchtime

In the Netherlands, many primary schools still close for lunch. For children who cannot go home, schools arrange a special lunch programme, known as *overblijven* (remaining behind). This programme is run by volunteers and exists outside of school regulations but nevertheless takes place at school.⁸ At the Gunningschool, only two or three 8th form pupils stayed at school. Mostly mothers (but some fathers) were home to have lunch with their children, while other pupils ate lunch by themselves. Meanwhile, the majority of pupils at the Kantlijn, stayed at school during the lunch break. When at the lunch break began at twelve, Luck left the pupils in the care of two, semi-permanent *overblijffkrachten* (lunch minders). The pupils ate their lunches, after which the group went outside to play. At the renovated school, the pupils used the school's playground during lunch. In the temporary building, the younger pupils used the schoolyard, and years 7 and 8 usually went to a nearby public playground with a street-football field and playground equipment. During the walk to the playground, the girls usually hopped,

singing either a pop song or a nursery rhyme. Some pupils refused to go outside, wanting to remain behind in the classroom to listen to music or just hang out. Playing sometimes got out of hand and accidents occurred. For instance, one girl broke her arm one day when she was pushed off the merry-go-round.

Afternoons

The Gunningschool returned to class at 13.15, the Kantlijn at 13.00. Waiting for school to start in the afternoon was similar to the morning at both schools, with the exception that the Kantlijn pupils who had remained, were allowed to enter together. The afternoons had no formal breaks and the two hours sometimes dragged for the pupils. Thomas solved this problem with fun activities, such as drawing or crafts. Luck often let the pupils go outside for a extra break. Afternoons were generally more relaxed than the mornings, with fewer tasks and hence more opportunities for informal conversations and fun. Many afternoons at the Kantlijn were taken up with rearranging the classrooms and the seating chart, which was a time-consuming activity that the pupils loved (exactly for that reason).

The end of the school day at the Gunningschool was announced with a bell at 15.15. Classroom assistants stayed behind to clean the classroom, whilst pupils with detention stayed behind in class to read. Outside, the janitor sent lingering pupils home. The Kantlijn's school day ended at 15.00; this was announced by the din coming from the other classrooms. Detention and class duties did not exist and the pupils left the classroom, although some hung around to ask Luck questions.

Special activities

Pupils had physical education twice a week at The Gunningschool and once a week at the Kantlijn. It is now compulsory in the Netherlands that a separate teacher teaches physical education. At the Kantlijn, special teachers also taught handicrafts and English, and a special music teacher taught there for several weeks as part of a music project. This school also participated in a photography project at a local youth theatre. All Amsterdam primary schools participate in *Museumles* (museum lessons). The municipality organises weekly visits to the city's many museums, where a guide shows the pupils around. The Gunningschool only participated in this program once every two years and combined the 7th and 8th years. These years always went by bus, chaperoned by volunteer parents and teachers.

Because the Kantlijn was located closer to the city centre, we often walked to the museum without extra supervision. Moreover, both schools also participated

in the yearly *Kunstschooldag* (Art school day), when concert halls, theatres and museums present special events for children.

The end of primary school is celebrated in most Dutch schools with a play or a musical.⁹ The Gunningschool produced a musical called *Chewing Gum Gangsters*. Thomas started rehearsals in March, but cancelled the musical in May because the pupils continued to misbehave throughout rehearsals. Instead, the boys and the girls rehearsed a dance that they performed for their classmates and the other teachers. The girls chose *Buttons*, a song by the then popular Pussycat Dolls. They had about six rehearsals without Thomas's supervision, which they considered a privilege. Rehearsal was a constant struggle over who would be allowed to speak and who would be allowed to show her moves, particularly between Consolacion, leader of the popular girls, and Aliye, the most experienced dancer. The girls copied all of the sensual and sexually provocative moves from the video, from opening and crossing their legs to running their hands over their breasts. Nonetheless, the dancing of the girls came across as shy, awkward and unpolished.

The Kantlijn (i.e., Luck with much input from the pupils) wrote their own play, entitled *School of the Future*. A face on a monitor had replaced the traditional teacher, and the pupils were sucked into this, as they ended up in a computer game. They had to play certain levels in the game to escape. The play featured many dance routines and made references to the idea of the Brede School. Preparations for the Kantlijn's final play began in June and took up most of the class's school time until the end of the school year in July. This meant rehearsals that lasted all day, with pupils receiving very little education (in the strict sense).

Conclusions

This article has investigated how specific, varying school contexts can affect the routines and rituals that constitute everyday youth culture at a school. It has provided a thick description of life in 8th form, locating everyday youth culture between skipping rope (tactic) and Eid ul-Fitr (strategic). The two studied schools were very different. The Gunningschool's closed playground versus the Kantlijn's open, community building corresponded with the different images that the schools conveyed; with the faculty 'owning' the Gunningschool's while the Kantlijn was owned by the community. The classroom in the Gunningschool treated pupils as students with duties. The Kantlijn classroom, by contrast, was it was more of a meeting place than an educational space; here is where pupils and teacher Luck spent their days together. With a strong focus on conventional learning, the climate at the Gunningschool can best be described as an educational culture. While the Kantlijn, on the other hand, could best be typified as a *gezelligheidscultuur* (convivial culture). The Kantlijn's strong emphasis on special activities corresponded to the school's emphasis on experience and learning about the world. The Gunningschool assigned far less time to this kind of activ-

ities. Thomas told me he needed all of his time just to teach them the basic skills. The differences between the two schools transcended a simple black/white dichotomy. Not all black schools are as strict as the Gunningschool, nor were all of the teachers at the Kantlijn considered as easygoing as Luck. However, this article did show the black/white dichotomy in action. With all of the teacher's time spent on teaching basic skills, the Gunningschool pupils were not only missing out on fun, they also were also not receiving the basic training in what can be labeled as middle-class skills: the skills of personal reflection and self-awareness. Thus, in response to the research question the study shows how the specific structure of a context (manifested here in the school building, the rules, etc.) is a decisive factor in determining the content of everyday youth culture.

Moreover, the focus on strategic spaces has brought to the fore that stable strategics create stable tactics, promoting historical and generational continuity rather than change. Contemporary life at school is structured by a number of routines and rituals that, despite their contextual and historical situatedness, defy change. Tactics are the ways pupils 'make do' with strategics and, although times and teachers may change, tactics have remained more or less the same over time. However, depictions of Dutch youth culture in the mass media generally portray contemporary youths as fundamentally different from those of previous generations, for instance, by calling them the digital generation¹⁰ or as *breezersletjes* (breezer sluts).¹¹ My analysis shows that school life has remained basically the same (cf. De Waal 1989), despite large societal trends such as multiculturalism and digitalisation. Pupils learn from their teacher and from books, and in between lessons, they prefer talking with each other to playing on the computer. During breaks, pupils go outside, where they spend their time shooting marbles, skipping rope and otherwise playing together.

The theoretical contribution of this article, i.e., the application of De Certeau's strategic practices to youth culture, warrants more attention to the ways such practices produce inequalities, in terms of gender, ethnicity or other identity axes. A historical and comparative perspective may prove particularly helpful in the disentanglement of this production of difference. Through its empirical contribution, this article also intervenes in societal debates about youth. I have drawn from methods common to anthropology that favour a holistic perspective on culture. Furthermore, De Certeau's conceptual tools bring a notion of power into the analysis, a notion that (often) lacks marketing descriptions or psychological investigations. To quote Marx's famous words: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx 1852, 10). The same applies to contemporary youth culture.

Notes

1. This article was adapted from chapter 5 in Duits (2008).
2. Reasons for this decline are beyond the scope of this article, but see Duits and Van Zoonen (2009) for a discussion of a similar decline in empirical girls' studies.
3. The key difference between primary and secondary school in the Netherlands is the division of pupils into separate levels. The CITO test, a national standardised placement exam, determines the level of one's secondary education.
4. The routines and rituals are 'socially established activity patterns that teachers and students pursue' (Bromme 2002, 15462). Although they are the result of pupil-teacher interactions, they are practices relative to the imposed strategic space.
5. Schools are referred to as 'black' when more than half of a school's population is of non-Western origin (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2007, 20), although these terms are clearly contested.
6. The names of the schools, the teachers and the pupils are fictitious.
7. The Kantlijn returned to the renovated building in June 2006. Due to the year-end theatre production (see below), this classroom was seldom used. I, therefore, focus on the classroom in the temporary building.
8. The remaining-behind-programme at the Kantlijn suffered the problems Van Daalen (2005) has described. Because the programme is organised from outside of the school, these volunteers have no formal authority over the pupils.
9. This is an institutionalised ritual and schools can buy different musicals including script and songs. See, for instance, <http://www.jingo.nl/?page=musicals>.
10. Today's youth has been labeled the internet generation (Livingstone and Bober 2005), or varieties thereof. For instance, on a marketing weblog (http://youngmarketing weblog.nl/youngmarketing/2006/07/generatie_etike.html) we can find today's youth termed 'cut & paste generation' (i.e., the first generation that combines styles to express their identities), the 'thumb generation' (i.e., the first generation to have the thumb as the strongest finger because of all of the text messaging), and the 'my media generation' (i.e., the first, global generation that can customise ('personalise') its world).
11. A 2006 report from the Dutch Health Service suggested that girls were having sex in exchange for gifts like a CDs or *breezers* (a fruit-flavoured rum drink). The term *breezer-sletje* (i.e., a girl easily seduced into having sex) became part of the daily language and even made its way into the Van Dale's dictionary.

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