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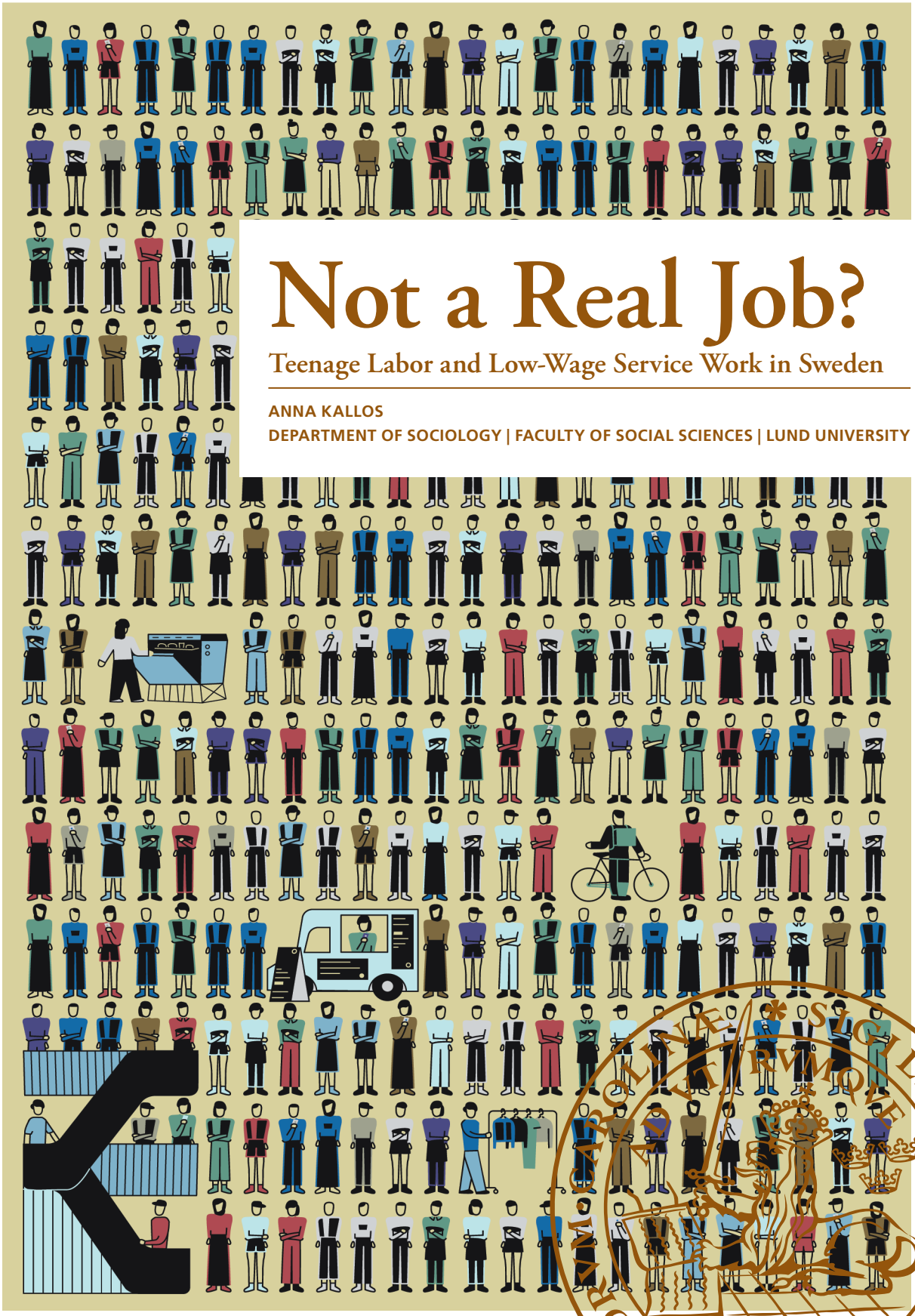
Kallos, Anna



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract: Teenage students constitute an important source of flexible, low-cost labor in interactive service sectors. However, existing empirical research has primarily treated their labor as transitional, focusing on its impact on future educational or labor market outcomes. There remains a lack of knowledge about how these young workers experience and make sense of their early employment, particularly within the Nordic context.

This thesis examines teenage students as a labor force in Sweden, at the intersection of low-wage, interactive service work reliant on young, flexible labor, and the different meanings these workers themselves attribute to their jobs. Using a mixed methods approach, the study analyzes data from the Swedish Labor Force Survey (2005-2019) and qualitative interviews with teenage students in paid work (N = 40). Adopting a theoretical perspective grounded in Marxian thought and intersectional feminism, the study investigates questions of exploitation, social differentiation, and subjectivity, focusing on how these issues are shaped by structural and cultural dynamics within the labor market.

The thesis consists of three sole-authored, peer-reviewed articles and an integrative part. **Article I** analyzes survey data to examine trends in the labor force participation of teenage students in Sweden and their worker profiles. It reveals their growing presence in sectors such as hospitality and retail, and demonstrates the heterogeneous nature of this workforce. **Article II** shows how the labor-intensive, low-unionized service sector creates specific conditions for exploitation. Drawing on interview data, it examines how teenage workers understand and legitimize unpaid labor, identifying three meaning-making rationales that normalize exploitative practices as part of their working lives. Finally, **Article III** probes deeper into how teenagers construct the meaning of their part-time jobs, focusing on shared narratives that articulate their motivations for working. It examines how these narratives both reflect and obscure social inequalities, showing how classed, racialized, and neighborhood-based differences shape young people's self-understandings as workers.

In synthesizing its findings, the thesis makes several contributions. First, it situates teenage labor within the broader context of Sweden's low-wage, non-standard service industries. Drawing on multiple data sources, the study offers rich empirical insights into both the development of teenagers' labor force participation and the challenges they face in their working conditions and daily lives. Second, it highlights the heterogeneous composition of this group and the diverse reasons adolescents take on part-time jobs during school, advancing a nuanced understanding of the unevenly distributed opportunities and risks linked to early employment. Finally, the thesis underscores the importance of cultural and discursive meanings of work. Teenagers often frame their first jobs as steps toward cultivating a self valued in the labor market. For the youngest workers, this ethical attachment to work is expressed in future-oriented, abstract terms that are often disconnected from the realities of service work. These narratives, the thesis argues, enable young people to downplay financial dependence and legitimize exploitative conditions. In conclusion, the study positions teenage labor as a meaningful site for both the production of youth subjectivities and the reproduction of social inequalities.

Key words: labor; low-wage jobs; non-standard work; subjectivity; Sweden; teenage workers; youth

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Table of contents

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Malmö, July 2025

Anna

List of articles

The following articles are included in the thesis and are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

Article I

Kallos, A (2024) The Studentification of Low-Wage Service Work: Who Participates? Trends and Variations in Part-Time Work among Young Student-Workers. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies,* 15(2): 31–53. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18291/njwls.148051

Article II

Kallos, A (Submitted manuscript) Making Sense of Exploitation: Teenage Workers' Experiences of Unpaid Labour in Low-Wage Service Jobs. (Resubmitted with minor revisions to *Work, Employment and Society,* 2025-06-24).

Article III

Kallos, A (2025) Beyond the Narratives of Experience and Money: The Formation of Teenage Students as Labor in Sweden. *Critical Sociology,* 00(0): 1–16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205251346899

Chapter 1. Introduction

Teenage students often occupy some of the most precarious positions in the service sector. They tend to be poorly paid, frequently employed on a casual basis, and are among the least likely to be unionized. Yet, within the Nordic context, little is known about these young employees and how they perceive the meaning of their work.

This thesis is about how teenage students are formed as labor within low-wage service sectors. In many Global North countries, these sectors—characterized by contractual differentiation and fragmented workforces (Alberti et al., 2018; Cant, 2020)—rely on teenagers not only as a source of cheap, flexible labor (Howieson et al., 2012a; Huddleston, 2011; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015), but also for their youthful attributes, such as appearance and soft skills, which are increasingly valorized (Besen-Cassino, 2014; Farrugia, 2018; McDowell, 2009). Furthermore, school-aged students remain a primary focus of ongoing educational policy interventions aimed at shaping young people into workers (Gerrard, 2014). From this perspective, teenage workers provide both an illustrative and significant case for theorizing the evolving relationship between youth and labor in contemporary service economies.

Working part-time during the school year has often been described as a distinctly American phenomenon (Besen-Cassino, 2018). Indeed, much of our understanding of teenage labor derives from research conducted in the United States and other Anglo-Saxon countries (Neyt et al., 2019; Patton and Smith, 2009). In these contexts, the emergence of a teenage workforce has been portrayed as closely tied to the growth of a low-wage, low-skill service economy (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Given the precarious nature of this work (Kalleberg, 2011), several studies have emphasized the heightened risks these young workers face, including exploitation and sexual harassment (Cohen, 2013; Fineran and Gruber, 2009; Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2015; Hobbs et al., 2016, 2017). However, most teenagers do not take on such jobs out of economic necessity. Many are so-called de-commodified workers who are not financially dependent on their wages (Williams and Connell, 2010) and instead view paid work as a valuable opportunity for socialization and self-branding (Besen-Cassino, 2014).

This study, however, focuses on teenage workers in the context of Sweden. While it has long been common in Sweden—and across the Nordic countries—for school-

aged youth to take on seasonal summer jobs, particularly in care work (Eurostat, 2024; Wadensjö, 2018), available data indicate that teenagers are a permanent part of the labor force year-round. According to Statistics Sweden (2018a, 2021), 65 percent of upper secondary students have held paid jobs, and around 25 percent work weekly throughout the entire year. Students in academic and vocational programs work at similar rates, and this trend holds across most regions in Sweden. As paid work has become a common experience for a majority of teenagers in Sweden, I argue that it is essential to analyze both its heterogeneity and its wider societal implications.

How can we make sense of the development of a teenage workforce within a labor market as comparatively well-organized as Sweden's? The Nordic labor markets are renowned for high levels of unionization, broad coverage of collective agreements, and strong employment protections (Andersen et al., 2014; Dølvik et al., 2015). At first glance, this context seems markedly different from the U.S. labor market, which underpins much of the existing research on adolescent workers. However, even in Sweden, private service sectors such as retail and hospitality have long had a higher incidence of non-standard employment, particularly among young people, women, and migrants (Berglund et al., 2021). These groups may experience heightened precarity in their working conditions and struggle to obtain enough hours to earn a living wage (Ilsøe, 2016; Rasmussen et al., 2019). Moreover, declining union density in these sectors, alongside the expansion and liberalization of temporary contracts, has led scholars to argue that the Swedish labor market is becoming increasingly segmented (Berglund et al., 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2019).

Currently, we know very little about teenage workers in low-wage, non-standard service sectors in the Nordic context, nor do we have much knowledge about their employment conditions and work experiences. This thesis addresses this gap by examining the development of the teenage workforce in Sweden and exploring how these young workers understand their jobs. I use multiple data sources to analyze teenagers' subjective experiences in relation to both the context of the Swedish labor market and broader structural changes in the economy. Using data from the Swedish Labor Force Survey (2005–2019), the study examines general trends and variations in teenage students' paid work at a macro level. Additionally, I draw on in-depth interviews with teenage students engaged in waged work (N = 40) to explore their motivations for and experiences of employment, as expressed in their own accounts. The thesis consists of three sole-authored, peer-reviewed articles and this integrative part ('kappa'). While the articles provide the primary empirical analysis, the integrative part offers a broader background and theoretical context, drawing connections between the findings of the individual articles to arrive at overarching conclusions.

Young people's school-to-work transitions have long been a central concern within the sociology of youth and work, both in Sweden and internationally. Research on teenagers' labor during school has largely been situated within this broader

paradigm. A key focus of this literature has been to assess whether part-time employment during school affects future outcomes, such as academic achievement or labor market entry, and it has primarily relied on quantitative methods (Neyt et al., 2019). Studies on teenage labor in the Nordic countries have generally shared this focus (Ballo et al., 2022; Hensvik et al., 2023; Müller, 2021; Wang et al., 2006). My research, however, does not aim to examine transitions or the long-term effects of early work experiences, but seeks instead to deepen our understanding of teenagers as laboring subjects in low-wage service industries and how they make sense of these jobs. To do this, I approach employment as something that holds broader significance in society beyond its strictly economic dimensions—namely, as a collective ethical obligation that shapes our everyday lives and self-understandings (Farrugia, 2022; Weeks, 2011). By analyzing how differently situated teenagers understand themselves as workers, the thesis contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that explores how paid work shapes youth subjectivities (Besen-Cassino, 2014; Farrugia, 2022; Lamberg, 2022).

To pursue this research, I focus on how teenagers engage with culturally widespread discourses and social imaginaries surrounding waged work. I situate my analysis within scholarship that posits economic productivity as an ethical imperative in the formation of the young self, promising self-realization and fulfillment through labor (Farrugia, 2022; Lamberg, 2022; Weeks, 2011). I examine how such work-related discourses and ideals shape the meanings teenage workers attach to their jobs, with particular attention to how these are negotiated in often ambivalent and contradictory ways. At the same time, I recognize that youth labor in low-wage services is both shaped by and reflective of longstanding social inequalities that are gendered, classed, and racialized (Coffey et al., 2021; Cohen, 2013; McDowell, 2012; Raby et al., 2018; Woodman, 2012). Building on this, I draw on intersectional feminist theory to explore how embodied social differences shape teenagers' understandings of work and the working self.

Furthermore, I connect these issues to the concrete position of teenage workers in the labor market, focusing on how sector-specific mechanisms of exploitation shape the conditions under which their work takes place. In particular, I examine various forms of flexible staffing strategies and the imposition of unpaid labor time, theorizing these practices as methods of extracting additional surplus value in labor-intensive sectors (Alfonsson, 2020; Cole et al., 2024; Marx, 1990). I am especially interested in the tension between these exploitative conditions and the work-related discourses and imaginaries that teenagers engage with and negotiate. In analyzing the meaning-making processes surrounding their work experiences, this thesis builds on a longstanding tradition of research into the formation of worker subjectivities and the production of consent in the workplace (Burawoy, 1979; Lordon, 2014; Read, 2024; Trappmann et al., 2024; Weeks, 2011). Alongside this, I explore how gendered, classed, and racialized inequalities are (re)produced

through participation in paid work, again engaging with intersectional feminist theory (de los Reyes, 2017; Ferguson, 2016).

In analyzing questions of labor, subjectivity, and social differentiation, I enter into a theoretical dialogue with Marxian theory and intersectional feminism. Guided by this framework, the overarching aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of teenage students as a labor force in Sweden, at the intersection of low-wage, interactive service work reliant on young, flexible labor, and the different meanings these workers themselves ascribe to their jobs. Using a mixed methods approach that combines survey data and interviews, I address the following research questions:

1. What characterizes the patterns and experiences of teenage students as labor in low-wage, non-standard services in Sweden? (Articles I and II)
2. How do intersecting social differences rooted in class, gender, racialization, migrancy, neighborhood and age structure teenagers' work in low-wage services? (Articles I and III)
3. What different meanings do teenagers attribute to paid work, and how do these perceptions relate to the contemporary work ethic and dominant discourses surrounding waged work? (Articles II and III)

Through these questions, I examine the labor market position, heterogeneous composition, and subjectivities of teenage student-workers, focusing on how employers' labor-use practices and dominant discourses shape these dimensions. Rather than mapping neatly onto each article, the questions are addressed through a synthesis of their findings. This is especially important to note for the second research question, as not all variables are addressed in each of the specific articles used to answer it. Article I analyzes the Labor Force Survey data to explore the employment rates and worker profiles of school students engaged in paid work. It contributes to understanding teenage student-workers as a heterogeneous labor force within Sweden's low-wage, non-standard service sectors, while also providing a contextual foundation for the qualitative analyses that follow. Article II draws on the interviews with upper secondary students to examine how the participants make sense of and legitimize exploitative working conditions, such as wage theft. It advances theorization of the age-based normalization of unpaid labor within low-wage services and deepens our understanding of how the youngest employees perceive themselves as workers. Finally, Article III, also based on the interviews, explores how teenagers mobilize normative narratives of working to 'gain experience' and 'earn extra money' in response to cultural imperatives to construct a self that holds value for employers. Adopting an intersectional lens, the article sheds light on the ideological and practical role of low-wage service work in shaping subjectivities within a heterogeneous teenage labor force.

In synthesizing these findings, my research makes several contributions. First, it situates the patterns and experiences of teenage employment within the Swedish labor market, a context that has remained largely unexplored in existing research. Using a mixed methods approach, I provide rich empirical data on the recent growth of teenagers' participation in sectors such as hospitality and retail, while also illuminating the challenges they face in their working conditions. I demonstrate that highly exploitative practices are widespread, yet often go unrecognized or remain unarticulated by the young workers themselves. In doing so, the study highlights the representational challenges surrounding this segment of the workforce, which plays a crucial role in low-wage, interactive services but remains difficult to organize (Ilsøe, 2016; Kjellberg, 2025a). Precarity and low unionization have long been identified as key issues for low-wage, non-standard service workers in Sweden more broadly (Alfonsson, 2020; Carlén and de los Reyes, 2024; de los Reyes and Holmlund, 2024). By foregrounding teenage student-workers' experiences, this study adds a distinct lens through which to reconsider these issues.

Second, this thesis contributes by unpacking the broad category of 'teenage workers' in labor market research. By opening up this category, it highlights two dimensions that are often obscured in existing scholarship. First, the findings problematize dominant imaginaries of de-commodified, middle-class youth taking on unskilled service jobs for socializing or leisure purposes (Besen-Cassino, 2014). Drawing on both statistical data and interviews, I demonstrate the heterogeneity within this group, both in terms of social background and work patterns, as well as the diverse reasons school-aged youth take on part-time jobs. For some students, this employment provides essential income to support their families. Second, the thesis offers a differentiated understanding of the opportunities and risks associated with employment during school, showing how these are unevenly distributed along lines of class, racialization, and migrancy. While transitions research has often focused on the long-term effects of early employment, this study contributes new knowledge about how paid work shapes teenage life in the present, structuring it in unequal ways.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of attending to the broader cultural and discursive meanings of work when analyzing early employment experiences. I show that teenagers often approach their first jobs as a crucial step in cultivating an active, entrepreneurial subjectivity. Working during school can be understood as a response to the ethical imperative of developing oneself as a valuable subject in the labor market. However, the analysis reveals that this process is neither straightforward nor uncritical; it is marked by ambivalence and contradiction, shaped by prevailing ideas of what a 'teenage job' should involve and by the students' perceptions of their own youthfulness. I argue that for very young students, the work ethic is often articulated in abstract, future-oriented terms, disconnected from the realities of the service jobs they actually perform. As the title of this dissertation suggests, this frequently leads them to view their current jobs as

something other than ‘real’ work. The thesis contributes by detailing what this future-oriented attachment to work makes possible in the present—particularly how it enables the downplaying of financial necessity and the normalization of exploitative conditions.

The remainder of this dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 sets the thesis within its broader context. I begin by situating teenage student-workers within the context of a changing Swedish labor market, followed by a review of research at the intersection of youth and labor studies that has shaped the broader academic literature on adolescent employment. Chapter 3 elaborates the analytical framework, drawing on Marxian scholarship and intersectional feminism to theorize exploitation in low-wage service work, social differentiation, and the contemporary work ethic. Chapter 4 outlines the study’s multiple data sources and methods, and offers methodological and ethical reflections. Chapter 5 summarizes the three articles and their key findings. Finally, Chapter 6 integrates the results to address the research questions, and concludes with a discussion of the study’s contributions and implications for future research.

Chapter 2. Context and research overview

In this chapter, I begin by situating my research subject—teenage student-workers—within the context of a changing Swedish labor market. This includes an overview of how adolescent workers' hours and wages are regulated through legislation and collective agreements. I then trace developments in non-standard employment, low-wage work, and declining unionization rates, all of which form the backdrop to the recent rise in teenage employment. Shifting to a broader perspective, I examine the research traditions that shape the study of teenage employment at the intersection of youth and labor studies. I first review literature on youth employment, showing how transitions into the labor market have emerged as a central concern, often with a focus on young people deemed 'at risk'. I then narrow the focus to studies specifically addressing teenage workers, which remains largely situated within the transitions research paradigm. Finally, I turn to scholarship that conceptualizes youth as a distinct segment of the precarious workforce, paying particular attention to how teenage and student workers are positioned within this field. Throughout the chapter, I identify the contributions this thesis makes to existing scholarship—both in the Swedish context and within the sociology of work concerned with youth labor and precarity.

Setting the scene: low-wage, non-standard work in Sweden

Although upper secondary education in Sweden is not compulsory, approximately 98 percent of young people continue to this level, which typically includes students between the ages of 16 and 19. The working hours of minors (individuals under the age of 18) are regulated by the Swedish Work Environment Authority (2023), which prohibits them from working between midnight and 5 a.m. The regulations otherwise distinguish between three age groups: younger children (under 13 years), older children, and youth. The youth category includes those who have completed compulsory schooling, from the calendar year in which they turn 16 until they reach the age of 18. This group is most relevant to the present study, although it also

includes some older children who begin upper secondary education before turning 16. According to the regulations, youth may work up to eight hours per day and a maximum of 40 hours per week, while older children are limited to seven hours per day and 35 hours per week. Once individuals turn 18, which most do before completing upper secondary school, these restrictions no longer apply, regardless of their educational status.

In the Swedish labor market model, wages are negotiated and determined by unions and employer organizations through collective agreements, without direct government involvement. As a result, Sweden does not have statutory minimum wage levels. However, many collective agreements negotiated by unions within LO—the confederation of blue-collar trade unions in Sweden—do specify minimum wages (Hällberg and Kjellström, 2020). In some of these agreements, youth wages are differentiated from adult ones. The definition of youth varies depending on the specific collective agreement (Hällberg and Kjellström, 2020). Looking at the two most significant sectors employing teenagers during the school year—hotels and restaurants, and retail (Article I)—both collective agreements stipulate lower youth wage rates, starting from under the ages of 20 and 18, respectively. In both cases, employees under 18 earn approximately 34 percent less per hour than their older counterparts (HRF and Visita, 2025; Svensk Handel and Handelsanställdas Förbund, 2023).

It is worth noting that although there are regulations governing minors' working hours and minimum wages set through collective agreements, these are not always upheld in practice. Many of the teenagers I interviewed reported not receiving the correct wage—or, in some cases, not being paid at all. This was a recurring experience, and it forms the focus of Article II. Although many of their workplaces were formally covered by collective agreements, there was often no union presence to monitor or enforce compliance. As I go on to elaborate, this reflects a broader trend of declining unionization rates among young people and in sectors such as hospitality. Likewise, several participants described having worked night shifts and served alcohol as minors, despite such practices being prohibited under regulations issued by the Swedish Work Environment Authority (2023). Thus, a clear gap emerged between the law—and the collective agreements—in the books and in practice.

Over the past two decades, there have been no major changes in the regulation of working hours and wages for young people, whether through legislation or collective agreements—although overall wage levels have generally seen annual increases (Alfonsson et al., 2024). These limited changes cannot explain the recent rise in year-round employment of teenage students in Sweden (Article I). In what follows, I examine several shifts that have facilitated the employment of teenage students as a source of cheap, flexible labor in the service sector. These include changes to the regulation of temporary employment, the promotion and subsidization of low-wage work, declining unionization rates among young workers

in private services, and broader transformations in the cultural and ideological meaning of paid labor in Sweden.

In the post-war era of Fordism, the 'Swedish model' of labor market and welfare policy was developed under predominantly Social Democratic rule.[1] This model is typically associated with a comprehensive welfare state, centralized collective bargaining regulating wages and working conditions, and active labor market policies aimed at increasing the skill levels of the unemployed (Davidsson, 2018; Esping-Andersen, 1990). Sweden has also been characterized by high union density and a relatively compressed wage structure (Dølvik et al., 2015). However, numerous scholars argue that this model has undergone neoliberal restructuring in recent decades, reflecting Sweden's shift toward a flexible growth model (Alfonsson, 2020; Belfrage and Kallifatides, 2018; Davidsson, 2018; Skyrman et al., 2023). The economic recession of the early 1990s is widely seen as a turning point, marking a broader departure from several core features of the Swedish model (Alfonsson, 2022; Davidsson, 2018; Holmlund and Storrie, 2002). Unemployment rose sharply—from relatively low levels before the crisis to 11 percent in 1993 (Davidsson, 2018). This employment decline primarily affected permanent, full-time jobs, while temporary employment increased during the same period, especially among young people and women (Holmlund and Storrie, 2002). These trends have proven enduring. Unemployment rates have since remained above pre-crisis levels (Davidsson, 2018), and temporary employment in Sweden now exceeds levels in other Nordic countries (Berglund et al., 2021; Rasmussen et al., 2019).

The recession also prompted ideational and regulatory changes. Most notably, the persistently high unemployment levels were invoked to justify the expansion of flexible forms of employment (Alfonsson, 2022; Carlén and de los Reyes, 2021; Davidsson, 2018). These arguments proved effective. Fixed-term employment was gradually deregulated through a series of reforms, the most significant of which came in 2007 with the introduction of a new category of temporary contract—General Temporary Employment (see Davidsson, 2018, for an overview of these policy changes). Consequently, temporary workers have experienced a loosening in employment protection, bringing it in line with nations such as the United Kingdom and Ireland (Berglund et al., 2017). Today, approximately 16 percent of all workers in Sweden are employed on fixed-term contracts (Berglund et al., 2021). This form of employment is more strongly associated with precariousness than other types of non-standard contracts (Berglund et al., 2022; Rasmussen et al., 2019) and is particularly prevalent in sectors such as retail and hospitality (Berglund et al., 2023; Carlén and de los Reyes, 2024; Larsen and Ilsøe, 2021). Among the groups most at

[1] The Social Democratic Party was continuously in office from 1936 to 1976, and again from 1982 to 1991, after a period of center-right coalition governments.

risk of holding temporary contracts are young people aged 15 to 17 and students (Berglund et al., 2021).

Davidsson (2018) argues that many of the labor market reforms introduced during the 1990s and beyond were designed to expand the supply of low-wage labor and encourage the creation of low-skill jobs. Alfonsson et al. (2024) also highlight the changes to unemployment insurance, along with a range of subsidies—such as the reduction of value added tax on restaurant services from 24 to 12 percent, and payroll tax cuts for employers hiring youth aged 19 to 25—as examples of reforms implemented by the liberal-conservative government (2006–2014) to promote job growth in low-wage sectors. The extent to which these reforms have actually led to growth in low-wage employment remains contested. While some researchers observe signs of labor market polarization in Sweden (Heyman, 2016; Åberg, 2015, 2016), others report weaker trends (Adermon and Gustafsson, 2015) or reject such claims altogether (Alfonsson et al., 2024; Oesch and Piccitto, 2019). Even if the overall number of low-paid workers has not increased, Alfonsson et al. (2024: 1108) demonstrate a shift in the composition of this segment over time. By 2019, young people, service workers, temporary employees, and individuals with only primary education were more likely to be in low-paid positions than in 2005.

Several measures were also introduced to encourage people to accept low-wage, non-standard jobs (Alfonsson et al., 2024; Davidsson, 2018). Reflecting a broader shift from welfare to workfare seen across many countries in the Global North, Sweden implemented a series of reforms that marked a move toward 'activating' labor market policies designed to incentivize employment (Peralta Prieto, 2006; Karlsson, 2019). These tendencies were particularly prominent under the liberal-conservative government in the 2000s, which promoted what was referred to as 'the new workfare approach'[2]—the idea that working should always be more financially rewarding than receiving social benefits or insurance. Tax reductions on labor were introduced to widen the gap between the incomes of employed and unemployed individuals, under the assumption that this would increase incentives to accept lower-wage jobs (Alfonsson et al., 2024). In addition, public campaigns portrayed recipients of social insurance as 'outsiders' and emphasized the need to address so-called 'welfare traps' (Altermark, 2020; Davidsson, 2016). Researchers have shown that this workfare discourse—where citizens are expected to earn their social rights through waged work—has contributed to the stigmatization of unemployment and social insurance recipients, often associated with racialized portrayals of 'undeserving, unemployed immigrants' (Dahlstedt and Vesterberg, 2017; Davidsson, 2016).

Internationally, Sweden stands out for its high levels of union density, but unionization rates have steadily declined since the 1990s—from 81 percent of the

[2] In Swedish, 'Den nya arbetslinjen'.

workforce in 1990 to 69 percent in 2024. During the pandemic, rates rose slightly, reaching 70 percent in 2021, but declined again during the inflationary years (Kjellberg, 2025b). Once again, 2007 marked a key turning point: the liberal-conservative government introduced differentiated fees in the voluntary unemployment insurance system, which is administered by the unions. This led to sharply increased fees in sectors with high unemployment, prompting many members to leave (Davidsson, 2018; Prytz and Berglund, 2023). The decline was most pronounced in private service sectors, where employees face the highest risks of unemployment. For instance, in 2024, only 26 percent of workers in the hospitality sector were union members (Kjellberg, 2025b).

The decline in unionization has been especially significant among young people, migrants, and temporary employees (Kjellberg, 2025a). Prytz and Berglund (2023) argue that the rise in temporary and young workers in sectors such as hotels and restaurants accounted for much of the drop in union membership following 2007. Today, certain labor unions—such as the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union[3] and the Commercial Employees' Union[4]—primarily organize a smaller subset of core workers with full-time, open-ended contracts, and therefore fail to reach the employees most affected by precarious working conditions (Kjellberg, 2025b).

The changes and reforms outlined above have had far-reaching effects. The expansion and deregulation of non-standard employment—particularly temporary contracts—have led several researchers to identify increasing segmentation or dualization in the Swedish labor market (e.g., Berglund et al., 2021; Davidsson, 2018; Rasmussen et al., 2019). These shifts—alongside the changing composition of the low-wage workforce and declining union density—have disproportionately affected young workers and students in the private service sector or, in some cases, been shaped by their growing participation in the labor force. It is against this backdrop that I situate the labor market conditions facing teenage student-workers, marked by features not typically associated with the Swedish model: insecure contracts, low pay, and weak union representation. The thesis thus contributes to scholarship on recent developments in the Swedish labor market by foregrounding a category of workers who are simultaneously at the forefront of these transformations yet often remain invisible Swedish research.

To sum up, teenage workers are overrepresented in jobs characterized as unstable, insecure, and precarious (Alfonsson et al., 2024). This pattern is not unique to Sweden. In fact, as we shall see, the relationship between youth and work has been described as increasingly fraught across many countries in the Global North. In the next section, I turn to literature in youth and labor studies to explore how this contested relationship between young people and employment has been theorized.

[3] In Swedish, Hotell- och Restaurangfacket, HRF.

[4] In Swedish, Handelsanställdas förbund.

Youth and student labor in transition

Youth has been described as a 'notoriously fuzzy' concept (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Although defined by a certain age range, it is not a biologically fixed category; its meaning varies across social, political, and cultural contexts and has evolved over time. In research, youth is typically defined in relation to adulthood, although the boundaries between these stages tend to be blurry (France and Threadgold, 2016). As traditional markers of adulthood—such as full-time employment, independent living, and homeownership—have become increasingly difficult to attain (Bessant et al., 2017; Silva, 2015), the definitions of youth have expanded (O'Reilly et al., 2019). This is particularly evident in research on youth employment, where the proliferation of precarious work has made it more challenging for young people to secure full-time, permanent contracts (Bessant et al., 2017). Consequently, some studies on youth and precarity extend the age range up to 35 years (e.g., Trappmann et al., 2024). As Sukarieh and Tannock (2015: 5) observe, 'youth has expanded vertically, to encompass a growing range of ages, as well as horizontally, in terms of the proportion of the population from different class, race, ethnic, national, and religious identities now associated with this life stage'. This conceptual overstretch does not imply that youth, as an empirical category, has become insignificant; substantial evidence shows that young workers face distinct disadvantages in the labor market compared to older cohorts (Bessant et al., 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2019). However, it is important to recognize that the category often encompasses a broad and heterogeneous group, within which different subgroups may encounter specific and varied challenges (Canny, 2002).

Existing theories on the relationship between youth and work typically engage with several core issues, offering varying interpretations of their causes and possible solutions. In Europe, these challenges include limited employment opportunities, often confined to low-wage, non-standard, and precarious jobs (Bessant et al., 2017; Grotti et al., 2019) and high rates of underemployment and unemployment (Bessant et al., 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2019). These trends have contributed to rising numbers of *poorly integrated new entrants*—'young people who, although qualified, experience persistent difficulties in accessing stable employment. They are caught in a series of short-term, insecure, and poorly paid jobs that frequently do not correspond well to their qualifications' (O'Reilly et al., 2019: 5; see also McGuinness et al., 2019; Scarpetta et al., 2010)—as well as to a growing group of *youth left behind*, commonly referred to as NEET (not in employment, education, or training). The latter group is particularly vulnerable, with substantial evidence indicating that this status has lasting scarring effects on lifetime earnings and career trajectories (Zuccotti and O'Reilly, 2019). These challenges make the youth–work relationship a highly contested field, closely tied to efforts by 'national governments and other political actors to produce and govern a useful labor force through

interventions into youth' (Farrugia, 2022: 4; see also Means, 2017; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015).

The challenges outlined above have led researchers to describe young people's entry into the labor market as increasingly problematic, non-linear, and complex (e.g., Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Pohl and Walther, 2007; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007). As a result, transitions from education to work have become a key focus in youth research, shaping one of the field's most influential paradigms (Farrugia, 2021; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). This body of research examines the increasingly prolonged and insecure pathways from school to work and higher education, emphasizing how structural inequalities and labor market conditions shape young people's trajectories (MacDonald, 2011). Given the severe scarring effects of prolonged youth unemployment, improving conditions for young people is a central concern within the field, with much research aimed at informing relevant policies (e.g., O'Reilly et al., 2019).

The Nordic countries, including Sweden, are often described as having relatively smooth school-to-work transitions compared to other European nations. Researchers highlight policies that support transitions, such as broad access to higher education, employment in a large public sector, and public childcare that facilitates women's labor market participation (Pohl and Walther, 2007; Walther, 2006). However, this is not to suggest that Nordic youth face no challenges. As noted, Sweden has high rates of temporary employment among young people, and persistent barriers remain for certain groups—such as early school leavers, youth with disabilities, and migrants—which continue to be significant concerns (Berglund et al., 2021; Plenty et al., 2018; Wadensjö, 2015). Accordingly, transitions into the labor market remain a central focus of youth research in both Sweden and the broader Nordic context (e.g., Albæk et al., 2015; Lorentzen et al., 2019; Olofsson and Wikström, 2018; Plenty et al., 2018).

Student labor presents an interesting case within this paradigm. While research has shown that precarious work during youth can lead to cycles of continued precarious employment (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007), findings by Nielsen et al. (2019) suggest a more nuanced picture. In their study of young Danish employees, they found that although students often hold precarious jobs during their education, this does not appear to negatively affect their future entry into the labor market. In fact, student employment is frequently portrayed as a potential asset for future outcomes. This is especially evident in analyses of the Nordic countries, where student employment rates are comparatively high by European standards. As a result, some researchers highlight the 'student job culture' in the Nordics as a key success factor in facilitating smooth school-to-work transitions (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2019; Joensen and Mattana, 2022; Madsen et al., 2013). Other researchers have given a less bright picture, as is shown in the next section.

As indicated above, research on youth transitions has been highly influential, playing a foundational role in establishing the sociology of youth as a distinct field (Farrugia, 2021). However, it has also sparked considerable debate and attracted substantial criticism (Schildrick and MacDonald, 2007; Wyn et al., 2017). Roberts (2011) contends that transition research often relies on dualistic classifications—framing transitions as either 'successful' or 'problematic'—and focuses primarily on youth at risk of social exclusion, thereby overlooking more 'ordinary' experiences. This dominant focus may help explain why the rise in student employment has been described as a largely overlooked phenomenon (Doogan, 2009; Howieson et al., 2012a). Student employment is an 'ordinary experience' (Price et al., 2011), typically examined through its impact on future labor market outcomes rather than the dynamics and logics of the workplaces where students are concentrated. Farrugia (2021: 372) argues that this emphasis on access to future employment tends to obscure how young people—such as students—are shaped as workers within the contemporary service economy, as 'subjects that are produced, valorized and devalorized as part of the formation of labor forces within transnational movements of capital and labor'. In this light, theorizing teenage students as laboring subjects within low-wage services constitutes a central contribution of this thesis.

As previous research on teenage employment remains deeply characterized by a focus on transitions, I next turn to this body of literature.

Teenage students in paid work

The literature reviewed above highlights youth unemployment as a central issue shaping theoretical developments within youth studies, with Sukarieh and Tannock (2015: 55) describing it as a 'specter' haunting both scholarly discourse and labor market policy. While high youth unemployment rates are indeed pressing concerns, there is an additional dimension to the story: certain groups of young people, particularly students, have increasingly joined the workforce over recent decades (Doogan, 2009; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Price et al. (2011: 2) describe this as 'a significant shift from a predominantly full-time youth workforce to a part-time one, driven principally by an increasing participation in schooling' in Global North countries. In this context, paid work has become a majority experience for young people in education (Price et al., 2011).

Although student part-time work during education is more common in the Nordic countries than in many other European nations (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2019; Madsen et al., 2013), the teenage workforce in this context remains under-researched, although a handful of studies can be mentioned. In Sweden, researchers such as Hensvik et al. (2023) and Müller (2021) have focused on vocational students,

identifying positive associations between early labor market entry and the social contacts developed through school-year employment (see also Wang et al., 2006). Similarly, in Norway, Ballo et al. (2022) find that teenage work experience is linked to a lower risk of future labor market exclusion. In Finland, Kouvonen and Lintonen (2002) have examined the relationship between adolescent employment during school and risks of heavy drinking. Ethnographic studies have also contributed important insights. In Sweden, Samuelsson (2008, 2011) explores children's work, problematizing their invisibility in labor market research and highlighting the diverse meanings work holds for children by centering their perspectives. Likewise, Fredriksen (1999) investigates children's labor in the Danish retail sector, emphasizing the underrepresentation of young people's own accounts in existing research. Both authors note that youth and employers often describe these jobs as something other than 'real work', raising critical questions about how adolescent labor is perceived and valued.

Internationally, research on the teenage workforce is more prevalent, particularly in the US, UK, and Australia, where combining work with schooling is widespread (Neyt et al., 2019; Patton and Smith, 2009). The reasons why adolescents enter the workforce remain a subject of debate. Some studies emphasize material needs as a driving force for working, especially in single-parent households (Hodgson and Spours, 2001; McCoy and Smyth, 2007; Raby et al., 2018), and others have found negative correlations between parental transfer payments and the number of hours worked (Dustmann et al., 2009; cf. Kalenkoski and Pabilonia, 2010). However, other studies suggest that most teenagers do not work out of financial necessity. Rather, these researchers argue that employment is a general trend among adolescents (Hobbs et al., 2007; Howieson et al., 2012a; Price et al., 2011). Commonly cited motivations include earning extra money, gaining financial independence, acquiring work experience, and building self-confidence (Hobbs et al., 2007; Neyt et al., 2019; Patton and Smith, 2009; Raby et al., 2018).

Regardless of their reasons for working, few teenagers envision pursuing the same types of jobs they hold during school as part of their future careers (Rauscher et al., 2012). These dynamics contribute to the perception of teenagers as something other than 'real workers'—not engaged in work out of necessity or viewing their jobs as a core part of their identity, as is often assumed for adults (Price and Grant-Smith, 2018; Samuelsson, 2011). Employers have frequently drawn on such stereotypes to justify lower wages for this group (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Yates, 2017). Teenagers themselves may inadvertently reinforce these views, as studies show they are often reluctant to define their employment as 'real work' (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Samuelsson, 2011). These notions—rooted in broader social imaginaries and sometimes echoed by young workers—tend to homogenize school students as a uniform group of workers, a perspective problematized in Articles I and III.

Underpinning the largest body of research, the youth transitions paradigm focuses on the educational and career outcomes of combining part-time work with full-time

education. Within this framework, teenagers are primarily seen either as students or as future members of the labor force, rather than as workers in the present. Their current employment is largely treated as a variable that influences future outcomes. The field has been characterized as sharply divided between researchers who view waged work as either valuable or detrimental (McCoy and Smyth, 2007; Patton and Smith, 2009). Some studies highlight positive effects, including personal development, skill enhancement, self-empowerment, and favorable associations with future labor market outcomes (Hensvik et al., 2023; Hobbs et al., 2007; Leonard, 2003; McKechnie et al., 2010, 2014; Simpson et al., 2018). Others conclude that working while studying endangers academic success, as there is indeed substantial empirical evidence for an association with poor educational achievement, truancy, and dropout (Marsh and Kleitman, 2005; McCoy and Smyth, 2007; Singh et al., 2007). A research review supports this view, mainly finding negative relationships between paid work during school and educational attainment (Neyt et al., 2019). However, ample research suggests so-called threshold effects, whereby potentially positive or negative outcomes are determined by the number of hours worked (Dumont et al., 2009; Monahan et al., 2011; Nagengast et al., 2014; Staff and Mortimer, 2007; Staff et al., 2020). The threshold value that defines intensive work varies between studies: Neyt et al. (2019) find definitions ranging from working more than 8 to 25 hours per week in their literature review.

As Rauscher et al. (2012) note, much research on teenage employment assumes that most adolescent jobs are similar in nature—low-waged, low-skilled, and routine. This assumption has led researchers to overlook the fact that 'youth may have different work experiences and thus, be differently affected by those experiences' (Rauscher et al., 2012: 561). As a result, there has been a focus on the number of hours worked as the primary measure for assessing how teenage employment impacts students. In response, several scholars have examined the quality of adolescent employment as a predictor of later outcomes (see Rauscher et al., 2012, for a review). While this marks a shift away from the question of whether work is beneficial for school students, it often introduces a similar one: what kinds of jobs are considered valuable for teenagers? This, too, reflects the prevailing emphasis on employment as a component of youth trajectories into the labor market. For example, Staff and Mortimer (2024) use job quality during adolescence as a predictor of whether individuals will occupy similar roles as they transition into the adult labor force and pursue their career paths.

The heterogeneity among young student-workers is mainly framed as an endogeneity issue that may introduce bias into statistical models. As Neyt et al. (2019: 899) summarize, 'Students who decide to combine study and work differ from those that do not combine these to activities in more than just their work status'. These pre-existing differences between working and non-working students may also affect educational outcomes. There is an ongoing debate over whether student workers represent a positive selection of the overall population or whether

students with lower motivation and poorer grades are overrepresented among those who work while attending school (Neyt et al., 2019). To establish causality, there is thus a need to control for differences among teenagers, including demographics, motivation, and ability. Findings suggest that work patterns are related to factors such as class background, gender, ethnicity, and previous academic performance (e.g., Bachman et al., 2013; Howieson et al., 2012b; Staff and Mortimer, 2007; Staff et al., 2020). Consistently, intensive work has been linked to more disadvantaged class positions. As Staff and Mortimer (2007: 1188) conclude, 'More advantaged youth, as gauged by their socioeconomic backgrounds and educational promise, limit their hours of work during high school; their less-advantaged counterparts tend to pursue more intensive work patterns'. This notion has been confirmed both by quantitative and qualitative studies (Raby et al., 2018; Staff et al., 2020).

Compared to the extensive focus on how employment affects educational attainment and long-term labor market trajectories, relatively little attention has been paid to the content and context of teenagers' work, although there are notable exceptions. Besen-Cassino (2014), for instance, investigates the shifting meanings of part-time employment among suburban youth, showing how work can resemble a form of consumption, enabling self-branding and personal development. Sheppard et al. (2019) explore how adolescent workers interpret, negotiate, and resist gendered discourses in their labor market participation, revealing that such discourses shape the experience and significance of early employment in often contradictory ways (see also Besen-Cassino, 2018). Woodman (2012), on the other hand, examines how the rise in precarious teenage employment affects broader aspects of life, particularly social relationships. He shows that irregular work schedules often hinder young people's ability to spend time with close friends, though the consequences are uneven—those with more resources are better able to manage their time and maintain social connections.

Even research on teenage students as laboring subjects and as a source of low-wage, non-standard labor remains comparatively limited. Tannock's (2001) study of teenagers working in fast food chains and large grocery stores reveals how employers often frame these jobs as opportunities for adolescents to socialize and have fun—an image that aligns with how young people themselves perceive part-time work during school. However, teenagers may also face specific risks as newcomers to the labor market and due to their young age. Scholars have drawn attention to risks such as economic exploitation (Hobbs et al., 2016; 2017), workplace injuries (Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2015), and the precarious nature of these jobs (Cohen, 2013; Raby et al., 2018). Researchers have also documented widespread sexual harassment, particularly among teenage girls (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Cohen, 2013; Fineran and Gruber, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2019). At the same time, other studies characterize these early work experiences as social, enjoyable, empowering, and valuable preparation for adult life (Besen-Cassino, 2014; Hobbs

et al., 2007). Consequently, researchers such as Besen-Cassino (2014) have described teenage employment as marked by a blend of exploitation and fun.

To summarize, teenage employment has primarily been studied as a variable influencing future outcomes, such as educational attainment or labor market trajectories. My thesis builds on a small but growing body of research that explores the meanings and experiences of such work. It contributes to this literature by theorizing how the exploitative conditions of low-wage service jobs—conditions widely acknowledged in previous research—are legitimized and normalized among this category of workers (Article II). Furthermore, while earlier studies have highlighted the gendered dimensions of adolescent work, my research adds an intersectional perspective, emphasizing how social differences rooted in class and racialization shape early work experiences (Articles I and III).

Precarious workers?

As I have shown above, the rise in employment among teenage students reflects broader labor market trends, such as the growth of private service sectors and the proliferation of non-standard work (Doogan, 2009; Yates, 2017). As Sukarieh and Tannock (2015: 38) explain, the 'worldwide growth in part-time, teenage student employment has been driven primarily by the rise of a low-wage, low-skill service economy' that relies on a seven-day, round-the-clock schedule (see also Huddleston, 2011). These labor market shifts have impacted young workers more broadly, sparking a growing body of research on youth and precarious work (Bessant et al., 2017; MacDonald, 2016). MacDonald (2016) notes that this scholarship raises several critical questions: Is precarious work a stepping-stone into the labor market, or a trap? Does precarity define a social generation of youth, or does it reflect other social divisions, such as class? Is precarious work imposed on young people, or is it sought after as a lifestyle choice, for example, by middle-class students? Moreover, do all youth engaged in precarious work experience precarity (Antonucci, 2018)?

The abovementioned questions are related to how we define precarity. The concept (and its many related morphological forms) has been described as overstretched and ambiguous, denoting several social phenomena pertaining to labor market insecurity (Alberti et al., 2018). Betti (2018) suggests that the difficulties in reaching a shared definition of precarity have to do with the fact that the concept has highly political connotations and is related to social movements. Although Bourdieu (1963) is often credited with the term *précarité* from his research on Algerian casual workers, the term can be traced back to its roots in classical Marxist theory (Jonna and Foster, 2016). In writings by Engels (1993), Marx (1990), and Morris (1915), the concept emerges as integrally related to the critique of capitalism and the impoverishment

of the working class. Most notably, precarity has been associated with the industrial reserve army of labor, thus linking it closely to the theory of capital accumulation (Jonna and Foster, 2016). In the 1970s, the concept gained greater prominence 'through its adoption by leftist movements in continental Europe, as a means of rallying (often) young workers excluded from stable jobs' (Alberti et al., 2018: 448). Its political relevance endured, most notably during the early 2000s with the European precarity movement. In its modern definition, the term has thus been developed and shaped by its usage in youth movements. Reflecting this connection in his discussion of the precariat as a social class, Standing (2011: 66) asserts that 'youth make up the core'. However, as Neilson and Rossiter (2008) observe, the expansion of academic literature on precarity has coincided with its decline as a political concept within social movements.

Most definitions of precarity and precarious work share common elements and emphasize uncertainties related to hours, pay, possibilities to plan ahead, and access to social benefits and statutory entitlements (e.g., Kalleberg and Vallas, 2017; Vosko, 2010). This is often contrasted with the stable and secure conditions associated with full-time, open-ended contracts, leading precarity to be portrayed as a 'deviation' or 'exception' (Rubery et al., 2018; Vosko, 2010). Betti (2018) describes how the academic use of the term emerged in the polarized debates during the 1990s, when economists promoted labor market flexibility to increase employment growth. To counter this, many sociologists emphasized the close connection between job flexibility and precarity. The definitions of the concept can be understood in the context of this debate, where precarity was considered 'the drawback' of flexibility (Kubisa and Mendonca, 2019).

Thus, precarity is usually defined in negative terms, which implies dichotomizations. First, precarity is understood against the idea of Fordism, thereby framing it as a novel condition that has appeared during recent decades. Feminist and intersectional scholars have criticized this view as being Global North-centric and partial, excluding the perspectives of oppressed groups (Betti, 2018; Fuller and Vosko, 2008; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Vosko, 2010). Historically, precarity instead appears as the norm for the many, whereas Fordism was a limited exception (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Secondly, precarity is defined against notions of 'core workers' on standard employment contracts, which portrays it as a condition limited to 'peripheral' groups in the labor market. This distinction fails to capture the dynamic of precarization as a process affecting the labor market more generally, rather than just segments of marginalized workers (Alberti et al., 2018; Lorey, 2015).

The dichotomous view underpinning many conceptualizations of precarious work has shaped research on student-workers. Since their experiences do not fully align with established definitions, they are often treated as a negative case to refine conceptual clarity. Some studies have used their experiences to distinguish precarious work from precarity (Antonucci, 2018) or to differentiate their

circumstances from other workers or youth segments, finding that insecure working conditions do not impact students in the same way (Nielsen et al., 2019; Standing, 2011). These distinctions become even more pronounced when examining teenage students who live at home. Therefore, Campbell and Price (2016) use school students as a 'theory-relevant' example to emphasize the importance of distinguishing between different meanings of precarious work.

The research on teenage students and precarious work is complicated by the tendency of teenagers to normalize or distance themselves from their employment conditions, even in cases of legal violations (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Cohen, 2013; Raby et al., 2018). This reflects a broader trend among youth, as studies suggest that young people frequently accept and normalize their working conditions (Karolak and Mrozowicki, 2017; Mrozowicki and Trappmann, 2021). Trappmann et al. (2024) identify several legitimizing frames through which young people come to accept precarious work, with variations depending on institutional contexts. Among these, the framing of precarity as 'the price of escaping organizational alienation and pursuing meaningful work' is highlighted as particularly significant (Trappmann et al., 2024: 1014). This finding resonates with Armano and Murgia's (2013) research on highly-skilled young workers in Italy, which shows how passion for one's occupation often serves to justify precarious working conditions, producing a tension between self-identification and self-exploitation. Another common frame identified by Trappmann et al. (2024) involves legitimizing precarity as temporary—something to be endured while seeking more stable employment. Similarly, Morgan et al. (2013), in their interviews with young people pursuing careers in creative fields, observed a tendency among participants to accept employment insecurity as a defining feature of youth employment. They also reflect on whether this acceptance may stem from prior experiences of insecurity in teenage jobs in retail and hospitality, which 'may have habituated them to relations that operate in creative fields, where work is scarce and the power of gatekeepers is often arbitrarily exercised' (Morgan et al., 2013: 410).

Morgan et al.'s (2013) findings caution against distinctly separating the experiences of school students from those of other worker categories, while also illustrating how a longitudinal perspective can blur otherwise dualistic views (see also Campbell and Price, 2016). Nevertheless, teenage students occupy a paradoxical position in labor market research: while they hold some of the most precarious jobs, they fit awkwardly within the conceptual frameworks used to describe precarious workers. This conceptual misfit may be yet another of the reasons why several researchers have pointed to an 'invisibility' of young students in labor market research, despite their substantial presence in sectors otherwise characterized by precarious employment conditions (Doogan, 2009; Howieson et al., 2012a; Smith and Patton, 2013).

In relation to previous studies on teenagers and precarious work, this thesis shifts the focus from asking whether school students are precarious workers (Campbell

and Price, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2019) to exploring their position as laboring subjects. This approach not only advances discussions on teenagers' role in contemporary labor forces but also extends the analysis to broader debates on exploitation and labor use in low-wage, non-standard service sectors. The next chapter introduces the theoretical perspectives that inform this research.

Chapter 3. Theoretical perspectives

As noted in the literature review above, the position of teenage student-workers in the labor market does not fit easily within many conventional conceptual frameworks in youth and labor market research. These include the assumed separation of school and work into distinct life phases (Wyn et al., 2017), as well as dominant definitions of precarious work and workers. Moreover, despite being employed, teenage students often do not perceive themselves as 'real workers'. In response to these tensions, I draw on recent theorization of emerging and hybrid laboring subjects—figures who embody a co-existence of characteristics that resist binary classification (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021; Murgia et al., 2020; Piro et al., 2023). From this perspective, hybridization is understood as a process that captures the fragmented nature of contemporary labor, in which the Fordist ideal of 'typical' employment—stable, socially protected, full-time work—has become increasingly atypical for many (Murgia and Pulignano, 2021).

Although hybridity is not a central concept in my analysis, I am inspired by these approaches for their development of novel analytical frameworks that address the complexities of contemporary labor. In particular, I draw on the idea of a subject-oriented approach, that moves beyond essentialist understandings of social categories by focusing on how work is lived and experienced by individuals (Armano et al., 2022). As Murgia et al. (2020: 5) describe, this approach involves 'systematically taking into account reciprocal impacts between subjects and social structures, integrating micro- and macro-level analysis to understand how individuals are shaped by social norms and institutions, while also recognizing their capacity to influence and reshape these structures'.

Examining teenage student-workers through this lens means attending both to the specificity of their position in the labor market and to their subjective experiences—while also analyzing how these are shaped by intersecting processes of racialization and gendered differentiation. Moreover, this approach foregrounds the tensions and contradictions that define their experiences and, in many ways, structure their role within the labor market. While this perspective is most explicitly developed in Article II, it informs the analytical orientation of the overall project. To pursue this research, this chapter outlines a theoretical framework grounded primarily in

Marxian perspectives and intersectional feminism, used to analyze the labor, heterogeneous social composition, and subjectivities of teenage student-workers.

Valorization and exploitation in low-wage interactive services

What defines teenage students' position in the labor market? As workers, they are very young, enrolled in full-time education during weekdays, lack formal qualifications for skilled labor, and are generally disconnected from unions. As previously noted, their growing presence in the labor force is closely linked to the expansion of consumer services such as hospitality and retail (Huddleston, 2011; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015), and, in the Swedish context, to a lesser extent, low-status care work (Statistics Sweden, 2021). These jobs share several defining features. First, they are concentrated in low-wage industries where young people constitute a key source of cheap labor (Campbell and Price, 2016; Howieson et al., 2012a), with employers leveraging both age-based wage differentials and high student turnover to keep wages down (Williams and Connell, 2010; Yates, 2017). Second, the work is non-standard, with teenagers often filling undesirable evening and weekend shifts (Canny, 2002; Huddleston, 2011; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Third, these jobs are labor-intensive, generating surplus primarily through staffing strategies; in this context, young workers are valued for their 'flexibility' (Canny, 2002). Finally, these roles are interactive, involving direct engagement with customers and clients, which shapes the power dynamics of the work. As Williams and Connell (2010: 351) observe, 'Unlike manufacturing jobs, employees in service jobs are accountable to two different "masters": their employers and managers, on the one hand, and their clients and customers on the other'.

Within the theoretical tradition of autonomist Marxism, authors have highlighted how contemporary economies in the Global North are characterized by insecure employment conditions, fragmented labor forces, and a growing emphasis on workers' personal investments and the pursuit of self-realization through work (Adkins, 2005; Hardt and Negri, 2005; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Weeks, 2011).[5] These shifts are tied to the increasing economic significance of service, knowledge, and

[5] Autonomist Marxist thinkers have characterized these labor markets as post-Fordist (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2005; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Weeks, 2011). While the prefix *post-* implies a rupture or radical transformation, several scholars have underscored the continuities within capitalist development (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). In light of these continuities, I have chosen to avoid the label post-Fordist. Nevertheless, I contend that many of the concepts developed within this broader framework remain useful for analyzing key shifts in the composition of labor—particularly in understanding how teenage students have come to form a central flexible workforce within interactive, low-wage service sectors.

creative industries, where the production of sensations, symbols, relationships, and embodied experiences constitutes the immaterial product of labor (Lazzarato, 1996). Interactive services—such as retail and hospitality—exemplify this form of labor (Dowling, 2007; Farrugia et al., 2018). From this perspective, teenage students are not only concentrated in but also integral to sectors that exemplify key trends in the evolving nature of contemporary labor.

The nature of interactive service work has been analyzed in terms of its emotional (Hochschild, 2003), aesthetic (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009; Williams and Connell, 2010), and affective character. The latter refers to the mobilization and performance of subjectivities, desires, and social relationships as integral components of labor (Farrugia et al., 2023; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Lazzarato, 1996). Affective labor collapses the boundary between work and leisure, drawing on workers' entire embodied subjectivities and social lives to generate value. This phenomenon has been most extensively theorized in studies of the creative industries, often seen as paradigmatic due to their reliance on workers' communicative and creative capacities (e.g., Gill and Pratt, 2008; Karlsson, 2024; McRobbie, 2016). However, as Read (2024: 82) observes, the tendency toward subjective alignment with work applies equally to low-wage service labor: 'A factory worker's mood or attitude was irrelevant to the task, but the same cannot be said of a call center worker or even an employee in a fast-food restaurant'.

The prominence of emotional, aesthetic, and affective labor in contemporary service economies has been described as a 'feminization of work' (Hardt and Negri, 2005). This highlights not only the shift toward increased part-time employment traditionally associated with women's careers but also the large-scale entry of women into the workforce. However, as Farrugia (2022: 37) argues, 'young people have also shifted into an increasingly significant position within the post-Fordist labor force, although this is not well documented or extensively theorized'. This observation encompasses both the widespread participation of young people in certain sectors—where student employment has become a normative experience—and how youthfulness, as an immaterial quality, is actively produced and valorized through labor.

Farrugia (2018: 516) describes youthfulness as being 'produced as the affective capacity for playful enjoyment, cutting-edge taste-making, savvy consumption, and desirable embodiment', prevalent in sectors like retail and hospitality. In these industries, embodied performances and customer interactions imbue value onto products or the experiences themselves. For instance, bar work demonstrates how young employees create atmospheres of ease and pleasure marketed to clients, a process often reliant on fostering social relationships among co-workers (Farrugia et al., 2018, 2023). However, this form of affective labor is deeply embodied, as structures of class, gender, and racialization position some young people as more

'appropriate' employees than others (McDowell, 2012). In low-wage interactive services, McDowell (2009: 63) identifies the 'idealized white, slim, young, unwrinkled, typically heterosexualized body' as the archetypal laboring figure (see also Besen-Cassino, 2018). The valorization of youthful embodiment thus reinforces inequalities (McDowell, 2020; Williams and Connell, 2010) and profoundly shapes labor processes. For instance, Coffey et al. (2018) highlight the gendered work required to maintain an inviting bar atmosphere while addressing the intersecting risks of sexual harassment faced by young women.

The production of youthfulness tends to blur the boundaries between work, consumption, and leisure (Farrugia, 2018). Williams and Connell (2010: 351) explore this dynamic in their discussion of why class-privileged workers are willing to take upscale retail jobs, despite their low wages and precarious nature. They describe the typical high-end retail employee as a hybrid 'worker-consumer' who identifies with and derives pleasure from their association with particular brands. Similarly, Besen-Cassino (2014) examines teenagers working in suburban coffee chains, finding that they identify with the brands they sell and view these low-paid jobs as vital to their social lives. Thus, these dynamics legitimize poor working conditions and low wages by intertwining labor with consumption and leisure (Besen-Cassino, 2014; Farrugia et al., 2018). Williams and Connell (2010: 365) summarize: 'In a masterful sleight of hand, the retail industry has transformed bad jobs into fun pastimes, enabling this large employment sector to escape social criticism and reform'.

Focusing on the valorization of youthfulness within low-wage interactive service work provides a useful lens for analyzing how teenagers contribute to these sectors beyond serving as a source of cheap, non-standard labor. I use this perspective to frame broader developments in teenage employment and to reflect on why certain groups of school students—such as young girls—tend to be overrepresented in this trend (Chapter 6). However, my research extends this scholarship by examining teenage workers in low-status jobs with which they do not identify—unlike the suburban youth in Besen-Cassino's (2014) study, who engaged with their roles through branded differentiation. In this context, I contribute with an analysis of the varied meanings teenagers attribute to paid work during school (Article III), and how they legitimize exploitative working conditions (Article II), beyond a setting in which such jobs are framed as enjoyable or recreational.

In addition, I argue that discussions of teenage labor must be grounded not only in the valorization of youthfulness, but also in the mechanisms of exploitation embedded in low-status interactive service work. Marx (1990) defines exploitation as a temporal relation: the ratio between paid and unpaid labor time inherent in the wage relation, through which capitalists extract surplus value. The rate of surplus value is thus determined by the degree of exploitation, and Marx maintains that

capitalists continually seek to increase this rate to gain a competitive advantage and maximize profit. This can be achieved in absolute terms by extending the working day, or in relative terms by increasing productivity through technological innovation. However, in interactive services—where the product is inseparable from the labor involved—the scope for technological substitution is limited (Cole, 2024). In these labor-intensive sectors, increasing profit tends instead to rely on adjusting labor use and wages to raise the rate of exploitation. For instance, employers in hospitality and retail often use flexible staffing practices, such as fixed-term or zero-hour contracts, to minimize labor costs (Alfonsson, 2020; Carlén and de los Reyes, 2024; Huddleston, 2011). Although such arrangements involve hiring workers on a casual basis, these workers are typically expected to remain constantly available (Alfonsson, 2020; de los Reyes and Holmlund, 2024; Williams and Connell, 2010). In this context, teenage students become particularly attractive to employers as a source of cheap and flexible labor.

However, there are other means of extracting additional surplus value in labor-intensive services. Cole et al. (2024) highlight how wage theft has become a systematic and widespread phenomenon in the hospitality sector, yet it is often framed as a labor market violation rather than as a mode of exploitation. As Marx (1990: 352) notes in his discussion of the working day, capital continually seeks to extract additional surplus labor and employs tactics such as 'small thefts from the workers' meal-times and recreation times', as well as 'snatchings' and 'petty pilferings of minutes'. Any increase in unpaid labor time, Marx argues, results in greater profit for the capitalist. Wage theft, therefore, should not be seen as a moral failure or the isolated wrongdoing of individual managers, but as a structural feature of surplus value extraction. As Marx (1990: 367) writes, the nature of capitalist production inherently strives 'towards the appropriation of labor throughout the whole of the 24 hours in the day'. Building on this insight, Cole et al. (2024) conceptualize wage theft as a mechanism for extracting unpaid labor time—one that is incentivized by the logic of capitalism itself. Based on their research in the hospitality industry, they develop a typology of wage theft that captures the legal, quasi-legal, and illegal practices employers use to secure unpaid labor time (Cole et al., 2024: 117). However, such exploitation often goes unnoticed. Several studies have shown that wage theft is both normalized and exacerbated by the absence of union representation and by workers' tolerance of underpayment (Campbell et al., 2019; Clibborn, 2021; Cole et al., 2024; Farrugia et al., 2020)—dynamics that reflect the conditions faced by teenagers working in low-status, interactive service jobs.

In Article II, I examine how wage theft and the coercive scheduling of additional shifts—understood as mechanisms for extracting unpaid labor time (Cole et al., 2024)—become ambiguously accepted features of teenagers' working lives. This analysis deepens our understanding of teenage students' position in the labor market

and connects these insights to broader debates on capital accumulation and labor-use practices in low-wage, non-standard service sectors. However, such sectors rely on fragmented labor and heterogeneous workforces (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), which I turn to next.

Producing difference: intersectional approaches

In examining the heterogeneous social composition of teenage students as labor, I build on the theoretical notion that practices producing social differences are constitutive to capital accumulation, as they enable multiple forms of exploitation (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Robinson, 2000). As Mezzadra (2018: 68) observes, this perspective challenges the ontological primacy of class in Marxian analysis: 'Factors such as gender and race *originally* divide the field of class, and they do so by introducing crucial differentials of power and devices of hierarchization'. In other words, capital maximizes profits not by approaching labor as abstract and homogenous, but precisely through the differentiation and stratification of the workforce (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Robinson, 2000).

In addition to Mezzadra's examples highlighting gender and race, the social category of age is particularly relevant to my study. As noted, teenagers are attractive to employers due to their relatively low cost compared to older workers—a phenomenon often referred to as the 'youth wage discount' (Campbell and Price, 2016; Yates, 2017). Employers have also actively drawn on stereotypes about very young workers to justify lower wages for this group. Several scholars have identified various 'deficit discourses' that depict teenagers as lacking discipline, occupying only temporary stop-gap jobs, or not genuinely 'needing' the income they earn (Price and Grant-Smith, 2018; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Tannock, 2001). Age thus functions as a key axis of differentiation, producing a context in which teenage workers are seen as undeserving of fair pay and decent working conditions, based on prevailing assumptions about this group (Yates, 2017).

These mechanisms of differentiation further homogenize and essentialize teenage workers by portraying them as a distinct group within the labor force. This conflation collapses the diverse labor experiences of teenagers into a single category, one that is laden with imaginaries and stereotypes often grounded in the perspective of middle-class students as the normative standard (Tannock, 2001). This notion is therefore worth problematizing, as it not only serves the purpose of exploitation but also obscures the heterogeneity within the teenage workforce. Furthermore, as Sukarieh and Tannock (2015: 25) argue, it influences our theoretical perspectives as researchers:

> Something happens when we start thinking of a minimum wage worker in his or her 20s as a youth or emerging adult, rather than, for example, a member of the working class. In highlighting youth as a relevant social category, one's analytic lens tends to focus more narrowly on issues of formal and informal education, training, learning and the individualized acquisition of skills and competencies.

The broad concept of 'teenage students' thus warrants closer examination, not only to illuminate the diversity of their experiences but also to promote a deeper understanding of their formation as labor (Article III).

Unpacking the category of teenage students serves as a central theme across two of the articles in the thesis (Article I, III; cf. Orth, 2024; Tapia and Alberti, 2018), informed by intersectional feminist theory. While the term intersectionality is credited to Crenshaw (1989), its academic emergence reflects the joint efforts by Black feminist scholarship in developing a theory explaining the compounding effects of gender, class, and race inequalities (Mulinari and Neergaard, 2017). My study engages with frameworks that integrate intersectional studies and working life research, placing exploitation and the (re)production of labor at the center of the analysis (de los Reyes, 2017; Ferguson, 2016; Mulinari and Selberg, 2013). In the quantitative analysis of Article I, I explore the range of social divisions within the category of teenage student-workers. This resembles an intra-categorical approach, focusing on subgroups within the same category, that has previously been used to uncover underlying complexities in groups not traditionally seen as vulnerable (McCall, 2005; Tapia and Alberti, 2018). I examine how the availability of teenage students as labor reflects gendered, racialized, and class-based structures, and how participation in paid work during school may exacerbate inequalities rooted in these dimensions (Fuller and Vosko, 2007).

While statistical data can reveal broader trends in inequalities among teenage student-workers, they cannot capture how these inequalities are lived and experienced (Besen-Cassino, 2019). Article III further unpacks the broad concept of teenage workers, using in-depth interviews to explore the various meanings of paid work and its role in shaping youth subjectivities. I draw on theories that conceptualize classed, racialized, and gendered inequalities as ongoing relational and affective processes of social positioning—understood as *struggles against classification* (Skeggs, 1997; Tyler, 2015). These perspectives build on Skeggs' (1997) seminal analysis of young working-class women's efforts to attain respectability and worth by actively disidentifying with their class positions. Subsequent research by Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) has shown how participants living in poverty often deny their own situation and express contempt for 'the undeserving poor'—a response interpreted as part of a broader struggle against the shame and stigma attached to marginalized class positions. Krivonos (2018) further discusses how racialized and classed hierarchies shape efforts to construct alternative values of respectability, demonstrating how young migrant

workers dissociate from others in similar positions to present themselves as deserving and respectable workers.

Using these perspectives as an interpretative framework, I analyze how the participants make sense of their work through shared narratives that often draw on dominant conceptions of teenage labor and employ a grammar of enterprise to articulate the value of their efforts (Carbajo and Kelly, 2023). These accounts contribute to and reinforce a homogenized image of teenage workers, with middle-class students implicitly positioned as the norm. In Article III, I examine how these shared narratives not only coexist with pronounced social divisions but are also mobilized to navigate, negotiate, or obscure such differences—differences shaped by the stigmatization and racialization of poverty and unemployment (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Tyler, 2015; Weeks, 2011). By approaching teenagers' mobilization of these narratives as declassificatory struggles, I emphasize the importance of an intersectional perspective in understanding how age-specific imaginaries of work shape classed and racialized subjectivities among youth.

Furthermore, my focus is on how social inequalities rooted in class, racialization, migrancy, and neighborhood are (re)produced through participation in paid work, with particular attention to dynamics of exploitation (Bhattacharyya, 2018; de los Reyes, 2017; Ferguson, 2016). This perspective is especially relevant in contexts where invasive staffing strategies extend the wage-labor relationship beyond the workplace, colonizing broader aspects of life (de los Reyes and Holmlund, 2024), and do so in highly uneven and stratified ways (Article III; Woodman, 2012). Prior research has shown that working-class students tend to work longer hours, due to financial pressures at home compared to their middle-class peers, often to the detriment of their schooling (Staff and Mortimer, 2007; Staff et al., 2020; see also Article I). However, employers further shape these conditions by assigning last-minute shifts to teenagers who occupy social positions that limit their ability to refuse. De los Reyes (2017) argues that the critical potential of intersectionality lies not only in its ability to expose how capitalist exploitation relies on social difference, but also in its capacity to interrogate the contexts in which such differences are obscured and rendered unquestioned. Regarding the latter, de los Reyes (2017: 14) mentions norms, values, and attitudes that construct some people as different or deviant, and that often remain unrecognized in workplaces. In my contribution, I show how the shared narratives teenagers use to make sense of their jobs constitute one such context that effectively conceals both social inequalities and exploitation (Article II, III). These narratives are also central to understanding how teenagers' subjectivities as workers are formed, which is the focus of the following section.

Self-realization and dissociation: the contemporary work ethic

As highlighted throughout this thesis, the meaning-making and subjective experiences of teenage employment are ambivalent and often contradictory. I take up Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013: 84) call to emphasize and theorize 'the tense and contradictory experiences of subjectivity' of emerging laboring figures. To address this, I build on discussions of the contemporary work ethic (Farrugia, 2022; Gerrard, 2014; Weeks, 2011) to outline the imperatives and discursive frameworks through which teenage students understand their working selves and employment experiences. This notion, developed by Weeks (2011: 8), investigates what she terms the 'subjectivation function' of work—the idea that work produces not only goods and services but also social and political subjects (see also Mezzadra, 2018; Read, 2011).

Weeks (2011: 8) defines capitalism as a 'work society' not only to underscore the central, naturalized, and depoliticized role of work in society, but also to highlight its numerous extra-economic functions: 'The wage relation generates not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members'. Work thus emerges as a key site for the production of a range of subjectivities. The concept of the work ethic captures this expanded role of work—as both an individual moral practice and collective ethical obligation—by reflecting the promises and imperatives that structure how labor forces are formed. This perspective enables a critical examination of our identification with and commitment to work, as well as how world-building practices are directed into and constrained by capitalist labor relations (see also Fisher, 2009).

The work ethic reflects the social organization of labor within specific historical contexts, and Weeks (2011) traces its evolution through three key shifts. She begins with Weber's (2005) classic account of the Protestant ethic, followed by the Fordist era, when employment became closely linked to upward mobility and access to consumer goods. In the final shift, Weeks characterizes the contemporary, post-Fordist work ethic as one centered on self-expression, emotional fulfillment, and the pursuit of meaning—an orientation that increasingly blurs the boundary between labor and other parts of life. As Weeks (2011: 75) argues, the post-Fordist ethical imperative to achieve self-realization through work represents an intensification of earlier forms: 'With each reconstitution of the work ethic, more is expected of work'. However, this approach risks committing what Read (2024: 83) identifies as the fundamental error of periodization—conceiving history as a series of self-contained epochs:

> Sometimes, one works just to pay the bills, and the fear of not being able to do so is what drives one to work; at other times, one is motivated by the possibilities of consumption. All of this is topped off by the desire to do the work that one loves. These different affective orientations define less three separate epochs in the history of capital than different affective orientations one might adopt over the course of the working day.

With this caution in mind, I use the concept of the work ethic not primarily as a framework for tracing historical developments—nor do I adopt the term 'post-Fordist'—but rather as an analytical lens to explore how teenagers make sense of their experiences in low-wage service jobs in relation to the promises and demands of the work society. Here, I build on recent research that has employed the work ethic to examine the formation of youth as workers. Scholars such as Farrugia (2019, 2022) and Lamberg (2022) demonstrate how young people negotiate the work ethic in ways that shape classed and gendered subjectivities. By contributing an intersectional approach, I add complexity to this emerging field by demonstrating how processes of racialization and neighborhood-based differentiation shape understandings of the working self (Article III). Moreover, I emphasize the ambivalence and contradictions embedded in these negotiations, acknowledging that 'the same individual might experience their work as something both hated and loved' (Read, 2024: 83).

In many respects, the contemporary work ethic resembles what Foucault (1988) terms 'technologies of the self'—mechanisms through which subjectivities are shaped within the parameters of available discourses. Farrugia (2022: 44) explains that as a technology of the self, 'the work ethic mandates the cultivation of the self in line with an ethical commitment to being productive, and producing a self that offers value to employers and to the labor force'. Foucault (2008: 225) describes this as an entrepreneurial self, where 'the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise' (see also Bröckling, 2016; Rose, 1999). Building on these insights, autonomist Marxists have explored the relationship between the production of subjectivity and capitalist valorization, arguing that it transforms labor into an investment in the self as human capital (Lazzarato, 2009; see also Hardt and Negri, 2005; Virno, 2004), compelling workers to become flexible and constantly adaptable to shifting labor market demands (Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017). This dynamic couples the ideal of self-realization through work with a radical responsibilization of the workforce (Fleming, 2017); relating to the self as a business entails becoming 'active, embracing risks, capably managing difficulties, and concealing injuries' (Scharff, 2016: 108). These theories have been influential in examining how ambivalent subjectivities are produced in the context of labor market insecurity (Armano et al., 2022), particularly in the creative sectors, where a strong sense of passion for and identification with one's job often serves to legitimize precarious working conditions (Armano and Murgia, 2013; Karlsson,

2024; Lorey, 2009; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021; Scharff, 2016). My thesis contributes to this literature by examining the formation of subjectivities among the youngest workers, moving beyond contexts where passion for one's job serves as the primary frame for legitimizing precarity.

Researchers have noted that young people are often specifically targeted by the demand to cultivate an enterprising self in line with employer expectations and market values (Carbajo and Kelly, 2023; Farrugia, 2022). In my articles, the idea of paid work during school as an investment in future employability is central to understanding why teenagers participate in the labor market (Article III) and how they make sense of experiences of exploitation (Article II). However, I also complicate this picture by highlighting how additional discourses further shape their understanding of the working self (see below). A crucial context for this analysis is educational and labor market policies that emphasize personal responsibility for employability (e.g., Brunila et al., 2020; Fejes, 2010; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Åström Rudberg, 2023). For instance, Sweden's national curriculum for upper secondary school states that all education 'should contribute to ensuring that all students develop knowledge and attitudes that promote entrepreneurship, business ventures, and innovative thinking, thereby enhancing their opportunities for future work, either through entrepreneurship or employment' (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). In this context, the notion of enterprising functions as a grammar or discursive repertoire for youth, 'pivotal in forging collective understandings, vocabularies, and obligations for individualized processes of self-formation' (Carbajo and Kelly, 2023: 69).

According to Weeks (2011: 73), the contemporary work ethic is deeply entwined with notions of professionalism, where even those 'in low-waged service-sector jobs under post-Fordism are asked to approach their work professionally as if it were a "career"'. This perspective, however, contrasts sharply with how the teenagers in this study view their jobs, which none of them see as offering a long-term career. Instead, these jobs are generally described as 'just a student job' (Article II), pursued primarily to 'gain experience and some extra money' (Article III). As previously noted, this mirrors discourses prevalent in the hospitality and retail industries, where employers have invested heavily in framing such positions as ideal for young people without any 'real' financial needs (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Tannock, 2001). Such dominant discourses shape how individuals perceive their occupational roles (Williams and Connell, 2010); young employees may come to see themselves as something other than 'real workers' and their jobs as distinct from 'real jobs'. Besen-Cassino (2018: 100) examines the implications of such narratives in her interviews with teenage girls working in service and retail, who repeatedly described their jobs as not being real:

> Everyday problems on the job arise in these retail and service jobs for many teenagers, but many of them said that it is not the same as it would be in a 'real'

> workplace. From sexual harassment to bullying to working conditions, many problems arose for young women I interviewed. However, many echoed the same sentiment, saying, 'It's not my *real* job'. The fact that these jobs were for part-time employment during school years often resulted in underreporting of work-related problems. However, even though the lived experience or personal definitions of the job differ, these jobs are still real jobs, and these definitions result in the normalization of problems in the workplace.

If the grammar of enterprise offers teenagers one framework for understanding themselves as workers—positioning early work experiences as essential individual investments in future employability—the notion of having 'just a student job' instead constructs them as a category of non-workers, engaging in jobs that are not considered 'real'. These conflicting discourses are reflected in a recurring tension in the interviews with working teenagers: framing work as an expression of a passionate and dynamic self, while distancing themselves from their jobs and work experiences. As such, it may appear that the grammar of enterprise fosters a sense of identification with work, while the notion of having 'just a student job' promotes dissociation. However, this is not entirely the case; both narratives offer distinct opportunities for recognition and disengagement (Article II, III). What I aim to emphasize instead, are the tensions that shape how teenage employment is understood and made meaningful. In doing so, this thesis makes a key theoretical contribution by mapping the discursive terrain through which the youngest workers make sense of their employment conditions and working selves.

To analyze these tensions, I draw on Read's (2024: 18) discussion of how the ethical imperatives of work—its imaginaries and ideologies—both reflect and diverge from material relations and conditions:

> The ideology of work is at once a direct reflection of material conditions, as a material imperative that is transformed into an ethical ideal, and a distortion, as the ideal of a well-rewarded work ethic that increasingly deviates from a reality of increasingly demanding but poorly compensated jobs.

In a heterodox reading of Marx's (1990) distinction between concrete and abstract labor, Read (2024) reinterprets this conceptual pair to illuminate the contradictory relationship between identification and distancing, ethical ideals and alienation. Concrete labor corresponds to the qualitative aspects of work, producing particular use values, whereas abstract labor pertains to the general, interchangeable conditions of labor that form the basis of exchange values (Marx, 1990). Read (2024: 36) reconceptualizes each of these dimensions not only as distinct forms of labor, but also as ethical frameworks and bases for recognition—while simultaneously foregrounding their inherent negativity and potential for alienation. In this sense, abstract labor represents an ethic of general productivity, where individuals are deemed worthy of respect not because they provide a valued service

or produce something necessary, but simply because they have a job. At the same time, this mechanism can render the production process alienating, undermining subjectivity as it transcends particular relationships and needs. Similarly, concrete labor 'appears both an ethic and an identity (that is, a place in the social order) and a limitation and reduction of one's abilities to the skills demanded by that place' (Read, 2024: 54). These two dimensions of labor—abstract and concrete—form a dynamic contradiction with multiple effects. They do not follow a simple logic where identification in one area leads to alienation in another; rather, they present a framework in which identification and dissociation must be understood in relation to specific situations.

Approaching the dynamics of identification and dissociation with work through the conceptual pair of abstract and concrete labor offers a way to analyze the hybridity of such conditions. For teenagers, in my reading, the work ethic imposes an imperative to be passionate, entrepreneurial, and productive in an abstract and future-oriented sense. This stands in contrast to the concrete material realities of their low-wage service jobs, where experiences of precarious working conditions are often downplayed and ambiguously distanced (Article II). Yet these aspects are deeply interconnected; the ethical rewards of labor are pursued through jobs that teenagers simultaneously dissociate from. Moreover, this dynamic is inseparable from the scripts teenagers employ to make sense of their experiences—enterprising discourses and dominant narratives surrounding student jobs (Article II)—that are mobilized in ways shaped by classed and racialized differences (Article III). Introducing the conceptual pair of abstract and concrete into the analysis of the work ethic thus allows me to examine the ambivalent and contradictory meanings teenagers attribute to work, while connecting these perceptions to dominant narratives about student labor.

I am interested in what this abstract, future-oriented relationship to work does and enables in the present. In Article III, I examine how the narratives teenagers mobilize can obscure social differences, while Article II instead focuses on how such accounts may legitimize and conceal exploitation. Here, I draw on theories of aspirational labor (Allen et al., 2013; Duffy, 2017) and hope labor (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), which describe work undertaken with the expectation of future rewards, despite being poorly compensated and precarious in the present. The unpaid intern is perhaps the most emblematic figure of this labor form, performing non-remunerated tasks in the hope of visibility and future opportunities (Allen et al., 2013). Such labor operates, as Kuehn and Corrigan (2013: 12) note, 'because it is largely not experienced as exploitation or alienation'—a dynamic that resonates with how teenagers normalize and justify instances of unpaid labor in their jobs (Article II). However, whereas the intern performs hope labor in pursuit of advancement within a particular industry, this does not apply to the teenagers in this study. Rather, the hope attached to their labor remains abstract and disconnected

from the low-status service jobs they occupy. Nevertheless, this attachment produces a distinct economic logic, in which wages may be partially or symbolically replaced by the promise of future rewards—even if those rewards remain entirely imaginary (Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017; Maury, 2020).

According to Berlant (2011), such promises and fantasies about the future are rarely individual; rather, they reflect normative social discourses. As I have argued, the idea of 'becoming a worker' while still in school—and the promises associated with what part-time work might enable—can be understood as shaped by dominant imaginaries surrounding work (Article III; Weeks, 2011). Relating to one's job in this way constitutes an affective attachment to a desired state or fantasy, which Berlant (2011) defines as optimistic: a hopeful, idealized projection of future change that renders present conditions more bearable. However, Berlant (2011: 2) also contends that optimism can be cruel—particularly when the object of desire becomes an obstacle to one's flourishing:

> Optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis (Chapter 6), I draw on both senses of cruel optimism to reflect on how teenagers' abstract, future-oriented attachments to their low-wage service jobs shape their present experiences, while also employing the concept to critically examine and politicize the role of work in young people's lives today (Weeks, 2011).

In summary, this chapter has introduced the theoretical framework of my thesis, offering conceptual tools to analyze teenage student-workers through a subject-oriented approach. To begin, I examined Marxian literature that situates young people at the forefront of the changing composition of contemporary labor forces. I contribute to this body of work by grounding the analysis in the concrete realities of low-status service work, with particular attention to the mechanisms of exploitation operating in these industries. Next, I engaged with intersectional feminism to explore the mechanisms of differentiation that position teenagers as a distinct category within the labor force, linking this to questions of exploitation. Recognizing the heterogeneous nature of the teenage workforce, I further argued for unpacking the category of teenage student-workers to deepen understanding of how social inequalities are both produced and reproduced through early paid work experiences. Finally, to analyze the subjectivities of teenage workers, I outlined recent discussions on youth and the contemporary work ethic, connecting these to

the conceptual distinction between abstract and concrete labor in order to theorize the ambivalent and contradictory meanings teenagers attribute to their work.

Chapter 4. Methods and materials

In what follows, I outline my methodological approach and the empirical material, including both survey data and qualitative interviews. Article I draws on the Swedish Labor Force Survey, the most comprehensive source of data on employment and working hours in Sweden. Articles II and III draw on semi-structured interviews with teenage student-workers, offering nuanced accounts of how they make sense of their diverse work experiences. Together, the research project adopts a mixed methods approach, primarily working with the two types of data in parallel. Engaging with both data sets concurrently has generated new insights and raised important questions, especially when inconsistencies emerged in the material. As Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010: 13–14) observe, although mixed methods research grew out of triangulation literature, 'there is a growing awareness that an equally important result of combining information from different sources is divergence or dissimilarity'. I address some of the divergences in the discussion of the limitations of the survey data in this chapter and explore them further in the conclusion of the thesis (Chapter 6).

The focus of this study is teenage student-workers—also referred to simply as teenage workers—which I have operationalized as upper secondary school students (15 to 20 years of age) who are engaged in paid work while in full-time education. In Sweden, young people aged 15 to 20 can attend upper secondary school, though students typically begin at age 16 and complete their studies three years later, at 19. It is worth noting that the terminology is not entirely consistent across the articles. In Article I, for instance, I use the term young student-workers to denote the same group. However, when presenting my qualitative findings at conferences and seminars, I found this term often led to the assumption that I was discussing older students—even when their ages were specified. To consistently clarify the age group in focus and emphasize their youth, I adopted the term teenage workers, which is used throughout Articles II and III as well as in the integrative part of the dissertation.

My definition excludes teenagers whose work experience is limited to seasonal employment during vacations. While Sweden has a long-standing tradition of school students taking summer jobs in sectors such as care (Eurostat, 2024; Wadensjö, 2018), the pattern of working during the academic year is a more recent development (Article I). Since my primary interest lies in understanding this shift—specifically how teenage students have come to form a segment of the regular labor

force in certain sectors—I chose to focus on those employed during the school semesters.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. The first section covers the quantitative part of the study, where I describe the origin and structure of the data, outline the statistical analysis, and discuss the limitations of this approach. The second section focuses on the qualitative interviews, detailing the recruitment of participants, the composition of the sample, and the analysis of the material. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations.

Survey data

Data

In Article I, I approach teenagers' labor market participation statistically, using survey data linked with information from official registries. The core of the data comes from the Swedish Labor Force Survey for 2005–2019, supplied by Statistics Sweden. I chose this survey over alternatives, such as the register of gross pay based on administrative sources (Statistics Sweden, 2021), because the Labor Force Survey includes questions on working hours, enabling a detailed analysis of work patterns. The survey builds on a stratified random sample of approximately 20,000 respondents (aged 15–75 years) every quarter, which is representative of the Swedish adult population. The Labor Force Survey applies a limited rotational panel approach: individual participants are interviewed every third month over two years, and they are thus observed for eight 'waves'. My sample consists of individuals in upper secondary education (15 to 20 years of age). Students on summer holidays have been excluded to avoid measuring seasonal employment.

The Labor Force Survey contains information on work, studies, and desire to work. However, the data lack certain demographic background variables of importance. For this reason, the records have been linked with register data from STATIV, an integrated longitudinal database created for integration studies, also provided by Statistics Sweden. Register data are usually compiled for administrative purposes and consist of population data at low levels of aggregation. As Mellander (2017) points out, such data are a fundamentally Nordic phenomenon and provide several advantages. For example, since every citizen in Sweden can be traced across multiple registries through their personal identification numbers, it is possible to enrich already collected data by matching techniques. In my study, the Labor Force Survey data are matched with records from STATIV, where the latter supplies information on, among other things, educational attainment, family background (parental employment, education, and migration), and household characteristics

(family type and household income). Additionally, a variable that measures the type of educational program has been sourced from the Swedish Register of Education.

Central to my study is measuring teenage employment and working hours. I operationalize these concepts using two variables from the Labor Force Survey. The variable *employment status* distinguishes between those in employment and those who are not and is used to measure employment rates over time. The outcome of the regression models is the variable *the number of hours (actually) worked per week*. This is a continuous measure of the self-reported number of hours worked in the main occupation and any secondary employment.

Analysis

In Article I, I explore the trends in employment rates and the worker profiles of teenage students. The first research question asks *how employment rates among school students have developed between the years 2006 and 2019* and is answered through an analysis of descriptive statistics based on Labor Force Survey data. Two subsequent research questions explore worker profiles and examine *how being involved in part-time work during the school year varies for differently situated students in terms of gender, age, class, migration background, and education*, and *how work patterns, in terms of the number of hours worked, vary for differently situated students*. These are jointly answered by conducting a zero-inflated negative binomial regression model on a pooled subsample of the Labor Force Survey for the years 2015–2018, where I control for time trends and geographical context by adding years and local labor market units as fixed effects. This is a mixture regression model with two components fitted simultaneously: a logistic part and a negative binomial model. The chosen approach makes it possible to capture the full richness of the data: it models the variation in working hours among working students, and differences *between* workers and non-workers. Overall, the model selection process has been guided by the outline proposed by Perumean-Chaney et al. (2013) (cf. Fávero et al., 2021).

Regression modeling is about establishing robust associations between variables while controlling for potentially confounding factors. This method has several implications. First, it means exploring general trends rather than particular phenomena, and furthermore not being able to examine causality. For example, we can see links between engaging in paid work and factors such as gender, grades, and class background—but these variables are broad categories, simplifications of complex social realities, and comprehensible only in relation to theory and the wider research field. Secondly, finding robust associations and controlling for confounders posits the challenge of omitting important variables. Simultaneously, there is the challenge of overfitting the model and presenting noise. To avoid the latter, I have opted for a selected number of controls that have support from previous research (Aneshensel, 2012). To check for robustness, I have tried different versions of fixed

effects to control for contextual dependency: local labor markets, municipalities, and municipality groupings. Moreover, the model has been compared to several alternatives, such as Bayesian and random effects versions.

Limitations

The Labor Force Survey is designed to be generalizable to the total working population in Sweden aged 15 to 74. However, two interlinked data limitations must be addressed. First, while most reported employment figures may underrepresent the scope of teenage students' waged work, as they often fail to capture the informal labor market, the Labor Force Survey is also known to underestimate non-standard workers more generally (Larsen and Ilsøe, 2021). Second, nonresponse rates have increased over the past decade, particularly among 15 to 24-year-olds. In this cohort, nonresponse rates rose from 15–20 percent in the early 2000s to almost 60 percent in 2020 (Statistics Sweden, 2024). An analysis by Statistics Sweden (2018b) highlights a significant relative bias in variables related to young people, including students. While some biases can be addressed through weighting the data, as was done in Article I for descriptive statistics, these weights do not apply to regression models, which would inflate the number of observations. Nevertheless, Statistics Sweden asserts that general estimates of level and change remain usable, despite the rising nonresponse rates (Statistics Sweden, 2018b).

The findings in Article I should be interpreted with these limitations in mind. For instance, the employment rates presented are noticeably lower than those derived from the register of gross pay based on administrative sources, even with the application of survey weights. As a result, I caution against interpreting the figures as absolute numbers; they are better understood as reflecting general trends. Moreover, while the statistical analysis in Article I indicates that students from the Global South are less likely to work, and that men in this group tend to work at a lower intensity, the qualitative data suggest a different pattern. In my qualitative sample, these students often have the most intensive work schedules, which aligns with findings from other qualitative studies on school students with a migration background in Sweden (Lindblad, 2016). Although the two data sources are not directly comparable, and the inconsistencies may stem from specificities in my qualitative sample, it is worth considering whether they also reflect issues with the quality of the survey data. Youth with a migration background are among the most underrepresented groups in the Labor Force Survey (Statistics Sweden, 2024). To resolve these issues, I have aimed to be as transparent and critical as possible, both in presenting and discussing the results in Article I.

Despite these limitations, I believe the figures offer valuable context for the overall study. As previously noted, few large-scale surveys are available to track participation rates and work patterns over time among specific populations. The data limitations and inconsistencies also raise broader questions about its overall

suitability for analyzing my research topic, which is an important issue to consider. Comparing official labor market statistics with qualitative findings is essential when examining emerging segments of the labor market, as it prompts critical discussions about whether large-scale surveys can accurately capture the evolving world of work (Murgia et al., 2020). I return to this point in the concluding discussion (Chapter 6).

Interviews

Recruiting participants

Articles II and III draw on qualitative interviews conducted in 2020. Since I aimed to explore the heterogeneity among teenage student-workers, it was important to ensure a varied sample in relation to class, migration background, and gender. My ambition was to recruit participants by presenting the research project at schools, since this would enable me to access many students at once. Moreover, I could actively use the fact that schools and educational programs have different student populations. I set up two broad selection criteria to guide the process of choosing and approaching schools. First, I aimed to present the project for students in academic programs and vocational programs, since the latter mainly attract teenagers from working-class backgrounds and have skewed gender distributions (Forsberg, 2018; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). Moreover, students may have different work experiences depending on their chosen educational path, since the vocational programs have closer ties to the labor market through, for example, workplace training. Secondly, considering the segregated character of the Swedish upper secondary school system (Forsberg, 2018; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023), I looked for schools with diverse student populations regarding migration background, using official statistics provided by the National Agency for Education.

My first round of recruitment started in the spring of 2020, which coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. All upper secondary schools in Sweden closed and converted to online teaching during the spring term, which forced me to consider alternative ways to find participants. First, I tried to access digital classrooms and present the project online. However, teachers and principals were generally reluctant to invite me. Those who responded when I contacted them told me that they were too busy and that the situation was chaotic at the moment. Two teachers allowed me to circulate a digital flier and present my project on Zoom, but these efforts did not generate any participants. Contacts with some major workplaces employing school students were also unsuccessful. Finally, I posted an advertisement on the Department of Sociology's website, encouraging friends and

colleagues to share online. One participant was recruited as a result of this approach, which later led to four more interviews through snowball sampling. These five participants were all girls who attended a renowned school, and all but one came from middle-class backgrounds.

I conducted a second recruitment round in the fall of 2020. For a few months, the schools opened again due to a lower spread of the virus. Consequently, I could resume my initial recruitment strategy. I emailed sociology teachers and guidance counselors who worked at schools that roughly matched my selection criteria. I chose these two professional groups because I presumed that they could be interested in contributing to the study. Overall, this was a successful strategy and the interest in helping me was greater than I had expected. In particular, the guidance counselors turned out to be important gatekeepers. Many were enthusiastic about the study and helped me access several classes in the same school. When I received positive responses, I contacted the principals to get formal consent before visiting the schools (Appendix 1).

I visited six upper secondary schools located in three different cities in Sweden. Including the school that the first five interviewees attended, students from seven schools are represented in the sample. Four of these offer academic programs, two are vocational schools, and one school offers both types of programs. The schools differ considerably in terms of their student population. For example, the proportion of students with a migration background[6] ranged from 14 to 85 percent between the schools. Similarly, the proportion of students whose parents had attended higher education ranged from 23 to 90 percent. I presented my research project to 20 school classes and distributed written information about the project (Appendix 2). I told the students I looked for interviewees with experience of doing paid work (formally or informally) while in school. After the presentation, I distributed a contact form for students interested in participating. Once again, the response was overwhelming, with over 100 students signing up. However, nearly half did not respond when I later followed up by text message or email. I chose to contact each student only once to avoid pressuring anyone into participating.

Introducing the participants

The qualitative data consists of 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with school students between 15 and 20 years old who have experience doing paid work while in full-time education. The conversations lasted between one and two hours. Table 1 presents some characteristics of the sample.

[6] The term—called 'foreign background' ['utländsk bakgrund' in Swedish] in official statistics—is defined by the National Agency for Education as either the student in question or both parents being born outside of Sweden.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Sample characteristics	N = 40
Gender	
Men	14
Women	26
Type of educational program	
Higher education preparatory	28
Vocational education and training	12
Class background*	
Working class	22
Middle class	18
Migration background	
Student or both parents born in Africa, Asia, or South America	13
Student or at least one parent born in Sweden	27
Working hours	
Marginal (<15 hours per week)	23
Intensive (≥15 hours per week)	17

* Based on parents' educational attainment and occupational status

Some comments can be made regarding the sample. First, the gender balance is uneven, with 14 young men and 26 young women. This was not intentional, as I aimed for equal representation, but fewer men in academic programs were interested in participating. However, the numbers do reflect a broader trend where more young women tend to work than their male counterparts (Article I; Statistics Sweden, 2021). Secondly, the students born, or have parents born, in countries outside of Europe, all had origins in North Africa or Southwest Asia. Three of these students had migrated to Sweden by themselves as children. Finally, a substantial number of the participants (17) work intensively − here defined as 15 hours or more per week. Among this group, there are a few students who work as much as 40 hours per week, thereby managing full-time jobs while in school. In my sample, intensive work was more prevalent among students with a migration background and those from working-class families, though these categories also overlap.

The interviewees work across a range of sectors, largely reflecting current trends in student employment both in Sweden and internationally (Beblavý and Fabo, 2015; Statistics Sweden, 2021). The most common jobs are in private services, such as restaurants and cafés, where participants work (or have worked) as waitstaff, and in retail. Other roles represented in the sample include cleaners, manual laborers (e.g., in factories, construction, and car repair), healthcare workers (retirement homes and home care), babysitters, sports coaches, referees, and platform workers. Many participants had already held several jobs despite their relatively short careers, with some working multiple jobs while attending school full-time. Interestingly, all participants had some experience in the service sector, even though this was not an initial selection criterion. Most participants reported similar experiences of low-wage, fixed-term service work, which I examine more closely in Article II. This is noteworthy given that many teenagers lost their jobs in these sectors due to

pandemic-related restrictions (Statistics Sweden, 2021). In the interviews, several described losing shifts when the restaurants, cafés, and bars where they worked were affected by these limitations. However, many also noted being called back on short notice once restrictions were lifted, highlighting how this group is used as a supply of flexible workers.

Interviewing, coding, and analysis

The interviews were conducted during 2020, and the pandemic also affected this process. The initial idea was to let the participants suggest a place for the meeting, and the first interviews mainly took place in various cafés. However, most interviews were conducted just as a second spike of Covid-19 infections occurred in Sweden, and increasingly strict restrictions were implemented to curb the spread of the virus. This meant that many interviews had to be conducted online. In comparison to the face-to-face interviews, I do not believe that the online setting affected the conversations in any noteworthy way. There were a few cases where technical issues temporarily interrupted the interviews. Most often, however, the participants seemed well accustomed to the format, probably due to the previous semester of online teaching.

The semi-structured interviews followed a guide with open-ended questions about seven different themes (Appendix 3). The main focus was on the teenagers' work situations. This theme included questions exploring the motivations for working, work experiences, employment conditions, and their general thoughts on waged work during school. Other themes included the participants' backgrounds, economic situations, schools, leisure time, work-school-life balance, and aspirations for the future. The questions in the interview guide were generally treated as suggestions and were not followed in a strict sense. Occasionally, I needed to be flexible and adapt the questions to better fit the participant's situation. For instance, the interview guide was designed with the expectation that participants lived with their families, which did not apply to some, particularly those who had arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors. Similarly, it assumed that participants held just one job, whereas several were balancing multiple jobs. However, such issues were generally managed by some alterations of the questions and did not affect the conversations meaningfully. Overall, the interviews flowed well, although some participants—particularly a few of the teenage men—required more frequent prompting to engage in conversation.

After recording the conversations, I transcribed all interviews verbatim and pseudonymized the documents by removing the names of people and workplaces. I then read through the transcripts, taking some initial, open-ended, and primarily descriptive codes. At this stage, I aimed to minimize theoretical engagement, as I wanted to avoid a strongly theory-led reading of the material and remain as open and curious as possible. The ideas for the two qualitative articles were both sparked

by data-driven observations I made during this process. The first was that the teenagers often described rather precarious working conditions in a light-hearted manner, downplaying the seriousness of these experiences. The second was the strikingly similar language they used to explain their motivations for working, despite significant differences in their life circumstances and the role of paid work in their everyday lives. Articles II and III both emerged from attempts to make sense of these observations, which initially struck me as puzzling. To do so, I engaged in more focused rounds of coding, in abductive dialogue with theory and previous research (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

Article II arose from my attempts to understand how teenagers made sense of their precarious working conditions. Drawing on the strategy of analytical bracketing—which involves capturing different dimensions of the material, focusing both on *what* is being said and *how* meaning is constructed (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018)—I conducted a second round of coding that concentrated on *what* precarious working conditions looked like and *how* the teenagers talked about them. Examples of 'what' codes included experiences such as not receiving the correct salary and being pressured to take on additional shifts. Engaging with existing literature on working conditions in low-status service jobs, I identified these as forms of exploitation aimed at extracting unpaid labor time. The article's core aim emerged more distinctly from this understanding: to examine how teenagers make sense of and legitimize their experiences of such exploitation. I used the 'how' codes to categorize different ways of speaking about and accounting for such working conditions, including justifications or explanatory statements. These codes typically consisted of short phrases drawn directly from the data, such as 'It's just a part-time job' or 'I'm doing it for the experience, not the money'. These phrases were analyzed and sorted into three broad themes that reflected the different rationales participants employed to make sense of their experiences.

In Article III, I examined more closely the shared language teenagers used to describe their motivations for working—where nearly all stated they worked to 'gain experience' and 'earn some extra money'—despite notable differences in work patterns and levels of financial dependency. Given the widespread use of these phrases across the sample, I understood them as expressions of dominant narratives that participants drew on to make sense of their experiences in low-status service jobs. However, my analysis was not narratological in a strict sense; rather, it was informed by thematic analysis, focusing on the notions of 'gaining experience' and 'earning extra money' as recurring patterns in the material, which I coded and used to construct an analytical narrative (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This analysis revealed that these themes not only cut across the social differences among participants, but also served as a form of shared language that could obscure those very differences. To remain attentive to these dynamics, I compiled summaries of each interview, outlining the teenagers' life circumstances and the role of paid work within them. Comparing these summaries with the coded data helped to identify broader patterns

related to social inequalities—particularly valuable given that many participants were reluctant to address such issues explicitly.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that while gendered dimensions of participants' work experiences were evident in the overall material, they are not a primary focus in the two qualitative articles. Previous research shows that workplace harassment by clients or customers is more frequently reported by teenage girls than boys, often shaped by the intersection of age and gender (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Cohen, 2013; Sheppard et al., 2019). These findings are reflected in my material, where several female participants working in hospitality recounted experiences of gendered and sexual harassment. However, these issues ultimately fell outside the scope of the two articles discussed above. Nevertheless, given the presence of such accounts—and particularly in light of gender emerging as a significant theme in the quantitative Article I—this remains an important area for further exploration based on this material. However, both quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated in the concluding Chapter 6 to reflect on the gendered dimensions of teenage labor, specifically in relation to the second research question.

Ethical questions

The overall project has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2020-00666). This is a prerequisite for accessing secondary data from Statistics Sweden, as well as registry data, due to the inclusion of sensitive personal information. The sensitive nature of the microdata meant that it could not be shared with other researchers during the peer review process, as is otherwise standard practice. Instead, the data could only be accessed and processed via Statistics Sweden's secure online platform. This restriction required that data processing and analysis be conducted with particular ethical care, as there was no way for other researchers to independently verify my conclusions. To mitigate this risk, I have made my code openly available and described the robustness checks as transparently as possible in Article I, in order to enhance the reliability of the findings.

The qualitative interviews were conducted in accordance with the guidelines set out by the Swedish Research Council (2017; see also 2024), following the principles of information, consent, confidentiality, and use. Many of the participants expressed fears about being identified during the interviews. This was especially the case for those working in smaller businesses. When they conveyed critical opinions about their jobs or told me stories that could potentially harm their employers' reputations, they often added, 'And this is anonymous, right?' For these reasons, being careful of the participants' integrity has been especially important. I have chosen not to specify any geographical locations since this has little significance for the analysis.

When using direct quotes, I have avoided unique details that may risk exposing the person concerned.

Mason (2002) and Eldén (2020) encourage researchers to actively engage in ethical questions and dilemmas throughout the research process. A practical challenge in this study has been ensuring that informed consent was thoroughly understood. I formally introduced the research project and the purpose of the interviews on several occasions, both orally and in writing. Nevertheless, when recruiting participants, I sometimes received questions such as, 'I don't understand; how are you going to use these conversations?' and 'How can this be research?' Some of these inquiries were related to my appearance, with many asking how I could publish research since I was 'so young' and 'didn't look like a researcher'. These questions often came from vocational program students who had limited exposure to higher education and appeared to associate 'research' with natural sciences, laboratories, and white coats. When needed, I took extra time to explain and discuss the broader nature of social science research in the classrooms during participant recruitment. I often shared a few newspaper headlines based on social science research relevant to their experiences—for example, 'Young people in Sweden experience anxiety from the pressure to achieve high grades'—and described how such findings could be derived from interviews. I then explained that I aimed to draw insights into the work experiences of teenagers in Sweden, and discussed how their interviews could contribute to such findings in the future.

At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated the purpose of the research, explained the principles of confidentiality and data use, and obtained consent to begin recording. Despite these precautions, a few participants still expressed confusion afterward, asking, 'I still don't quite understand how you plan to use this and how this relates to research'. The concept of qualitative research appeared unfamiliar to them, with many struggling to grasp how a deeply personal interview could be transformed into research findings. In such cases, I took extra time to explain the research process, particularly the steps of coding and identifying themes. I also encouraged participants to contact me with any further questions and reassured them that they retained the right to withdraw from the study, even after completing the interview.

Another ethical concern related to representation. Several of my participants who lived in socio-economically marginalized neighborhoods compared themselves to, and expressed harsh judgements about, non-working youth in these areas—often portraying them as lazy or criminal in ways that echoed dominant discourses surrounding these neighborhoods and the people who inhabit them (de los Reyes, 2016). The challenge was how to analyze and present these statements without feeding into racialized stereotypes. Reflecting on migrant youth expressing racist views about other migrants, Krivonos (2019: 54) notes that being ethical in such situations 'meant remaining committed to understanding people's conceptions of themselves, and not representing them in ways that would reproduce negative

stereotypes'. In line with this approach, I have sought to understand what these statements reveal about teenagers' self-conceptions as workers, closely analyzing instances in the material where such discourses were mobilized. This led me to interpret the invocation of racialized stereotypes of unemployed or criminal youth as a strategy for countering imposed classifications and territorial stigmatization (Article III).

Relatedly, another dilemma has been how to do justice to the participants' narratives when discussing their jobs. As mentioned, Article II addresses the tendency among most teenagers to downplay experiences of exploitative working conditions. My interest here lay in the various rationales participants invoked to legitimize exploitation, and how these were shaped by broader discourses and social imaginaries surrounding teenage labor. At the same time, it was crucial to avoid portraying participants as cultural dupes—that is, as people who uncritically adopt and internalize subjugating discourses. I was guided in this by Gill's (2007) notion of critical respect, an orientation to qualitative research that entails attentive, respectful listening without letting go of the need to question and interrogate. As Gill (2007: 77) puts it, the analytical task is 'to contextualize these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and, above all, to locate them in a wider context'. In Article II, I treat the act of relating participants' statements to broader discourses as a way of situating them within such a wider context. At the same time, I have aimed to scrutinize and foreground the many nuances, emotions, in-betweens, and contradictions embedded in these expressions.

Finally, I have frequently reflected on my positionality as a researcher—being a white university employee—and questioned how this may have affected the material and its validity. This concern was most pressing when discussing financial issues with participants who had experienced strain at home, particularly those with a migration background. For example, one participant felt compelled to clarify that I should not view her parents as 'lazy immigrants' after explaining that she worked to support her family. Others strongly denied working for financial reasons, even when it became evident that they used their earnings to contribute to the household budget. To what extent did such responses reflect a desire not to be judged by me in the interview setting? Unfortunately, there is no definitive answer to that question. During the conversations, I sought to reduce the risk of sounding stigmatizing when asking about financial matters by emphasizing that these were standard questions posed to all participants. Even so, discussing these issues remained challenging, and the narratives were often contradictory, as analyzed in Article III. Since qualitative data cannot be separated from the context in which it is generated, being transparent about these concerns—and how I attempted to address them—is one way of producing more trustworthy findings.

Chapter 5. Summary of findings

This section presents Articles I to III separately, describing their research questions, analyses, and main conclusions. The findings are then brought together and discussed in relation to the overarching research questions in the concluding Chapter 6.

Article I

The Studentification of Low-Wage Service Work: Who Participates? Trends and Variations in Part-Time Work among Young Student-Workers.

In Article I, I analyze data from the Swedish Labor Force Survey (2006–2019) with linked records from population-based registries, to examine employment rates and worker profiles of school students aged 15 to 20 who engage in part-time work. The analysis situates teenage employment within broader sectoral and regulatory changes in the Swedish labor market. Furthermore, it critically examines the social composition and work patterns of teenage student-workers through an intersectional lens, addressing social differences such as gender, class, and migration background. The article contributes to understanding teenage student-workers as a heterogeneous figure of labor within Sweden's low-wage, non-standard service sectors, and provides a contextual foundation for the qualitative analyses in Articles II and III.

The first research question examines how employment rates among teenage students evolved during the studied period, characterized by the liberalization of temporary contracts and reduced employment protection for non-standard workers in Sweden. The findings reveal a notable increase in teenage students' employment rates, although the Labor Force Survey likely underestimates the figures. This rise is primarily driven by growing participation in the service sector, particularly hospitality and retail. Building on existing research that identifies youth as a key labor source in interactive consumer services (Besen-Cassino, 2014; Cant, 2020; Yates, 2017), I argue that teenage students constitute an emerging segment of the flexible, low-wage workforce. However, the findings highlight a gendered dimension to this trend: while employment rates have risen for teenagers overall, the increase is significantly more pronounced among girls. Given previous studies emphasizing the risks of sexual harassment faced by teenage girls in these

industries, and in light of my results, I propose further research on the working conditions and experiences of this group.

The second empirical section of the article examines differences within the teenage workforce, addressing how participation in paid work during the school year varies among students based on gender, age, class, migration background, and education. The analysis engages with intersectional perspectives on working life, acknowledging part-time work as a multidimensional phenomenon with patterns, risks, and rewards that can differ significantly. Previous research suggests that the impact of waged work during school depends on the number of hours worked: a few hours per week may yield positive effects, but exceeding a certain threshold increasingly risks negative consequences, particularly jeopardizing academic success (Neyt et al., 2019). Building on these insights, an additional research question investigates how work patterns—specifically the number of hours worked—vary for differently situated school students.

To address these questions, a zero-inflated negative binomial regression model is applied to uncover intersecting patterns of social divisions associated with young students' participation in paid work, using a pooled subsample of survey data. The model consists of two components, each addressing a specific research question. The first component examines differences between workers and non-workers in upper secondary school. A key finding is that gender and prior educational attainment are strongly correlated with employment: girls are more than twice as likely to engage in paid work, and the likelihood increases with higher grades from compulsory school. The second component analyzes variations in work patterns among differently situated student-workers. The findings reveal that students with parents who have higher education and income levels are predicted to work fewer hours per week. This suggests that the risks and rewards of waged work are unevenly distributed. Girls and high-achieving students are more likely to work a limited number of hours, which may have positive outcomes. In contrast, intensive work—associated with potential harm such as poor academic performance and school dropout—is more prevalent among students from disadvantaged class backgrounds. These patterns indicate that paid work among teenage students can reinforce or exacerbate class-based inequalities. The results highlight the necessity of examining teenage work through an intersectional lens.

Finally, the regression model indicates that teenage students with migration backgrounds from the Global South are less likely to work during school, with boys in this group also less likely to engage in high-intensity work. While this aligns with prior research on employment disadvantages (Brandén et al., 2016), it contrasts with qualitative studies that report high work levels in this group (Article III; Lindblad, 2016). Given the challenges in capturing employment figures for young people with migration backgrounds in official data, my regression results should be interpreted cautiously.

Article II

Making Sense of Exploitation: Teenage Workers' Experiences of Unpaid Labor in Low-Wage Service Jobs

Article II draws on the qualitative interviews with teenage workers (N = 40) to examine how exploitative working conditions in low-wage service jobs are perceived and legitimized. I engage with a growing body of research showing that the extraction of unpaid labor is both prevalent and systematic in sectors such as hospitality and retail (e.g., Campbell et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2024; Milkman et al., 2012), and that such practices are often accepted and normalized by workers (Campbell et al., 2019; Clibborn, 2021). The article focuses on wage theft and the coercive scheduling of additional shifts—both recurrent themes in the interviews—which I interpret as employer strategies for intensifying the extraction of unpaid labor time. I ask: how do teenage workers make sense of these experiences? In addressing this question, the article makes a twofold contribution. First, it advances theorization of how unpaid labor in labor-intensive, low-wage services becomes normalized as part of broader processes of capital accumulation (Cole et al., 2024; Maury, 2020). Second, it adds to a wider scholarship on young people's acceptance of precarious working conditions—a field that has often drawn on studies of older youth cohorts, particularly within creative or highly skilled sectors.

Theoretically, I use a subject-oriented approach (Armano et al., 2022; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021), meaning that I analyze how teenage workers' subjectivities—their ways of perceiving, understanding, and relating to themselves and to work—are shaped in relation to experiences of exploitation. I argue that this is a valuable lens for understanding how practices such as wage theft and the coercive scheduling of additional shifts come to be legitimized; that is, seen as inevitable, unchallengeable, or even as something other than exploitation. Specifically, I identify three rationales, understood as broader sets of ideas embedded in various discourses that shape how participants relate to themselves and their work, which teenagers draw on to make sense of and legitimize exploitation.

The first rationale positioned experiences of exploitation as secondary to a broader objective: using part-time work during school as a means of gaining experience. Many teenagers emphasized that violations related to pay and working hours were less important than benefits such as enhancing their CVs or gaining a competitive edge in the labor market. This reasoning drew on enterprising discourses that framed school-time employment as a form of self-investment and a matter of individual responsibility. Low-wage service work was thus perceived as a kind of hope labor, where present-day underpayment was tolerated in exchange for anticipated future opportunities. This perspective enabled participants to distance themselves from, and ultimately legitimize, their experiences of unpaid labor.

Other participants downplayed the significance of unpaid labor by emphasizing the temporary nature of their jobs—a pattern also observed in previous research on youth and precarious work (Trappmann et al., 2024). In this second rationale, however, I argue that such reasoning extends beyond the transitional role of student employment to assumptions about the jobs themselves. These positions were often described as something other than 'real work', where accurate pay and proper conditions were not expected. This echoes employer discourses that portray such jobs as temporary stopgaps rather than legitimate employment. By invoking similar narratives, participants constructed an understanding of themselves as not quite 'real workers', which in turn helped legitimize exploitative practices.

Finally, some participants explicitly criticized their working conditions, describing wage theft and coercive extra shifts as forms of youth exploitation. This third rationale framed teenage workers as vulnerable, enabling a collective and structural understanding of their position in the labor market. At the same time, this vulnerability was also perceived as a personal failing. All participants who invoked this line of reasoning expressed some degree of individual guilt for having allowed labor violations to occur. This produced an ambivalent account of exploitation—one that supported collective critique while also placing part of the blame on themselves. As I argue in the article, it shaped an understanding of the working self as both *exploited* and *exploitable*.

In conclusion, although analytically distinct, the three rationales often overlapped in practice, with participants engaging with them in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Together, I argue, they form a discursive terrain that shapes understandings of the working self and helps explain how unpaid labor became ambivalently accepted aspects of these jobs. This analysis deepens our understanding of how the extraction of unpaid labor becomes systemic in low-wage service sectors (Cole et al., 2024), and why such exploitation often goes unrecognized in everyday life (Maury, 2020). While these rationales are specific to teenage students, similar dynamics have been observed in other parts of the service sector, raising important questions about how early labor experiences may shape expectations of work. I therefore call for further research into the long-term consequences of teenage employment, particularly its role in normalizing exploitative conditions.

Article III

Beyond the Narratives of Experience and Money: The Formation of Teenage Students as Labor in Sweden

Article III, also based on the qualitative interviews, further explores the diverse meanings teenage students attribute to paid work and how these relate to the shaping

of youth subjectivities. The article's starting point stemmed from the empirical observation that nearly all participants, regardless of their life circumstances, stated that they worked to 'gain experience' and 'earn some extra money'. This rhetoric was remarkably consistent across otherwise diverse interviews. I interpret these phrases as reflecting dominant and normative narratives through which participants oriented themselves and ascribed meaning to their experiences in low-status services jobs. The guiding research question is therefore: what do the narratives of experience and extra money reveal about the formation of teenage students as workers?

To answer this question, I depart from Weeks' (2011) conceptualization of the contemporary work ethic, combined with an intersectional approach. According to Weeks, capitalist societies are characterized by a work ethic that frames paid work as essential to achieving personal fulfilment and self-realization. This ethic operates as a cultural imperative, urging individuals to shape a self that is valuable within the labor market. In the article, I examine how narratives around working during school to 'gain experience' and 'earn extra money' are articulated in response to this normative demand. However, I explore how embodied inequalities shape different expressions of this ethic, analyzing how racialization, migrancy, and neighborhood context further shape understandings of the working self. In doing so, the article contributes to theorizing the ideological and practical role of paid work in shaping youth subjectivities while providing insight into how differently situated teenagers come to form an available low-wage service labor force.

The first empirical section examines the widespread idea of engaging in paid work during school to 'gain experience', which participants generally understood as an investment in future employability and a way to get ahead of their peers. The analysis reveals how this engagement with the work ethic took different forms. For middle-class participants, becoming a worker while still in school was closely linked to demonstrating desirable character traits via their CVs; work experiences were used to cultivate a passionate and driven self-image. Paid employment was valued primarily in abstract, future-oriented terms—as evidence of early initiative and activity. Among racialized teenagers from socio-economically marginalized neighborhoods, similar narratives of employability and self-development were shaped by different conditions: paid work also served as a means of distancing themselves from stigmatizing representations of unemployed and criminal youth in their neighborhoods. In this sense, becoming a worker was interpreted as part of a declassificatory struggle for worth and respectability (Krivonos, 2018).

The second empirical section analyzes how wages were framed as 'just some extra money'. Since most teenagers emphasized work as a means of gaining experience, they tended to tone down financial motives; becoming an employable subject partly depended on distancing oneself from the material rewards of work. This reflects the ethics of the work society, where individuals are expected not only to work but to become workers, while poverty and unemployment are stigmatized as personal

failings (Tyler, 2015; Weeks, 2011). In this context, I show that the rhetoric of earning 'just some extra money' functioned as a form of stigma management for young people experiencing financial strain at home. These participants often downplayed the importance of their wages, despite contributing significantly to the household budget. Yet in mobilizing this narrative, they also obscured financial inequalities that shaped their relationship to work.

Throughout the analysis, I show how the narratives of working to 'gain experience' and 'earn some extra money' construct an ideal of the employable subject, while obscuring the unequal resources required to attain it. Realizing this ideal demands careful balance and support, as paid work could not be allowed to jeopardize academic success. Yet the conditions necessary to sustain that balance were often undermined. Differences rooted in class, racialization, and migrancy shaped participants' varying levels of dependence on their jobs, with both material and symbolic motivations prompting some to take on intensive work schedules. This dynamic was further exacerbated by exploitative practices, such as employers requesting extra shifts at short notice, rendering some teenagers especially susceptible to exploitation as flexible labor. This caused work to colonize everyday life in multiple ways, reducing time for sleep, socializing, and family.

In summary, this article shows how, for these youngest workers, the work ethic is future-oriented and abstract, centered less on the nature of specific jobs and more on the perceived value of 'gaining experience'. Early employment becomes a way of crafting a self-image as active and entrepreneurial, with earnings framed as secondary—'just something extra'. While many teenagers share this orientation, their ability to embody the ideal of the employable self is shaped by social inequalities. Throughout the article, I emphasize the need for an intersectional perspective—one that accounts for how class, racialization, migrancy, and neighborhood context shape teenagers' understandings of the working self.

Chapter 6. Concluding discussion

In this doctoral thesis, I have examined the development of teenage students as a low-paid, flexible service labor force in Sweden, offering insights into their work experiences, heterogeneous social composition, and subjectivities as workers. Now I return to the research questions in light of the findings presented in the articles, highlighting the study's empirical and theoretical contributions that cut across them. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of these findings for policy and practice, and by suggesting directions for future research.

Results and contributions

The first research question addressed the patterns and experiences of teenage students as labor in the Swedish context. I have shown a clear rise in participation rates among this group, particularly in the hospitality and retail sectors (Article I). I situated this trend within broader shifts in the Swedish labor market, including the liberalization of temporary contracts and activating labor market policies. As discussed in Chapter 2, these reforms were often framed as strategies to reduce unemployment, especially among youth—though their effectiveness remains contested. My findings add another dimension to this picture by showing how these developments can be understood in relation to a studentification of non-standard, interactive service work (Article I). In this way, the thesis contributes to recent research on the changing composition of Sweden's low-wage workforce (Alfonsson et al., 2024).

Another pattern I have identified is the extraction of unpaid labor time, often through wage theft and coercive scheduling of extra shifts. In Article II, these employer practices served as a point of departure rather than a primary finding, but they warrant attention as a recurring feature of teenage students' working conditions. International research has shown that such practices are common in low-unionized sectors and are often enabled by workers' tacit acceptance. In the Swedish context, my findings revealed that these forms of exploitation were not only widespread but also frequently normalized by teenage students themselves. These experiences reflect a labor market context in which young workers were effectively left to fend for themselves: with weak or absent legal enforcement and union representation, violations could spread and become routine. This presents serious challenges for

trade unions, as I will discuss below. More broadly, these findings lend evidence to research that highlights unpaid labor as a key driver of precarization (Maury, 2020).

The second research question examined how intersecting social differences—rooted in class, gender, racialization, migrancy, neighborhood and age—structure teenagers' work in low-wage service sectors. My analysis demonstrated that the rise in teenage employment was partially driven by an increase in girls' participation—gendered patterns that intensified over time (Article I). I further established that girls and students with higher grades were significantly more likely to be employed during the school year compared to their peers. Feminist scholarship has linked such patterns to gendered discourses and entrepreneurial ideals that position young, middle-class women as competitive, self-managing subjects (Ringrose, 2007; Sheppard et al., 2019), which I suggested as one possible explanation in Article I. However, my qualitative findings offered little support for this interpretation. Both girls and boys engaged with similar employability discourses, presenting paid work as a strategic investment in their imagined competitive futures (Articles II and III). This raises the possibility that the overrepresentation of girls reflects not gendered dispositions, but labor market preferences for certain bodies in interactive service work (Besen-Cassino, 2018; McDowell, 2020). Scholars have argued that hiring practices in these sectors often hinges on physical appearance and social presentation (Gatta, 2011; Williams and Connell, 2010). Although this study did not directly examine hiring practices, I argue that future research in the Swedish context should explore how such dynamics might reinforce not only gendered but also classed and racialized inequalities among teenagers and youth more broadly.

My findings also showed that around one-third of all students worked at an intensity that may be harmful—a pattern more common among disadvantaged youth (Article I). The interviews deepened this picture, illustrating how class, racialization, migrancy, and neighborhood-based differences shaped incentives to enter the workforce at a young age (Article III). For some, paid work became essential: materially, to support their families; socially, to distance themselves from what they described as 'the bad crowd'; and symbolically, to assert themselves as hardworking and responsible in contrast to racialized stereotypes of poverty or criminality. Where such drivers of intensive work converged, work often encroached on study time, sleep, and social life. These findings complicate assumptions about de-commodified, middle-class student workers and show how social inequalities were actively reproduced through paid labor—shaping not only future outcomes but also teenagers' everyday lives. Moreover, the results highlighted the active role of employers in shaping these dynamics: invasive labor-use strategies intersected with some young people's heightened dependency on their jobs, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation (Articles II and III). As the Nordic debate on teenage labor remains limited, this study offers important insights by highlighting that the uneven distribution of risks and rewards can only be understood by acknowledging the heterogeneity within this workforce. It also underscores the need to consider not

only the quantity of work but its qualitative dimensions—particularly mechanisms of exploitation—in order to meaningfully assess the implications of early employment.

The third and final research question addressed the symbolic dimensions of paid work, exploring the meanings teenagers attribute to it and how these relate to the contemporary work ethic and dominant discourses surrounding employment. My findings demonstrated teenagers' commitment to waged work and their future roles as workers. Early work experiences enabled them to present themselves as active, productive, and passionate individuals—traits framed as inherent to their personalities (Articles II and III). Part-time jobs during school were not just a means of earning money, but also a key aspect of developing self-understandings as workers. The thesis thus underscores the strong cultural meaning of work in Sweden, viewed through the lenses of teenagers entering their first jobs.

However, the ways in which this meaning was articulated varied. Becoming a worker was frequently seen as a pathway to respectability, worth, and social belonging, within a context where unemployment and poverty are stigmatized and intertwined with racialized stereotypes (Article III). This highlights waged work as a powerful site for shaping youth subjectivities (Farrugia, 2022), while also emphasizing the need for an intersectional approach to understanding these dynamics. At the same time, I explored the tension between the ideal of work as a means of cultivating a passionate, active self and the highly exploitative conditions of teenagers' low-waged service jobs. Entrepreneurial discourses provided a dominant language for making sense of this tension, framing work as an investment in themselves and their futures. Yet teenagers engaged with this discourse ambivalently, also invoking employer-promoted notions of what 'teenage jobs' should entail, and vulnerability discourses related to their age to navigate experiences of exploitation. By mapping this discursive terrain (Article II), I contribute to a growing body of research that theorizes how new generations of workers and emerging figures of labor navigate the precarity of contemporary working life (Karlsson, 2024; Maury, 2020; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021; Trappmann et al., 2024).

Building on these findings, I argue that for the youngest workers, the ethical commitment to work is articulated in abstract, future-oriented terms. The specific content of their jobs mattered less than the act of having a job, which enabled them to cultivate and project a self-image of productivity. This distancing from the concrete realities of their labor—both in terms of exploitative conditions and the economic needs that drove some to seek work (Articles II and III)—allowed them to frame their jobs as either employment experience or temporary stopgaps, rather than 'real work'. In this way, work became a form of aspirational labor, invested with hope of shaping themselves as subjects of value in the labor market. A key contribution of this thesis, therefore, is to the literature on hope, aspirations, and fantasies in contemporary capitalism (Allen et al., 2013; Berlant, 2011; Kuehn and

Corrigan, 2013; Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017), and their role in sustaining precarious labor markets. For teenagers, the rewards of labor are not located in the present but deferred into the future: abstract and disconnected from their current jobs. Understanding these promises, I argue, is essential to grasping how differently situated teenagers are made available as a flexible, low-cost labor force.

The concept of aspirations is central to research on teenagers' school-to-work transitions and educational outcomes (e.g., Berrington et al., 2016; Engzell, 2019; Nygård, 2021). While aspirations are future-oriented, I argue that it is equally important to examine what they do and enable in the present. In dialogue with Berlant (2011), I understand teenage workers' aspirations as expressions of cultural and collective affects that generate an optimistic attachment to work (see also Read, 2024; Weeks, 2011). Yet this attachment can take on cruel dimensions in several interconnected ways. First, the bind to fantasies becomes cruel when something desired ultimately blocks the satisfactions it promises and hinders flourishing. Many teenagers take on part-time jobs hoping to gain value in the labor market, only to find that the intensity of their work undermines their academic achievements and well-being (Article III). Second, this future-oriented attachment becomes cruel when it ties them to exploitative conditions in the present, such as unpaid labor (Article II). Finally, cruelty resides in the language of these aspirations and hopes, which obscures both structural inequalities and exploitative conditions that may render such ideals inaccessible (Articles II and III). By understanding aspirations not only as drivers of future outcomes but also as collective affective orientations that shape present attachments, this study offers a critical account of the often-unspoken challenges facing working teenagers.

Implications and directions for future research

In relation to these results, I want to discuss some of their broader implications. First, I want to make some concrete policy recommendations for teenage workers in the Swedish context. Currently, regulations on young people's working hours are based on age, with restrictions ending at 18. These also distinguish between minors who have and have not completed compulsory schooling (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2023). However, given this study's findings on the intensive work patterns of many teenagers (Articles I and III)—which ample research links to poor academic performance and school dropout—I recommend that the regulations take into account both age and school enrollment, regardless of whether or not the level of education is formally compulsory. This would extend protection to upper secondary students over the age of 18, as most graduate at 19. It would also acknowledge that, although not mandatory, the vast majority participate in upper secondary education, and that it is crucial for future labor market outcomes. Such changes could help prevent, for instance, 18-year-olds from working night

shifts while in school—something a few participants described in interviews. However, as noted in Chapter 2, even the current regulations for minors are not always enforced in practice. Considering such enforcement gaps, unions play a crucial role in securing workers' rights (cf. Calleman, 2025). The findings thus carry further implications for trade unions in Sweden, which I turn to next.

As discussed in Article II, teenagers often navigated the labor market alone, with exploitative conditions normalized in part by the absence of union involvement. Many participants had never heard of unions, while others believed they were only relevant for full-time or long-term employees. Given the steady rise in teenage employment and frequent reports of labor violations (Articles I and II), it is vital to consider how unions can better reach and support these young workers. Organizing them presents clear challenges, including high turnover rates and their transitory status in the labor market. However, there are initiatives to build upon. Several unions have a tradition of visiting vocational programs in upper secondary schools to provide information. I encourage unions to expand these attempts, recognizing that working teenagers are enrolled in various educational programs, including higher education preparatory tracks. Moreover, LO, the confederation of blue-collar trade unions in Sweden, has campaigned for young seasonal employees and offers a free advisory service (LO, 2025). Drawing on my findings, these efforts should be broadened to address the growing presence of teenagers as a distinct segment of the regular workforce year-round. While these initiatives may not immediately boost union membership among teenagers, they can improve awareness and foster social connections. Such experiences matter; research shows that early contact with unions is a key predictor of future membership, including among students (Vandaele, 2019).

Another barrier to organizing teenage workers is their perception of unions as distant actors primarily representing other groups of employees (Article II). This partly reflects their employment in sectors where the social norm of union membership is weak (Chapter 2) but also stems from a self-image of not being 'real workers'—i.e., full-time, permanent, and older employees. As discussed in Article II, these perceptions were shaped in part by how employers framed teenagers' roles and status in the workplace. However, as Vandaele (2019) notes, unions do not always make active efforts to recruit young students; even in unionized workplaces, representatives may not ask them to join (see also Calmfors et al., 2021; Oliver, 2010; Pyman et al., 2009). When teenagers see themselves as outside the category of 'real workers', such union inaction can reinforce that view. I therefore urge unions to recognize these dynamics, avoid reinforcing teenage students' sense of exclusion, and actively construct alternative narratives to better reach and represent this group of workers.

The findings also raise methodological considerations. The interviews revealed that some working-class youth with migration backgrounds worked long hours alongside school, often due to their parents' exclusion from the labor market (Article

III). Although based on a small qualitative sample, these findings contrast with my quantitative results, which showed that students from the Global South, especially boys, were less likely to work during school and tended not to do so intensively (Article I). This discrepancy points to potential blind spots in the Labor Force Survey, particularly given high non-response rates among youth with migration backgrounds. While public debate and research often highlight this group's employment barriers, my qualitative findings suggest that some work at intensities that could compromise their education and well-being (see also Lindblad, 2016). This is not to suggest that these patterns are mutually exclusive: many might struggle to access employment, while those who do work may put in longer hours than their peers. However, the Labor Force Survey could be limited in capturing the latter, leading to underrepresentation. To improve accuracy, alternatives such as registry data or targeted surveys in schools and workplaces should be explored. Further mixed-methods research could also help document these young people's experiences and assess the limits of official labor market statistics.

Lastly, I want to offer some directions for future research. To advance the analysis of work as a common experience among Swedish adolescents, I suggest examining how employment shapes the temporal structure of their daily lives, particularly in relation to friendships, family, and leisure (Woodman, 2012). My findings indicated that even middle-class students working relatively few hours often prioritized school and jobs over social time. These effects were more pronounced among disadvantaged youth, who depended financially on their income and were thus especially vulnerable to exploitation as flexible labor (Article III). While preliminary, these findings point to the need for further investigation into how paid labor influences youth time use and its role in reproducing social inequalities. I therefore encourage engagement with emerging scholarship rooted in social reproduction theory that explores how precarious work affects opportunities for leisure and social relationships (de los Reyes and Holmlund, 2024; Mulinari, 2024; see also Philipson Isaac, 2024). Although this literature addresses the unequal dispossession of time through racialized and gendered divisions of labor, it has yet to fully consider how these dynamics intersect with age. Teenagers' participation in precarious youth labor markets could provide a valuable vantage point for such analysis.

Furthermore, my findings showed that employers actively shaped not only exploitative working conditions for teenagers but also young workers' self-perceptions. I have also raised the question of whether hiring practices in low-wage, interactive service sectors reinforce gendered and racialized hierarchies among adolescents. Future research should examine employers' influence on teenage labor more closely—both in how they present these jobs and in the characteristics they seek when hiring. To this end, ethnographic studies would offer valuable insights into everyday interactions between managers and young employees, revealing how worker subjectivities are formed in practice. Such approaches could also clarify how

teenage workers' experiences align with or differ from those of other non-standard service employees. As discussed in Article II, the normalization of exploitative conditions in these sectors extends beyond youth, with notable parallels to other groups of workers. Ethnographic engagement could therefore deepen our understanding of how work-related values and subjectivities are shaped and transmitted, situating teenage labor within broader dynamics of low-wage service employment.

To conclude, this study has illuminated the patterns, conditions, and meanings of low-wage service work within a highly heterogeneous teenage labor force in Sweden. Since the data were collected, these issues have attracted some media attention. An article published in the daily newspaper *Sydsvenskan* featured parents describing how their adolescent children were treated as 'less than human' in their hospitality jobs, citing instances of unpaid labor and last-minute shift cancellations. A union representative interviewed in the piece characterized such practices as systemic (Thuresson, 2024). In contrast, an opinion piece published in *Dagens Nyheter*—another major national newspaper—was signed by several large-scale employers and advocated expanding part-time work opportunities for school-aged youth in socio-economically marginalized areas. It proposed introducing a new type of employment contract for children still in compulsory school, arguing that early work experience would help them build social networks and improve future career prospects (Cetin et al., 2025). These opposing perspectives highlight that teenage labor remains a pressing and contested issue. In light of this, I hope this thesis provides meaningful evidence to inform ongoing debates about employment and its broader implications for adolescents, while emphasizing the need for continued attention and research.

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Appendix 1. Information for principals

Hej,

Jag heter Anna Kallos och är doktorand i sociologi vid Lunds universitet. I mitt avhandlingsarbete undersöker jag elevers deltidsarbete parallellt med gymnasiestudier. Trots att en stor andel av alla gymnasieelever arbetar idag, vet vi mycket lite om fenomenet. Vilka är eleverna som arbetar? Av vilka skäl arbetar de? Med vilka jobb? Hur påverkar arbetet deras vardag? Dessa frågor hoppas jag att kunna besvara genom forskningsprojektet. Undersökningar av det här slaget är inte så vanliga i Sverige. Flertalet studier om ungas arbetsliv rör de som redan gått ut gymnasiet, trots att flera börjar arbeta redan under skoltiden. Min förhoppning är därför att den här undersökningen skall ge oss mer kunskap.

Projektet bygger på statistiska analyser av enkätdata och intervjuer med gymnasieelever. Det är med anledning av intervjustudien jag vänder mig till er. Jag önskar att få möjlighet att muntligt informera om studien direkt till elever i klassrummet, i syfte att rekrytera intervjupersoner. Det innebär att jag under ca. 5–10 minuter informerar om studien, besvarar frågor, samt ger mina kontaktuppgifter till intresserade elever. Själva intervjuerna sker utanför skoltid och deltagandet är helt frivilligt. Intervjumaterialet kommer att behandlas konfidentiellt och pseudonymiseras i enlighet med forskningsetiska principer. Projektet har godkänts av Etikprövningsmyndigheten.

Om ni ställer er positiva, diskuterar jag gärna med er vilka dagar och lektioner som passar bäst. Jag kan även presentera studien för lärare och diskutera eventuella frågor, innan ni lämnar ert definitiva svar. Jag kan tyvärr inte ge någon kompensation, varken till skolan eller till de elever jag intervjuar, men jag kan däremot återkoppla till er i framtiden när jag börjat få resultat och redovisa vad jag kommer fram till.

Jag hoppas att jag får besöka er skola och informera om studien! Har ni några övriga frågor, kan ni nå mig på mailadressen eller telefonnumret nedan. Där finns även kontaktuppgifter till min handledare professor Åsa Lundqvist, som är huvudansvarig för studien.

Med vänliga hälsningar,

Anna Kallos

Kontaktuppgifter:

Anna Kallos, doktorand

Sociologiska institutionen, Lunds universitet

Email: -

Telefonnummer: -

Åsa Lundqvist, professor

Sociologiska institutionen, Lunds universitet

Email: -

Telefonnummer: -

Appendix 2. Information for participants

Hej!

Jag heter Anna Kallos och är doktorand i sociologi vid Lunds universitet. Jag genomför ett forskningsprojekt som handlar om gymnasieelevers deltidsarbete parallellt med studier. Studien bygger på både statistik och intervjuer med gymnasieelever. Intervjuerna handlar om elevers erfarenheter av deltidsarbete under skolåret: av vilka skäl de väljer att arbeta, vilka typer av arbetslivserfarenheter de har och hur deras vardag ser ut. Undersökningar av det här slaget är inte så vanliga i Sverige. Flertalet studier om ungas arbetsliv rör de som redan gått ut gymnasiet, trots att flera börjar arbeta redan under skoltiden. Min förhoppning är därför att den här undersökningen skall ge oss mer kunskap.

Hur går det till?

Skolan har gett mig sitt samtycke till att utföra undersökningen här. Jag söker därför efter elever att intervjua som har erfarenhet av att jobba extra under terminerna. Intervjuerna innebär att jag samlar in dina tankar om och erfarenheter av deltidsarbete genom ett informellt samtal som spelas in. Jag kommer även att ställa bakgrundsfrågor om bland annat din familj, skolgång och fritid. Deltagandet är helt frivilligt och du kan när som helst välja att avbryta din medverkan. Resultaten av studien kommer att publiceras i form av ett antal vetenskapliga artiklar och en längre bok, så kallad avhandling.

Hur hanteras de inspelade intervjuerna?

De inspelade intervjuerna transkriberas (det vill säga, skrivs ned), men kommer att pseudonymiseras. Det innebär att all information kommer att behandlas på ett sådant sätt att enskilda personer inte kan identifieras. Varken i de transkriberade intervjuerna eller i rapporteringen kommer det att framgå vilken ort, skola, arbetsplats eller vilka elever som medverkat. Intervjuinspelningar och -transkriptioner kommer att behandlas så att obehöriga inte kan ta del av dem.

Vad händer med dina uppgifter?

Ansvarig för dina personuppgifter är Lunds universitet. Enligt EU:s dataskyddsförordning har du rätt att kostnadsfritt få ta del av samtliga uppgifter om

dig som hanteras och vid behov få eventuella fel rättade. Du kan också begära att uppgifter om dig raderas eller att behandlingen av dina personuppgifter begränsas. Om du vill ta del av uppgifterna kan du kontakta mig (Anna Kallos, se kontaktuppgifter nedan). Dataskyddsombud nås på 046–222 00 00 eller via mejl på dataskyddsombud@lu.se. Om du är missnöjd med hur dina personuppgifter behandlas har du rätt att ge in klagomål till Datainspektionen, som är tillsynsmyndighet.

Har du övriga frågor, kan du nå mig på mailadressen eller telefonnumret nedan. Där finns även kontaktuppgifter till min handledare professor Åsa Lundqvist, som är huvudansvarig för studien.

Med vänliga hälsningar,

Anna Kallos

Kontaktuppgifter:

Anna Kallos, doktorand

Sociologiska institutionen, Lunds universitet

Email: -

Telefonnummer: -

Åsa Lundqvist, professor

Sociologiska institutionen, Lunds universitet

Email: -

Telefonnummer: -

Appendix 3. Interview guide

Original version in Swedish

Bakgrund:

- Berätta om dig själv! Boende, syskon, föräldrar (yrke/utbildning)?

Arbete:

- Innan du sökte ditt första jobb: varför ville du börja arbeta?
- Berätta om de olika jobb du haft.
- Arbete idag? Hur länge har du arbetat där? Hur fick du jobbet?
- Berätta om ett typiskt pass på jobbet.
- Relationen till kollegor, chef, kunder?
- Vad är dina känslor kring ditt nuvarande jobb?
- Finns det stunder när ditt jobb är givande? Stunder när det är jobbigt?
- Har du någonsin varit i kontakt med facket?
- När och hur ofta jobbar du?
- Hur schemaläggs du? Hur får du reda på när du ska jobba?
- Lön? Typ av kontrakt?
- Vad är det huvudsakliga skälet till att du arbetar?
- Vilka positiva/negativa effekter ser du av att ha ett arbete under gymnasiet på kort resp. lång sikt?
- Varför tror du att många gymnasieelever väljer att arbeta parallellt med sina studier idag?

Lön:

- Hur mycket pengar får du ut per månad av jobbet?
- Vad använder du pengarna till?

- Får du använda pengarna från studiebidraget?
- Kan du komma ihåg om din familj har haft det svårt ekonomiskt vid något tillfälle?

Skola:

- Vilken gymnasielinje går du?
- Tycker du att skolan är intressant? Trivs du?
- Är det viktigt att få bra betyg?
- Hur lyckas du i skolan?
- Jobbar många av dina klasskamrater?

Fritid:

- Vad gör du på fritiden?
- Pluggar du ofta hemma/gör läxor?
- Vilka typer av hushållssysslor gör du hemma? Hur ofta?

Balans arbete/skola/fritid:

- Hur skulle du beskriva balansen mellan arbete, skola och fritid i ditt liv?
- Har du någonsin känt dig stressad på grund av att du haft för mycket att hinna med? När? Varför?
- Vad tycker din familj om att/hur mycket du arbetar? Vad tycker vänner? Lärare?
- Har du någonsin prioriterat bort skolan för att jobba? Prioriterat bort annat?

Framtid:

- Vad är dina planer efter gymnasiet?
- Vad vill du göra i framtiden? Vad vill du arbeta som?

Övrigt:

- Något jag glömt att fråga om?

English translation

Background:

- Tell me about yourself! (Living situation, parents, siblings, parents' work/education)

Work:

- Before you had your first job: why did you want to start working?
- Tell me about the different jobs you have had.
- Do you have a job today? How long have you worked there? How did you get the job?
- Tell me about a typical day at work.
- Relationship to colleagues, boss, customers.
- What are your feelings about your current job?
- Are there times when your job is rewarding? Times when it is hard?
- Have you ever been in contact with the union?
- When and how often do you work?
- How are you scheduled? How do you find out when you have to work?
- Your salary? Type of job contract?
- What is the main reason that you work today?
- Which are the potential positive effects of having a job during upper secondary school? And negative effects?
- Why do you think that so many upper secondary students work during the school year?

Economy:

- How much money do you get per month from the job?
- What do you use it for?
- Do you receive the student grant yourself?
- Can you remember if your family has had a hard time financially?

School:

- Which educational program do you attend?
- Do you find school interesting? Do you enjoy school?
- Is it important to get good grades?
- How do you succeed in school?

- Do many of your classmates work?

Leisure time:

- What do you do in your spare time?
- Do you often study?
- What sort of chores do you do at home?

School-work-life balance:

- How would you describe your balance between work, school, and life?
- Have you ever felt stressed because you have had too much to do? When and why?
- What does your family think about you working? Friends? Teachers?
- Have you ever prioritized work over school? Or something else?

Future:

- What are your plans after you have finished school? Dreams for the future?
- Something else you would like to add? Something that I have forgotten to ask?

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Not a Real Job?

Teenage students often occupy some of the most precarious positions in the service sector. They earn low wages, face limited job security, and are among the least likely to be unionized in the workforce. Despite this, existing research has largely treated their labor as transitional, focusing primarily on its impact on future educational or career outcomes. As a result, little is known about how these youngest workers experience and make sense of their employment, particularly within the Nordic context.

Not a Real Job? presents a detailed empirical account of the teenage labor force in Sweden, examining both its development and the experiences of young people in low-wage, interactive service jobs. Drawing on survey data and in-depth interviews, the study explores themes of exploitation, social differentiation, and the varied ways teenagers attach meaning to their work. In doing so, it positions teenage labor as a significant site for the formation of youth subjectivities and the reproduction of social inequalities.

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