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Selecting the Team. Doing Whiteness and Masculinity

Jette Kofoed
Department of Educational Psychology
The Danish University of Education

Introduction

In qualifying the theoretical dialogues concerning the concepts of intersectionality and normativity in ways that are fruitful in understanding the becoming of subjects and social categories, my contribution is an attempt to try to point at how subjects and social categories are constructed, produced, negotiated, and subverted in ongoing meaning-making processes and furthermore in relation to (intersecting) normativities such as e.g. whiteness (Frankenberg 1993), pupilness, ethnic racialised masculinity. I will try to throw light on the discussions on the intersections between ethnicity, gender, and normativity from an empirical study.

As I understand the concept of intersectionality, it is an attempt to conceptualize the fact that social categories and other components intersect and mingle with each other. In this mingling the categories might exaggerate one another, overrule each other, and dismantle each other (Crenshaw 1994; Collins 1998; Lykke 2003; May & Ferri 2002; Kofoed 2004; Staunæs 2003; 2004; Mørck 1998; Søndergaard 2005). The need for a concept such as intersectionality is the need **not** to reduce social relations to a matter of either one category or the other, or to merely add categories. A concept of intersectionality is partly a matter of de-essentializing social categories.

I will take up one incident from fieldwork among 12-13-year-old school children and from that incident follow the lines of reasoning into practices of inclusion and exclusion and the relationships between the larger groups of pupils. I will explore a particular ritual of team selection and from there follow the taken-for-granted practices and understandings of teams and football among the schoolboys. The data mentioned here is data produced as part of my PhD.

Let me introduce to you a group of 13-year-olds, who at the beginning of every break – which is at least three times daily – repeat the selection of teams for football. In interviews the boys describe how they do the selection; they describe who is allowed to be first-electror and second-electror and how the rest of the group let themselves be chosen. They describe in what sequence the boys

are selected. Basically, they choose the same teams every time. It seems that all participants are aware of the practice of selection and of the outcome of it, yet they repeat the daily ritual of selection.

Let me first describe to you the setting and how the ritual is performed.

Yosef describes the selection of the teams:

J: how are these teams selected?

Y: we always start with Naser. He is allowed to pick one. Because then he can choose the one he likes the best. So he picks Thomas. Then the second-electro is allowed to pick two. He takes the others. So he picks Abdel, and then we always stay together – the good ones. And then we mix up with Martin and the others.

J: does that mean that Thomas is the best?

Y: no that is Naser. They have played together so many times so they know each other's way of playing. And the talk. Me and Daniel we have known each other a long time – from kindergarten and now we go to school together.

Yosef establishes the narration of football. It is a narration of how football is practised, what sequence the actions must follow and what principles the selection follows. Yosef's narration has canonical features. A canon is about how lives should be lived and in this case it is also about hegemonic masculinity (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman 2002: 76). Hegemonic masculinity understood as powerful ideas that regulate boys' behaviour (Mac An Ghaill 1994; Connell 1999; Epstein 1997). Different masculinities are produced through performances that draw on the cultural resources available. Such canonical narratives can be identified in individual accounts such as Yosef's. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in social interactions and is about what is required to be 'acceptably' male. Literature on masculinity generally finds that this acceptability is associated with heterosexuality, toughness, power, authority, and competitiveness. (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 12; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman 2002: 76). Hegemonic masculinity as it produces itself among young boys in a London-study done by Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman is about maintaining their difference from girls, 'hardness', being cool, casual treatment of schoolwork, looking good and football (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman 2002: 12-13). I will let this understanding of hegemonic masculinity inform the analysis of these 13-year-olds in Copenhagen.

Football

Yosef's canon about football is repeated by other boys. Rasmus goes:

R: You can either play football or otherwise be good at getting friends.

In school-life narrations football is the core activity. For those participating and for those who do not. Of course there are differences in their perspectives but

basically the narration follows the same pattern. The group of boys is gathered up against the wall, two boys in turn select members for their teams. It seems that the best players are chosen first, the less good later. However, other criteria for selection interfere. Who are friends with whom? It is possible to be chosen as one of the first if you are best friend with the selectors, even if your football skills are not particularly good. Or a choice can be made based on familiarity and time. If two boys have known each other since Kindergarten, and if they like each other, there is a good chance that he will be chosen as one of the first, even though the boy in question is not a really good football player. In addition the teams must end up being competitive. The game must be fair.

Previous to the actual activity 'playing football', a line of difference has already been drawn. It is a distinction which has implications for the meaning-making processes. The difference is about gender. The canon about football is spoken out loudly. The difference of gender is silenced, however. It is already established. The fact is that actors who are bodily signed as girls do not engage in football. Relevant players are those who are bodily signed as male (Søndergaard 1996), whether they actually play football or not. Even those boys who have no special skills in handling the ball are considered relevant and legitimate players/participants. Girls – irrespective of their ball-skills – are non-legitimate participants. The difference that separates the pupils in legitimate and non-legitimate players is body signs. Only within the category of male bodily signed actors do football skills become relevant criteria. This difference has implications for both boys and girls. For the feminine signed it implies that they are prevented from playing football. If they intend to play ball, basket ball is an option. If they want to be close to football playing, the position as spectator is available. Football skills, familiarity and time do not make any sense if the bodily sign is feminine. For the masculine signed it implies that they have to take part in the game to do appropriate 'boyhood' and masculinity (Haraway 1992).

Through their bodily sign the girls are excluded from the game, and through *their* bodily sign the boys have no way out or away from the game. Through his masculine body sign, each actor is inscribed as a legitimate and relevant player. These positions are the ones negotiated in the class. And these are the positions available for the pupils to take up. Girls watch the boys play football, and the boys can be categorized as 'football players'. Not all boys are skilled players and this has an impact on how attractive you become to the others. Football is not just a matter for the actual partners in a specific game. Football becomes the social structure within the school class.

The selection of teams is a daily event. It indicates the transition from lesson to recess. It could be understood as a ritual of transition (Turner (1964) 1979; van Gennep (1908) 1977). It ensures that the transition from pupil to football player takes place, and that the transition from lesson to recess takes place. The ritual has further potentials. It becomes the practice where the pupils police each

other, where they place each other in hierarchies and they construct community and otherness.

In a first analytical move, the daily repetitions of the selection maintain a collective understanding of who are the good and who are the bad players – and it maintains meanings of familiarity and time. The ritual is not just at repetition – it is a concrete naming of position. It is a concrete citation. The outspoken selection is a hierarchisation of a core activity of hegemonic masculinity.

This citation makes it difficult for the bad player to move out of the category ‘bad player’, because the composition of teams is decided and the positions are defined and retained. In this perspective the daily citation of teams freezes the positions. It makes it even more difficult to disturb. In the repetition lies also the production of the notion of the good and the bad player, and of familiarity and time. Were the repetition not spoken and done on a daily basis there might have been an opportunity for the bad player to improve his play.

In a second analytical move, however, a disturbance is added. It is a potential that lies in the citation. Time passes. So when the ritual is repeated it refers to the time that has passed and to events that has taken place in the time just passing. It does not repeat an original ritual; such a thing does not exist. The ritual of repetition repeats itself, so to speak (Schmidt 2000; Butler (1993) 1999). The repetition refers to a situation where somebody can be produced as a potential player. Mark is a pupil who entered the class in the 4th grade, i.e. he has not always been there and he is not a routinized football player. Yet he has altered – during the time I spent at the school – from a non-player to a legitimate player. Not a good player, but a relevant player. Such disturbances are the fissures that enable the subjects to move and to alter positions. An incident like this selection can be understood as a routinized practice being constitutive for the ways in which positions are negotiated.

The ritual works as a kind of social glue which both maintains and disturbs positioning. And it makes it possible to study how positions are constructed and reconstructed.

Mark`s position

Let me dwell on Mark`s position. Mark became a pupil in this class in the 4th grade. When he was a newcomer he did not have basic football skills such as dribbling, tackling and he did not know whether a foot ball was round or oval. In the interviews he talks about it, the other boys discuss it. And there is widespread agreement that Mark is a real poor football player. At the same time every participant knows that football is an unavoidable condition, a core activity, in hegemonic masculinity.

Mark lives the narration of a boy being greeted by pupils who are familiar with each other and who are positioned in relation to each other (Davies & Harré 1990). They bully him. Mark's story is an account of how the bullying stopped and how he learned the rules of football. It is the account of a boy who does not do boyhood appropriately. The position that is assigned him is obvious. He is labelled as being a tease, farting, having the wrong haircut, and being too fat. He is bodily signed as white and masculine. He is being helped and saved by others. And he is positioned at the margin depending on the kindness of others. How does he relate himself to hegemonic masculinity and to the canon among these boys?

Apparently Mark does what he can to find his way to the masculinity expected. It is about being cool, playing football, and being neither too smart nor too dull in school (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman 2002).

Mark is one of the boys who do not fit in. He is inappropriate (Haraway 1992). That position confirms the existence and the content of the canon, yet it is an account of the wish to oppose the claim to unambiguous agreement with the claims.

Apparently Mark is uncomfortable in the position he lives. The position that has acquired Mark is marked as the fat, non-football-skilled boy who has been bullied by the class as he entered it in the 4th grade. All in all not a very attractive position and Mark seems uncomfortable about the lack of value in the position he has been acquired to. Mark points to another pupil in the classroom as the one who de-legitimizes Mark. That pupil is Martin.

Let me take a look at the pupil who Mark points at. Positioning is a negotiation and furthermore it is about policing. A variety of practices are involved in this, including more subtle strategies for constructing non-hegemonic practices as ridiculous, non-respectable etc. Several actors might want to police others, but few are in a position powerful enough to keep things tidy and in agreement with the local perception of normality. It takes recognition to police.

Farting, weakness and lack of football competences are in this particular class elements that disqualify in the calculation of 'who are the right boys'. Martin seems to be in a position from where he polices Mark and wherefrom he points at these inappropriate practices.

Martin seems to be (and now I skip part of the analysis and jump to conclusions) positioned as the maintainer of the established social order in this class. He positions himself that way – as the teachers' assistant – and his classmates explains that he is the *preventer* of their opportunities. Martin seems to be the guardian of social regulation. A guardian also becomes the powerful narrator.

Martin does not present himself as the 'normal' pupil. That is not the point. He is not exceptionally good at football, really he does just ok. He is not the best in math, or in Danish. Actually, he takes up a position right in the middle. And from that position he is capable of – and good at – policing the others. That activity is not highly regarded by his class-mates, however. They wish him to disappear. Mark explains in detail how this policing is experienced:

M: If Martin disappeared I would be ok

J: If Martin is not at school?

M: Yes. I look forward to..., actually I hope that he'll leave the school.

We are not really friends. It would be nice if he were not here

J: What would be nice?

M: He would... well, there would be no one to hate me all the time. I know he does though he does not know that I know. I am sure. Maybe not all the time, but he does. He tries to be smart with me and to prove that he is better at football. If he left it would be okay with me.

J: Would it be good?

M: Yes. I would be thrilled. I would not sing or anything but I would feel better in the class.

J: How would it change things?

M: I would be able to unfold myself more easily, I'd say.

J: What do you mean?

M: I would not have to keep myself as a secret...

[...]

M: If I were to be myself I would hardly ever play football. If they had not bullied me I would never have played football. I would probably have ... I don't know ... how to explain. It is a little difficult to explain.

J: What is?

M: I cannot be myself in this school. It is not me who sits in the classroom. It is somebody that I play.

J: Is that only because of Martin?

M: Yes it is certainly because Martin is there. Of course there are ... tiny little ... well ... I believe I would be more myself if he disappeared. Just like that .. puff!

Out you go!

Several of the pupils could do without Martin. Martin is described as annoying and irritating. He is the one who decides who participates in the football games.

These descriptions of the 'guardian of normality' are of course positioned. Those who wish him away argue in similar ways. Often the argument goes: Martin prevents them from being who they think they are. He becomes the powerful narrator of canon of how positions are distributed in this class. For that reason they would be better off without him. He becomes the maintainer of

the existing processes of inclusion and exclusion. And the maintainer becomes the hindrance to change and to becoming 'another'.

In spite of their reluctance, Martin stays. And his position is re-strengthened from the established meaning-making processes in the local history of this class. Martin has *always* been there. Over time he has been acquired by the category of 'guardian of normality' and referring to the components in the discourse of hegemonic masculinity that he can claim his position. He does play football, he teases – even bullies the others – he is not too stupid, and not too good at school work. He fits the description. He does not challenge the discourse; on the contrary he is consistent with the discourse in power.

Let me now do a last analytical move.

This guardian of normality – Martin – is bodily signed as masculine, white, blond and blue-eyed. Let me now – for a moment – exchange the social categories. Had Martin been bodily signed as black, black-haired, and brown eyed, would he then have been acquired by the category of 'guardian of normality'? Do the categories of gender and ethnicity intersect the canon in ways that demand the 'guardian of normality' to be white and male? Had Martin been bodily signed as feminine, had he then been able to take up the position? Does the position as 'guardian' stand open only to subjects who are bodily signed in specific ways? Do other bodily marks make it possible to capture this position? Must the 'guardian' be consistent with a discourse of hegemonic masculinity and with a discourse of the 'right' nationality?

A replacement of social categories makes visible how the ways to fulfil the claims of hegemonic masculinity are important, too. Social categories – yes, but the local demands – the local components of appropriatedness – are relevant, too. Let me do an exchange of the following components: school performance, relationship to the teachers, interests, peer relationships, looks and football.

If Sofie, who is bodily signed as white and feminine, should be the guardian of normality in this class, I suggest that she dis-improved in math and spelling, and English, at least in some disciplines she would have to be less good, she would have to expose herself to teachers' disparagement now and then, she would have to give up playing the flute at Christmas. She should stop playing around in the schoolyard, and instead take an interest in the older boys, she would have to replace her long skirt with a either shorter or tighter one and find herself a cooler dress code. She would have to start watching the boys play football. That is, *if* she were to take over Martin's position.

If Rasmus, who is bodily signed as masculine and white, were to take over, he probably should make himself less good at school work. Just like Sofie. He would have to make himself less popular among the teachers, and perhaps most

importantly he should begin taking an interest in his class-mates. And then he should grow up, get himself a bigger body. Obviously, he would have to participate in the selection of the team. Was he to be acquired by the position of the ‘guardian’, that is.

Should Naser, who is bodily signed as masculine and black, take over – something else would have to be changed/alterd. Naser would have to acquire some math skills; he would have to dis-acquire the position as the “one who does not at all take any interest in school work”. He would have to establish a more balanced perception of whom he is among the teachers, so that he could move out of the category ‘the lads’. He would have to secure himself a wider support among his class-mates, especially he would have to relate to the white males. Naser would probably have to stop being the one who selects the team, and rather let himself ‘be’ selected. As he would have to drop the dress code of only wearing Adidas. That is, **if** he were to be acquired by the position of the ‘guardian’.

This is not happening. This is merely analytical moves to illustrate how social categories – such as body signs like gender and ethnicity – are part of doing pupilhood – not separately, but intersecting with the concrete and local management of hegemonic masculinity (Staunæs 2003; Søndergaard 1996; Kofoed 2004). When Mark becomes a pupil, several components are part of his daily school life: football-skills mingle with ways of doing masculinity, with gender and colour of skin. When Mark becomes a pupil the intersection of categories decides whether he becomes an appropriate pupil, and whether he does what is required to be ‘acceptably’ male.

To return to my own question: Is the position as ‘guardian’ only open to pupils who are bodily signed in specific ways? Yes, it seems that the position as ‘guardian’ is only available to pupils with a specific combination of categories and components. Yes, these various categories and components must counterbalance each other. Too much femininity and too much school work must be compensated for by an amount of coolness or some troublemaking.

So when Martin does the actual guarding it is because important social categories such as gender and ethnicity intersect in ways that conform with the claims of normality and that these are recognisable and appreciative in the school.

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Aalborg University

Fibigerstraede 2

DK-9220 Aalborg OE

Denmark

Phone + 45 96 35 84 38

Fax + 45 98 15 11 26

Web: <http://www.amid.dk>

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