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GENDER AND THE ADDING OF MEANING TO MARKS

- a study among pupils in compulsory school grade 9

Introduction

In Denmark as in several other countries all over the world similar tendencies is to be seen in educational system. In compulsory school girls get better marks than boys in most subjects, although the boys are doing better in test in mathematics and science. A long list of such differences in favour of the girls can be listed, when talking both about compulsory school and education during lifetime. To me as to others the interesting question is, why the boys get lower marks than the girls, when doing better on test. It also points to the question of democracy in education. If boys from some reasons does not get the same opportunity to develop and use their potential as girls.

In this paper I will discuss first differences between girls and boys in the way they add meaning marks, second if there seem to be any differences between pupils with low, medium and high marks in the way that they do this. Finally I will discuss how boys and girls communities contributes to the adding of meaning to marks and school matters, and if this can explain some of these differences.

My interest in this problem emerged from my studies within assessment in compulsory school in Denmark, grade 9, where the final assessment and the only real assessment is going on. In my outset I had no special interest in differences related to the two genders. In my pre-study it already became clear, that there were some differences, I would have to discuss related to how boys and girls think about marks and assessment. In my further studies it seemed even more clear. I could see some tendencies of boys and girls reacting in very different ways to marks and assessment, and in ways which could perhaps be of importance for them later on during education and life.

This problem was related to how marks are perceived by the two genders, what they mean or not mean to them in their daily life and the role they play in shaping of pupils identities and understanding of who they are. By studying statistics about education and gender in Denmark and some other studies within the some area, I saw here something which could be considered as a real problem, which was in some aspects still not so well discovered, and I therefore decided to make a final study in which I examined these matters. Symbolic interactionism deals in a theoretical way with central concepts for my study such as meaning and identity, and I therefore chose it to be my theoretical framework.

The problem

There are different reasons for evaluating students outcome of learning and giving marks. Most of all they are meant to support learning by giving students an idea of, what is wanted from them. But as much research shows, marks has many other effects, some of them unintended and even unwanted. Boys and girls have different ways of perceiving the world, and they also seem to react different to marks.

In Denmark as well as in several other Scandinavian countries and countries in western world, there is a tendency in compulsory school for girls to get better marks than the boys. Also there are several other differences between girls and boys, making up a picture of boys as being not as interested in, and liking school as much as girls. In Denmark the major part of children who need special support in school are boys, boys cuts more classes than girls, they get less education after compulsory school, and in later education boys more often drop out. Seen as a whole these trends are indicating a problem, but a problem that can not be identified as only localized to compulsory school. But boys and girls experiences in compulsory school might form the basis for, how they act later on according to schooling and education.

Of course boys and girls should have equal access to education and have the same opportunities to get education after compulsory school. Marks in compulsory school does not in themselves play a very important role in young peoples fearther life, but they do indirectly. Getting low marks can influence students thoughts about themselves and their possibilities on the one hand, on the other hand they play a role in if the students are recommended to take a high school education. Third marks from high school are quite important, and there are reasons to believe that boys ways of reacting to having marks and thinking about it are the same at high school as it is in compulsory school.

From these reasons it is interesting to get some understanding of how the two genders are thinking about marks, how they react to it and how it influences their thoughts about themselves and their future.

In this project I study the differences between boys and girls, in how they perceive marks, what marks means to them and how they act in accordance to this. Democracy in society imply equity for anyone irrespective of gender, race and social class. If marks influence boys and girls in different ways, with more serious consequences later in life, this could be considered as a democratic problem.

Human acting and the concept of meaning

Herbert Blumer describes three premises in symbolic interaction related to the activity of human beings and the understanding of it (Blumer 1969):

- 1) We act towards things on the basis of the meaning that things give to us
- 2) Meaning is derived from the social interaction that we have with our surroundings
- 3) Meaning are modified through an interpretative process, that the person is using when dealing with objects in the surroundings.

Seen from the perspective of symbolic interactionist theory meaning is therefore central in the attempt to understand acting of human beings, understanding why we choose as we do and why we act as we do. The central matter in this is getting to know a little about

what we are thinking about the objects we are surrounded by and if possible, why we are thinking in the way we do about them. There is a limitation in this, as we cannot expect that people always know more clearly why they are thinking about the world the way they do. This can be explained by the fact that so much of the experience we get, which makes up the fundament for the development of the self and the producing of meanings, comes to us in our childhood. It is still very active, giving meaning to the world, but also very hard to make conscious.

According to symbolic interactionism our acting in the world and towards the objects in it can be understood and explained by the way in which these objects gives meaning to us. The concept of meaning is closely related to our identity and the way that we perceive our self, as we seek to act according to this and also to express ourselves through our actions.

The way in which we act towards marks is among other things therefore to be understood as some sort of consequence of the role that marks play for us in our daily life, in relation to our identities and in being and showing who we are. The concept of identity seems to be central in the understanding of why boys and girls seem to respond differently and act differently according to marks.

Meaning according to self, identity or the surrounding world

In my study I have a focus on how pupils aged 15 and 16 (grade 9) in compulsory school add meaning to their school activities, first of all to getting marks, and next to the engagement in activities which might be supposed to have some consequences for their marks. This adding of meaning to marks and activities related to them, is to be understood in the context of how students understand themselves. From this reason some factors related to this is studied too.

I have collected data from interviews with 60 pupils during january and february 2006, which means that I have just finished most of the interviews, but still have a few left. This is supplied with the results in a preliminary study based on questionnaires with answers from 186 students during autumn 2005.

I have made transcriptions of about 30 of the interviews and this is a preliminary report based on them and on the tendencies, I have noticed.

In the present analysis I will first take a focus on how boys and girls differ in how they add meaning to marks and getting good marks. Secondly I will discuss if these findings can be used in the understanding of why girls in compulsory school in general get better marks than boys do.

The analysis is structured after the following way

- 1) Finding into which important dimensions pupils in general add meaning to marks. Analysis of to what extent boys and girls act according to these important dimensions, and the effects of this on the adding of meaning to marks

Important dimensions in the adding of meaning to marks

My study shows five important dimensions according to which meaning is created: 1) Oneself, 2) future, education, job, 3) parents, 4) friends, 5) teachers.

Ex. 1. Significant dimensions according to the adding of meaning to marks

I: You say that getting a not very high mark is not great, why is it that one wants to do good?

Girl low marks: I think it has something to do with that your parents are looking forwards, and everybody are looking forwards to you to get good marks, your friends, the teacher and family, so in that way it means a lot to me to get good marks, it would only harm myself if I get low marks, if you want to have good opportunities after school, you should have good marks.

Comparing boys and girls and pupils with high, medium or low marks some differences turn up

- Boys more often than girls point at job, education and future as what makes marks important to them, what adds meaning to strive for good marks. Especially this is the case for boys with high marks.
- Girls more often point at either “myself” or parents, friends and teachers as what makes them feel the importance of getting good marks

Ex. 2: Excerpts about significant dimensions according to the adding of meaning to marks. Differences between boys and girls.

I: Why is it important to do good?

Boy low marks: Then I get better marks, so I can have a better education, and you are more attentive in school, you learn more.

Boy high marks: Your whole future depends on it, it is in your marks, from now on everything will be about these marks the next years.

Girl low marks: I think that it is just for my own sake, it is a nice feeling, I think that there are many feeling the same way, they need to show, that they were better than the others, but to me it is most to satisfy myself, I think it is nice to see, that you are doing good, are doing better, and if you find out that you are getting a little better marks than your girlfriends, then you become really happy.

Girl high marks: I think it is to please myself, also when I tell my parents at home, I like that they become, I would not say proud, but happy on my behalf ...

Now the question is, why does boys seem to have this more operational attitude to marks? And why does girls seem to have a more personal and emotional attitude to marks? I will try to discuss this according to the social contexts to which boys and girls belong.

Meaning according to boys and girls communities

Boys and girls communities differ from each other in several wellknown aspects. Very generally these differences can be described this way

- Boys are more competitive than the girls, who are tending to strive more towards being equal and not so much putting emphasis on who is better at what
- Girls are in general more directed towards the social communities to which they belong and trying to adapt to the expectations from them. Boys are putting more distance to this kind of behaviour.

These very general differences can be seen very clearly in my data, of course with lots of differences from one pupil to another. But the tendencies are clear, and very useful in the understanding of boys and girls attitudes to marks.

Meaning of striving for good marks – differences in engagement

Boys and girls differ in the way they think about working hard in school and striving for good marks. This is not looked upon in the same way in boys and girls communities. In the boys community having a positive attitude to homework, working hard and being very engaged in getting good marks is not as common as it is among the girls.

Clearly there are also boys who describe that they are emotionally affected by and that getting good marks means a lot to them, as also some girls tell that they do not take much notice. But there seems to be a difference between pupils with low and pupils with high marks, pupils with low marks does not express the same interest in marks as pupils with high marks. Trying to find a clear explanation to this difference is difficult and complex. But it can be stated that the interest in marks and the extent to which one is affected can be taken as an expression of or indicator for the importance of marks according to identity and selfesteem.

Ex. 3: Excerpts about how much the pupils are thinking about marks in grade 9

Boy medium marks: I do not think much about them, but when we are going to have them, I am of course thinking of them.

Boy low marks: I am almost not thinking about it, when I get them I just look look through them and I say: That was not too good, and I put them away. Then I show them to my mum and dad and they say: That was not too good, and me: No, I know, and then moving on.

Girl medium marks: I am thinking a lot of it, because you have to think about your future and what sort of education you want, if you are not good at math, you will have to fight if you want something with math.

Girl low marks: I am thinking a lot of it, if you want to be something after, if you want to be a lawyer you need to have good marks, it is very important for you to have good marks.

Talking about the girls it can be said, that it seems to give more meaning to the girls to strive for good marks, simply to avoid the disappointment of not having this. But as it will appear later in this paper, there are several reasons for the girls to pay more attention to marks and react more emotionally to them, than the boys do.

Meaning according to the communities of boys and girls

These differences in the pupils description of their engagement in the striving to do good in school and try to get good marks, can to some extent be understood according to differences in the norms in the boys and the girls communities. Where engagement in school activities in general, and therefore also in doing good at school, seems to be more accepted among the girls and to have a natural space in their life, this is different for the boys. Getting good marks is not necessarily exclusively looked upon as something positive in the boys community. It would not necessarily affect the way the other boys perceive you positively, - it could be on the contrary.

When asked what the other girls or boys thought about pupils doing a lot of homework, and being very engaged in getting good marks, boys said that it was common to tease boys being very engaged in school. Some boys getting very good marks told that they had been bullied, and that this had to do with their good results in school, but they had learned not to pay attention to it. Others told that they had themselves been bullying others who were clever and did their homework. What they say is, that it is not very accepted among the boys not to have a high priority to the group and being together with the boys in the group, but choosing school instead.

Box 4: Excerpts about the attitude to doing homework and getting good marks.

Boy high marks: [...] none of the boys in my class with high marks are popular, only if someone needs help, then they are popular, but the rest of the time they are not popular, because they are too engaged in it [school and doing homework], they think.

Boy high marks: [...] there are the popular, the cool guys, it seems to be those who are not really serious about their marks, these two groups of boys, there are those, let us call them the "nerds", and then there are the others, eh thugs, if we could use that word, the thugs they are not stupid or anything, but they do not have the same attitude to marks as the boys in the other group, the other group [...] they have a more serious attitude towards marks.

I: How is the attitude in your class to pupils spending a lot of time doing homework and getting good marks?

Girl medium marks: Then everybody wants to talk with them, trying to be close to them, hear all they say and trying to have contact with them all the time.

I: How is the attitude in your class to pupils spending a lot of time on their homework and working hard to get good marks?

Girl low marks: [...] I do not think that it is looked upon as a suck-up, because everybody wants to have good marks, so I do not think that anyone is thinking that she is doing a lot of homework, because that is the reason why we are going to school, we have to work here or we will not learn anything.

In girls culture "being" together, talking, chatter and gossiping has a very important place, while boys has more focus on "doing" things together, such as doing sport, playing computergames etc. This leaves a more natural space to doing homework in girls everydaylife. At the same time girls also find it immature and childish not to do ones homework. They also describe less interference from their parents in this matter, because as several of the girls say: they know that they can trust me. The girls here seem to be more reasonable than the boys.

Competition

Competition is a more integrated part of boys culture than it is the case with girls. Boys do in general have a more positive attitude to competition. As expected, this tendency can also be seen in my data. In general the girls distances themselves to competition on marks, while still accepting it in sport for example. Some girls does mention that they can have a small tussle with the girl sitting next to them, but this is not typical. Instead the girls describe that they find it important to support each other if someone gets bad marks and to be able to share the happiness with those getting good marks. They find in general competition on marks unpleasant and something that one should keep away from (Box 2).

In opposition to this boys in general find competition on marks ok, but also here there seems to be differences related to if the boy asked gets high or low marks. Especially boys with high marks seem to be more similar to the girls, not finding competition on marks pleasant. Several of the boys with low marks share the same opinion, but the boys with middle marks are the most positive to competition on marks. Clearly this has something to do with the chance of winning sometimes, the possibility of having the better mark. Boys with very good marks are “winning” all of the time, and therefore competing on marks are by them described as bragging and gloating, and not necessary to feel that they are good. Several of the boys with low marks do not find competition on marks appealing. The boys who like competing on marks describe that they often do it with boys who are at their own level, and that it should be possible to get the better mark sometimes to add meaning to competition on marks.

Box 5: Excerpts about competition

I: Why do you compare your marks in class?

Boy high marks: Because you like competition, you like to get the best mark, I do, I like competition.

Boy low marks: I find it [competition] on marks stupid, because you are not equal, if one is really smart he will automatically get better marks, so that is a stupid competition.

Girl high marks: I think that you should only think of your own marks, although I ask because I am curious about other pupils marks it has nothing to do with my own, because it is only me who can make my own marks better, and it is only them who can make theirs better.

Girl low marks: I find it to be stupid, you cannot compete on who is getting the better mark, imagine that I got a very low mark and was very sorry, then ahh: I got a good mark. You could not do that, I don't think so.

In the PISA study it is concluded that preference for competition correlates with test results. My results explain why, if we are talking about competition on marks. The boys doing better has a more positive attitude to this, as it gives meaning. But it should not be seen as the reason why they are doing well, as some sort of motivating factor.

Now the question is which role competitiveness plays. Can competition be seen as some sort of motivation for the boys? This does not seem to be the case, as the boys clearly express, that they are not very engaged in their marks, and does not find marks very important.

Competition can be considered as so integrated in the boys way of being together all way from childhood, they are so used to it, that being evaluated (with a mark for instance) does not seem to affect them or make any deep impression. If competition is more

accepted among boys it is probably not really related to engagement, but more an expression of boys natural way of being together, boys culture and boys identity. To put it in an other way engagement in school activities does not get meaning through marks for boys, they are just some unimportant but necessary signs of, how school evaluate their work, but nothing to take really notice of. Engagement in school and striving for good results does for most of the boys not seem to find meaning in marks it seems.

Girls trying harder to adapt to expectations from the outside world

It is a little hard to find the explanation of girls being more responsible in relation to school activities. Girls are often thought of as paying more attention and trying to adapt to expectations in the communities to which they belong than boys. One could say that doing homework and doing well in school are given meaning through girls attempt to live up to the expectations from grown ups in their surroundings.

There appears a difference between girls and boys in how much attention one pays to expectations from surroundings and the degree to which one tries to fit to these expectations. It is a common assumption about girls thinking and behavior, that they pay more attention to such circumstances, and this finds support in my results.

I asked the pupils if they thought that their marks meant anything to, how other people saw them as persons, what they were thinking about them in a more personal way. Here girls had a more clear tendency to think that this was the case, while several of the boys did not. This seems to support, that the girls at least think, that they are being judged by the outside world on what they are doing, and gives them a reason to try to live up to such expectations.

Box 6: Excerpts about how pupils describe teachers thoughts about what "a good pupil" is, and their attempt to live up to that or trying to make a good relation to the teacher.

I: What is "a good pupil" in the teachers opinion, how do they like pupils to behave in school?

Boy high marks: Quiet, doing your homework, being able to answer their questions, that should make them happy I think.

I: Are you trying to do that?

Boy high marks: No, not really, I don't.

I: Are you doing something your self to keep a good relationship to the teacher?

Boy low marks: I don't know [...], I just try to be myself, and I will have to see if they like me.

I: What I ment was, if you are doing something to ensure a good relationship?

Boy low marks: I don't think that I pay attention to that.

I: Having a good relation to your teacher, what does that mean to you?

Girl medium marks: I would say, that you should always make sure to have a good relation to your teacher, not answer back and always do as they say, because I think it is a mistake to answer the teacher back, you should not do that.

I: Are you doing something to keep a good relationship to your teacher?

Girl low marks: Yes, talking nice to the teacher, answering politely and so.

I: Is that what you do?

Girl low marks: Yes, I have never had problems and stuff like that, I never answered teachers back, I would not.

I have some more data about this matter, but will stop it here trying not to make this paper too long.

But one thing seems to be quite clear, that doing homework fit much better with girls communities and girls culture than with boys.

Boys and girls evaluation of their own achievement

Boys and girls does not seem to evaluate their achievements in the same way. This is also quite clear from my data. Boys are more content with their marks than girls are, although the boys marks are lower as an average. But how should this finding be interpreted

- are girls more ambitious than the boys?
- is it the boys who are less affected by marks and therefore being less selfcritical?

Probably it is both. When the girls are more directed towards trying to satisfy people in their social surrounding, this could also cause a higher tendency to think critical about ones marks.

But it seems to be clear, that boys are not as engaged in marks and getting good marks, it is not as important to them as it seems to be for the girls, this could explain if marks does not affect their selfesteem and selfconfidence according to schoolmatters as highly as it is the case for the girls.

So it could seem as if both explanations are interacting.

What all this means to pupils marks

As described several circumstances are giving advantage to the girls when talking about getting good marks in compulsory school

- girls striving for accept from sourroundings which lead to responsibility and a more mature attitude to school
- girls culture which fits better whith school activities
- higher expectations to ones achievement

At the same time circumstances in boys culture and way of thinking about school does not support engagement in school

- boys culture does not give a natural space for homework
- less attention to expectations from sourroundings
- lower expectations to ones achievement

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