Social inclusion in multi-ethnic physical education classes: Contextualized understandings of how social relations influence female students’ experiences of inclusion and exclusion

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Abstract
Within increasingly diverse societies, school is considered an important arena for social inclusion, as it ensures that all students can participate in social life within and outside the class. The Norwegian national curriculum emphasizes physical education (PE) as a particularly relevant subject for social inclusion, yet studies have revealed that some students experience discrimination and marginalization in PE because of their ethnicity, race, religion, social class, sexuality, and/or gender. This paper aims to examine how female students’ diverse backgrounds influence their positioning among classmates and to investigate how inclusion and exclusion in PE can be understood in light of social relations in multi-ethnic classes. The article is based on an intersectional perspective. The data consist of written fieldnotes and semi-structured interviews from ethnographic fieldwork in two coeducational, multi-ethnic PE classes at a public school in Oslo, Norway. Three female students’ narratives are discussed. The findings reveal that gender was the most significant factor in the girls’ stories of inclusion and exclusion in PE. With regard to ethnic relations, the narratives show that ethnicity intersected with gender, social class, religion, and race, creating hierarchical boundaries in the peer group. However, these boundaries were less prevalent in the girls’ PE experiences. The findings indicate that gender overshadows other differences in PE, making it difficult to see how exclusion is also clustered around other parts of students’ positionalities.

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Introduction

School is an important arena for social inclusion in Norwegian society. It is responsible not only for academic development but for ensuring that all students can participate in cultural and social communities (Haug et al., 2014). Central to the Norwegian Educational Act\(^1\) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020) are aspects such as solidarity, equality, and citizenship. Furthermore, social skills such as participating and cooperating in heterogeneous groups are considered important in increasingly multicultural societies and the globalized world (Ludvigsen, 2015). Research has indicated, however, that aspects of race,\(^2\) ethnicity, and social class create lines of inclusion and exclusion in peer communities in Norwegian schools (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Eriksen, 2013; Nielsen, 2009). For instance, in an ethnographic study at an urban high school in Norway, Eriksen (2013) found that many young people from ethnic minorities experienced school as constructed on the premises of the majority culture. This context triggered the importance of marking one’s belonging within peer groups and resulted in the development of a “split” between “ethnic minority students” and “ethnic Norwegian students” (Eriksen, 2013: 61).

The Norwegian national curriculum emphasizes physical education (PE) as a particularly relevant subject for social inclusion:

The social aspects of physical activities mean that physical education is important for promoting fair play and respect for one another. Teaching in the subject shall contribute to helping the pupils experience joy, inspiration, and a sense of mastery by being physically active and by interacting with others. (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2015, unpaginated)

In this sense, PE is an important arena for developing inclusive and non-discriminatory environments. Yet, both national and international studies have confirmed that due to practices and prevailing discourses in PE, some students experience exclusion and marginalization because of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, religion, social class, and/or ability (see, e.g. Azzarito, 2010; Azzarito et al., 2017; Barker et al., 2014; Dagkas et al., 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2013, 2019; Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012; Hastie et al., 2006; Hills, 2007; Larsson et al., 2011; Macdonald et al., 2009; Stride, 2014; Walseth, 2015; With-Nielsen and Pfister, 2011). Research has illuminated the importance of positive social relations in this context for students’ well-being and learning (Dyson, 2006), particularly among girls (Ennis, 1999; Flitoff and Scraton, 2006; Oliver and Kirk, 2017). However, scholars have raised concerns about how the social aspects of PE are often ignored in favour of pedagogies emphasizing motor skill learning, sports performance, and physical fitness, causing many girls and low-skilled students to disengage from the subject (Ennis, 1999; Goodyear et al., 2014; Hills, 2007; Kirk, 2010).

Moreover, research has indicated that PE’s perceived role in social inclusion in increasingly diverse societies is taken for granted (Anttila et al., 2018; Barker et al., 2017; Goodyear et al., 2014). Yet, studies have indicated that social relations in PE are formed by hierarchical power relations, positioning students based on their gender, ethnicity, race, social class, and other markers of difference (Hill and Azzarito, 2012; Hills, 2007, 2010; With-Nielsen and Pfister, 2011). However, more studies are needed to explore the diversity of girls’ PE experiences in multi-ethnic
PE contexts, how students of minority and majority backgrounds relate to each other (Dowling and Flintoff, 2018), and the consequences in terms of inclusion and exclusion. In the Norwegian context, research on issues related to PE and social inclusion in multi-ethnic classes is scarce. To enhance our understanding of PE’s potential role in social inclusion in diverse societies, researchers must examine students’ PE experiences within a larger context and provide more complex analyses of young people’s lives (Azzarito and Solomon, 2005; Dowling et al., 2012; Wright and Macdonald, 2010). Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the complexity of peer relations, and by studying female students’ positioning among peers, gain more knowledge about PE as an arena for social inclusion. Applying an intersectional perspective (Anthias, 2006; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016), the paper is based on a study of diverse students’ experiences of inclusion and exclusion in PE in an upper secondary school in Norway. As the inclusion of girls still persists as an unresolved issue in PE (Ennis, 1999; Flintoff and Scraton, 2006; Oliver and Kirk, 2017), and researchers have only just begun exploring the plurality of girls’ experiences in diverse PE contexts (Hills and Croston, 2012), the paper draws on the narratives of three girls of different social and ethnic backgrounds. The following questions are addressed in this article: (a) How do the girls’ multiple identities influence their positioning among classmates? (b) How are inclusion and exclusion in PE influenced by the girls’ positioning in the peer group in a multi-ethnic class? The paper is organized as follows: first, the theoretical perspective is introduced; second, the methods, analysis, and ethical considerations are discussed; and third, the findings, an overall discussion and concluding remarks are presented.

Intersectionality – positionality, relationality, and “doing intersectionality”

Intersectionality grew out of Black women’s struggle for justice in the US during the 1960s and 1970s. Some early scholars developed the concept into a tool for understanding how race intersected with gender, as well as other social identifiers such as sexuality, socioeconomic status or (dis)ability, to form power relations that shape people’s possibilities and social positioning within society (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2009). In intersectional thought, individuals’ contextualized life experiences are an important starting point for understanding inclusion (Hill Collins, 2016). Hill Collins (2009) proposed that power relations should be analysed via intersections – that is, how gender, age, (dis)ability, ethnicity, and religion constitute “interlocking, mutually constructing systems of power” (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016: 27) – and across domains of power (interpersonal, disciplinary, structural, and cultural). Rather than limiting the focus to how a single category such as gender or ethnicity shapes people’s experiences, intersectionality seeks to understand “the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience” (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016: 25).

Intersectionality has been characterized as middle-ground theorizing (Stride, 2016), as it seeks to merge structural and post-structural scholarship (Davis, 2008). Scholars within the latter have, however, been critical of how the concept of intersecting categories places too much emphasis on structural aspects, which are often based on predetermined intersections and hierarchies (e.g. Staunæs, 2003). Seeking to foreground largely individual experience and agency, Staunæs (2003) suggested understanding intersectionality as something performed in different situations and contexts. The doing of intersectionality is reflected in the concepts of positionality (Anthias, 2001) and relationality (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Positionality refers to “the space at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (social positioning, meaning and practice)”
(Anthias, 2001: 635), as well as the practices involved in how “class [or subject] positions are achieved and enacted as lived reality” (Levine-Rasky, 2011: 246). Positionality also means that in some situations, certain categories might “overrule, capture, differentiate and transgress others” (Staunæs, 2003: 105).

The concept of relationality takes different forms within intersectional work (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016), and it is applied in different ways to understand the narratives in the current paper. Firstly, the concept is relevant for understanding how people do “identity work”; that is, how they navigate their different identities within their lives, performing a wide range of intersections in fluid and contradictory ways (Azzarito and Katzew, 2010). Thus, relationality embraces hybrid notions of identity and acknowledges the complexity of belonging to the minority and/or the majority in ethnically diverse contexts. Secondly, relationality suggests that identity work is always done in relation to others. Thus, identity cannot simply be perceived as something we freely choose; social categories are clustered with meaning and become tools for inclusion and exclusion (Anthias, 2006; Staunæs, 2003). For instance, young people with minority backgrounds might identify as Norwegian but be viewed as foreigners and part of an ethnic minority group by peers. How one identifies oneself or is identified by others might have real consequences in the students’ everyday life experiences in terms of inclusion or exclusion in the social community of the PE class. By studying the process of positioning, that is how our stories “… are clustered around some hegemonic constructions of boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ and between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Martin, 1995, cited in Yuval-Davis et al., 2006: 2), power relations can be revealed (Anthias, 2006). As such, positionality is particularly useful for studying social relations within a context and how these relations influence young people’s experiences of inclusion.

Finally, relationality involves a “both/and frame” and a rejection of binary thinking (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Viewing inclusion relationally enables us to gain more nuanced understandings of the ways young people (dis)engage in PE (Macdonald et al., 2012). Relationality considers that people are not always or only excluded or marginalized in a context (Hill Collins, 2016). Hence, it is important to examine how people negotiate and resist power relations and exclusion (Macdonald et al., 2012), which is a central issue in this article.

**Methodology**

The data are from my PhD project about secondary students’ (ages 14–16) experiences of inclusion and exclusion in PE in a multi-ethnic school context. The project was based on fieldwork in two coeducational PE classes (Class A and Class B) in a public school3 in Oslo, Norway. From an intersectional perspective, two key elements help to gain insights into power relations in society: by seeking individual stories; and through the concept of contextualization (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). In order to gain insights into students’ PE experiences, the fieldwork combines participant observations and qualitative interviews (Fangen, 2010). About a third of the students were bilingual, with families coming from countries in South Asia, the Middle East, West and East Africa, and North America. All students except one were born and raised in Norway.

For this article, I drew on data from Class B, where I observed 30 PE lessons from Grade 8 to Grade 10 spread over three semesters. At the end of the fieldwork, I conducted one-to-one interviews with six of the students (two boys and four girls). The interviews were carried out in separate rooms during school hours and lasted from 50 to 80 minutes. Selection criteria for the interviewees were based on the student’s gender, ethnic background, visible skills, and attitudes toward PE, as well as how they appeared to belong to different social groupings within the class.
For this article, three female students’ narratives were selected: those of Veronika, Yasmin and Sara. Only female students were included to generate more insights into the challenges of applying equal gender practices to girls in multi-ethnic PE contexts. Moreover, although it is important to recognize that other groups of students also face this issue, such as low-skilled boys (Hill, 2015; Tischler and McCaughtry, 2011) or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students (Larsson et al., 2011), only including girls provided plural, complex, and nuanced pictures, breaking from essentialist understandings of girls’ PE experiences in diverse contexts (Hills and Croston, 2012; Paechter, 2003). Moreover, the three students were chosen as they were positioned differently in terms of their physical identities and experiences, and in relation to the majority culture.

In general, an open and explorative approach in the field was adopted to increase the possibility of discovering the unexpected (Fangen, 2010). However, based on knowledge from prior research, particular attention was paid to students’ participation and (dis)engagement in the content/activities, the social relations they engaged in, or if issues of gender, social class, religion, culture, race or ethnicity were brought up during the lessons. The semi-structured interview guide was composed of questions on several topics, including questions on positioning, for example: “How would you describe yourself as a student in PE?” or “How would you describe your class?” All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were carried out in Norwegian. Quotations used in the article were translated into English trying to stay close to the original wording as well as to keep the colloquial language.

The interviews were analysed following Riessman’s (2008) description of thematic narrative analysis. Each interview was analysed separately. In the first reading of the data a recurrent theme in the interviews was the centrality of social relations. For that reason particular attention was paid to how students positioned themselves and others in their stories through their use of pronouns (e.g. I, we, us, they, and them), and how students made distinctions between groups of students, reflecting social categories (e.g. “The boys don’t bother to pass the ball to us girls” and “Some in my class wear different clothes like hijab”). In the second round, the analysis explored how social relations could be understood in light of the girls’ gendered, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds. In the fieldnotes, accounts involving the three girls as well as accounts where social categories such as gender, ethnicity or race appeared to be made relevant by students, were extracted and used to support or contrast the narratives.

To strengthen the trustworthiness the study combined two different methods for data-generation, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. In addition, the fieldwork included a prolonged stay in the class. In the study, narratives are viewed as “extended accounts of lives in context” (Riessman, 2008: 6), developed during interviews or constructed in fieldnotes. The narratives presented below were constructed by combining interview data and fieldnotes. The narratives were not returned to participants for member checking; however, the narratives have been kept close to the participants’ accounts by including direct quotations.

The project received ethical approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. Written informed consent was obtained from teachers and parents, and oral consent was obtained from the interviewed students. The consent forms stated that all data would be handled with confidentiality, and interviewees were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All people’s names are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Research centralizing social categories such as ethnicity or race always poses the risk of reproducing stereotypical and marginalized understandings (Flintoff and Webb, 2012). To handle ethical aspects beyond official requests, the project is based on relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). This involved writing reflexive accounts to raise awareness of how my gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, age, and
experience, might have influenced the questions and understandings. For instance, I assume that ethnicity played a more important role in the girls’ enacted reality than I, due to my White majority positionality, was able to comprehend.

Findings

The findings and discussion are organized in three subsections. The first subsection briefly introduces the three girls – Veronika, Yasmin, and Sara – followed by narratives of their physical identities and social positioning in PE. The second subsection presents findings on how the girls’ multiple identities intersected and influenced their positioning among their peers, and how their narratives of positionality revealed aspects of inclusion, exclusion and/or marginalization in PE. The final subsection contains a discussion of the results and implications of how insights from the article might help PE teachers better facilitate social inclusion in their lessons.

Contextualizing the stories

Veronika lived with her parents and two younger siblings in a row house near the school. Her parents were born in Norway. Veronika is White and identified herself as Norwegian and Christian. Both her parents underwent vocational training and had jobs involving shift work.

Yasmin lived in an apartment with her father and older brother who emigrated from Iran in the 1990s. Her father was a taxi owner, and her older brother was studying for a university degree. Yasmin had not had any contact with her mother since she was five years old. Her family was Muslim, but she did not consider herself religious. Yasmin was born in Norway and identified herself as Norwegian.

Sara was an only child and lived with her mother in a high-rise apartment block near the school. Her mother was from Kenya, and her father is from Pakistan. She did not have any contact with her father. Her mother was unemployed. Regarding ethnicity, Sara felt both Norwegian and Kenyan, depending on the context (e.g. she felt Norwegian when she was abroad). Sara said that her religion, Islam, was important to her. She spent four afternoons each week at Koran school.

Taken together, the three girls shared some similarities with respect to social background. Based on housing and their parents’ work (or unemployment), all three can be considered working class in the Norwegian context, albeit with some differences. Since two girls were uncertain about their parents’ education, it could not be used as an indicator of class background. Another important difference is that Veronika grew up in a two-parent household, while Sara and Yasmin lived with one parent. Veronika’s leisure activities also indicated a higher socioeconomic status than the others.

Narratives of physical identities and social positioning in PE. In general, physical activity was an important aspect in the girls’ stories. However, their involvement and experiences greatly differed. In her spare time, Veronika engaged in several activities. She did horse riding twice a week and played handball with the local girls’ handball team four times a week. Sometimes, she asked her parents to join her for a run, which indicated her family’s physically active lifestyle. Yasmin also said that her family was physically active; however, they never exercised together. In her spare time, Yasmin was an active dancer. She also did strength training with a friend at a fitness studio. Unlike the others, Sara did not participate in regular physical activity during her leisure time; however, she enjoyed dancing and previously played volleyball and exercised at a fitness studio.
The girls’ diverse physical experiences were reflected in how they narrated their positioning in PE. Of the three, Veronika was the only who said she greatly enjoyed PE. She positioned herself as a “good student” in PE, who actively took part in all lessons. Apparently, the skills she had gained from playing competitive sports were recognized in the lessons. She particularly liked ball games. Yasmin’s experiences of PE appeared to be more ambivalent. Describing herself as a student in PE, she stated, “Sometimes I just don’t bother to do anything, and I am really lazy, but other times, I can be really good and do exactly what the teacher asks us to do.” During the lessons, she showed good technique and ability in a variety of sports. However, the fieldnotes also indicated that Yasmin felt marginalized and sometimes excluded herself from PE, such as by arriving late at the changing room, leaving activities or sitting on the sidelines. Sara repeatedly talked about feeling uncomfortable during PE lessons. While describing herself as a student, she emphasized being unathletic and “unskilled” compared to her classmates. She enjoyed PE when it was less “serious” and training was not so hard: “At primary, we had fun while learning in PE, and we played more games.” During the fieldwork, Sara became progressively less active in PE lessons. When interviewed, she said she had an “unknown” disease and that the doctor had told her not to participate in physical activity, which the PE teachers accepted.

Connections have been made between sporting competencies and social status in PE (Hills, 2007). However, despite the girls’ different physical identities, all three seemed a bit outside the peer community during PE. They all explained that groupings existed in the class and talked about students being socially excluded. While Veronika shared that she had a good friend in class, Hanne, who she mostly wanted to be with during activities, both Yasmin and Sara said that they did not have any close friends in class. During PE, this was evident in group work lessons. Sara related:

Interviewer: Sometimes you are told to gather in groups [in PE]. How do you group together?
Sara: We group together with those we know best…like your best friends.
Interviewer: So, it’s friends that group together?
Sara: Yes.
Interviewer: Do you think anyone feels left out?
Sara (interrupts): Yes, I really think some feel left out.

As this statement shows, Sara tended not to include personal experiences when talking about friendships and peer relations, indicating that it was a sensitive topic for her. The importance of friendships in PE was also evident in Yasmin’s story. She explained:

...in our class, there’s always two and two who are really good friends and they hang together all the time, while I do not have anyone I am close to...then I think like, “Okay, who should I be with?”...It does not matter to me who I am with...I just think about doing the task thoroughly, do it well and not think about who I am with.

When starting upper secondary school, Yasmin was moved to a different school than her friends from primary school. Throughout the interview, Yasmin talked about being with friends, losing friends and trying to make new friends. However, while friendships and peer relations were important in Yasmin’s everyday life in school and beyond, she positioned herself outside the peer
community when talking about PE. Here, she apparently did not care whom she was with. In PE, she just thought about “doing the task thoroughly”; otherwise, she tended to drop out of activities.

**Intersectional positionalities**

*Narratives of gender.* In the three stories, the girls’ gendered identities were the most central aspect of how they positioned themselves in PE. However, the ways gender intersected with their physical identities influenced the positions available to them in their PE class (Hill and Azzarito, 2012; Hills, 2007; With-Nielsen and Pfister, 2011) as active and good students (Yasmin and Veronika) or unathletic (Sara). Despite taking up different physical identities, the girls shared a common feeling of marginalization compared to the boys. Both Veronika and Sara said that “poor performance” was laughed at, or some boys made negative comments. Sara said, “For instance, if you can’t shoot the basketball... they [some boys] think it’s funny and make quite a big deal out of it,” pointing to the influence of peers monitoring one’s abilities, and how girls often experience their bodies as being on display in PE (Azzarito, 2010; Fisette, 2011; Hills, 2010; Hills and Croston, 2012; Hunter, 2004; Stride, 2016). Yasmin emphasized the competitiveness she felt in PE lessons:

> Yasmin: It’s [the class] so competitive! They get mad all the time! It’s impossible to cooperate with them.

Interviewer: When you say them, you are referring to—

Yasmin (interrupts): The boys!

These aspects were also evident in the fieldnotes, referring to occasions where boys made comments, such as when a student missed catching the ball, missed a scoring opportunity or lost the ball to an opponent. While similar incidents occurred in other subjects as well, they were particularly evident to both Yasmin and Veronika during PE lessons. Veronika said that although she felt competent in PE because she could use many of her physical skills from playing sports in her spare time, the competitiveness sometimes made her and others fearful of performing in front of classmates. She said it “annoyed” her to see some boys repeatedly mocking other classmates in PE lessons. Sara explained that dominant boys made her fearful of the ball or uncomfortable in different ways. This was particularly the case before the lesson started, if the PE teacher let students warm up with balls on their own. When asked to reflect on how she experienced this praxis, Sara said: “I get really uncomfortable when the boys start to play with a basketball or a soccer ball, like that’s a really hard ball, if I get it in the head...” Yasmin, however, experienced marginalization as a girl in terms of being invisible in class and going unnoticed by the teacher:

> When the boys dominate the game, the rest of us do not get to show our best... because the teacher does not say that you have to cooperate more or not dominate that much... then you will always be the person who is kind of invisible because you do not scream as loudly as the boys.

While the narratives revealed how the girls’ gendered identities led to experiences of marginalization in PE, the girls also challenged what they experienced as unjust gendered practices. For example, despite feeling invisible compared to the boys, Yasmin was not critical of the mixed gender setting. She reflected, “It [separating boys and girls] wouldn’t be necessary if the boys were nicer.” Both Yasmin and Veronika were concerned that girls-only environments might lead to
cliques, which is similar to the girls in Hills’ (2007) study. Referring to both PE lessons and the school day in general, Veronika said:

Some girls have really good relationships in class... I think that is a bit bad because, okay, they can be best friends, but do they always have to be together or... be on the same team? I think it excludes others a bit.

Sara, however, said it would be better if they could sometimes have girls-only PE lessons, because “the girls might not be comfortable having PE with the boys all the time” and “the girls might get to know each other better.” When asked if she had an example of experiencing inclusion in PE, Sara recalled a lesson where the girls played against the boys in floorball:

We [the girls] had a good group. We talked about how we were going to play, and then everyone was included, and we played really well... we cooperated a lot... if we focus more on how to do it, how you act in a group, then you play better... then it is more fair play.

In the statement, Sara referred to being part of a “we” together with the other girls as a source of inclusion and a supportive learning environment in PE (Flintoff and Scraton, 2006). Sara then highlighted the importance of listening to girls’ suggestions and needs to create socially inclusive curricula (Enright and O’Sullivan, 2010; Oliver and Kirk, 2017). Furthermore, she indicated that schools need to better support girls in becoming confident learners in heterogeneous groups (Azzarito, 2010).

Narratives of ethnicity and race/racism. In different ways, ethnicity and race played significant parts in social relations in all three stories. For example, with regard to ethnicity, neither Sara nor Veronika had friends across their own minority/majority position, whereas Yasmin’s story reflected how she negotiated her position as both a “foreigner” and a Norwegian to develop friendships. However, while gender stood out as a clear-cut division in the social community, particularly in PE, ethnicity operated more subtly and intersected with religion, social class, gender, and race/appearance in the girls’ stories.

Veronika’s story indicated ethnic lines within social relations at school. When interviewed, she was asked to reflect on situations where she thought about being Norwegian:

Many in my class are from other countries that may have different rules... I have no such rules connected with being Norwegian, or I have to follow the Norwegian rules that are current in Norway and such, but not like the Muslims who have many rules concerning that... So, I do notice the difference a bit if someone is not allowed to eat this or that, then I see that and think, “Wow, what must that be like?”... I am allowed to eat what I want and such... Some in my class... wear different clothes like hijab, for instance, which is a mandatory garment, and then I see, well yes, but I am Norwegian and a Christian and... I do not have rules like these.

Being part of a multi-ethnic class made Veronika aware of her own ethnic identity and her perceived privileged position in relation to minority students in her class. Her reflection on feeling Norwegian (and Christian) was made solely in relation to other girls in class who were from “other countries” with “different rules.” As such, the statement indicated how the (White Christian) majority culture serves as the unmarked norm (Dyer, 1997) in PE (Barker, 2019; Douglas and...
Halas, 2013; Flintoff, 2015; Flintoff and Dowling, 2019; Robinson, 2019; Simon and Azzarito, 2019) and in education more generally (Gillborn, 2005), (re)producing colour-blind pedagogies that present White experiences as universal. While Veronika’s reflection was built on genuine curiosity about what the other girls’ situations were like, her statement indicated unequal power relations among students of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Identifying as a majority girl, she experienced having “no rules” and the freedom to do, wear or eat whatever she liked, as opposed to the enforcement of strict rules experienced by, for instance, Muslim girls.

Being among the Muslim girls in class, Yasmin’s and Sara’s stories indicated that minority students were excluded or marginalized because of their ethnic background. When asked whether she thought the students’ background mattered with regard to who hung out together at school, Sara reflected:

I do believe these days . . . [more people] don’t care that much about racism, but they do racist things against other people, but they don’t know that they do it . . . maybe they don’t want to be with the person because the person is from a certain country, or wears glasses or has brown hair . . . .

In the statement, Sara pointed to how constructions of ethnicity and race often work in taken-for-granted and subtle ways (Barker et al., 2014). On the one hand, Sara seemed to understate the role of race in social interactions at school by including general markers of difference, such as wearing glasses. On the other hand, her story indicated the importance of race relations by showing how non-White/non-Norwegian visible markers of appearance (such as brown hair) might cause exclusion (Chinga-Ramirez and Solhaug, 2014).

Yasmin’s narrative reflected power relations tied to ethnicity in the social relations among students in her class and at school. In the interview, Yasmin talked about the visibility of students’ different backgrounds at school, indicating how ethnic background intersected with social class and gender:

Yasmin: You know very well whether a person is completely Norwegian or foreign . . . most Norwegian girls look very similar to me. It’s often blond hair, blue eyes or brown, usual posh style, the same clothes, Ralph Lauren t-shirt. Foreign girls have their own style, brown features, dark hair, dark eyes, may be a little darker skin, talk differently.

Interviewer: At [name of school], are you sort of accepted regardless of style?

Yasmin: Yes, I accept them. I don’t judge people based on first impressions . . . I might have done so before, because if you see a girl who doesn’t wear what everybody else wears and who has got her own look, you think, “Oh, she must have been a loser or something. I won’t bother talking to her.” . . . now I go and talk to the person and try to get to know her, but many judge based on appearance. I know that those who don’t look that great are not even looked at. You don’t even know their names. But those who are very rich and have got everything you would want and look great, are very, not liked, but they are sort of recognized.

Yasmin’s statement shows how she negotiated multiple identities in seeking to fit in among the girls. Yasmin identified herself as “obviously Norwegian,” yet she also appeared to distance herself from the “completely Norwegian” girls, describing them as similar and in opposition to the foreign girls. On one side, this suggests that while she considered herself Norwegian, Yasmin was not accepted as a Norwegian among her peers. Social class intersected with ethnicity in
Yasmin’s reflection on how “Norwegianess” was performed (Staunæs, 2003) through fashion among her peers, indicating the importance of how her own working-class background was “achieved and enacted” (Levine-Rasky, 2011: 246) in the multi-ethnic context. On the other side, by identifying as both Norwegian and foreign, Yasmin’s story can also be read as an act of resistance, seeking to expand what being Norwegian is. Moreover, by including a reflection on her own position and power to include girls of different styles, she did “Norwegianess” differently and created a space for social inclusion for girls of minority backgrounds.

Though more subtle, the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and social class was also apparent in PE. Both Sara and Yasmin explained how fashion and bodily appearance among girls negatively influenced social relations in PE. Yasmin reflected:

I used to be like this in eighth grade; I did not want to have PE because I did not have the right workout outfit, or I felt uncomfortable...I think everyone else who is uncertain with regard to PE feels this way as well...For instance, if they don’t want to wear the tightest leggings and don’t want to wear exactly what everyone else wears...if they wear a big hoodie and baggy sweatpants, they feel a bit worse than everyone else...Now that I am older, I think, “Yes, okay, why do you need to be like everyone else?” You can stand out...it doesn’t matter to me anymore; I can wear sweatpants in PE, but I’m sure it matters to others.

Both Yasmin and Sara indicated a hierarchy in the peer group in PE, marked by a “right” way of being, looking, and doing, and furthermore, that this “right way” appeared to be defined by certain kinds of being Norwegian, middle/upper class, and female (Azzarito, 2010; Azzarito et al., 2017; With-Nielsen and Pfister, 2011). Yasmin’s story showed how she negotiated and disrupted power relations as she grew older, saying that she herself did not care anymore. As such, her story illuminates the importance of supporting girls to challenge gender norms and hegemonic discourses “of the female sporting body” (Azzarito, 2010: 269).

Discussion

The findings revealed how the girls’ diverse backgrounds were relevant to their positioning in the social community in a multi-ethnic PE context, as well as how their positioning influenced their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in PE. In the following analysis, the intersectional lens, particularly the concepts of relationality (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016) and positionality (Anthias, 2001, 2006), are applied to discuss the importance and implications of the findings.

In the three stories, the girls’ gendered identities were the most central aspect of how they positioned themselves in PE. Looking at the processes of positioning (Yuval-Davis et al., 2006), the girls commonly talked about themselves (or “us”) in relation to “them” (the boys) in their reflections on the subject. The narratives revealed that the girls experienced gender relations as oppressive (e.g. fearful of receiving negative comments from some boys) and marginalizing (e.g. not having their skills recognized compared to the dominant boys). Their stories reflected hegemonic constructions of gendered boundaries (Yuval-Davis et al., 2006) between girls and boys in PE. As such, the findings add to a long line of previous research on girls’ disengagement in PE in environments dominated by highly skilled boys/masculine values (e.g. Ennis, 1999; Flintoff and Scraton, 2006; Oliver and Kirk, 2017). Furthermore, all three girls indicated that a lack of friendships and social relations in class caused experiences of exclusion in PE, particularly in situations where the students were asked to form pairs or teams on their own (Grimminger, 2014; Hills, 2007). However, while Sara and Yasmin seemed marginalized or excluded, or excluded
themselves in PE (e.g. by not participating in some lessons or activities), Veronika acted more comfortably, despite having few friends, as she was very active and participated in all lessons. This difference can be understood in light of structural and interpersonal power relations in an environment valuing physical skills gained from playing competitive sport (Ennis, 1999; Goodyear et al., 2014; Hills, 2007; Kirk, 2010). Yet, this interpretation overlooks how the girls’ positionality also included intersections of ethnicity, race, religion, and social class enacted in their peer group. Next, how addressing these issues can deepen our understanding of the girls’ experiences of inclusion and exclusion in PE is discussed.

Although the girls shared the categories of gender, age, ability, and, to some degree, social class, the category of ethnicity played a significant role in how they positioned themselves and their classmates. From an intersectional perspective, one can examine how ethnicity is intertwined with other categories in different ways (Staunæs, 2003). For example, Veronika emphasized the relational aspect of gendered, ethnic, and religious identities in multi-ethnic classrooms. Her reflection on situations of feeling Norwegian (and Christian) was made in relation to classmates from “other countries” with “different rules.” This reflects how White majority identities are often understood and experienced as unmarked (Dyer, 1997), which resonates with findings on how Whiteness operates in multi-ethnic PE classes through a naturalization of White values (Barker, 2019; Simon and Azzarito, 2019).

Having Muslim backgrounds, both Yasmin and Sara considered themselves Norwegian, albeit to different extents. However, their stories also indicated that the subject position (Staunæs, 2003) as Norwegian was not available to them. In their stories, ethnicity, race/appearance, social class, and gender intersected in constructing hegemonic boundaries, creating lines of inclusion and exclusion in the social community at school, in their class, and in PE. However, Yasmin’s story indicated that she also took a position of resistance (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). She distinguished between Norwegian girls who all looked the same and foreign girls who had “their own style.” Emphasizing the diversity among foreign girls and including “foreignness” in the category of Norwegian can be interpreted as a way of acting against stereotypical pictures of ethnic minority girls (Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012). Yasmin’s resistance is further reflected in how she positioned herself outside the peer community in PE. Rather than feeling excluded, she chose to focus on her tasks, do them well, and not think about who she was with, or she dropped out of the activities altogether. This interpretation highlights the importance of relationality by breaking the binary understanding of inclusion–exclusion and challenging the notion of exclusion as simply something that one is exposed to (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016; Macdonald et al., 2012; Oliver and Kirk, 2017). Considering how students might choose exclusion (Macdonald et al., 2012) in PE can reveal the ways that young people negotiate power in a subject where they feel “othered” (Azzarito et al., 2006; Stride, 2014); it can also disrupt stereotypical understandings of certain groups of students, particularly girls of minority backgrounds, as lazy, uninterested, and “bodies at risk” (Azzarito, 2010; Stride, 2014).

While ethnicity, religion, and social class (along with gender) appeared to be important for the girls’ positioning in their peer group, these relations were almost absent in the girls’ PE experiences. In PE, the category of gender “seemed to overshadow the category of [ethnicity] in their respective tales” (Staunæs, 2003: 107). This may be interpreted in several ways. For example, Yasmin said she felt invisible as a girl, which points to structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal aspects (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016), such as how teachers might construct gender differences through their practices (Flintoff and Scraton, 2006; van Doodewaard and Knoppers, 2018). This can also be related to the dominance of sports performance in the curriculum and content of PE lessons, which is effective in (re)producing gender inequality (Ennis, 1999), leading to gender overruling other differences in their
PE class (Hills and Croston, 2012; Oliver and Kirk, 2017; Paechter, 2003). Moreover, gender could be interpreted as a category that unites in PE. Considering how gender appeared as a common “we” in the girls’ stories can reveal how girls use gender to challenge power relations in PE. Emphasizing gender in social relations among their peers constructs a “we” or a community and a feeling of inclusion in a subject that they, in different ways, also experience as excluding them. Insights into how girls resist male dominance and whether gender-separate PE classes are the “solution” to these challenges is a continuous and inconclusive discussion (Hills and Croston, 2012). However, as discussed by Hills and Croston (2012), pedagogical practices based upon certain notions of masculinity, whereby differences between boys and girls continue to be the main explanation for male domination in the subject, make it difficult for girls to express feelings of exclusion without reinscribing binary categorizations.

A final interpretation can be drawn in relation to Walseth’s (2013) findings on Norwegian Pakistani girls, whose PE experiences were dominated by their gendered identities. Walseth (2013, 244) concluded that “religiosity seems to have little influence” in PE. Although I agree that gender relations are central to students’ PE experiences, complex analyses are needed to reveal how other markers of difference operate in PE. That ethnicity appears to be absent from the girls’ PE experiences might be a sign that ethnic, cultural, or religious identities are not considered important in PE; hence, they are neither recognized as a recourse (Thorjussen and Sisjord, 2020) nor viewed in terms of how they might create lines of exclusion or tension among students of diverse backgrounds (Thorjussen and Sisjord, 2018). This interpretation reflects that PE is taken for granted as an arena for social inclusion and integration in diverse societies (Anttila et al., 2018; Barker et al., 2017; Goodyear et al., 2014).

**Conclusion**

Regarding the research questions, the narratives showed how the girls’ multiple identities intersected and influenced their positioning among their classmates. The findings also indicated how the girls’ positioning among peers influenced their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in PE. The girls’ gendered identities dominated their PE experiences of marginalization and exclusion by or compared to the boys. Looking at the girls’ positionality (Anthias, 2001, 2006) in social relations in their class, however, revealed the importance of how other markers of difference were performed in the peer group (Staunæs, 2003), constructing hegemonic boundaries among groups of students (Yuval-Davis et al., 2006). The insights gained from the girls’ contextualized stories provided a more nuanced picture of their experiences of inclusion or exclusion in PE.

Instead of asking how students of diverse backgrounds can interact and learn together in ways that are socially inclusive in PE, Anthias (2006: 17) challenged us to ask, “Under what conditions did education fail to create a socially inclusive arena for students of diverse ethnic, gendered, religious and class background?” She emphasized that “structural and political conditions” were involved. This is an important point regarding PE as an arena for social inclusion, and scholars have increasingly focused on how exclusion and marginalization are related to aspects such as institutional practices or curricula favouring Whiteness (Benn and Dagkas, 2006; Douglas and Halas, 2013; Dowling and Flintoff, 2018; Flintoff and Dowling, 2019; Flintoff et al., 2015), hegemonic gender norms (Azzarito, 2010; Larsson et al., 2011; Paechter, 2003; Tischler and McCaughtry, 2011), or middle-class values (Dowling, 2015). However, it is important not to be stuck in describing the reality (Oliver and Kirk, 2017). Hence, both questions are warranted. Researchers must continuously investigate how institutions and institutional practices, despite
good intentions, might contribute to reproducing social exclusion while, simultaneously, change and proactive agency are needed in this reality (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Oliver and Kirk, 2017). The findings of the current study highlight the importance of teachers adopting critical intersectional pedagogies that move beyond simplistic and binary understandings of the “gender problem” in PE, that acknowledge the plurality of girls’ experiences, and that actively support students in developing non-discriminatory learning environments in diverse contexts.

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Notes
1. The Norwegian Educational Act is the common law directing all public approved education in Norway. The law comprises all levels of compulsory schooling.
2. Due to its historical origins, particularly concerning World War II, the concept of race is considered taboo in the Norwegian context. The paper takes the position that the category of race continues to hold social significance in society as racism is still part of many young people’s everyday experiences (Gullestad, 2002).
3. In Norway, 96.4% of students attend public schools in their local school district (Statistics Norway, 2016).

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