

Roddy Walker:

Doing elite identity - A practice theory approach

RESUMÉ

Artiklen forsøger at forstå dannelsen af individuel identitet på elitekostskoler. Herlufsholm Kostskole anskues i denne sammenhæng som en praksiskonstellation rettet mod produktion af eliten. Under den empiriske undersøgelse blev individuelle elever på skolen inviteret til at konstruere narrativer ud fra deres egne erfaringer og forståelser af deres deltagelsesbaner i konstellationen. Ved at foretage en meningskondensering af disse narrativer og operationalisere en praksisteoretisk ramme af situeret læring inspireret af Jean Lave og Etienne Wenger er det muligt at danne en forståelse for, hvordan en Herloviansk identitet - anskuet som en eliteidentitet - kan blive individualiseret gennem de relationer og interaktioner, der opstår ved deltagelse i skolens praksis.

ABSTRACT

The article aims to provide an understanding of the development of individual identity within elite boarding schools. To this end, Herlufsholm School is perceived as a constellation of practices geared towards the production of the elite. During the empirical investigation, individual students attending the school were invited to construct narratives concerning their experiences and understandings of their trajectories of participation within this constellation. By condensing the meaning of these narratives, and operationalising a practice theory framework of situated learning inspired by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, it is possible to gain an understanding of how a Herlovian identity - perceived as an elite identity - becomes individualised through the relations and interactions occurring within the practices of the school.

EMNEORD

Elite identity, elite boarding schools, practice theory, constellations of practice

KEYWORDS

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Introduction – addressing the issue of elite boarding schools

The high degree of correlation between where an individual has attended school, the positions they later occupy in the workplace, and their status within society is an irrefutably recognisable global phenomenon. The role of elite boarding schools, in the preparation of individuals for advantageous positions of power and responsibility in future life, has therefore long been the subject of debate in national and international contexts – why should this be the case, and how can it be understood and explained? The most typical approach to the understanding of these tendencies has been to adopt the perspective provided by C Wright Mills, in his seminal and ground breaking exploration of this area (Mills 1956, 64). This sets a precedent for the tendency of sociological investigations to approach elite boarding schools primarily as technologies dependent upon, and contributing to the reproduction of social inequality. In this manner, the function of elite boarding schools is ultimately understood to be “teaching fish to swim” (Bourdieu 1996, 73), providing an infrastructure for the successful transfer and inheritance of privilege for selected individuals with appropriate social and economic backgrounds.

The aim of this article is not to be bound by this typical sociological focus upon the links between elite education and social advantage, rather to focus upon the inherent practices and processes shaping individual experiences at elite boarding schools. If the study of student subjectivity, understood as “how students experience the world and come to understand themselves socially and culturally in relation to others” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a, 1090) has hitherto been focused primarily upon the antagonistic relationship between disadvantaged, marginalised groups and public schools, then it is both relevant and essential to investigate these processes of subject formation in alternative arenas. Through this perspective, “studying up,” (Nader 1972) becomes essential, it is necessary to investigate the ‘haves,’ as well as the ‘have-nots.’

This idea of “studying up” is adopted to serve a more pedagogical area of interest, in an attempt to gain greater understanding of the processes at play within such a specialised arena. With this ambition in mind, the field of an elite boarding school will be comprehended as the site of unique educational opportunity, enabling and empowering the individual with a specific understanding of self. The aim is therefore to illuminate the dynamics in place

between participants within these practices, potentially providing insight into potential implications for the development of individual identity. In what ways do subjective experiences and understandings of participation within an elite institution, and the navigation of relations between the individuals embodying it, shape the understanding of self?

Herlufsholm as an elite boarding school

These were the focus areas of the Master's thesis in education, undertaken at the University of Copenhagen, which forms the basis for this article (Walker, 2014). Any meaningful attempt to conduct an empirical investigation into this subject meant that access to a research site which could be understood and identified as an elite boarding school was essential. Within the national context of Denmark, and its traditional and cultural reluctance to at all engage with elite concepts (Hansen and Dichow Lund 2008), this represented a challenge in itself. However, a limited knowledge of Herlufsholm School - as being a private, residential institution of secondary education - immediately made this a potential candidate. By engaging this institution with the five criteria developed for the depiction of an 'ideal type' (Weber, 1968 cited in Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a, 1091) for the identification of elite boarding schools, the perception of the school in this way becomes legitimate. These criteria are to be understood as an analytical tool, capable of accommodating the very elasticity and relativity of the term 'elite,' and appreciating the fluidity of this concept. The criteria developed by Gaztambide-Fernández -through the study of elite boarding schools in the USA - are that the institution should be: 1: Typologically, 2: Scholastically, 3: Historically, 4: Geographically, and 5: Demographically elite.

Engaging the school with the five criteria of this ideal type for an elite boarding school gives strong credence to the understanding of Herlufsholm as such an institution. It can be regarded as *typologically elite* as it is independent and self-sufficient, displaying high levels of autonomy and self-governance. The admissions process underlines this autonomy, with the school ultimately free to select which individuals are granted permission to attend, illustrating the legitimacy of understanding this as 'a self-selected community.' The school can be regarded as *scholastically elite*, as is illustrated in the vast array of programmes on offer; the high standards of these facilities

and the high levels of support available to the students. This is illustrated in the determination to assist and challenge all students, with programmes such as participation within the ‘Junior Researchers Project’¹ – in cooperation with the University Of Copenhagen – in place for more advanced students, and extensive assistance available for those requiring support. (Herlufsholm School Handbook 2013, 59) The plethora of extra-curricular activities, exchange programmes and study trips (ibid., 61) further emphasises the holistic approach and richness of the programmes on offer. This scholastically elite status is further compounded by the school’s fifth position in the national league table, the ranking of schools’ grade point average.²

The longevity of its historical roots – stretching back to 1565 – and the importance of traditions and family legacies at Herlufsholm provides a rudimentary, yet compelling basis for the understanding of it as *historically elite*. The same is true of the school’s geographical location,³ where the size of its grounds and the impressive architecture in place also provide a basis for the understanding of its *geographically elite* status. The *demographically elite* status of students at the school can be understood through consideration of the price of attendance. A conservative estimate of the price of attending Herlufsholm, for a student in the first year of upper secondary school, would be in the region of DKK 161,100 for the school year; excluding extra programmes, study trips and activities. While financial aid packages and scholarships are available (ibid., 35) to prevent academically and personally qualified students being denied attendance due to financial restraints, this remains a significant figure, indicating that the majority of students attending share a relatively similar socioeconomic background. It can therefore be concluded that the five criteria for the identification of elite boarding schools prove both appropriate and relevant when applied to Herlufsholm, providing a legitimate foundation for the understanding of this as an example of an elite

¹ “Forskerspigerprojektet” www.forskerspiger.ku.dk/om/ (Accessed 30.04.14) Students representing Herlufsholm won this competition in 2010, 11 and 12.

² <http://herlufsholm.dk/Dansk/Nyheder/Documents/Gymnasiernes%20rangliste.pdf> (Accessed 30.04.14)

³ The school is located approximately 60 km from the Danish capital, Copenhagen – in a rural area close to the town of Næstved.

boarding school. With an appropriate site for research established, it was important to develop a relevant theoretical approach to understanding the influence of participation within such a site, on the development of individual identity.

A practice theory approach

In order to gain insight into this area in the desired manner, a practice theory framework seemed to offer the greatest potential – representing an ontological choice (Nicolini 2012, 13) and heuristic device (Reckwitz 2002, 257) for approaching social phenomena in a certain way. This focuses upon the primacy of practice in the production of meaning and in the understanding of social activity and interaction, where becoming part of a practice involves learning how to act, absorbing and being absorbed in it, and mastering social and material activity (Reckwitz 2002, 257). “For practice theory, social practices are bodily and mental routines. Thus, mental activities do not appear as individual, but as socially routinized; the individual ‘consists’ in the unique crossing of different mental and bodily routines ‘in’ one mind/body and in the interpretative treatment of this constellation of ‘crossing.’” This perception of the individual forms the foundation for the approach undertaken in this article, implying that the nature of the social practices available to the individual are of extreme importance to their potential pathways and development of identity – identity is not something which is given, but is constructed and realised through engagement in social practices (Rasche and Chia 2009, 724).

Applications of a practice theory framework in relevant and influential research

The ethnographic investigations into elite boarding schools undertaken by Khan (2011) and Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b) are hugely influential to departures undertaken here. While they make no citation of practice theory, they are heavily influenced by the praxeological approach undertaken by Pierre Bourdieu, in his classic study of the dynamics of elite boarding schools in France, and their relation to social reproduction and inequality (Bourdieu 1996). However, during the course of their research, this approach increasingly fails to represent the actualities of their findings, which come to

resemble each other greatly. They contend that to understand these institutions accurately, it is of greatest interest to focus on the relations and interactions taking place between participants, shaping their experiences and understandings. Reflecting upon the results of his ethnographical studies conducted at St Paul's – an elite boarding school in the USA, Khan concludes that these interactions allow the individuals to embody an extremely advantageous interactional resource:

“Thinking about this process, the ‘ideal’ of St. Paul’s is not a scholastic one; it is relational. The value of St Paul’s is in ‘being there’ – the way students find their place is by experiencing the relationships that gird the school...I found that this knowledge is not simply a set of things that students cognitively know; instead, how to negotiate relationships is an embodied interactional knowledge” (Khan 2011, 71).

This is described as a form of corporal knowledge, an ‘embodied performative act,’ made possible and available only to those in attendance – it is the very attendance within this specialised interactional arena which enables participants to *learn* to understand themselves as being elite. This type of identity becomes available through the points of reference provided by their own endeavours and experiences, which have the capacity to modify this understanding of self.

The interactional focus adopted by Khan builds upon that put forth by Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b), reporting upon the results of his two-year ethnographic research project at an unnamed elite American boarding school. This contends that elites should be comprehended more as an example of the status groups described by Max Weber, (1968) where the key to membership is the ability to traverse the multiple symbolic boundaries regulating entrance, for example; particular forms of acceptable behaviour, knowledge, social connections and experiences. It is maintained that such membership can be made possible through the interactions available at elite boarding schools, and is the basis for their efficacy. Elite identity is understood as something produced through cultural practices, shaping the individual subjectivities of those participating (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009b, 1). It is therefore the individual’s opportunity to learn how to achieve mobility within and across the innumerable social groupings and contexts of the school – described as

'bubbles' (ibid., 63) - that is of greatest importance in the development of an elite identity. "Acquiring the ability to negotiate this social space successfully results in the development of a social habitus that prepares students for their future lives of distinction"(ibid., 131).

An amalgamation – drawing upon situated learning and communities of practice

Although undertaken by neither researcher, the relational, interactive and corporeal aspects of the findings revealed in the studies conducted by Khan and Gaztambide– Fernández, and framed by a practice theory understanding, can segue naturally into the theoretical perspectives introduced collectively by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991), and subsequently developed and augmented by Wenger in a more particular manner (Wenger 1998). By introducing the findings of these studies to the theoretical apparatus of Lave and Wenger, it is possible to develop a cohesive approach to a renewed understanding of, and investigation into, the development of identity at elite boarding schools.

An appreciation of the importance of the role of learning is crucial to any practice based theorising, as this supports and explains the notion that practice has the capacity to go beyond individuals and persist in time (Nicolini 2012, 78), through the handing down of ways of doing and being at individual level. This underlines the existence of phenomena and structures independent of individual members, and thus from which these individuals emerge. The individual should therefore be considered as historically and socially situated and contingent (Lave and Holland 2013), which is crucial to the critique of cognitive approaches to learning, undertaken by Lave and Wenger. Here it is social engagement, rather than cognitive processes leading to the internalisation of conceptual structures within the individual mind, which is to be regarded as the proper context for understanding learning.

Central to this understanding is the analytical viewpoint of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). This can be understood as a way of framing the dynamic nature of learning as social practice, whereby learning is not regarded as the acquisition of structure, but the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performances – i.e., the mastery of, and in, the

given activities constituting the “community of practice.”⁴ This is based upon asymmetrical forms of co-participation, where more experienced and proficient participants act as the carriers of mature practice of the specific context, personifying the learning landscape - the ‘learning matrix’ for newcomers (Lave and Wenger 1991, 21). These carriers of mature practice offer the newcomers an example of the required skills, appropriate behaviour and relevant dispositions – a model for the shaping of their own developing identity.

The centripetal movement of these newcomers into the given community of practice both arises from, and contributes, to increasing identifications with this practice and facilitates the gradual progression towards the status of ‘full’ participation. This represents the processes which are to be understood as learning. The movement of the individual from the status as a newcomer, through legitimate peripheral participation in a given practice, to full participation and mastery of this practice can be understood as the individual trajectory of participation (*ibid.*, 36) - both the result of and resulting in the continuing development of identity. In this way, LPP should be understood as a way of being in the world, not a way of coming to know about it, a “descriptor of engagement in social practice” (*ibid.*, 36), involving the whole person acting in the world and thereby dissolving the dichotomy between cerebral and embodied activity (*ibid.*, 51). This learning involves the whole person becoming a member, a specific kind of person:

“Activities, tasks, functions and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by, as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations....learning involves the

⁴ “A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity and world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 98).

construction of identities"⁵ (ibid., 53).

This construction of identity involves the individual shaping of values, standards and understandings appropriate to the given practice. This is achieved by learning to perceive oneself from another perspective – a reinterpretation of the self within the given context (ibid., 83). This could provide a theoretical explanation for the findings of Khan, in relation to his understandings of the development of a corporeal understanding of elite identity. This could then be perceived as a *learning process*, the result of legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice - or perhaps more accurately, communities of practice.

Development of identity within constellations of practices

Wenger's theoretical development of the concept of situated learning (Wenger 1998) provides a bi-focal capacity, allowing for a more detailed investigation of the individual's processes of identification and centripetal movement within a single community of practice, while simultaneously widening the scope of this activity. Hence, it also becomes possible to consider and appreciate the individual's activity and trajectories of participation across multitudinous communities of practice:

"An identity then, is a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other. As we encounter our effects on the world and develop our relations with each other, these layers build upon each other to produce our identity as a very complex interweaving of participative experience and reificative projections. Bringing the two together through the negotiation of meaning, we construct who we are. In the same way that meaning exists in its negotiation, identity exists – not as an object in and of itself – but in the constant work of negotiating the self. It is in this cascading interplay of participation and reification that our experience of life becomes one of identity..." (Wenger 1998, 151).

⁵ "We conceive of identities as long term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice. Thus identity, knowing and social membership entail one another." (Lave and Wenger 1991, 53)

This view of identity as being shaped by the individual's activity and participation within the accessible constellation of practices is central to the position adopted by this article. If the purpose and meaning of a given practice is based upon the duality of participation and reification (*ibid.*, 83), the individual's understandings of these practices and their positions within them must influence the eventual identity constructed in accordance to them.

Perceiving Herlufsholm as a constellation of practices geared towards the production of the elite enables a specific perspective, enlightening an understanding of the processes occurring between and within the individual participants. Such an approach is an effective way of appraising the varied social and scholarly contexts and groupings comprising an elite boarding school. This also provides a theoretical apparatus capable of explaining the findings of Gaztambide-Fernández, in which the individual's utilisation and navigation of such 'bubbles,' were found to be fundamental to their development of an elite identity (2009b, 63).

Plotting trajectories of participation

Empirically, this article draws upon ethnographic research, including 13 qualitative interviews conducted with students representing three particular categories of membership within the upper secondary school at Herlufsholm, in November 2013. These were:

- "Newcomers," (five first-year students enrolled the previous summer)
- "Old-timers," (four third-year students assigned the title of prefect, and thereby representing the legitimised embodiment of mature practice)
- Members of a distinct community of practice within the constellation. (Four members of a specific extra-curricular activity – the student committee of a voluntary humanitarian development project)

This was a purposive selection (Suter 2006, 350), in an attempt to gain maximal insight into examples of trajectories of participation – from those recently introduced to the constellation, through to the imminently complete trajectories represented by the old-timers. It was hoped that this range could

enlighten the experiences of individuals at various stages of participation. Through the interviews it also became evident that there was definite variation in the socio-economic and academic backgrounds of the informants, suggesting that the school should not merely be regarded as 'teaching fish to swim,' with regards to these factors. The dynamics inherent within the theoretical framework offered a natural and pregnant structure for the analysis of this empirical material, ultimately revealing how individuals' intentional, at times strategic, investments in particular inherent communities of practice were understood to influence their developing trajectory within the constellation of practices as a whole. The investigation reveals that this process is essentially distilled in the individual students' strategic cultivation of appropriate trajectories of participation for the attainment of the perfect position – the authorised representatives of mature practice within the school.

Entrance and legitimate peripheral participation

Without exception, all of the students involved in the interview process regard their attendance at Herlufsholm as the result of a fully conscious decision, undertaken by themselves and for themselves. The individual motivation for participation proves to be closely connected to their perception of the school's status and renom  – offering the promise of advantage and the opportunity for advancement. This can also be interpreted as an instant example of how an understanding of the school's elite status can directly influence individual activity, reflecting the importance of the "discourse of distinction" (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009b, 15) - a reification central in the communication and understanding of elite schools. Among those interviewed, Herlufsholm is uniformly regarded as an elite school, albeit for various reasons, with the 'Herlovian' identity thereby becoming synonymous with an elite identity. Therefore, this understanding of the practices of, and at, the school can influence the individual's developing understanding of self. Attendance at the school is viewed as providing a potential gateway towards favourable opportunities, the first steps on a new path. This appears to have a decisive role in shaping the initial approach of the subjective towards the collective, equipping the individual with an essential openness and willingness to adapt.

The value of this approach towards entrance becomes obvious through the individual accounts of their initial period of settling into life at the school. While this period and its inherent experiences are often extremely challenging, they are understood and organised in a manner which does not undermine the legitimacy of the individual's position, instead serving to provide a rational explanation for any eventual challenges, or barriers encountered – thereby making them potentially surmountable. The students describe an acceptance of responsibility for this process of settling in, attempting to understand and navigate the dynamics at place within the social contexts of the school, and the patterns of interactions in place. There is evidence of an initially inescapable vacuum between the new students and those who have attended previously, but this is understood as a natural and acceptable privilege of membership status. Indeed membership and positions within the constellation of practices seem to become the most obvious and decisive factor in determining relations during this introductory period – disguising, or at least temporarily muting the importance of differences in social and economic backgrounds in a particular manner. In this way, the individual's claims to the collective identifications (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009b, 200) of the school become key to acceptance by the other students, rather than their socio-economic background.

The difference in seniority between participants is experienced as natural and unavoidable, thereby presenting no threat to the newcomers' perception of their legitimate status. Perceived through the understandings of asymmetrical forms of co-participation described within the theories of Lave and Wenger, this dynamic can instead act as an encouraging factor, and a motivation to develop and advance. In this way, the experience of legitimate participation within the school is initially built upon instantaneous acceptance from the staff, and fellow newcomers. This typically occurs through the formal groupings arranged by the school, such as placement within dorm rooms and allocation of pre-ordained class membership. This could be perceived as an essential function of the school's "teaching curriculum"⁶ (Lave and Wenger

⁶ "A learning curriculum consists of situated opportunitiesit is a field of learning resources in everyday practice, viewed from the perspective of learners.....A teaching curriculum, by contrast is constructed for the introduction of newcomers – supplying and thereby limiting structural resources for learning" (Lave and Wenger 1991, 94).

1991), providing a solid interactional foundation through immediate experiences of positions of legitimate peripheral participation. Access to other communities of practice, however - typically the more informal and prestigious, and primarily those of a more socially determined character, are restricted to a much greater degree. The status of legitimate peripheral participation attributed to new students, while sufficient to engage the individual within particular communities of practice, does not open the door to an interactional Shangri-La. Rather, it provides an awareness of the dynamics involved in these interactions and relations, how they work and what may be required to secure the desired progression within the constellation. This could be regarded as the engine for the individual's development of their 'learning curriculum,' which, as is later revealed, can ultimately enable an individualisation of the Herlovian identity. The adoption of the theoretical apparatus outlined previously, enables this to be understood as the initial process of the individual learning how to act - absorbing and being absorbed in the social practices available to them. This can be regarded as a learning process facilitating a reinterpretation of the self, and the development of a particular identity.

Mature practice

Hierarchies and status

The interviews revealed understandings of a hierarchical structure to particular relations at the school, which provide an immediate insight into the nature of the interactions taking place. This structure can be appreciated instantly, through consideration of the very obvious symbolic privileges afforded to the senior, third-year students. This can itself be understood as reification, where this privileged status becomes objectified through the allowance of these older students to wear special items of uniform - white trousers for the boys and white skirts for the girls - as well as granting them exclusive access to certain sites on campus. An example of this is a particular bench reserved for senior students, which proves to be an important focal point for challenging and enforcing the hierarchical structure of relations between newcomers and old-timers. It is here that the tension between these groups becomes particularly pronounced, and can be seen to be played out in daily life, which could be regarded as an example of the tensions inevitably

arising from the unavoidable “continuity – displacement contradiction” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 116) within the dynamics of the relationships central to situated learning. Here, the old-timers exhibit determination to emphasise and protect the status of their privileged positions and are sensitive to the challenges presented by the trajectories of newcomers, which imply their inevitable secession of authority and seniority to these very newcomers.

The underlying hierarchical structure of relations at the school is, however, also acceptable to those at the bottom of this structure, because their inevitable ascension to these dominant positions is guaranteed.⁷ It is, however, precisely the inevitability of this ascension to the positions available to third-year students which appears to undermine any idea of the holders of this position as being the most important manifestation of mature practice within the school. While the symbols afforded to the third-year students are important status markers, providing considerable social recognition – they are an inevitable feature of participation which ultimately devalues them as any reflection of individual character or competence. Indeed the process of the attainment of these positions was described by one student as being akin to waiting to reach the chosen destination on a bus journey! In this manner, the actual influence of these senior students upon newcomers is predominantly as the carriers of the privilege and status which is to be their eventual inheritance. They are not perceived as the holders of any essential dispositions, knowledge or expertise – factors which are so fundamental to the understanding of the role of old-timers within the asymmetric relations central to the dynamics of Lave and Wenger’s situated learning.

Relations to prefects as the presentation of – and guaranteed access to – mature practice

Instead, the students at the top of the hierarchical structure, and enjoying the privileged status of being recognised as the authorised carriers of mature practice within the constellation are the prefects. There is a rigorous and competitive application process for prefect positions, a title conferred upon selected third-year students who are expected to assist the dormitory teacher

⁷ This reflects the findings of Khan, in which the hierarchies are not simply imposed from above, but simultaneously maintained from below.

in coordinating work and providing guidance for other students in their assigned dormitories (Herlufsholm School Handbook 2013, 99). This can be regarded as the epitome and reification of the ideal Herlovian identity. While the importance and relevance of the prefect role is commonly perceived to diminish in the later year groups and as the students get older, the first meetings with their prefects prove pivotal for all of the students interviewed, and are found to be extremely important in shaping their ensuing time at the school. All of the students intimated that these early interactions with the prefects inspired a resilient ambition and determination to personally achieve this privileged status. This proves to be the case regardless of whether the individual entered the school in sixth grade of primary school, or in the first-year of upper secondary school. The official institutional consecration of these holders of the prefect position confers both privilege and status upon these individuals – but also binds them with concrete expectations and responsibilities to the school. They are expected to act in a certain way, and perform a particular function, essentially ensuring a positive and approachable example of the kind of mature practice expected of the best students. This ensures a level of engagement and interaction between newcomers and these old-timers, which otherwise may have been difficult to obtain, due to the “continuity – displacement contradiction” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 116) described previously. The prefect role can therefore be seen as ensuring the integration of newcomers, while simultaneously providing an example of the kind of identities of participation expected of those to be granted this title. In this way the exemplification of how the prefects act and have managed their time at the school - their trajectories of participation - provides a demonstration of how things can, and to an extent should, be done in order for this privileged status to be achieved – informing the ‘learning curriculums’ of newcomers.

Motivation for the work of belonging

This individual learning curriculum provides motivation for individual application and investments in particular activities (Lave and Wenger 1991, 94). This could be seen throughout the interviews, with students deliberately and strategically focusing their social and academic efforts in very particular, purposeful activities within communities of practice. One striking example of this was a new first-year student who reported concerted efforts in

maintaining fencing and hunting as extra-curricular activities, despite having no previous experiences of these. The student clearly regards these activities as a valuable investment for the future, potentially influencing the interactional pathways and relations available to him during his ongoing attendance at the school. It is in this way that the 'use value' of potential learning outcomes becomes the motivating factor, whereby the individual makes investments to improve and develop in particular areas based upon experiences of what can be deemed important in the actual practices of the environment. It is not just the potential exchange value represented by the achievement of good exam grades - which could potentially be argued to be the key practice of the school- which becomes the motivation for deliberate and targeted activity. Through the theoretical perspectives of Lave and Wenger, this could be perceived as the process whereby the whole person actively becomes a member, and a specific kind of person – through the development of an identity of participation within particular communities of practice (ibid.,36).

In this way, relations between newcomers and other participants -in particular the prefects and the learning curriculums they inspire - provide the basis for strengthening identifications, whereby the individual can develop bonds to the communities within the constellation of practices and individualise the collective Herlovian identity. In Wenger's perspective, this can be regarded as "the work of belonging" (1998, 183), where individual investments in various forms of participation, make it possible for the individual to make the meaning and practice of particular communities its own – gaining ownership of their meaning. This work of belonging becomes evident throughout the multitude of practices within which the students are involved, both academically and socially- that of the whole person within the constellation. This becomes clear at numerous points in the interview process, with the students regarding Herlufsholm as offering much more than merely a scholarly education, offering the individual the opportunity to grow and develop in a particular manner, through their interactions within the relations and networks which become available. Positions of full participation are not found to be purely determined by academic performance, nor social skills – it is within a wide variety of arenas in which the individual must invest and perform the work of belonging, in order to achieve centripetal movement within particular communities of practice and the constellation as a whole.

Only this makes it possible to develop a valid, recognisable and accepted Herlovian identity.

Management of interactions – the path to becoming a prefect

Prefects providing a template for the management of the nexus of multiple membership, and development of Herlovian identity

During the interviews it became resoundingly clear, that a key feature in the attainment of the position of prefect, and thereby attainment of such an authorised and recognised Herlovian identity, was understood to be the securing of mobility within and across the multitudinous interactional contexts of the school – in this case perceived as communities of practice. This involved developing the ability to master and traverse various spheres (for example; academic, social, extra-curricular and sporting contexts) as well as displaying a willingness to challenge the official guidelines and rules of the school. In this way, the prefects were seen to embody model trajectories of how this could and should be done – examples upon which newcomers could base their own intentional and strategic investments in particular activities, in the attempt to eventually secure this position themselves. This can be regarded as the management of intentional activity in particular communities within the constellation of practices, through which it becomes possible to construct a coherent and robust “nexus of multiple membership” (Wenger 1998, 158). This can essentially be understood as the aggregation of the multiple trajectories of participation experienced by an individual, into an understanding of a consistent individual identity. This can provide an effective understanding of the development of identities of full participation within the school. This should not be understood as merely the result of a process of assimilation, rather the individualisation of a collective, trans-generational Herlovian identity, which becomes achievable specifically through participation within its practices.

Managing interactions

During the analysis of the interviews undertaken with the prefects, the presence of common themes to the understandings of their successful trajectories of participation and achievement of this prefect status became apparent. Besides active participation across the schools’ official programmes,

appropriate behaviour and the achievement of high academic standards, there is another common denominator. This is the development of a conscious and deliberate approach to the management of relations across the spectrum of the school, which instils them with an interactional stability, fortifying the capacity to navigate these relations effectively. As described in the findings of Khan, this could be understood as the development of an “embodied interactional resource” (Khan 2011, 71). These approaches were highly individual, ranging from the development of an essentially professional approach – distancing the self from being emotionally affected by potentially problematic relations, to a more abrasive and confrontational approach to such challenges, intended to nip any potential problem in the bud. Ultimately, there was evidence of the establishment of consistent individual approaches to interactions at the school – enabling their navigation of this complex web of relations. This could be regarded as a key factor in enabling the development and maintenance of a coherent nexus of multiple-membership – securing the necessary mobility across the different interactional contexts of the school and ultimately the attainment of the prefect position, the successful individualisation of Herlovian identity.

Development of an elite identity

The individual’s strategic investments and activities within these inter-connected communities of practice were, then, revealed to be capable of influencing the eventual position they could attain within the constellation of practices, emphasising the relevance of an appreciation of the effects of this individual’s conscious and deliberate activity. Through the perspectives of the theoretical framework it was revealed that the attainment of prefect status – essentially the reification of an identity of full participation and/or an ideal Herlovian identity- was dependent upon the achievement of mobility within and across the inter-connected communities of practices comprising the constellation. This mobility required mastery within academic and, perhaps more importantly, social contexts. It became clear that the students who had attained this prefect position had developed specific interactional management techniques, relational skills which enabled and maintained productive relations with other participants. This interactional capability allowed the consolidation of what could be regarded as the nexus of multiple-membership - the aggregation of their numerous identities of participation-

into a coherent and robust individual identity. This can be perceived as a process of individualisation in which the collective meanings, understandings and values of the school are made available through participation within its practices, and are then interpreted into the individual understanding of self. The individual gains ownership of the Herlovian identity.

The participants perceive the school as being scholastically, and, perhaps most importantly, socially elite. This perception has little to do with the socio-economic background of the students attending, and more to do with its perceived ability to provide access to invaluable networks, through the attainment of membership to the Herlovian community - incorporating both the current students and also alumni. The interactional skills and resources developed at the school were understood to equip the individual with the capacity to adapt within this community and navigate it – providing advantageous opportunities and connections in future life. These elite perceptions become reified through the widely held acceptance of the school as an elite institution, but also through such aspects as its high performance in national league tables of exam results. Likewise, this status is reified through the discourse of distinction surrounding the school which is used and accepted by the students, believing they have advantages over others - those who have not attended the school. This reification informs their very understandings of the meaning of their participation within the constellation of practices, the relations and interactions girding it - and instils them with the belief that the attainment of a Herlovian identity is in essence synonymous with what can be understood as an elite identity.

In conclusion

The adoption of a practice theory approach to investigating the processes influencing the development of individual identity within elite boarding schools offers an intriguing perspective, allowing dimensions of pedagogical interest to come into focus, rather than sociological. By adopting a theoretical framework inspired by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, it becomes possible to concentrate upon the intentional activity and participation of individuals within such an environment, whereby their interactions, relations and shared experiences of meaning with others within these particular practices are seen to facilitate a re-interpretation of the self. This can be regarded as the

individual development of particular and coherent identities of participation in relation to other participants within this constellation of practices, facilitating interactional capabilities which are crucial in ensuring mobility within and across these contexts and potentially leading to the privileged position of prefect, a reification of the ideal student identity. This can be perceived as a process of individualisation in which the collective meanings, understandings and values of the school are made available through participation within its practices, and are then interpreted into the individual understanding of self. The individual gains ownership of the Herlovian identity: an elite identity. In this manner it becomes possible to perceive such an elite identity as something which can be actively constructed by the individual, through participation in specific practices, while simultaneously emphasising the crucial importance of the nature of the practices available to the individual.

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