

## **'I can try it': Negotiating masculinity through football in the playground**

Abstract: The research presented explores the negotiation of hegemonic masculinity through football in a group of school children between three and five years of age in a school in Spain. The article shows that in the construction of masculinity within the school, football plays an important role. In this sense, it shows how the playing of football created a double system of exclusion. On the one hand, girls were excluded from the football field and, on the other hand, some children looked for strategies to exclude younger school children. At the same time, a classification of the various masculinities was created based on the skills they had and their overall ability of the sport. However, through football some children also found a way to negotiate their masculinity. In line with this issue, the struggle of powers and tensions that football provoked among the peer group is shown. The data analysis has been conducted under a post-structuralist lens for an in depth study of the process of exclusion, differentiation and surveillance through the sport.

Keywords: football, playground, school, hegemonic masculinity, ethnography

There are several studies that investigate the union between masculinity and football during primary education (Keddie, 2005; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Skelton, 1997). However, there is little research on the connection of playing football and hegemonic masculinity in younger children. In this sense, the article that we present aims to explore how power relations are created and initiated with football in a small group of students between three and five years of age in a Spanish school. In Spain, between three and five years of age, boys and girls are enrolled in pre-school education. This educational stage is not compulsory but the state guarantees its gratuity so that schooling is practically universal. We must also mention that in Spain, the importance of football goes beyond its sporting dimension. A recent study published by the Center for Sociological Research (2014) shows that 48% of respondents said they were interested in football despite not even practicing it. Likewise, 67.4% felt close or showed sympathy for a football team. In this aspect, children observe football as a widespread social phenomenon and cultural practice in Spain. Therefore, it is very common to practice from an early age. Schools offer football as an extracurricular activity because it is highly demanded by families. In addition, school conflicts have already begun throughout Spain due to the monopolization of playground by this sport. Thus, in Spain, experiments were carried out in different schools with a goal to achieve a more equitable use of space in the playground. These are

known as 'days without a ball', and they have generated a broad social debate (Garay, Vizcarra & Ugalde, 2017).

From this social context, and from a theoretical-methodological perspective, we will use Connell's (1995, 1998) theory of hegemonic masculinity as an analysis tool because it allows us to study the construction of plural masculinities in a specific school context, and the power struggle for the hegemonic perfectness through sports. Thus, our study explores the potential of the peer group and the process of exclusion, classification and surveillance that is generated from football between the various masculinities. The data presented come from an ethnographic study and show that the school, as another institution of the social context, acts as a support that confers certain status to children with better football skills. Specifically, it shows the playground as an important space for the negotiation of the various masculinities from football.

### **Hegemonic masculinity**

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was initially formulated by Connell (1995, 1998) to theorize the pattern of practices that legitimizes the patriarchal system in society. Thus, following the approach of Demetriou (2001), hegemonic masculinity is reproduced from a double system of submission: through its 'external' function it guarantees the dominion of men over women and from the system of 'internal hegemony' it exercises power over other men subordinated to the hegemonic power. Hence, in opposition to hegemonic masculinity or idealized masculinity, there are other 'marginalized' or 'subordinated' masculinities, as well as femininities. For this reason, we see a system of hierarchical gender represented which accumulates tension in the negotiation of the perfect hegemonic masculinity while appearing natural in its forms. Nevertheless, the legitimization of the unequal gender order is embodied by a minority of men, while the rest passively support the hegemonic model from a position of complicity. From these masculinity accomplices derives a patriarchal dividend that perpetuates the collective power of men in relation to women (Coles, 2008). In this sense, masculine hegemony includes persuasion and vigilance among its strategies of domination. With this, heterosexuality, sports prowess, violence or competitiveness are some of the central components in the regulation of masculinity, establishing the limits between those practices that are considered proper in a man and those that move away from the hegemonic model.

Since its initial version, the concept has received various criticisms (Donaldson, 1993; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Whitehead, 1999). The main difficulty for some authors is that, starting from a dichotomous conception between hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity, it becomes impossible to theorize the dismantling of the gender order (Demetriou, 2001; Duncanson, 2015). Other authors (Hearn, 2004; Swain, 2006), meanwhile, state that the problem lies in the fact that Connell's theory has been too simplified in many studies through the use of typologies. For example, Martino (1999) makes use of the categories 'cool boys,' 'party animals,' 'squids,' and 'poofers' to represent the different forms of masculinity within the school. In this respect, Swain (2006) recognizes that these typologies can be useful to explain the way in which the diverse forms of masculinity are constructed. However, the author also points out that they are often too restrictive, and that they do not always recognize the fluid, complex and contradictory nature of identities. In addition, some studies point out that another of the main weaknesses of Connell's theory is that women have been commonly placed as mere consumers of hegemonic patterns, rather than active agents in their reconstruction (Schippers, 2007; Talbot & Quayle, 2010).

Based on the limitations that some of the authors raise, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) conducted a review of the initial formulation of the concept and proposed a more dynamic version, recognizing that gender relations always involve tension in their negotiation. In turn, several authors also suggest new conceptualizations by considering that the original version of the Connell model is not sufficient to explore the way in which men subtly negotiate masculinity in their daily lives, sometimes resisting hegemonic pressures. In this sense, Coles (2008) proposed the concept of 'mosaic masculinities' to refer to the process through which some men configured individual forms of masculinity that allowed them to adopt a position of power without aligning themselves with the hegemonic model. On the other hand, Anderson (2008) found a model of 'inclusive masculinity' that was positioned against hegemonic masculinity through respect for women and tolerance of homosexuality. In this same direction, Swain (2004) also discovered a new pattern of masculinity within the school that he called 'personalized masculinities', these were represented by children who showed no desire to imitate the hegemonic form of masculinity. However, other authors claim that these changes in the reconfiguration of masculinity serve, sometimes, to mask the hegemonic domain instead of subverting it. Demetriou (2001), the main defender of this position, alludes to a flexible

‘hegemonic masculine bloc’ that ‘displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new, historically novel forms of power relations.’ (p. 348). Thus, this ‘masculine bloc’ is articulated through the selective appropriation of diverse elements of other masculinities and femininities that serve to prop up the masculine domain.

Based on the criticisms that have arisen about the concept of Connell, the research we present uses the theory of hegemonic masculinity as an analytical tool to study the construction of plural masculinities and the struggle for the hegemonic perfectness through sport in an everyday life at school. However, we also verified that Connell's proposal was not enough to study the complexity in the process of constructing masculinity based on football in the case of our ethnographic context. Accordingly, and as can be analyzed from the results presented, we observe that there is a ‘flexible masculinity’ that allows some children to place themselves, using the game of football, between the different forms of masculinity proposed by Connell.

### **Sport, Masculinity and School**

Messner (1990) assures that sport works as an important social institution that promotes the construction of a dominant form of masculinity. With this in mind, the school has been studied as a privileged scenario for the creation of a sportive dominant masculinity in a space on which to publicly exhibit these sports skills. However, we must consider the school, as an institution, that shapes masculinity patterns configured in a broader social context. In this respect, the children, at their early ages, are the objects of the commercialization of articles related to the sport like football t-shirts, playing cards, stickers, etc. that directly influence their understanding of the sport. Swain (2006) states that the sports that are practiced in school (rugby, football, hockey, netball ...) are not an innocent pastime, but are used to create a model of superior masculinity, that in which has been taken, in large part, from the media, where the professional player conforms to the hegemonic model of masculinity. In this context, and to study the construction of masculinity from sport within the school, numerous studies have taken as a frame of reference Connell's theory (Keddie, 2005; Martino, 1999; Skelton, 1997). More specifically, his theory has been used to study the role of football in the construction of masculinity, since it is the most popular sport among boys within the school. In this sense, several investigations have shown that skills such as strength or speed are highly valued

in order to play football within the school (Campbell, Gray, Kelly & MacIsaac, 2016; Swain, 2000; Warren, 2003).

Playing sports serve to separate those who do not demonstrate the necessary skills and abilities within the playing field, resulting in a segregation of spaces (Epstein, Kehily, Mac AnGhail & Redman, 2001; Karsten, 2003; Renold, 2004). In this way, cultural conceptions of girls' lack of sporting skills mean that they are commonly excluded from the game (Fagrell, Larsson & Redelius, 2012; Paechter, 2006; Renold, 1997). In the same way, sports which are considered masculine, are perceived in opposition to feminine sports to which softer forms are attributed (Warren, 2003). In this sense, Barnes (2011) found that some children referred to the women's hockey team as 'a bunch of retards', ridiculing their achievements and placing them in a less serious level. Showing how children used humor to establish a distance between the women's hockey team and the men's hockey team, which they considered superior. In this manner, when girls try to participate in a male sport, their male peers often develop strategies to disengage them. Accordingly, several investigations have found that girls who participate in football are often categorized as tomboys and exposed to humiliation (Mayeza, 2017; Paechter, 2010). In this way, they occupy a marginal role and are seldom included as a member within the activity. In turn, this marginality causes some girls to end up accepting the secondary role assigned to them during the game or concealing their taste in football. Paechter and Clark (2007), for example, found that male peers placed their female teammates in the goal as goalkeepers to prevent full female participation in football. In line with this question, other investigations (Fagrell et al., 2012; Paechter & Clark, 2007) found that girls often renounce possession of the ball or pass the ball quickly because they occupy a space that does not belong to them.

However, the social-cultural conceptions that exist around football not only serve to exclude girls, but in turn create a hierarchy among the different masculinities, establishing demarcations between those who are fit for sports and those who do not adapt to the hegemonic standard. Taking all this into consideration, several investigations have made visible the way in which masculinity is negotiated within the peer group and the surveillance mechanisms that work within the classroom. Swain (2003), for example, found that high sports performance was the most effective way to gain popularity among the peer group and to achieve privileged status in the classroom. In this manner, children who distance themselves from sports are often labeled as others and often ridiculed by

their peers (Atencio & Koca, 2011; Hickey, 2008; Martino, 1999; Renold, 1997; Swain, 2000). In turn, Renold (1997) found that boys who did not choose to play football were often represented as feminine and subjected to ridicule. Following this point of view, Phoenix and Frosh (2001) observed that boys who spent more time studying than playing football were the object of ridicule from their peers.

Boys who show a lack of sports skills are, in many cases, subjected to homophobic abuse (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Silva, Botelho-Gomes & Goellner, 2012; Swain, 2000). In this way, football appears strongly linked to heterosexual masculine discourses. As Swain (2000) correctly points out, the image of an ideal heterosexual man is strongly represented on television, magazines and in the media, so it is important to study the union between professional football and the construction of hegemonic masculinity within the classroom. A process of exclusion, differentiation and surveillance; which is set forth, serves to establish a comparison with non-football children; meanwhile giving children with extensive sports skills, which are transferable and useful in football, a privileged place in the classroom. Therefore, football at school becomes a way to reproduce hegemonic masculinity through a highly hierarchical system (Messner, 1990). More recently, other investigations have tried to show the performative character of masculinity through football. In this sense, Campbell, Gray, Kelly and MacIsaac (2016) indicated that the participants of their study considered physical strength as an important component for football; however, they did not want to see themselves as extremely strong. In this way, participants negotiated an identity that avoided strong-weak extremes. In regard to this, Jeanes (2011) found that some girls constructed alternative femininities from playing football while, at the same time, cultivating the ideal body and aligning with idealized femininity. In light of this research, it is necessary to study the complex networks through which hegemonic masculinity and football meet within the school context.

## **Methods**

The research takes an ethnographic approach and for it a total of 300 hours of participant observation have been carried out in three schools located in the north of Spain, with boys and girls between three and five years of age. During the first week, the observer was placed in the classroom and in the playground where field notes were taken. The descriptions and transcriptions that we show in the results section are part of extracts from

the field diary, in which conversations are collected between the boys and girls, as well as between the infants and the observer. The analysis that we offer below takes a post-structuralist perspective to adequately theorize the gender relations among students from football.

## **Participants**

The data presented in this article includes the results of the last school we visited, which we have called 'Rosario Acuña' (both the name of the school and the names of the participants are fictitious). We have chosen this school because in it the construction of masculinity was very much linked to football. In addition, in the other two schools the game of football was complicated because they did not have space to practice it. There were 60 hours of participant observation, spread over the months of May and June 2017. In total, there were 40 students who were in preschool education (3-5 years) and primary education (6-12 years). The observations were made in the preschool classroom where there were 10 students. Specifically, there were two five-year-old students (Rosario and Simón), four four-year-old students (Asley, Alfonso, Tomás and Asier) and four three-year-old students (Jana, Carlos, Dani and Mateo).

In this context, football should be studied as a widespread social phenomenon in Spain and, more specifically, in the local context where the school in which we conducted the study is found. This school was public, it was located in a rural area of the Principality of Asturias and it was attended by children from the surrounding villages. Most parents had a high school education and some had a university education. Also, some families spent part of their leisure time, during the evenings and weekends, to take their children to football training sessions as well as to regularly attend professional football matches. In the school 'Rosario Acuña', football was part of the daily life of the school. Boys played this sport during playtimes, monopolizing the game space and without the teachers intervening to modify this situation. In addition, the teacher allowed the children to talk while doing tasks, and this was used by the children to bring up the subject of football.

## **Results**

### *Space distribution in the playground*

Identity is constructed through the body and in relation to spaces occupied (Paechter & Clark, 2007). For this reason, it is necessary to study the structures of schools and the use



that children make of the school space based on the opportunities that each local space offers to students. In this sense, several studies point to the segregated use of space in the playground and the low participation of girls in playing sports (Epstein et al., 2001; Martino, 1999; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Renold, 2004). In 'Rosario Acuña' there were between one and two teachers watching the playground but they only intervened in cases of dispute between the students. In this way, the segregated distribution of spaces had been assumed as normal.

The school had a large playground in which children freely chose the games to play during recess, which lasted approximately one hour, spread out throughout the morning. In the central area of the playground, the four and five-year-olds developed a daily football activity while the girls and the youngest children played in a garden located on one of the sides of the patio. In the preschool classroom there were only three four-year-olds and one five-year-old, so the central area of the playground, which was approximately two thirds of the playing area, was occupied by four students while the rest of the children were relocated to the garden area. Therefore, although there were few children who played football on a daily basis, the central area was reserved for this activity. When primary students were later incorporated into the play area, the girls occupied the garden located on the other side of the playground and most of the boys from primary joined the central area (see figure 1). Thus, due to this union between masculinity and playing football, girls and boys of younger ages were excluded from this sport; a hierarchy was formed according to age and gender for accessibility to the playing field.

figure 1 near here

### ***The exclusion of girls and younger children***

Some of the children used expressions that served to establish a distance between masculinity and femininity and reinforce the idea of masculine superiority. In this sense, four-year-old boys would say that girls were '*babies who do not know how to play football*' (field journal extract), or '*football is for boys and not girls*' (field journal extract). Therefore, they came to understand that the behavior of girls was immature and childish. In this way, they thought that girls lacked the necessary requirements to participate in sports and made use of derision to ridicule the skills of their peers (Keddie,

2005; Paechter & Clark, 2007). Thus, the girls showed no interest in participating in football and only in specific cases did they join the activity assuming the role of referee, thus placing them in a marginal position instead of actually taking part in the game (Paechter & Clark, 2007). In this way, they assumed the subordination structure and when they were asked the reason for their disengagement, they expressed disinterest in football activities:

*Observer: Why don't you play football with Asier and Tomás?*

*Rosario: Because they are very boring.*

*Mateo: These boys are very dumb (interrupts)*

*Observer: Why are they dumb?*

*Mateo: Because they didn't pass Rosario the ball*

*Rosario: That is why I don't want to play with them!!*

*[...]*

*Jana: The boys play with the boys and the girls with the girls*

*Observer: and why is that?*

*Jana: because the boys always ruin the fun*

*Observer: How do they ruin the fun?*

*Jana: because they always want to be bad and play football*

*Observer: and you girls don't play football?*

*Jana: football is a thing for boys*

This shows how some girls understood that boys should join the football field to play 'the appropriate game', reinforcing the binary of boys and girls games. However, it is important to keep in mind that there were only three girls in the classroom and this is likely to make it difficult to challenge the gender boundaries. At the same time, the area of the school garden occupied by the girls of primary was a feminized space and when conflicts arose during the games in this area the girls took possession of them, threatening to expel the younger children. In the garden, Rosario, being the oldest girl, enjoyed a certain status among the group of girls and non-football children. Rosario would complain that the boys annoyed and insulted the girls at recess times and when she was asked the reason for this interference she resorted to phrases like 'they are boys' (field journal extract) which helped position herself as a correct and respectful girl arguing that 'those things are not to be done' (field journal extract). Therefore, as an older girl, Rosario

assumed an exemplary model of femininity through respect and kindness to establish distance from the hegemonic form of masculinity, but at the same time exercised power over younger children contributing to their subordination. In this way, she alternated between different versions of femininity which in turn allowed her to adapt to different situations:

*Rosario: Tomás y Asier are always bothering us.*

*Observer: How do they bother you?*

*Rosario: They tell us that we are silly and they do not let the other children play (the 'other children' are Carlos, Dani and Mateo who are playing with the girls in the garden)*

*Observer: and what do you all do?*

*Rosario: We tell them that those things shouldn't be done*

*Observer: and why do they do them?*

*Rosario: because they are boys (sigh)*

*Rosario: We have Dani, and as I have already said a thousand times, he shouldn't play girl games.*

*The three-year-old boy and the observer listen in silence.*

*Rosario: It's not your business Dani. Go ask them if you can play with them, do you want to?*

*Dani: No*

*Jana: Well you have to want to play with them.*

*Dani is distraught and generates a climate of silence*

At the same time, the three-year-old boys played during recess with the girls but they seemed to be occupying a borrowed and provisional space, until they acquired the necessary male abilities (speed, movement ...) to be able to join the field of play:

*Tomás and Asier begin a kind of game that consists of 'self-hitting' every time stronger, with their fist in their face. I warn them that they can hurt themselves*

*Tomás: No. We cannot hurt ourselves not the two of us nor Alfonso*

*Asier: Well, Alfonso can, he sometimes cries when he plays football*

*Carlos is observed trying to imitate the action of his classmates*

*Asier: And Carlos does not know because he is small and still does not know how to play football*

*Tomás, Asier and Alfonso get up and begin to bang strongly on their heads and chests while they make an attempt not to show any pain. After a few minutes, to exaggerate the blow, Alfonso kneels on the floor, and, while hitting his stomach without stopping, pretends to be vomiting (field journal extract).*

Tomás and Asier made a clear effort to publicly show their physical abilities (agility, hardness...) through 'corporal actions' in which they demonstrated tolerance to physical pain. The youngest children (Carlos, Dani and Mateo) also tried to participate in these demonstrations of strength and hardness; however, their partners often excluded them because they felt they were not strong enough. From the point of view of these younger boys, they were convinced that 'the elders' had better physical disposition for the sport activity because they were 'very strong and fast' (Mateo, 3 years old). In this way, the hegemonic form of masculinity was strongly linked to the concept of body and physicality that children acquired based on their age. Likewise, strength was valued by younger children as an important feature in sports. It is likely that for this reason, like their peers, they assumed the marginal role they played during the game, limiting themselves to chasing the ball while their peers directed the activity. Therefore, older children found a way to exclude younger boys from the game. As an example, on one of the occasions when Carlos (3 years old) tried to take the ball, Tomás (4 years old) grabbed his arm and whispered in his ear 'No Carlos, look, you cannot play because the ball is a little broken, do you see?' In this way, a subtle dissociation of the younger children was practiced and a strong hierarchy of age was formed in the access to the playing field (Paechter & Clark, 2007).

### ***The vigilance of the peer group***

*The children are sitting on the carpet placed in the center of the classroom while the teacher prepares the work materials. Alfonso is sitting next to Tomás. You can see Alfonso crawling to get next to Rosario*

*Tomás: Go back to your place right now Alfonso!*

*Rosario: No. Now he's with me*

*Tomás: He's always with you. Come here. You cannot change places.*

*Alfonso: I'm more comfortable here*

*Observer: Who do you want to play with in the yard?*

*Alfonso: with Rosario*

*Soon Alfonso and Rosario play in the corner of the play-kitchens. Prior to the exit to the playground, the children usually negotiate what will be their positions during the football match. You hear Tomás on the other side of the room say that Alfonso would play football in the playground.*

*Alfonso adopts a pensive pose for a few seconds*

*Alfonso: I'm going to play football*

*Observer: But didn't you say you're going to play with Rosario?*

*Alfonso: but I can try it...*

*Observer: but if you do not like it...*

*Alfonso: It does not matter, I am going to try it*

Alfonso (4 years old) usually would play in the classroom with Rosario and, often made a conscious effort to self-regulate and model his masculinity by alternating his play with girls, with the hegemonic form of masculinity through football (Atencio & Koca, 2011). Through the discursive fragments, we can see that the child distanced himself from the norm of gender and chose to play with the girls but, at the same time, he aligned himself with the hegemonic forms of masculinity during recess times to defend his position within the group. In short, we see how in Alfonso a contradictory commitment is inferred as a result of this calculation that evaluates the costs and benefits of accommodating or, on the contrary, resisting to the hegemonic norm (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These costs were translated in the classroom into ridicule by other children who had better sports abilities and who often said that Alfonso could be harmed during football matches 'because he cried' (field journal extract) and, therefore, it showed a lack of hardness that affected the sports context. In this way, the child was often ridiculed by externalizing behaviors considered feminine such as showing sensitivity and expressing emotions (Martino, 1999).

### ***Negotiation during the game***

Although some children took a subordinate position during the development of the football activity, the number of players was very small (four children after the direct exclusion of the three-year-old children), so all of them became necessary pieces of the game. This led to a clear hierarchy of masculinities on the playing field (Martíno, 1999). On the one hand, there were children who showed high skills for sports (Tomás and Simón) and, on the other hand, those who were not especially skilled in the activity (Alfonso and Asier), but were necessary for it to develop and form teams (two against two). Therefore, Tomás used to say that Alfonso was not good enough for the sport but, in spite of his complaints, he showed some agreement with the performance of his partner and usually would claim his presence during the game:

*Tomás: Alfonso is very bad, he only knows how to shoot penalties. But he's good enough to play.*

This situation allowed negotiation possibilities for non-football boys who often threatened to leave the field if playing conditions were not met. For Asier, an important condition was being part of Tomás's team to avoid the feeling of helplessness in an activity that produced insecurity. Thus, when Tomás tried to disassociate himself from his friend, Asier left the area of the game and a process of negotiation was opened:

*Tomás: We play against you (He refers to him and Simón)*

*Asier: Okay, well, me and Alfonso will not play, right Alfonso?*

*Asier proceeds to leave the field and Tomás runs after him*

*Tomás: You're kidding, aren't you?*

*Asier does not answer and continues walking. Tomás runs after his friend and stands in front of him*

*Tomás: No. Look. We will play you and me together, okay? okay?*

*Asier returns to the field*

Hence, although the alternative forms of masculinity were restricted due to peer group surveillance, non-football boys found a way to negotiate their presence in the activity of football. Therefore, gender relations were always a product of tension, resistance and negotiation within the classroom; and masculinity became a precarious achievement framed in the daily struggle within the field. In this way, the presence of the sport activity

became complicated because the children used a large part of the time to resolve conflicts every day.

### *Sharing game scenario with primary school children*

Occasionally, children in preschool education shared a game scenario with primary school children. During these sessions, Tomás and Simón, who had well-developed football skills for their age, were incorporated into the football matches organized by the oldest children. At this time, football was becoming a serious activity in which children imagined being part of a professional football team with well-defined rules, using a high dose of concentration that reinforced the conspiracy among the players. The sporting activity included the organization which normally could not be found in matches between infants of four and five-year-olds. The children experienced the enjoyment and excitement of participating in a seemingly serious match, with a well-defined timetable and the role of each player established previously. During the game, Tomás and Simón occupied a privileged place and their companions frequently recognized their achievements, which made the children experience the pleasure of being at the height of the game that the older children started. In this new scenario, the players were valued for their soccer skills and the age difference was not an impediment to participate in the game. With all this, the children lacking sports skills stopped being necessary pieces for the start-up of the activity and were relegated to a marginal space. This exclusion seemed to be a relief for Alfonso who was looking for a way to disengage from the game; However not; Asier, who was in a position to aspire to hegemonic masculinity, frequently criticized his friend for his absence:

*Asier: Today you played a lot with the older kids and very little with me  
(in a scolding tone)*

*Tomás: I'm sorry. Tomorrow I will play with you*

*The next day, when the children observe through the classroom window that the elementary school children were in the playground*

*Tomás: Today you have to play with the older kids. But you will never learn to play football (addressing his comment to Asier)*

*Asier shakes his head several times saying no*

In one of the informal conversations between the teacher and the observer, the teacher pointed out that Tomás was ‘the most competitive child in the class’ (field journal extract) and that he often pushed the rest of the children to participate in the class. These pressures which were observed in the classroom made it obvious who was apt to compete in sports and who had to strive to adapt to the demands of hegemony.

***Distancing oneself from the hegemonic masculinity***

*Tomás: Simón, today you do not play with us. We want to be alone and calm and you are always bothering us (from his desk)*

*Simón pretends not to listen to him and continues with the task. Tomás repeated the same message several times throughout the morning.*

*Asier: We will never play with you again*

*Simón continues simulating that he does not listen*

*Simón: I'm not here. I'm not here. You speak so low that I can't hear you (to make clear that he is ignoring them)*

*Simón is sitting next to the observer. Simón begins to look at the observer and laugh.*

*Observer: Tomás and Asier always play together?*

*Simón: They are boyfriends (laughs)*

*Observer: Boyfriends?*

*Simón: Yes, boyfriends. They do not want to say anything but we already know it. They are always together. That means they are boyfriends for sure (he swings in his chair while continuing to laugh)*

*Observer: And you play in the playground with them?*

*Simón: Sometimes I do play with them but, other times they don't let me*



- Observer: And why?*
- Simón: They do not want to play football with me because I'm better than them, because I always beat them and that's why they do not want to*
- Observer: and why do girls never play football?*
- Simón: That's because they do not want to*
- Observer: Mateo says it's because the children do not let Rosario play (remembering the conversation a few days ago)*
- Simón: That's because I was not there. When I am, you tell me and she will play football with us.*

Simón used free play time in the classroom to play with Asley (4 years old). During the free play, Simón followed Asley around the classroom and seemed to take on a protective role with her. Simón was the only child who shared the game area with the girls on a daily basis showing himself relaxed during the playful activity. At times, Rosario (5 years old) approached Simón and Asley and said ‘they are in love’ (field journal extract) while Simón caressed the girl and laughed. In this way, unlike his peers, he did not avoid ties with the girls but reinforced them almost daily. However, in private conversations with the observer, with whom he established great affinity, the child made use of humor to question the heterosexual masculinity of his companions:

*All children are sitting down doing work. The observer sat next to Simón and Rosario (at the five-year table). The observer listens to how Asier and Tomás, at the next table, whisper into each others ears, look at Simon and laugh.*

- Simón: Look at Tomás and Asier (he covers his mouth)*
- Observer: What is wrong?*
- Simón: They are together.*
- Observer: They are doing their work.*
- Simón: No, because everyone knows they are boyfriends (they laugh)*

In this way, Simon used humor as a strategy to defuse tension in the classroom, trying to reinforce his masculine position. For this, he made a representation of masculinity through comic devices that served to ridicule the masculinity of other children (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). However, in public, the most used tactic by Simon was to create distance

from the hegemonic model, creating his own version of masculinity. For this, he ignored the comments of his colleagues and seemed unconcerned about their attacks. Simón was always dressed in the shirt and pants of his favorite soccer team and this resource also helped him to create distance with the masculinity that his teammates represented from corporal signs that publicly exhibited his union with this sport.

Therefore, Simón made use of an equalitarian gender discourse, positioning himself as a fair child and willing to introduce girls to football (see previous narrative fragment); However, during football matches he never made an obvious effort to include any of his girl classmates in the activity. At the same time, Simón frequently placed the female figure in a fragile and helpless place, acting as protector of the girls in the face of male attacks. In turn, he perceived himself as invincible in sports and assumed the role of a football star impossible to defeat. With this, the limits between hegemonic and subversive practices were blurred. This ambivalence in the configuration of hegemonic masculinity managed to place him as a kind and friendly child, while reinforcing his position of privilege within the group (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Thus, for Simón, his well-developed football skills was the element that allowed him to make other decisions during the game without putting his position of privilege at risk:

- Observer: You are not going to play football?*  
*Simón: No, I don't feel like it today.*  
*Asier: Exactly! You are not playing football!*  
*Simón: It's just I don't feel like it*

Therefore, Simón showed a wider range of behavior and showed no fear of being labeled by his peers as an *other* (Anderson, 2008). However, it was the privileged position he acquired due to his football skills that allowed him to show a more fluid masculinity. Thus, as we see in the next section, Simón did not fear the exclusion of the activity because, through football, he reinforced his position of privilege in the classroom.

### ***Preparation of football in the classroom***

- Asier: We have to get it so that Simón does not play football*  
*Tomás: Yes, because he always wants to play football and never the girls games. What if we play all three against Simón?*  
*Alfonso: Sure, that's how we are strong and Simón won't be able to.*

*Tomás: But Simón is very fast and he can take it while we pass (he refers to the ball)*

*Simón: I heard you Alfonso (Listening to the conversation from the next table, laughs)*

*Alfonso: I have to work. Goodbye*

*Simón (to the observer): They are afraid of me (he continues laughing)*

*[...]*

*Asier: What, Alfonso cannot score against Simón?*

*Tomás: It's impossible against Simón, but I can*

As we can see in the extract shown above, there was a pact between the children to be able to disassociate Simón from the activity, since he is notably outstanding in football. Speed was a highly valued component during the game and the rest of the boys considered Simón particularly fast on the field. However, sharing the game scenario with Simón with well-developed skills was also a privilege and the preparatory meetings for the sport seemed a moment of enjoyment in themselves through an obvious attempt for Simon to listen to these conversations. Probably, because of this, during playtime Simón's participation was always valued and requested by the rest of the boys. At the same time, the football competition of the rest of the boys diminished when they compared themselves with Simón, who was considered unbeatable on the playing field (see previous narrative extract). Thus, beating Simón was a challenge for Tomás and during the football match his effort concentrated on demonstrating better sports skills than his opposition. Therefore, the hegemonic form of masculinity, in its need to be reaffirmed and recognized, was frequently compared with other forms of masculinity, forming a system of clearly competitive masculinities.

Alfonso was commonly involved in these conversations, although he said that he preferred to play 'the girls' game' (field journal extract), and he placed himself in a relationship of complicity with hegemonic masculinity during the preparatory conversations for sport. As Connell mentioned (1995), the construction of masculinities is a collective enterprise, so that the behaviors of a group of children do not always correspond to their individual desires. With this in mind, children with less football skills found these moments as optimal times to reinforce their masculinity by creating a collective identity with their peer group. Football served, during these conversations, as a reinforcement to the union of these children against Simón, regardless of their abilities

for sport. In this way, power relations within the classroom were complex and some children showed themselves, sometimes, powerful and, in other moments helpless. Thus, some boys who were conceptualized as *others* because they did not possess sports skills, enjoyed at some point the privilege of speaking about football at the same level as the football boys did.

## **Conclusions**

This research supports the findings of previous research which have indicated that high status masculinity is conferred on children who demonstrate advanced football skills (Martino, 1999). Thus, cultural and social conceptions that revolve around football, and in turn make it the sport of par excellence in Spain, have furthermore created a hierarchical system in the playground that favored the exclusion of girls and younger children from this activity (Jeanes, 2011; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Swain, 2000). In this sense, the local composition of the school favored the configuration of hegemonic masculinity, since the segregation of the spaces was not questioned by the teachers and the children enjoyed the large football field inside the school without any restrictions. In turn, children with better football skills also found in their family an optimal space to talk about football and rehearse their sports skills. In this sense, the teacher responsible for the classroom defined the families of Tomás and Simón as ‘football fans’. Thus, the teacher pointed out that both families played football with their children and followed their favorite professional football teams on television together. In addition, Simon went, with his family, on a regular basis, to a large football stadium located in a nearby city, where professional football competitions are held. Simon also attended a football school twice a week. Therefore, school and family were complementary social institutions that reinforced the hegemonic model of masculinity.

For this research we have found useful the concepts of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, ‘complicit masculinity’ and ‘subordinate masculinity’ proposed by Connell. In this regard, we see that hegemonic elements such as physical prowess, competitiveness or domination are linked to the game of football from an early age. Hence, we have shown how Tomás made an effort to align himself with this hegemonic ideal of masculinity through football. However, the Connell model was limited to understand the complexity in the process of building other masculinities from sport in the daily life at school. In this manner, Simon distanced himself from hegemonic masculinity through a model of gentle

masculinity, showing himself willing to maintain an equal relationship with girls. However, he was also proud of being feared by his teammates during football and defined himself as the best footballer. In this way, his advanced sports skills allowed him to align with a flexible masculinity without endangering his privileged position within the group. In turn, Alfonso shared his play area with the girls and was ridiculed for his behavior which was considered feminine; however, he strengthened his position within the group when he actively participated in football conversations. Thus, we observed that football allowed some children, such as Alfonso and Simón, to embody a ‘flexible masculinity’ in which they incorporated elements of diverse masculinities while, at the same time, enjoying male privileges related to football.

The studies carried out on the influence of sports in general, and football in particular, on the development of masculinities, have been carried out in primary and secondary schools: Contexts that confirm the predominance of the hegemonic model over others. However, in our study, the age of the students has been able to influence some of them to develop a ‘flexible masculinity’ which, in all likelihood, will become more static/hegemonic over the years. The social context (the cultural values associated with football, the media, families, teachers) are shaping the expectations that children must meet and will become more visible as they get older, bringing with them the predominance of the hegemonic model. In this sense, a possible line of research in the future would be to analyze the behavior and attitudes of a group of males from their first years of life until adolescence and to confirm or refute whether, over the years, hegemonic masculinity is consolidated.

Therefore, co-educational intervention in the first years of life is a priority to avoid the encapsulation of hegemonic forms of masculinity. Equal distribution of spaces should be encouraged, especially in the playground, promoting the practice of other games and sports that are alternative to football (Garay et al., 2017). Likewise, girls and boys who do not exhibit the characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity should be encouraged to participate actively in football, giving them the opportunity to occupy a privileged position in the development of the game. Naturally, for this we need a teaching attitude in favor of co-education. Teachers must be able to understand that gender is socially and culturally constructed and that school is an essential agent of socialization. For this reason they must understand that gender inequities must begin to be solved in schools and that they play an active role in this process because they are role models for

their students. For this reason, they cannot adopt a passive attitude, of non-intervention, towards the dynamics of relationship that are generated among students through football. This attitude reinforces the stereotypes of the sociocultural context in which the school is inserted, preventing the status quo from changing.

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