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Theorizing about conflicts in the social practice of the school – part I

Including paper: Dialectic and conflicts – researching school as conflictual social practice

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Introduction

The school as an institution for the education of future citizens is a central site for debate about how to develop a democratic society – and hence for social conflict. Many parties participate in making school what it is.

On one hand the school connects these different parties in a shared engagement to make good education for all children on the other hand the different parties are distributed into different tasks and concerns in relation to the school.

In this symposium, we have all worked with school problems seen from the involved parties’ different perspectives and the background for our common research project is analyses of the widespread displacement of problems between places and parties.

The involved parties (children, teachers, school leader, psychologist, parents) have different perspectives on school problems and discuss for instance whether a problem should be understood related to a child’s family life, a teacher’s competence, the social dynamics in the classroom etc.

In psychological investigations of the problems such conflicts are seldom involved explicitly – investigations often focus on pupils’ individual behavior, deficits or shortcomings. In this way, you could say that social problems - and disagreements about them - are displaced to individualized categories.

In previous research we have discussed how such categorizations of individual children imply different ways of understanding them and different social conditions for the children in the classroom. We have discussed such processes as situated inequality (Højholt, 2016).
In this symposium, we want to focus on the conflicts that at the same time seem to dominate these kind of processes in the school – and to disappear in the terminology about school problems.

We want to illustrate how these conflicts relate to societal conflicts about the school. To do so we analyze social situations in the school from different viewpoints through the different presentations you will meet today and Friday in two connected symposiums.

Conflicts in and about public education seem as an illustrative case for exploring how historical and political discussions form part of personal and intersubjective ways of making things work in social institutions. Simultaneously the participants actively struggle to make their personal conduct of everyday life hang together and in relation to that they make up the conditions to each other.

So, through a focus on conflicts, we intend to discuss theoretical challenges related to conceptualizing the dialectic relationship between historical conditions and situated interplay in concrete everyday practice.

In this way, we want to open theoretical possibilities for analyzing how contradictory aspects of social practice at one and the same time are incompatible and dependent on one another.

Through an exploration of conflictual processes seen from children’s, parents, teachers, pedagogues, school leaders, psychologist and officials perspectives we discuss how situated conflicts in everyday practices can be analyzed in the light of historical and political struggles about the school.

The mentioned parties are involved in the school life of children but they have different kinds of access to knowledge about what is going on here and they have different kinds of responsibility connected to different aspects of the many-sided matter.

Thus, we understand the disagreeing parties not as “randomly disagreeing”. Their different perspectives can be analytically linked to their different positions and their different types of responsibilities and contributions are differentiated in a complex practice structure.

Still, the parties are related through common matters, and you could say that their disagreements express their shared engagement and provide an opportunity to expand our understanding of the social practice of the school.

**Common organization and methodology of the subprojects**
We are organized in different subprojects with a joint focus on *Children’s Inclusion in School Investigated as Confictual Cooperation*. We investigate the same schools from different perspectives and share empirical material. In this way, we have different access to knowledge about the social life of the schools and find ourselves in the contradictions of this life – developing different perspectives on the same matter. Through analysis of these differences and how they are anchored in the social practice of the school we develop our understandings.

In the entire project we take our methodological approach in a tradition of *Practice research* and arrange research processes as collaboration (Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; Kousholt, 2016). We meet regularly with co-researchers from the schools we are collaborating with – to have dialogues about the progress of the project, to listen to examples and pertinent dilemmas from practice and to discuss and analyse the empirical material together.

It is a way of organizing research as mutual learning processes trying to work with the development of practice and theory interlinked (Højholt & Kousholt, in prep-b).


With an understanding of subjectivity and participation as founded in social practice, we try to make dialectical analyses of subjective – and collective – handling of societal contradictions in and around the school (Dreier, 2008; Holzkamp, 2013; Højholt & Kousholt, 2017; Schraube & Højholt, 2016).

This is a situated approach to structural and political issues with a point of reference in the common societal life, where persons from different locations and positions are dealing with common matters. Still these common matters are many-sided and contradictory and in relation to this project, we have dwelled on Ollmans dialectical points about inner relations and contradictions (Ollman, 2003, 2015).

In this respect, we need conceptualizations not just for the distribution of tasks and perspectives but also for the content of the conflicts – what are the conflicts about?

We need to conceptualize dialectical connections between the common matters, the many-sided aspects of school life and the inner contradictions related to this.
Analytically it is an ambition – but also a challenge – to relate the situated and intersubjective interplay of everyday life with the historical matters and contradictions of the school. And that is, among other things, what we would like to discuss with you today!

**Paper: Dialectic and conflicts – researching school as conflictual social practice**

Now we will turn to the paper that draws on analysis from the subproject about connections between the social life of the children and parental cooperation.

In this project, I have followed a school class from 1st to 3rd grade through participatory observations and interviews with the children about their school life. In addition, I have interviewed the parents (to the children in this class) and the two primary teachers (Kousholt, 2018).

We will start out by shortly returning to the theoretical concepts touched upon in the introduction and through a small example open for further theoretical elaborations

**Conflict in a practice perspective and Inherent contradictions of the children’s school life**

The concept of social practice entails that humans are connected in a social life and thereby conditions for each other. In this way, conflicts are seen as part of historical processes as an always immanent potentiality that arises out of people engaging together in a collective practice - as the school.

The common matter is in a Marxist understanding contradictory; containing *incompatible elements that are also dependent on one another* (Ollman, 2003, 2015). The participants relate to the contradictory relations in different ways and have different conditions for handling them and these contradictions can potentially lead to conflicts.

With regard to the children, teaching and learning takes place in a social life with plenty of social dynamics at stake at the same time. The children must continuously relate to the agenda of the teaching, to their personal learning processes and to the social life, they share with each other in the classroom and other places.

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1 article in prep for Theory&Psychology
In political discussions as well as in conflicts between the different parties in the school these aspects are often separated in conflicts about what should be most important the children.

Still, in the everyday life of the school the participants relate to the contradictory aspects to make things work. As Axel formulates it:

“In praxis, making things go together, which won't go together, maintains the contradiction, but in a form which can be handled practically” (Axel, in prep).

In their subjective ways of adjusting their conditions, participants continuously deal with contradictions – sometimes in quite unnoticed ways.

Observations of the situated interplay in the everyday of the school are illustrative for this: Every participant is working with the challenges of making the incompatible elements hang together in their activities.

To make things work the children must ‘wriggle’ and twist their attention and maneuver in relation to lots of things going on at the same time, finding their ways of keeping a plurality of foci in a flexible way.

For instance, the children must distribute their attention between academic tasks and the social life of the class, between focusing on the task and being thorough – and also focusing on finishing the task in time and following the next social activities. Often they have to coordinate and arrange themselves in relation to timing their work with the learning communities they take part in.

This involves collaboration, but often the children have different perspectives and conditions in relation to solve a task and to deal with the contradictions.

In this light, children’s conflicts are not ‘empty’, but related to dealing with contradictory aspects in the social practice they take part in.

However, in the case of children, we meet a strong tendency to individualize their conflicts as having to do with individual children’s problems or lack of social competencies or we meet conceptualizations of the conflicts as just relational, as a question of positioning, or some kind of childish mudslinging without relevant content.

We try to analyze the interplay of the children as subjective ways of handling the contradictions of the school as an important context of their everyday life together with peers.
With a small example, we want to demonstrate how a seemingly trivial conflict between some children in first grade illuminates a contradictory relation and how parents in their joint responsibility of supporting the school life of their children sometimes find themselves in quite dramatic conflicts.

The children are taking turn on the task of making order in the classroom for a week. This involves among other things to return the empty service after lunch – in Denmark a so-called milk crate. It is part of the task to cooperate in pairs and Carl and Naja has the task this week.

Naja wants to return the milk crate at once and her friend Anna are eager to help. Carl is involved in negotiations with some other boys making plans for what they are going to do together in the break. He does not want to leave the class just now and it seems like he feel pressured by the two girls. Anna is insisting that they should do the task now – she is shouting at him and Carl becomes frustrated and angry and ends up threatening to hit the girls.

Then, Naja becomes frightened and so unhappy that the school phone her mother so that Naja can go home - and at home she cries. Her mother promises to talk with Carl and his mother next day, but since she cannot find Carl’s mother she just talk to Carl about collaborating about tasks in the school. To Carl’s mother it is not okay that another mother tells her son how to behave – in her perspective the teacher should have been involved. The story includes quite a lot of attempts to solve the conflicts but in spite of their collaborative intensions, the two mothers end up in a quite complicated conflict.

Conflicts, analyses and development

The conflict about the milk crate, you could analyze as different ways to handle the contradiction between focus and flexibility – to make social life and responsibility in relation to the task hang together.

Anna and Naja want to accomplish the task at once and together, while Carl seems to have other conditions in relation to that – he needs to take care of social obligations first, in relation to succeed with both aspects of his school life.

Focus and flexibility appear as contradictory aspects - incompatible, as well as interdependent – The one cannot work without the other - and the participants must make these aspects go together.
This is not a question of individual competencies but of how the common activities are organized.

Therefore discussions in and about the school are often about how the common activities are organized; how the parties ought to relate to e.g. rules, discipline, disturbance and how to take different perspectives of the children into account.

Such discussions could be analyzed as conflicts related to historical contradictions of the school - and has been part of political discussions about the school for a long time.

The two mothers in the example seem engaged in the same matter: The personal wellbeing and integrity as well as learning possibilities for their children - but they have access to quite different experiences from their children about their dilemmas related to taking part in school life.

Parents to the children in the same class are connected through the children’s common life. In interviews the parents express different perspectives on the question of rules and regulation vs individual considerations and flexibility.

Such different perspectives are often seen as detached values, but could also be seen as grounded in a social practice, in different experiences with personal dilemmas of the children and in engagement in a common but many-sided matter.

How parents can handle disagreements seem to have to do with possibilities for connecting the different perspectives to common contradictions and dilemmas in their children’s school life.

As we have tried to illustrate the question of organizing flexibility and focus for the participation of a plurality of children with different experiences and approaches to school is a core contradiction - of the school.

In the daily school life these aspects are linked but in ideologies they may be ‘torn apart’ as a question of choosing one side of the contradictions. When the conflicts become locked the contradictory aspects cannot be analyzed as ‘two side of the same coin’ or inner relations - and the involved may experience themselves in opposition to each other and with incompatible interests threatened by each other.

**Summing up**

We have tried to illustrate how conflicts are of personal meanings to the participants – connected to their efforts of conducting their personal lives.
In Denmark the school life of children is a crucial and conflictual part of organizing family life – with intensive political discussions about the responsibility and involvement of parents (Højholt, Kousholt, & Juhl, 2017).

Furthermore, the conflicts are historical – connected to political discussions about general contradictions in relation to organizing public education.

In Denmark the political debate around the school has intensified as a kind of arena for the conflicts about the development of a welfare state or a competition state and the many combination hereof.

Differentiation, exclusion, individual categorizations are aspects of the history of school as well as of the current political debates.

Investigating conflicts could be seen as an opportunity for insight into the many aspects of the matter and how these aspects in one and the same time are contradictory and connected.

So, to be able to develop the practice of the school we need access to knowledge about how the matter looks like from different ways of handling it – and we need knowledge about the distribution of responsibility, tasks and influence in the societal institutions.

This relates to a question of democracy in the concrete everyday life of the institutions and in the collaboration about them: Who can speak up here, contribute with their different perspectives and influence the development of the conditions of school life?

With dialectical analyses we do not aim at ’resolving’ conflicts, but at analyzing what they are part of, what they are related to and how we may think in other ways about the contradictions of social practice (Juul Jensen)

To think in other ways about the contradictions connects to ways of thinking about democracy:

We cannot understand the difficulties of school life without exploring them from different perspectives - learning from knowledge founded in different experiences from dealing with the contradictions different places and in relation to different tasks.

We need democratic exploration to understand the many-sided matter in its meanings to different participants. In such exploration, differences are seen as related to the common life, instead of related to individual categorizations of behavior and personalities.
In the displacements of problems - we mentioned in the beginning - the differences are understood isolated and the political conflicts about the school are covert.

To conclude: individualization, exclusion and displacements of problems could be seen as linked to problematic and undemocratic ways of understanding and dealing with differences, contradictions and conflicts.

**Literature**


Ollman, B. (2015). Marxism and the philosophy of internal relations; or, How to replace the mysterious ‘paradox’ with ‘contradictions’ that can be studied and resolved. *Capital & Class, 39*(1), 7-23. doi:10.1177/0309816814564128