Roskilde University

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Røn Larsen, Maja

Published in:
The International Journal on School Disaffection

DOI:
10.18546/IJSD.12.1.04

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Røn Larsen, M. (2016). “May I please tell you a little anecdote?”: Inter-professional decision-making about inclusion in the borderland between normal and special schooling. *The International Journal on School Disaffection*, *12*(1), 65-84. https://doi.org/10.18546/IJSD.12.1.04

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Download date: 02. Dec. 2021

10.18546/IJSD.12.1.04

ijsd
vol 12 no 1

'May I please tell you a little anecdote?'

Inter-professional decision-making about inclusion in the borderland between general and special schooling

Maja Røn Larsen**
Roskilde University, Denmark

Abstract

This article addresses inter-professional work and decision-making around inclusion in school, using an approach inspired by social practice theory. Based on a case analysis, the article presents analytical examples of the ways in which knowledge from children's everyday life tends to be considered anecdotal and disregarded in the decision-making processes. This leads to an institutional blindness to life aspects important to children, such as their peer relationships, and the ways in which interventions sometimes further complicate children's life situations, hence leading to mutual processes of powerlessness among children, parents, and professionals.

Keywords: Decision-making, inclusion, school, everyday life, inter-professional work

Introduction

> It's the whole organization; it's simply not geared for inclusion. There seem to be this paradox, that in our quest of thinking in inclusive ways, we invent all kinds of specializations. So when we start to speak of inclusion, almost by definition we have already excluded.
>
> (School psychologist, Denmark)

*Corresponding author: mrl@ruc.dk

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These are the words of a Danish school psychologist as she describes her experience of the dilemmas and contradictions in the processes of inclusion and relates them to the overall institutional arrangement around dealing with school difficulties. In Denmark, a series of political and jurisdictional initiatives demanding an increase in the rate of inclusion have been implemented over the past couple of years. This is a trend that reflects a wider international development among school systems since the Salamanca Statement in 1994. Currently, a substantial number of different experiments and pilot projects are carried out in Danish schools in efforts to develop a more inclusive school practice. Many of the participants involved, politicians and managers as well as professionals, have explicit intentions of overcoming an individualistic perspective. Instead, they wish to approach difficulties as something related to the broader school context. However, when it comes to the discussion of what inclusion actually means in school practice, there are many different interpretations at stake. This article is not intended to 'sort out' the discussions about inclusion, but to see them as a part of the institutional arrangement for understanding and handling children in difficulties in school.[1]

The article deals with social processes in a child's life, and with the inter-professional interventions in what I call the 'borderland between general and special school systems' (Røn Larsen, 2011c). Different research projects following the trajectories of children in difficulties point out how strategies of inclusion paradoxically seem to have contributed to the development of this borderland, where children's final placements are constantly negotiated and in conflict, sometimes for periods spanning several years (Kousholt, 2011; Morin, 2015; Røn Larsen, 2011b, 2011c). This article draws on two research projects, both exploring aspects of the institutional practices related to inclusion and school difficulties (Højholt, 2011a; Højholt *et al*., 2014). Both projects link research areas that have often been studied separately, namely studies of institutional processes of policy, administration, and inter-professional collaboration, and studies of children's everyday lives. The theoretical aim is to unfold how the described paradoxes of inclusion are grounded in complex and contradictory social practices in a larger institutional arrangement, where many different people participate with different agendas and interests in relation to the child (Dreier, 2008; Højholt, 2011b; Røn Larsen, 2011a).

This article is built on the case of a boy in the borderland between general and special schooling. The analytical strategy is two-fold. The first aspect focuses on the different descriptions of school difficulties, as they appear in professionals' verbal or written statements in the course of interventions. The second focuses on children's everyday lives in the borderland between the common and the special school. This

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is explored through analysis of the boy's participation across different educational settings, such as general school, special school, after-school club, and family. The overall analysis focuses on what kinds of knowledge are noticed and valued in the different settings when it comes to understanding difficulties concerning 'Simon', and in deciding how to help him. This analytical approach points out how knowledge from children's everyday lives, such as knowledge concerning peer relationships, is often disregarded or granted only anecdotal, insignificant meaning in the inter-professional processes of negotiation and decision-making, often despite explicit intentions of the opposite. Furthermore, it is illustrated how these processes are in many ways related to more comprehensive contradictions in the school's institutional arrangement, as the initial quote from a psychologist indicated. The actual practice of understanding and handling school difficulties in purportedly inclusive ways seems geared and arranged in ways that paradoxically presuppose processes of individualized problem definition and exclusion.

The theoretical approach

The theoretical framework of this article is concerned with developing perspectives on structural and societal relations from the standpoint of the subject, without reducing actions to the individuals' free will. It is inspired mainly by critical psychology, with roots in cultural, historical, activity theory (CHAT) (Dreier, 1997; Holzkamp, 2013; Nissen, 2009) and social practice theory based on critical ethnography (Lave, 2011, 2012). In these approaches, both children and adults are conceptualized as participants, whose actions both determine and are determined by the societal and institutional structures in which they are situated. In order to understand the structural conditions, therefore, we must analyse them from the standpoint of the subject in relation to what they mean for those who are at the same time under their influence and also influencing them (Holzkamp, 2013; Schraube, 2013). This research tradition differs from other theoretical approaches, such as labelling theory, because of the intention to grasp the subject as a person who contributes to the production of the social world through participation across different social practices and among other participants (Dreier, 1997, 2008; Lave, 2011, 2012; and noted in labelling theory by Gill and Maynard, 1995). The focus on the subject's trajectories of participation does not imply societal development as a harmonious progression. On the contrary, the participation of the subject is always conflictual. The participation is grounded in the contradictory structural conditions in institutional settings. In these settings, subjects are exposed to often

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contradictory tasks and demands that form the conditions for their participation and contributions to social practice (Axel, 2011; Busch-Jensen, 2015).

This is an important point to note in relation to inter-professional coordination and collaboration, which have been key terms in institutional approaches to the inclusion of children (Daniels, 2011; Edwards *et al.*, 2010; Hartley, 2007; Røn Larsen, 2012). This is often substantiated by the need to follow the trajectories of the children into settings other than school, and the possibilities of 'working on the boundaries of school' (Edwards *et al.*, 2010: 27). However, developing these attempts into new strategies and procedures is a complicated matter, playing into what Edwards *et al.*, with inspiration from Gunter (2007), refer to as a 'complex struggle over ideas and territory: the amount and deployment of resources; and the culture and practice of professionality' (Edwards *et al.*, 2010: 37). During these struggles, some of the individualistic understandings that the ideas of inclusion are intended to overcome tend in fact to be reproduced. As various pieces of research have pointed out, despite the intention of working with more inclusive perspectives and developing 'holistic' approaches to children's lives, the tendency to individualize difficulties in children's lives to either inner, neurological features or to questions of the family background is persistent in the decision-making process (Hjörne, 2004; Mehan, 1993; Morin, 2007; Røn Larsen, 2011b; Skidmore, 2004). Following on from this, the purpose of this article is to pursue the described paradoxes in the practice of inclusion as connected to specific structural conditions in broader institutional arrangements resulting from historically constituted divisions of labour between professionals. The aim is to study the structural conditions from the perspectives of the people involved in and across the various social practices (Axel, 2011; Busch-Jensen, 2013; Edwards *et al.*, 2010; Højholt, 2011a).

Difficulties and interventions in children's everyday lives

Let us turn to the children's lives in 'the borderland between general and special schooling' in order to understand some of the issues with which children are struggling. In general, children live their lives across different settings. They follow trajectories of participation across many settings, such as family, school, and after-school club. Each context is populated with other participants: peers, parents, and professionals. For the children, this is a coherent life despite contradictions and ambiguities in and between the different settings. What takes place in one setting has significance for what takes place in another. The children therefore have an important task in linking and managing differences and potential contradictions between demands in different places (Hedegaard, 2012; Højholt, 2008, 2011b).

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For the various professionals, however, this coherence is not necessarily obvious. Due to a division of labour, professionals are split among different institutions, each with different goals, tasks, and possibilities connected to the situation of the child. These divisions often complicate children's participation across contexts, and some research points out how dynamics of exclusion and categorizations of individual children are often related to more general conflicts in school (Dreier, 2008; Højholt, 2006, 2011b; Højholt *et al.*, 2014; Kousholt, 2011; Røn Larsen, 2011a, 2011b). Different studies have shown how children in both general and special school settings struggle to make their lives hang together, and often rely on their relationships with peers when doing so (Stanek, 2013, 2014; Stokholm, 2009). Other studies of children who are for indefinite periods of time referred to special education outside the state school classroom point out how the possibilities for these children to participate in collective processes of orientation are often restricted (Morin, 2007; Røn Larsen, 2011a, 2011c). The children are often left to themselves to navigate between different kinds of educational institutions, and in relation to different kinds of specialists, such as school psychologists, family counsellors, physiotherapists, speech therapists, and other specialists. This is a process that tends to put children's access to possibilities of participation and influence at risk (Højholt and Kousholt, 2014; Morin, 2007; Røn Larsen, 2011a, 2011b).

Methodological approach and empirical material

The empirical data that form the basis of the analysis presented consist of material from two distinct research projects, both of them concerning inter-professional work around children facing difficulties at school. The first project was primarily concerned with children's perspectives on the different forms of intervention around inclusion. Over three years I followed children attending two different special education classes. Both of the special education classes reflected the overall goal of inclusion that has saturated both the Danish and the international school systems in recent years. Therefore, they collaborated continuously with the regular school system in order to 're-include' the children there. In the first special class the children participated in lessons quite similar to the regular school classes, but with a higher teacher:child ratio and with more individual aims. The other special class was a family class, where the children participated together with their parents three days per week. The idea of the family class is to include the parents and make them more responsible for their child's school success.[2] The family class reflects another central issue in Danish school development, namely the focus on parents

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as important agents in the development of pupils' school success (Knudsen, 2009; Røn Larsen *et al.*, 2014). As part of supporting families, many other systems of intervention can be drawn in, such as family counselling, group therapy, and, as we shall see shortly, at times also drug addiction counsellors. During the period of observations in the special classes, I also observed administrative procedures such as processes of referral, interdisciplinary meetings, and the development of records of the children, their journals, as these evolved through cooperative effort between different professionals. These records are considered an important tool for keeping track of the various interventions. Finally, I conducted interviews with children, teachers, parents, social workers, psychologists, and administrators (Røn Larsen, 2011a). The second research project takes place as part of a three-year ongoing study conducted in a larger research group (Højholt *et al.,* 2014), investigating the institutional conditions for interdisciplinary collaboration and conflict among various professionals. It focuses on the often contradictory demands of their different tasks, procedures for cooperation, and divisions of labour, as well as the different legislation related to the work of professionals such as teachers, inclusion counsellors, psychologists, and social workers. The empirical data in this project consist of interviews with the various professionals concerning their work with school difficulties, and participant observations of the everyday work lives of psychologists and social workers (such as conversations and test situations with children, and meetings with other participants such as teachers, headteachers, and parents).

Studies of conflicts and difficulties in school involve ethical questions concerning how the study itself influences the conflictual processes of categorization and problem definition in school. In my research, I am very concerned with how to develop knowledge on the dynamics of exclusion without at the same time contributing to the problematization and categorization of children and families by my participation and my many questions about school difficulties. This has led to ongoing considerations, not only in relation to publishing results, but also in relation to my participation during the research. Of course, all participants have been informed about the study and its aims, and have continuously been given the possibility to withdraw from the project. It has been made clear to them both verbally and in writing that such decisions would not interfere with the professional interventions and support they receive. I have also been aware of ethical concerns that relate to my trajectories of participation across differing contexts that are usually separated. Working in this way demands extreme caution that knowledge from one context should not be allowed to travel with me to another context,

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manifesting e.g. in the questions I might pose in an interview, and thereby influencing the course of interventions. Another ethical issue concerns the question of what 'informed consent' means in relation to children in vulnerable positions. For these children informed consent tends to be a much more processual and situated ethical issue, not just relating to direct questions of approval. Many times, I have stepped back from situations where my participation would have put the children whom I followed in a conspicuous situation, e.g. in the general classrooms, and possibly complicating the situation for them further.

Because I participate across different contexts in the institutional arrangement around dealing with school difficulties, I notice the differences between descriptions of difficulties in different contexts. A recurring aspect from the empirical data across the two projects is a general gap between the different professionals' descriptions of school difficulties at meetings and in the records on the one hand, and on the other the children's reflections and attempts to arrange their lives across their different contexts. In the following sequence, this is illustrated by the case of Simon, a nine-year-old boy attending the family class, and the multiple interventions related to him and his family.[3]

As mentioned in the introduction, the analytical strategy is two-fold. The first analytical track focuses on inter-professional practices. It is informed by participant observations at the various inter-professional meetings, as well as by interviews with teachers, special teachers, psychologists, and administrators across general and special education. This analysis also draws on children's records, including documents such as school reports, statements, test results from educational psychologists, reports from social workers, summaries of inter-professional meetings, and notes on decisions from referral processes. The second analytical track is guided by the ambition of studying children's everyday lives across family, 'general', and 'special' education, from the participants' perspectives. For this purpose, the participant observations focused on the children's movements and engagements – following what and whom they were directing their attention and their actions towards, focusing on the interplay, the invitations, and rejections between the participants in the different contexts (Højholt and Kousholt, 2014). Inspired by life mode interviews with children, the children were invited to give the researcher 'guided tours' of their everyday lives, explaining the special importance of the different settings, such as the classrooms, playground, and so on (Andenæs, 1991, 2012; Haavind, 1987; Røn Larsen, 2011a). The observations were supported by situated interviews and general conversations with the children, their teachers, and their parents. The research focus was motivated by questions about what kind

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of engagements were driving the child and what were the triggers of the child's actions. In other words, the research focus was not directed *at* the child and his or her specific behaviour; instead it strove to understand everyday life *with* the children in their concrete life conditions, searching for the possibilities and limitations of participation (Højholt and Kousholt, 2014; Røn Larsen, 2011b). This multifaceted design has contributed to giving insight into the interplay among the different parties' contributions to the compound institutional arrangements and the concrete meanings in relation to the everyday lives of the affected children – a connectedness that will guide the following sections.

Analysis of inter-professional collaboration – what kind of knowledge guides interventions?

In an interview about the need for inter-professional collaboration in relation to inclusion in the municipality where our focal child, Simon, attends school, the head of the school administration stated: 'We focus on getting all the way around the child.' This 'holistic' endeavour has been expressed by various participants throughout the institutional organization of schools in Denmark in recent years. This perspective is also reflected in the broad interdisciplinary organization of the course of interventions in this municipality. The overall decision-making processes about the school placement are located in inter-professional 'referral meetings', where teachers from state schools and special schools, psychologists, and social welfare workers are represented. Another interdisciplinary setting is the quarterly 'developmental meeting', in which the parents also participate, where different interventions around the individual child are coordinated, monitored, and evaluated. Finally, 'network meetings' are also held; these involve various professionals, parents, and other relevant members of the family's network, who meet in order to exchange knowledge from the different settings or life contexts of the child. During the three years that I have followed Simon, he has been living his life across a number of different settings: family, state school, special school, and after-school clubs. Besides Simon and his various peers, these settings are also populated by a number of adults: parents, teachers, special teachers, and after-school club pedagogues. Further down the course of interventions a psychologist, a family therapist, and a drug addiction counsellor have also been drawn in. Thus, the study of the interventions relating to Simon shows many different parties connected through a division of labour, where each has different tasks, accesses, responsibilities, and interests, but where at the same time all are connected through Simon and his life trajectory across the different contexts. The following is analytically structured by the question of how the 'difficulties' around Simon

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are described in these contexts. What kind of information is emphasized in the inter-professional collaborative processes in order to decide and orchestrate the interventions for Simon and his family?

At the beginning of the data collection period, Simon is attending second grade in the family class and is at the centre of a course of interventions in the 'borderland between general and special schooling'. According to Simon's journal, he was referred to the family class at the end of first grade. The placement is based on teachers' descriptions of him as a very distracted child with very variable motivation. He is described as a child who is having difficulty being in the company of other children, often opting out of social activities with his peers. The tests performed by the school psychologist state that his attention span and working memory are appropriate for his age, but they also indicate fluctuating results that are difficult to interpret. It is noted that he tends to give up when confronted with difficult exercises. In the journal, the teachers' comments in relation to the family are reported. They have noticed that Simon's mother is unemployed and seems uncommitted to Simon's school life, since she has repeatedly been absent from parents' evenings. The journal summarizes:

> [Simon] is probably a little immature, with the ability for but not the interest in academic learning. From the test results, it is difficult to give advice in relation to the preparation of the teaching, but turbulence in the home might explain his irregular performances.
>
> (Simon's journal)

He is referred to the family class, with the explicit intention of returning him to the state school later in the process. Simon attends the family class together with his mother three days a week. He is supposed to attend the state school the other two days. However, the teachers at the state school find him too disturbing in class. They describe him as having severe difficulties concentrating on his school exercises and say that he is too distracting for the other pupils. 'It is too distressing – both for Simon and for the class,' notes a summary from a developmental meeting. However, the intervention is still geared towards Simon's future inclusion. In the family class, interventions are structured around specific goals for the individual pupils, goals that are scored and evaluated every day. Simon's goals are 'anger management' and 'improving reading and writing Danish'. A family class status report notes:

> It is increasingly obvious that Simon is fairly good at mathematics, whereas in Danish he is having difficulties. We have therefore made an agreement with [name of the state school] that the primary effort will be on Danish.
>
> (Simon's journal)

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The interventions in family class are meant to prepare Simon for his possible future life in the state school. However, Simon's record from this period indicates that the state school teachers express great concerns about having Simon return to the class, especially without extra resources.

As part of the family class intervention, Simon's parents are provided with family group therapy. According to a summary from a developmental meeting, it is disclosed that the parents have many conflicts, and that Simon's father often smokes marijuana in the evenings. Consequently, the father is referred to a rehabilitation programme, but 'fails to appear' at the programme. The father's drug use receives a lot of attention in the records, and the ongoing evaluations of success and failure in the family therapy and rehabilitation programme seem to influence the evaluations of Simon's school placement. The decision to return Simon to the state school is suspended while the results from therapy and rehabilitation are awaited. It is considered important to 'wait and see', in order 'not to have too many interventions put to work at the same time', concludes the family counsellor at a developmental meeting. Observations from the family class during this period show more fragmented participation and an increase in the number of conflicts between Simon, his mother, and the professionals in the family class. In the ongoing assessment of Simon's academic results, his academic level in Danish stagnates and his scores in mathematics show a decline.

Over the following year, up until the month of holidays between second and third grade, the negotiations with the state school are reintensified. In particular, Simon's mother exerts pressure for Simon to be readmitted into the state school. She continually states that she thinks it is time to continue the process of 're-inclusion' into the state school. However, her voice is scarcely represented in the record summaries. A summary from a development meeting notes that the state school 'must specify what academic goals the family class needs to work with in order for Simon to come back to the class'. During the last month before the holidays, Simon starts attending the state school once a week. According to the record, the intention is that his participation rate should be escalated up to the holidays, and in third grade Simon is supposed to participate full time.

During the same period, the record summing up the various interdisciplinary meetings shows concerns about Simon's non-attendance in family class, his psychological instability, and his academic results. The state school teachers are especially concerned over whether Simon will be able to keep up with the class and whether he will prove a distraction in the class. At the same time, observations from the inter-professional meetings indicate that the state school is in a turbulent

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situation due to its integration with another state school. It is discussed whether this will hamper Simon's chances of 'gliding in' to the school, as expressed by one of the teachers. The details about the schools merging are not reported in Simon's record.

According to the record, everything goes wrong after the holidays. Simon is described as lagging severely academically and having major difficulties focusing in class. The difficulties in the class escalate during the early months of the academic year, and Simon is reported as running away from school. During third grade, different models are tried out for the allocation of Simon's schooling between the state school and the family class, but with no indications of success. However, the after-school club reports major progress in Simon's social life.[4] He is engaging in play and is described as being better at withdrawing from conflicts instead of getting into fights. Furthermore, he has improved his ability to 'distinguish between imagination and reality', an issue that had been discussed earlier at the network meetings.

Around March, it is discussed at a developmental meeting that third grade has been a very turbulent time for Simon. The different professionals agree that Simon's uncertain school placement has affected him. It is decided to introduce him to pictographs. 'In this way, it will become more clear to Simon when he needs to be at a particular location and what will be happening at the different places.' The following developmental meeting concludes that Simon needs to have a 'fresh start' and he is transferred to another state school, which also entails switching to a different after-school club. It is agreed that a comprehensive process of handing over Simon's records is necessary, so the new school is well informed about Simon and his family. Simon's academic performance is again assessed, and he shows severe weaknesses in both mathematics and Danish.

Simon starts at the new school just after the October holiday. 'Simon is very nervous and complains about stomach aches', it is reported in a summary from a network meeting. It is considered whether it is 'The mother's anxiety rubbing off'. The material from the new school is very sparse, but at the developmental meeting around December, it is concluded that the possibilities for inclusion are negligible. It is stated that Simon is not performing at the expected level for his age and is 'unable to manage school, either academically or socially'. Simon is therefore referred to another special school on a permanent basis. The participatory observations end here, but I continued to follow up on Simon's case through conversations with the different teachers and heads of administration. According to them, Simon continued in the special school until seventh grade, and was then referred to an independent

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boarding school for lower secondary school students. In the referral papers, he is described as 'academically very weak' and 'socially fragile'.

Simon's case displays some characteristic aspects from the empirical material. For example, the final quotes from Simon's record are representative of a general tendency in the descriptions in the records and at the inter-professional meetings, namely the tendency for information about difficulties in school to be brief, disjointed, and individualized. Reading the records provides us with very little information to help us understand what appears to be a downward spiral of decline and mutual resignations in the course of interventions regarding Simon. I will follow up on this in my final remarks, but let us first turn to the analysis of Simon's perspectives in his everyday life.

Simon's everyday life in the borderland between general and special schooling

When I met Simon, he had experienced a troublesome year, with ongoing negotiations between the family class and the state school. The question of whether he 'might be ready for re-inclusion', as one of the special class teachers put it, is contested all the time. Both Simon and his mother are very enthusiastic about him re-entering the state school and are trying hard to cooperate with the family class teachers in order to establish possibilities for a future inclusion in the regular state school. However, there is always also 'an open door' into a more permanent placement in the special school system. For the children, this means that in 'the borderland between general and special schooling', their belonging to the school is always at risk, negotiable, and under evaluation. Simon seems strongly oriented towards his former class in the state school, even though he is attending neither the school nor the after-school club during this period. His social life among his peers is very limited. Simon's mother explains in an interview that he misses his old friends and hopes they will send him back: 'That's why he is so nervous before the developmental meetings.' He rarely contacts the other children in the family class, and seems to dodge their infrequent attempts to contact him. One time, when he was showing me around the outside area of the family class, he told me that he never participates in play activities during the breaks. He explains: 'You never know how long you are going to stay here anyway' – that is, there is no point in getting to know the others since you don't know how long either you or the other children will stay in the family class. Simon talks a lot about his old classmates and describes the children in the state school as 'my friends' in spite of the conflicts described in Simon's records. Simon's peer relations in the state school seems to be very important to him.

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During the middle of second grade, it is decided to tone down the effort in relation to mathematics and instead focus on reading and writing Danish in order to enhance Simon's chances for re-inclusion. This appears to be a source of great frustration for Simon. The observations from this period show Simon trying to trick his way into continuing to work with the mathematics book, instead of switching to the Danish exercises. During this period, he often sings a self-composed song that goes 'I love mathematics, I love mathematics'. However, his strategy appears to lead to many conflicts with both his mother and the teachers in the family class. They argue that it is important that he sticks to the stated targets about optimizing effort in Danish. According to the teachers, a basic idea in the family class is that the key to improvement is based on the parent–child relationship. Therefore, the task of supporting Simon is allocated to his mother. The Danish classes often result in conflicts, sanctions, and resignation for Simon, his mother, and the teachers. It is obvious that Simon has difficulties 'cracking the code' of reading, and it is also clear that his mother has a difficult time helping him, since she has trouble reading herself. Observations and conversations with Simon indicate that he is very frustrated with his inability to solve the given exercises in Danish and he is uncertain of the quality of the support he is given by his mother. Simon protests strongly about his restricted possibilities to focus on mathematics, and during Danish classes is very upset that he has to continue working with the first-grade books, even though he is a second grader now: 'I don't want those books, they are for babies,' he cries during a conflict.

The 're-inclusion' into his old class in the state school is repeatedly postponed from April to June. Simon is very frustrated. His mother tells me that he does not understand why: 'He feels that he has been working so hard to keep up'. She describes an episode from a quarrel at home about school, where Simon ended up screaming at her: 'But will they even know who I am when I get back? I don't know if my friends know me any more.' Following Simon over time, it is very clear that he misses his old classmates. At the same time, it seems that this focus on his old class interferes with his search for new possibilities for participation in the family class. Simon's mother is worried about him, and talking about his peer relationships she says:

> Well, it has never been perfect, but at one time Simon had a good friend in his old class. Not that they couldn't get into a fight… but ehm… an okay friend who came home to play in the weekends and sometimes stayed for dinner and so on … But now… Now there is just nobody.
>
> (Simon's mother)

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Teachers and after-school club pedagogues seem to have noticed Simon's longing for his old class. At the end of a developmental meeting, a teacher from the state school talks about an experience she had when she went to the swimming pool with Simon's old class and met Simon there, asking at one of the developmental meetings:

> May I please tell you a little anecdote? The other day we went to the swimming pool with the class, and then I heard him calling: 'Hey, come and have a look'. And then he wanted us to see that he could jump into the water at the deep end. He was SO happy, even if he was in the middle pool, and we were in the children's pool.
>
> (Teacher at Simon's former state school)

The after-school club pedagogue, who was also on the trip, corroborates the teacher's story: 'That is right. He was so glad to see the class again – as if he belonged there anyway.'

An interesting issue here is that even though parents and professionals around Simon appear to know about his longing for his classmates, at inter-professional meetings where possibilities and strategies for inclusion and 're-entry' are discussed, this knowledge is granted only an anecdotal status. In relation to the decisions about and the orchestration of the course of interventions for Simon, these anecdotes are not considered relevant. At no time during the long process are Simon's possibilities for participation in his everyday life noted as a focus for professional intervention, and the 'anecdotal' information from the professionals and the parents is not reported in the record. This 'anecdotal meaning of everyday life' appears to be a strong feature in the empirical data from both research projects. A thought worth considering, and too large to unfold in this context, is that the term 'anecdotal' also reflects an aspect of the evidence hierarchy which is becoming increasingly dominant in the planning of educational policy and social work. Anecdotal evidence is considered the lowest level of scientific knowledge, the least reliable form of knowledge upon which to base a decision.

Still, when this anecdotal knowledge about children's perspectives on everyday life escapes the inter-professional processes of coordinating the interventions around children and their families, it tends to have unintended and far-reaching consequences for the children. When knowledge about his peer relationships and the conflictual dynamics of the context from which he is excluded are left out, the intervention risks losing relevance for Simon in his everyday life. In Simon's case, it was decided to await an update from his father's rehabilitation programme in order to secure proper coordination between the various interventions in the family, but this waiting time contributed dramatically to Simon's frustrations in school. Simon

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is confronted with a situation where his future in school is dependent on events in places to which he has no access, that he cannot influence, and where information that seems crucial to him in his everyday life is granted only anecdotal meaning. The structure and practice of the intervention family class, with training and daily evaluation of specific individual goals for Simon, indicates that it is up to him to work on his possibilities for 're-inclusion'. In the family class, for example, when quarrelling over the task with the 'books for babies', Simon is often confronted with statements like: 'If you want to return to your class, you will have to learn that in school you just have to do as you're told.' Thus, for some time, Simon works hard to cooperate and achieve good scores in the evaluations of the family class work. However, Simon seems to lose heart over time. He experiences an increasing number of conflicts with his mother and the teachers, and is constantly in opposition during classes. Over time, he appears to withdraw from all activities. In spite of good intentions, the many interventions implemented in relation to Simon and his family appear to have quite the opposite effect.

The multifaceted professional ambitions of optimizing Simon's qualifications for the state school and 'repairing' the family appear to overlook Simon's engagements and directedness in relation to gaining relevant possibilities for participation among his peers, and his resourceful engagement in mathematics. Analysed from Simon's perspective, this leads to the frustrating situation whereby the intention of supporting Simon seems to put him in an even more difficult situation, with restricted possibilities for influencing his life conditions, a situation to which he strongly objects. However, the case record does not include the reasons for his objections. It is simply noted that he expresses reluctance to attend school, is falling behind academically, and finally that he is socially fragile.

Summing up

The analysis of this article points to important issues in relation to the institutional arrangements around children in difficulties at school. First, it highlights the processes through which knowledge about children's perspectives in their complex everyday lives across different contexts often disappears in their records and in the administrative and inter-professional settings around their cases. Secondly, it shows how it is exactly this vanishing knowledge that seems crucial for understanding children's life situations and directing the interventions in ways considered helpful by such children.

Both professionals and municipal managers explain that the aim of the process is to gain more holistic and contextualized understandings of the

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difficulties. However, the analysis shows that the institutionalized attempt to achieve a holistic and resource-oriented approach transforms into a misguided, fragmentary investigation into each of the distinct life-contexts of the child, resulting in disconnected images from different settings represented by different professionals, a situation in which knowledge of everyday life vanishes in spite of good intentions. In the interdisciplinary work, the individualizing categories are not completely unambiguous. From time to time, the professional exchanges and discussions reflect complexities and ambivalences connected to the endeavours to develop more context-sensitive and holistic approaches to children's lives on the one hand, and the aforementioned tendency to individualize on the other. During the inter-professional exchanges about Simon's situation, knowledge such as the 'anecdotes' about Simon's longing for his old classmates and the reflections on the merging of the two schools, both of which are important to the success of Simon's inclusion, are mentioned. However, in the summaries, status reports, and Simon's school record, this kind of knowledge has disappeared. The knowledge considered relevant here consists of Simon's assessment scores, psychological test results and evaluations from family therapy, details of drug treatments, and the assessment of the mother and father's ability to function as 'good enough' parents. So, in the documents forming the background for the decision-making process, difficulties are generally connected to individualistic descriptions of Simon or his family's inabilities or disabilities, a tendency that recurs throughout the empirical data. Peer relationships are very important to children and can have significant impact in relation to their school adjustment and performance, not least for children living parts of their everyday lives in 'the borderland between regular and special schooling' (Højholt and Røn Larsen, 2014; Morin, 2007; Røn Larsen, 2011b; Stanek, 2013, 2014). However, in relation to these children, the various authorities and professionals involved tend to neglect this. Instead, they focus more on the children's behavioural and academic performances, and thereby fail to see important possibilities for relating the interventions to the interests of the children in their everyday lives.

Processes like the ones around Simon are often dominated by a sense of despair and powerlessness for the many people involved: the children, parents, and professionals. The inter-professional and administrative processes are characterized by many ruptures, discontinuities, and resignations, and many factors other than children's personal characteristics and efforts appear to play an important role in the course of events. The more desperate and powerless the professionals become during the process, the more they tend to promulgate individualistic concerns

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regarding Simon's life. Instead of relating the different problems to each other, they appear to produce descriptions of the problems that they identify in relation to Simon's learning disabilities, his social incompetence and aggressive behaviour, the family's instability, his mother's mental state and employment status, and his father's drug abuse. The perspectives on Simon are informed by the various professionals' tasks, areas of expertise, and specific access to knowledge, and all aspects of children's lives that fall between the different professional areas of focus seem to vanish. In many ways, the case of Simon illustrates what Højholt and Kousholt have conceptualized as a 'slope of exclusion', where the conjunction of the many disconnected professional efforts aggravates the risk of exclusion in spite of those professionals having the opposite intentions (Højholt and Kousholt, in press; Kousholt, 2011).

It appears that the ambition of 'getting around the child' encourages an even wider division of labour, one characterized by the disconnectedness of incommensurable systems of school and social work, instead of contributing to reflections on how different aspects of children's lives hang together across these systems. In the same way, the institutional arrangement appears to reproduce the separation between 'general education' and 'special education', which strategies of inclusion are meant to bridge, and uphold the processes of sorting out which children go where that such a division prompts (Morin, 2007; Røn Larsen, 2011a, 2011b). Very little room is left for *'the relational agency (…) as a capacity for working with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems'* (Edwards *et al.*, 2010: 31). The institutional conditions tend to demand a reduction of complexity that leaves out knowledge from the children's perspectives, as well as knowledge from the general, conflictual processes of everyday life. In this way, inter-professional practice and records are indeed 'not geared' to overcoming the individualizing categorization of weaknesses and competencies, as the psychologist observed in the quote that opened this article. Looking at this from the perspective of Simon's everyday life, precisely all these circumstances that are not noted anywhere in the record, all this knowledge that exists only as 'anecdotes', is what tells us a lot about what is important to him and what he would like to get help with, as well as about how the interventions actually seem to be counterproductive for him and his life.

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Acknowledgements

The research referred to in this article originates from two projects, both with funds awarded by the Danish Council for Independent Research – Culture and Communication.

Notes

1 In this article, I use phrases like 'children *in* difficulties' to address the multifaceted context in which difficulties and problems develop, and thereby to disassociate this approach from the widespread tendency to individualize problems as a question of the child's inner dispositions.

2 The 'family class' is inspired by the 'Marlborough model' (Asen *et al.*, 2001): for further discussion see e.g. Knudsen, 2009; Morin, 2011.

3 The material has been anonymized by the use of a pseudonym and by altering other recognizable features insignificant to the analysis.

4 In Denmark, after-school clubs were traditionally developed as autonomous pedagogical institutions providing for children's after-school life. They are managed by pedagogically trained personnel and are to a substantial degree structured by the children's own engagements, supporting their free play. At present, though, they are becoming an ever more integrated part of the school system.

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