Parental collaboration in relation to children's school life - advanced self-regulation or possibilities for solidarity?

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Parental Collaboration in Relation to Children's School Lives
- Advanced Regulation or an Opportunity for Solidarity?

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Parental collaboration is both promoted for enhancing children's performance and criticized for reproducing educational inequality. The issue of parental collaboration thus presents an opportunity to discuss theoretical differences in current debates about education, notably the educational consequences of social background and governmentality. The article emphasizes the conflictual nature of children's school lives and analyzes the social interplay between the involved subjects, who are connected through their engagement in common matters and concerns. Our analysis challenges approaches inspired by Bourdieu that analyze the social reproduction of inequality in terms of discrepancies between parental style and the culture of the school. It also raises questions about the Foucauldian perspective which regards policies and practices of parental collaboration as means to govern parents. Through a discussion of these analyses, the article shows how different ways of conceptualizing parental collaboration offer different opportunities for organizing collaboration and dealing with the historical problems of the school.

Keywords: parental collaboration; subjectivity; participation; situated inequality; conflictual social practice

Introduction

Children's school lives are characterized by unequal conditions for participation, and by conflicts between the involved adults (e.g. parents, teachers, school counselors, politicians) about how the school should prioritize and deal with different kinds of problems related to the social life of the school. More deliberate involvement of parents is sometimes regarded as an answer to these problems (Epstein 2001, 2010; Christenson, 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Still, parental involvement is also criticized as a kind of problem displacement which shifts the focus away from the social practices of the school and onto the family lives of individual children. In this article, our point of departure is the premise that inequality and the displacement of problems are fundamental and historical problems in public education. Against this background, we discuss how different ways of conceptualizing parental collaboration offer different opportunities for organizing the latter and for dealing with these historical problems. Our contribution is therefore theoretical, and addresses in particular the concept of subjectivity. We also propose an understanding of parents as connected through a common cause, namely their children's education.

In research and debates about parental involvement, parents are often represented as individuals competing over professional resources and over their performance as 'good parents'. This often obscures their shared concerns and interests, which are anchored both in the interwoven everyday lives of their children, who belong to common learning communities; and in the conditions for taking part in, and contributing to, those communities. In other words, in debates about parental collaboration, we often overlook the intersubjective relations in children's learning communities which might otherwise lead us to focus on common interests among parents of children in the same school. We also lack analyses of how different groups of adults are convened, through schooling, in a historical structure where responsibilities and tasks are

distributed among them. This forms a background for common interests as well as for social conflicts over the school and its priorities.

To analyze how the parties involved in children's school life are connected, as well as their collaboration and conflicts in everyday life, we draw on the concept of 'social practice' (Bernstein, 1971; Chaiklin et al, 1999; Hedegaard et al, 1999, Holland & Lave, 2001; Lave, 2008, 2011). Seen through a social practice lens, the parties involved in children's education should be studied not as accidental others interacting in relations characterized by independent tasks, interests and responsibilities, but as persons connected through their involvement in common matters and concerns (e.g. Axel, 2002; Juul Jensen, 1987, 1999, 2001). This point is reflected in the title of our article, which proposes that while parental collaboration may be analyzed in terms of regulation, it can also be regarded as an opportunity for solidarity in tackling the school's problems.

By focusing on the subjective dimensions of interconnected structural practices (Dreier, 2003, 2008; Holzkamp, 2013; Højholt & Kousholt, 2017; Schraube, 2013), the historical concerns around which the involved parties gather come into view. Education is thus understood as a common matter, and different perspectives on children, on the school, and on what school life should be about, can be analyzed in terms of how they are connected.

In the following sections, we present key issues from research about parental collaboration, as well as some illustrations from our empirical research on this topic. First, we present some historical shifts in debates about parental collaboration and its organization. The idea of parental collaboration is both widely promoted and criticized, in research as well as practice. It is promoted as a way to improve children's learning in general, and as a means to compensate for inequality in children's family backgrounds (e.g. Carter, 2002, Hedeen et al.,

2011, Henderson & Mapp, 2002). We then present research focusing on different, class-related parental strategies as a background for inequality in school (Lareau, 2000, 2002, 2003), and we discuss theoretical issues related to the conceptualization of parental strategies and subjectivity. Without ignoring the importance of children's social background, our focus is more on how the significance of social background is mediated through conflictual practices in schools. We then present research that criticizes parental collaboration as a means of governing parents and of exercising social control in new ways (Baez & Talburt, 2008; Dahlstedt 2009). This appears to be a pertinent critique, but it may also conceal conflicts and the multifaceted nature of the school, leading us to miss opportunities to learn about the topic by exploring the disagreements that surround it and by investigating how each party's contribution is entangled with the collective interplay across the interconnected institutions that structure children's education and upbringing.

We use these examples of how parental collaboration is promoted and criticized as a point of departure for discussing the theoretical challenges of conceptualizing collaboration among parties who share tasks and concerns but who are nonetheless positioned in a conflictual situation when it comes to the distribution of responsibilities and influence. These challenges have to do with the way in which subjectivity is conceptualized. Hence, by exploring the different ways in which subjectivity, regulation and collaboration are accounted for in the above-mentioned research, we will be able to develop the conceptualization of subjectivity and explain what this reconceptualization means for our approach to parental collaboration. For the past 20 years, we have carried out a variety of research projects in and across children's diverse life contexts – observing everyday life across different locations and interviewing various parties such as the children themselves, parents, pedagogues, teachers, psychologists, etc. In this article,

we focus on parental collaboration seen from multiple perspectives, and we draw on an ongoing

project about social conflicts in children's school lives.[1]

In the following sections we discuss theoretical challenges in the fields of research and

thereafter we present the research project we draw on in further detail.

Historical changes and debates about parental collaboration

Parental collaboration can be understood as a multifaceted, societal issue that has been

represented and discussed from different perspectives, partly due to its historical variations. Ule,

Živoder & du Bois-Reymond (2015) link the increasing focus on parental involvement to

entwined processes of what they term institutionalization and familialization - that **"**success in

school is gaining importance in children's life course trajectories (institutionalization), while at

the same time the school delegates responsibilities for this success to the students themselves –

and their families (familialization)" (p. 332).

In Denmark, this tendency is reflected in the introduction to the 'Act on increased

parental responsibility' from 2006. The objective of the Act is to clarify and strengthen parents'

general duties and responsibilities in relation to their children's learning and school lives. A

further ambition is 'to support socially vulnerable children by committing their parents to take on

their responsibility' ("Letter of Information Accompanying the Act", Ministry of Social Welfare,

2006:1, see also Kryger & Ravn, 2009). The Act can be understood in the light of current Danish

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[1] https://typo3.ruc.dk/en/departments/department-of-people-and-technology-

dpt/research/projekter/childrens-inclusion-in-school-as-conflictual-collaboration-between-families-

teachers-school-leaders-and-legislation/

policy on child welfare and parental tasks, which focuses on concern for children's well-being and development in terms of risk factors (Juhl, 2014, 2015; Grumløse, 2014).

The points made above highlight historical changes in the way parents' responsibilities are accounted for: from following rules and expert advice, to exercising responsibility by taking part in defining what it means to be a responsible parent (this is what Knudsen and Andersen (2014) term 'hyper-responsibility'). Knudsen and Andersen (2014) underline that these different types of responsibility are all present and coexist today. This tendency is linked by many researchers to debates about, and changes in, the way learning is conceptualized: a broader concept of learning has gained ground, and learning is now perceived as something that also occurs in the family and in everyday life. In connection with this, the home is understood as a central context for the child's learning environment (e.g. Epstein, 2001, 2010; Christenson, 2004; Jeynes, 2011 Reschly & Christenson, 2012). These tendencies may also be seen in the light of global economic and political changes (Donner, 2017).

As previously mentioned, research points to a growing professionalization and accountability of parents in relation to children's learning and development. In that connection, recent studies have analyzed how the boundaries between schools' and parents' responsibilities have shifted historically towards the increased 'responsibilization of parents' (Knudsen & Andersen, 2014). It is part of the 'Agreement on the Danish Public School' from 2013 that the school board's principles for collaboration between the school and the home should include principles on parents' responsibility for such collaboration.[2] Following the requirement that

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[2] 'How to make a good school even better'. Agreement on improvement of standards in the Danish public school (primary and lower-secondary education).

parents must take responsibility, there has been an intensified focus in schools on informing and involving parents, which has led to increased demands on teachers and new tasks for parents.

The emphasis on the importance of parental support and upbringing for children's learning and achievement in school has led to a number of interventions that involve parents in various partnership models when children experience difficulties in school (for instance Marlborough-inspired family classes; Morin, 2015; Knudsen, 2007). Such interventions can be seen as encouraged by research documenting that parents' involvement has a significant influence on their children's achievements in school (Carter, 2002; Hedeen et al, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002, Jeynes 2005, 2011).

A great deal of research has been conducted which focuses on the (implicit or explicit) expectations that parents are faced with, and on their struggles to be seen as responsible. In various ways, these studies (which are often sociological or ethnographic) analyze parents' difficulties in meeting school 'imperatives', and explore how different positions are available to different groups of parents (Bæck, 2005; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Crozier, et al., 2011; David, 2003, 2005; Lareau 2000, 2002, 2003; Matthiesen, 2016, Palludan, 2012; Reay, 1999). Informed by Bourdieu and Lareau, among others, Crozier, Reay and James (2011) argue that middle-class parental involvement is central to social reproduction and to 'the transmission of parents' middle-class privilege to their children, almost regardless of their intentions' (Crozier et al., p. 199). This research informs notions about the barriers intrinsic to the school's normativity, and cultural expectations regarding parental behavior and involvement, and about how class, gender and ethnicity play a role in creating different conditions for parents' and children's participation in school (e.g. Matthiesen's (2016) critique that Somali parents' collaboration style is interpreted as stemming from an 'authoritarian subservience culture').

Nevertheless, even though children's learning and wellbeing might appear to be quite unambiguous issues, political ambitions as well as strategies of everyday life and the distribution of tasks and responsibilities regarding children's education are multifaceted, contradictory and constitute an object of political conflict.

Hence, discussions about parental collaboration are connected to more fundamental societal problems and conflicts. What are all these conflicts about learning and public education really about? They extend beyond the immediate relations between parents and professionals, and cannot be handled through courses, contracts or communicative systems alone (see also Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). In relation to education, we see a tendency to implement, for instance, dialogue techniques, methods for teaching parents how to chat with their children, and 'written agreements' between officials and parents aimed at solving problems or clarifying expectations concerning the contributions of those involved (for a critique see e.g. Baez and Talburt, 2008; Knudsen & Andersen, 2014). In such practices, opportunities to assert oneself, and to have one's knowledge and perspective on a given problem acknowledged, are unequally distributed. Often, parents are regarded as the very problem to be solved, and in this way school dilemmas may be displaced onto the children's family background (Højholt & Kousholt, 2018a, see also Christenson 2004). In research, conceptualizations and interventions, this displacement produces a focus on family life and parenting at the expense of inquiry into situated interplay in schools, and into how children and parents experience school life as well as broader social conflicts over schooling. Before turning to our discussion of situations from everyday school life, we will present and discuss key research on relations between parents and schools.

Inequality in school conceptualized in relation to parental strategies

The term 'parental collaboration' denotes the general collaboration between all the parents and professionals in the school; however, it is quite often reduced to discussions about social background and the intergenerational transmission of parents' disadvantages - with collaboration being understood and performed as a kind of compensatory arrangement to help parents to support their children's school lives. Such debates accentuate the question of how to conceptualize the connections between situated problems in schools and the different (unequal) conditions of different family lives. In this way, parental collaboration is associated with a widespread way of thinking and understanding children's school success as being closely connected to family background (e.g. Lareau, 2000, 2003) and associated with social help, compensative interventions and social control.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Lareau (2002) has argued that social class shapes the cultural logic of childrearing, with strategies of 'concerted cultivation' (p. 748) (e.g. organized leisure activities and extensive reasoning) adopted by middle-class parents being more 'in sync with the standards of dominant institutions'. The child-rearing strategies of working-class or poor parents (categorized as 'accomplishment of natural growth' p. 748) become a disadvantage for their children in relation to their school life. For instance, Lareau writes that parents from working-class families did not encourage their children to engage in 'conversation that promotes reasoning and negotiation' (p. 756) and did not make them 'feel "special"' (p. 754). They did not give the impression that their children's 'opinions needed to be cultivated and developed' (p. 759), and they did not 'continuously direct and monitor their children's leisure activities' (p. 758) (Lareau, 2002). In the author's words: 'social class does indeed create distinctive parenting styles' (ibid. p. 748). In this way, she finds a close connection between the children's class

position and 'the uneven outcomes of their experiences outside the home as they interact with professionals…' (ibid. p. 749).

The above research offers an important perspective on the link between social class and inequality. Still, it regards inequalities as related to *different parenting styles and the transfer of class backgrounds*, and the overall focus is on how parents (willingly or not) convey cultural norms to their children that have an impact on their achievements in school. The processes that shape inequality are connected to class-based mechanisms through which parents transmit (dis)advantages. Lareau points to the fact that 'little is known about the degree to which children adopt and enact their parents' beliefs' (2002, p.748) and calls for a more dynamic model of parent-child interaction. This raises the question of how parents' and children's subjectivity is conceptualized in analyses. Subjectivity appears to be connected to the appropriation of values and skills, norms and culture. In this approach, the concept of subjectivity does not appear central, however – rather, it seems to be connected to the transfer of social class norms and the acquisition of culture. Furthermore, the culture of these families is quite unambiguously contrasted with the culture of the school. In this way, the school is understood as part of the problem, but is still depicted as having a rather homogeneous culture itself.

This highlights the challenge of how to conceptualize the connection between children's social background and the unequal conditions for participating in school life. By using the term 'situated inequality', we wish to highlight the fact that processes of differentiation and exclusion are linked to concrete situations and interplay in schools, seen as historical institutions. This opens up for a different perspective on inequality compared to analyses that focus on the advantages or disadvantages associated with children's class backgrounds. In this way, we aim to highlight and analyze processes of social coordination, interplay and conflicts – and how these

play out - as the backdrop for children's unequal conditions for participating in school life and for dealing with the multifaceted agendas and inherent contradictions of the school.

Parental collaboration could be seen as an 'answer' to such dilemmas – as a way of organizing the coordination and interaction between those involved, and opening up for the exchange of knowledge about children's interplay and conditions in school and about parents' influence on school life - instead of singling out individuals (Epstein 2001, 2010; Christenson 2004). Still, parental collaboration can also be seen as a new way to govern parents, thus exacerbating the inequalities of school life.

New ways of governing parents

Another branch of research, arising from Foucauldian-inspired theorizing about governmentality, addresses how parents are constituted as subjects in neoliberal societies (e.g. Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). The focus on governmentality includes the ways in which 'social institutions seek to guide, shape, and direct the behavior of others *and* the ways individuals govern themselves and their actions' (Baez & Talburt, 2008, p. 28). This focus on the regulation of institutions, and on how this regulation shapes how subjects regulate themselves, appears to be an extension of Foucault's formulations about the exercise of power 'as a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions. What therefore would be proper to a relationship of power is that it be a mode of action upon actions' (1982, p. 22). Analyses of relationships of power in this sense are often linked to a focus on social technologies of power or technologies of the self, with a view to understanding how subjects are created (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014).

A number of recent studies have analyzed the social technologies of home-school cooperation – for instance 'games' in which parents are invited to simultaneously 'be more responsible' and 'participate in defining what responsibility means' (Knudsen & Andersen,

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2014), or pamphlets to inform and direct the conduct of parents in relation to supporting their children's school lives (Baez & Talburt, 2008). Analyses of the governance mechanisms involved in neoliberal technologies of home-school cooperation point to dislocation and radicalization of the mode of parents' responsibilization, as well as to how such technologies utilize parent-child relationships and define a certain set of cultural norms that should direct home-school cooperation (Baez & Talburt, 2008, Dahlstedt, 2009; Kryger & Ravn, 2009, p. 170). Following from the focus on responsibilization and on how the school as a societal institution governs parents, the concept of subjectivity appears to be connected to subjectification and to how the regulation of others constitutes them as subjects. Parental collaboration is, in this way, conceptualized as a means of governing parents so that they govern themselves, and is interpreted in terms of self-technologies that subjectify parents in order to meet societal needs (Baez & Talburt, 2008; Dahlstedt 2009).

Analyses that take their point of departure in a governmentality perspective often address various policy documents or technologies directed at governing parents' behavior or the teacher-parent-relationship. The aspects of parental collaboration that pertain to parents' relationships with each other, or with parents' communities, seem absent from these analyses. In addition, the focus is on the types of conduct that various social technologies used for parental collaboration implicitly seek to direct, and is typically not on how parents experience or make use of such technologies (Baez & Talburt, 2008). One could say that it is not a central concern of such approaches to address the perspectives and everyday practices of the people involved (teachers and parents), since the focus is on the constituting powers regulating everyday practices.

The framing of this article within a historical structure of interconnected practices directs the focus towards distributed subjects who are connected through a common (contradictory)

concern, instead of regarding them as separate individuals subjected to governing practices. Parents' perspectives and dilemmas can then be analyzed in relation to more general and historical social conflicts about the school and its societal dilemmas. This could open up for perspectives on parental collaboration as 'contributions to collaborative transformative practices' (Stetsenko, 2008, p. 471).

Knudsen and Andersen (2014) formulate their approach as 'to stay on 'the surface' of the discourse' – and analyze 'the logical and general impossibilities inherent in the discourse' (p. 2). In contrast to this, our inquiry seeks to explore 'the substance' of conflicts in schools. This entails connecting the different perspectives to different positions and different types of responsibilities and contributions that are differentiated within a complex practice structure (Dreier, 2008; Højholt, 2011). This approach takes its point of departure in the assumption that the perspectives of the parties involved are connected by a 'common concern', as well as being differentiated by the different tasks they have in relation to the children's school lives and the different parties' positions in the conflicts (Axel, 2002, 2009).

Methodological considerations and methods

Parental collaboration may appear to be a fairly new kind of regulation, but it can also be seen as a manifestation of the understanding that different social practices are connected and that collaboration is a social necessity. A similar point is put forward by Epstein: building on a system-ecological approach, she has developed 'the overlapping spheres of influence' model which addresses the mutual influence between families and the school in relation to children's school success (Epstein, 2001, 2010).

In a collective research project, we explore children's school lives through a focus on how the conditions for children's participation in school are distributed in several different

places, with important conditions including teachers' experiences of professionalism and parents' experiences of modern parental tasks. This calls for a focus on how these conditions are linked to structural conditions in schools, which is why our research project includes the perspectives of school management, municipal management and legislation. The article draws on analyses from this large study and while our aim here is not to report on the findings, the empirical material is used to highlight the main conceptual points. We will give a brief account of the research design to give some context for the empirical examples we use. Over a four-year period, and in collaboration with six other researchers, we conducted field work at three schools in different municipalities with varied demographic configurations in which we addressed children's everyday life in school, interdisciplinary cooperation, parental collaboration, children in difficulties and psychological investigations. As researchers we position ourselves as participants joining everyday life in a way that makes it possible to obtain access to social dynamics, conditions and interplay – implying to vary ones participation and attention in flexible ways with respect to differences in the concrete practices (Højholt & Kousholt, 2014a; Kousholt, 2016). Regarding parental collaboration, a subproject focused on parents' perspectives and followed a school class from 1st grade to 3rd grade (age seven to nine) and the parental collaboration around it through participatory observations and interviews with parents and children. This particular school was located in an inner city area of the capital associated with highly educated parents. The researcher participated in the children's school life during class hours and breaks for 14-16 whole days in total spread out during the semesters (primarily fall semesters) and participated in three parental meetings. We conducted three rounds of interviews with the children in smaller groups (21 children were interviewed the first year, 25 children the second year, and 23 children the third year - 25 interviews in total) and interviews with the

parents to 11 of the children in the class. The parents to three of children were interviewed two times to follow up on the development in the class (in total 17 parents were interviewed - when possible the mother and father together, three interviews were with the mother only). Furthermore, we conducted interviews about parental collaboration with two of the main teachers of the class and the school leader (see also Kousholt, 2018). To anchor our analyses in broader experiences of school life, the researchers collaborated continuously with the professionals involved in the children's school life, presenting empirical material and analyses for wider reflections (6 teachers and 3 pedagogues were involved in regular reflections meetings, several others in frequent dialogues during field work at the three schools, see also Højholt & Kousholt, 2018b).

In the research group, we shared empirical material from the schools and the different perspectives, and we analyzed the material using our common theoretical approach to social practice and subjectivity. Analytical concepts relating to the connection between *social* conditions and *personal* meanings guided a situated analysis of structural conflicts and dilemmas in social practices and of how people deal with and overcome them. We therefore analyzed the participants' different perspectives in connection with their different responsibilities, their conditions, and the different kinds of access they had to knowledge about the children's school life (for a more thorough presentation of the methodological departure in practice research and the analytical approach see Højholt & Kousholt, 2014b, in press/2019). Our analytical ambition was, thus, to understand everyone involved, and to explore their reasoning in connection with the social practices where they took part (Dreier, 2003).

The point is that these different practices interrelate – what happens in one context influences what is going on in the other – and that the social practice of the school is complex,

multifaceted and connected to multiple different interests and issues (compare Bernstein, 1971,

Axel 2011). Additionally, the conflictual social interplay of the school can be analytically

connected to political debates over the purposes of the school, who the public school should

include, and who should have responsibility for what in relation to children's education.

A structure of interconnected social practices

Erik Axel writes about cooperation as a contradiction between 'a common cause' on the one

hand, and differentiation of a cause into different aspects and contributions on the other, and he

argues that this necessitates the development of cooperation (2011). Axel's focus is on

interdisciplinary collaboration in connection with building a house, but he emphasizes a general

theoretical point about the historical character of human practice and about how subjects develop

their conditions together. In the field of childhood studies, we find parallels to this idea in

formulations about 'chains of care', which emphasize collaboration among several different

parties over children's everyday life (Andenæs & Haavind, 2018).

Parental collaboration thus becomes a compound and contradictory matter. It is

understood by the parties involved both as indirect governance and as a way of being involved in

the identification and regulation of common concerns, and of being able to influence and change

conditions by virtue of experiencing the (often unintended and overlooked meanings of those

conditions when seen from other contexts and perspectives. One could say that these are two

sides of the same coin, and we agree that there is regulation at stake in both situations. Still, if we

want to organize collaboration in a democratic manner, we need to be able to distinguish

between forms of organizing that allow parents to contribute to and influence school practices,

and forms that close down disagreements and govern through privileging one-sided perspectives.

Furthermore, the opportunity to learn about problems by apprehending the different perspectives of the involved parties might contribute to the improvement of the social practice in question.

The parties are involved in a common commitment, but the different aspects of that commitment, as well as the strategies and methods it involves, may be separated, isolated and regarded as being antithetical to one another. An example of this is the tendency to counterpose discipline and educational focus with flexibility and concern about the social life of the children. Teaching cannot be resolved without considering all these aspects, but they are often discussed in a quite polarised manner in ideological struggles. In the following, we will present empirical examples from our current research project in order to illustrate these theoretical points.

In the Danish context, a common means of involving parents in their children's school life is to organize 'playgroups', selected by the adults concerned, in which the class is divided into groups of four to five children who take turns visiting each other at home. Playgroups are increasingly promoted as a way to develop class community and inclusion. Our research shows that playgroups become part of the social dynamics in the classroom, and can contribute both to inclusive and exclusionary processes. Thus, playgroups can have different meanings for different children – and for their parents. Our observations at parents' meetings and interviews with parents show how such arrangements can be sources of intense conflicts – and can lead to very principled debates about individuals' 'private' right to decide with whom they wish to spend their time vs. social responsibility. In this way, parents' meetings can be seen as sites for political discussions about how school should be organized, and about priorities and strategies in relation to inclusion. Disagreements and exclusionary dynamics were already present prior to the introduction of the playgroups, and had an impact on the children's communities and on who visited whom. When such dilemmas are brought up explicitly, parents and teachers gain the

opportunity to recognize them and to deal with them in a coordinated way. In that way, the ways in which parents *connect* their different perspectives and acknowledge their differences appear significant. Parents report that playgroups create an opportunity to get to know one other, and especially to get to know the peers of one's child, thereby enhancing their understanding of the social interplay of the class in new ways. Playgroups can thus create opportunities to develop the class learning community.

In our empirical material, parents' meetings constitute situations in which parents and teachers can discuss how the organization of the school day (e.g. day trips or homework) can create dilemmas when it comes to practical arrangements in families' everyday lives. Through such discussions, parents can explore together the multifaceted aspects of such dilemmas, and can develop common solutions, negotiate, rearrange or adjust conditions (e.g. agreeing to arrange shared transport or to put collective pressure on the school to change its practices). In general, various aspects of the multifaceted issues that arise at schools are likely to be overlooked if exchange and collaboration are not organized in a nuanced, explorative way. This underlines the need to tailor collaborative activities to local conditions (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

Conflicts over different aspects of a compound social practice
Since in their everyday lives children span the school and home contexts, teachers and parents cannot accomplish their task without looking beyond their own contexts and the 'functions' associated with these. Their contributions to the children's lives are interwoven, and at the same time they must pursue the different concerns related to their different positions and tasks. In our interviews, teachers explained that social interplay and conflicts between children influence how they arrange their teaching. Opportunities for dealing with conflicts between children are important in relation to learning about the social dynamics in the classroom, managing teaching

tasks, and involving the children in learning practices that allow them to express their opinions, listen to one another, and develop shared solutions (Mardahl-Hansen, 2018). Our observations illustrated the interconnectedness of the conditions for learning and social processes in the classroom – a point that can be obscured in principled debates over 'what should be prioritized most highly'. Such debates often become dichotomized so that interlinked aspects become separated and isolated, for instance when 'the social' is accentuated to the detriment of 'the academic', or 'discipline' is prioritized over 'flexibility'. In teachers' accounts, as well as in observations from school life, these aspects are interwoven, and teaching cannot be carried out without situated variation – i.e. pursuing apparently contradictory aspects at one and the same time.

In dealing with social conflicts, teachers talked about the importance of 'knowing the children', which involves getting a feel for the class and for what is going on between the children, as well as for individual children's engagement or difficulties. In relation to this, teachers stated that they also depended on knowledge from, and collaboration with, parents.

Thus, the different parties are connected through the content of their tasks in relation to the children and, at the same time, they have different responsibilities and perspectives (Højholt, 2006; Axel, 2011; Røn Larsen, 2012). Their collaboration appears loaded with conflicts that are linked to broader debates about what is relevant in relation to learning, how schools should prioritize, how learning difficulties ought to be understood, and who is responsible. Furthermore, parents sometimes represent a significant 'exclusion dynamic' themselves (Hein, 2014; Højholt, 2011), and the way their collaboration is organized seems to play a significant role in the situated inequality of the classroom. Parents may exert pressure on teachers, and they may have internal conflicts about how the school should prioritize and about what is best for the class. These

conflicts feed into conflicts between the children in a class. Parents influence the way children relate to one other, but research as well as experiences from practice point to the difficulties for parents and professionals when seeking to obtain insight into the complex social dynamics in children's communities (Højholt, 2012; Kousholt, 2011; Stanek, 2011). At the same time, examples illustrate that through shared exploration and collaboration, teachers and parents can gain more compound knowledge about what is at stake in children's social interplay and conflicts. Additionally, studies of parents' perspectives illustrate that collaboration with *other parents* is crucial for the way in which parents experience their own child and for how they regard their own accomplishments as parents (Højholt, Juhl & Kousholt, 2017; Kousholt, 2011; Hein, 2014). One father put it like this:

> I am interested in understanding what is going on because [as a parent] you do not
> have natural insight. Actually, this is what you want the other parents to help you
> with.

In parents' stories about how they tried to obtain insight into conflicts between their children at school, the opportunity for dialogue with other parents appears crucial. Parents described how their exchanges with other parents influenced the way they felt they were able to support their own child – as well as their own development as parents of growing schoolchildren. Children's conflicts are complex and interwoven with their different conditions for taking part in, and influencing, social interplay, thereby connecting personal participation with social possibilities (cf. Højholt & Kousholt, 2018; Stanek, 2011). Accordingly, conflicts can be experienced very differently by children, and it is often the case that the stories parents are told vary a lot. Parents depend on each other's knowledge, and that of the teachers, to attain an understanding of the social situations in which their children participate. In relation to this, it is striking when

interviewing parents that their stories about 'when conflicts between the children reach a deadlock' are often followed by statements about 'not being able to talk to that child's parent'. From one parent's perspective, it may be a matter of supporting one's own child's integrity, while the other parent's reactions can be experienced as 'overstepping personal boundaries'. The points of view of other children and parents with regard to the conflict in question can seem incomprehensible. In this way, parents can become isolated from or opposed to each other over conflicts between their children. In connection with this, our interviews with parents offered insights into the importance of teachers' organization of knowledge-sharing about children's social interplay – i.e. how teachers involve parents in investigating what conflicts seem to be about, and in decisions about how to collaborate over possible solutions. Thus, conflicts may be seen as latent possibilities that can be worked with and understood as social conflicts connected to the societal tasks and priorities of the school, instead of displacing them onto individualized children. This will provide new understandings of the problems in question, and new possibilities for working with children's social conditions – and calls for a reorganization and reconceptualization of collaboration.

Mutual resignation, conflictuality and personal agency

Due to the structure of interconnected practices, the involved adults and their collaboration influence children's opportunities to participate meaningfully in educational settings. Educational research has shown that conflicts in the communities in which children take part are crucial for inclusion and learning, and emphasizes the social possibilities for taking part in learning communities (Højholt, 2008, 2012; Morin, 2015; Røn Larsen, 2011).

One recurrent finding in cases where children are excluded from school, or marginalized there, is that professionals report a lack of collaboration with the parents – or problems with their

collaboration - as the reason for this. Teachers as well as school leaders identify parental collaboration as a crucial challenge in relation to children's inclusion in school. Likewise, parents report on 'giving up on the school', and in our analysis which follows children's trajectories over time, it seems as though some children give up on their efforts to participate in learning activities and to belong to communities of other children. In such processes, the other children also seem to 'forget' or 'give up' inviting children in difficulties into their communities. These interconnected processes are characterized by conflicts between adults, between adults and children, and between children; and they are also characterized by personal conflicts in the lives of the children in difficulties (Højholt & Kousholt, 2018a, 2018b; Højholt, 2016; Kousholt, 2012).

The ways in which children deal with these conflictual conditions for taking part in school life are often seen (and investigated), in a quite isolated fashion, as pertaining to a single child and its history and family background. Therefore, in these processes social background plays a crucial part – but it is *mediated through situated conflicts* and possibilities for participation. We see, then, how subjectivity and personal approaches to participation are distributed and linked to the ways in which concrete dilemmas are dealt with in everyday life and in regard to coordination with others.

At the same time, statistical research on intergenerational transmission emphasizes that it is misleading to assume that children inherit their parents' social problems. Research on intergenerational transmission demonstrates the complexity of relationships between factors and the scientific dilemmas involved in investigating the interrelated meanings in people's lives (e.g. Barnes et al., 2012). In that respect, it is not possible to reach an unambiguous conclusion about how and what children inherit from their parents. Personal 'agency' often becomes a kind of

independent variable in these discussions of intergenerational transmission (Bird, 2007), and subjectivity appears as a matter of individual ability (present or not). In such research, relations between social possibilities and personal agency tend to remain unaddressed.

Analyses of concrete collaboration regarding children illustrate how personal agency is interwoven with how social conflicts develop – both among children and in conflictual collaboration over children. We will conceptualize subjectivity as an aspect of participation in social practice, which implies that learning and the development of personal agency are seen as entangled in the conflictuality of social practice. Hence, working to enhance learning possibilities becomes a collective matter.

Parental collaboration as conflictual social practice and an opportunity for development

At the beginning of this article, we stated that the strategies and distribution of tasks and responsibilities in relation to children's school lives are multifaceted, contradictory and conflictual. During our analysis and discussion, we emphasized that the involved parties are gathered around, and connected through, historical matters when it comes to children's education. We further suggested that the debate about parental collaboration is intertwined with societal problems and questions such as 'what are conflicts over learning and public education really about?' What kind of general contradictions and dilemmas are related to these common matters, and how can we explore the latter's actual, concrete and personal meanings in the everyday lives of the people involved?

In our research, it was striking that through organizing collaboration between the involved adults, the representation of school problems can be refocused away from an emphasis on individualized and isolated problems, and towards a focus on organizational dilemmas and

common responsibilities when it comes to working with the contradictions and social conflicts that characterize children's everyday lives. In this way, the participants can become part of common efforts to enhance children's communities and shared lives. Children and parents have regular conversations about what is going on at school. The way in which parents relate to children's stories of conflicts with other children, for instance, influences the social life of the children in the school. Parents therefore – often without realizing, and unintentionally – influence the conditions for participation in children's communities. Seen from this perspective, parental collaboration is a social necessity, and has an impact even when it is not deliberately organized – sometimes in quite accidental, unintended and exclusionary ways.

This focus on the common interests of adults and schoolchildren might be seen as a kind of naive solidarity which cannot stand alone. Conceptualizing the relationship between families and schools in terms of 'partnership', and emphasizing communalities, shared interests and responsibilities, and mutual exchange, would seem to be important steps in developing collaborative practices in school (Christenson, 2004; Epstein, 2001, 2010). Furthermore, in our approach we emphasized the importance of understanding the inherently conflictual nature of schooling as a social practice and, hence, of children's school lives. When developing collaboration among parents, we need to pay attention to their unequal conditions for participation and for getting their perspectives on a given problem acknowledged. When parents become involved it is sometimes as part of 'the problem' rather than as part of the solution and part of the process of exploring the problem and influencing the school's practice. However, this unequal positioning is not historically new and is not a result of the current political focus on parental involvement. The problem of who should influence school decisions, priorities and organizations, as well as processes of differentiation and individualization at school, are

historical, as is the displacement of problems and responsibility. The point is not to overlook

dilemmas, power and governance in relation to parental involvement, but instead to analyze

these aspects as anchored in historical and conflictual social practice.

Power and governmentality are at stake in parental involvement, but not in an

unambiguous way. In our analysis, regulation takes place in the situated and unpredictable

interplay between parties who have different conditions for participation. These differences are

produced in the concrete and intersubjective interplay between the persons involved, and are

related to political conflicts over shared concerns.

In that regard, the different conceptualizations of parental collaboration appear quite

crucial since theoretical understandings sometimes appear to contribute to the displacement of

problems away from the school and its inherent conflicts and onto the family backgrounds of the

children. Unequal positionings resulting from children's social backgrounds cannot be dismissed,

but these are mediated in the classroom. Children's experiences are understood quite differently

depending on the character of the collaboration and of the communities in and around the

classroom. This is connected to the theoretical challenge of formulating how concrete conflicts

and tensions in ongoing social practice are linked to historical conflicts and struggles – i.e. to the

challenge of analyzing historical conflictuality in situated interplay (compare Lave, 2011, 2019).

Returning to our point of departure, i.e. the concept of conflictual social practice, we

posit that disagreements among the participants can be seen as an expression of their shared

engagement. This means that exploring their different perspectives and disagreements provides

an opportunity to expand our understanding of the practice in question, thus opening up for a

'conflicts as heuristics' approach (Busch-Jensen, 2015). With a point of departure in the *general*

problems related to organizing education for a diverse group of children from different social

backgrounds, we can explore concrete meanings as understood by different children and parents. By exploring children's and parents' perspectives, we can learn about the different aspects of the multifaceted nature of school life, thereby developing the school's social practice by exploring conflicts about schooling.

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