

“You can be up on the mountain or down in the lake”

– empirical studies of children’s perspectives on social conflicts in school with a focus on popularity and social hierarchies.

This paper raises a discussion about social hierarchies in and outside the classroom in relation to social conflicts among children in school. The discussion is raised based on a 10-month long fieldwork that was methodically inspired by the concept of co-researching stemming from Danish-German critical psychology. Following the children of a public-school class across grade 3 and 4, the children and I, made empirical investigations on how they perceived, understood and conducted their social lives in school – through a focus on social conflicts.

The fieldwork included observations, interviews, mappings and analytical group sessions with the children, why it was possible to make thick descriptions of everyday school life from the vantage point of both children that experienced inclusion and marginalisation. The empirical studies made it possible to analyse the children’s social conflicts in relation to their school life and explore the dialectical connection between school as a historical practice setting and the here-and-now conflicts among the children. These analyses give the possibility to expand understandings on how social problems regarding for instance popularity and exclusion in school is interconnected with school itself and cannot be understood only as relational difficulties and social hierarchies within the classroom.

The problem itself

In Denmark the ambition of making public schools more inclusive has been a dominant wish for more than a decade. Various legislative, pedagogical and economical attempts have been made to both expand the group of children attending public school and to increase the social wellbeing of the pupils already in school. Alas, it seems that these attempts have been somewhat in vain – the larger part of Danish children are overall happy with school, but the group of children that does not thrive seems to be the same even after all the attempts. Moreover, the group of children attending segregated schools is also the same – percentage wise (Weirsøe, 2021).

My Ph.D. project took its interest in the group of children to whom school does not become the place for academic and social development and growth that was intended. Children who experience exclusion and marginalization as a big part of their school life. In order to get to know more about why we can’t seem to “crack the code” to making schools more inclusive – I set out to ask the children themselves and from this the investigation began.

The way of investigating it

I followed a group of 21 children, a school class, in a ten-month period from 3rd to 4th class. In Denmark are 3rd and 4th-graders app. 9-10 years old. My way of entering the school class was inspired from ethnographic fieldwork (Eder & Corsaro, 1999; Gulløv & Højlund, 2003; Tanggaard, 2014) where I strived to enter and get insight in to the practices and communities among the children by striving for the least-adult role (Mandell, 1988) and engaging in their world and everyday life (Griffin et al., 2016). I conducted observations (Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; Nielsen, 2012) throughout the day and was a part of both classes, breaks, playdates, leisure time activities, birthday parties and so on. Later in the fieldwork I worked with inspiration from participatory research stemming from Critical Psychology’s notion of co-researchers as a way of investigating first person perspectives in practice (Holzkamp, 2005; Kousholt & Højholt, 2011). I did a series of interviews inspired by the life form interview (Andenæs, 1991) and also developed a mapping method as an attempt to follow developments over time in the children’s social life and communities in school (Testmann, 2023). In addition to this I held meetings with the children, where we discussed findings and analytical points (Testmann, 2021).

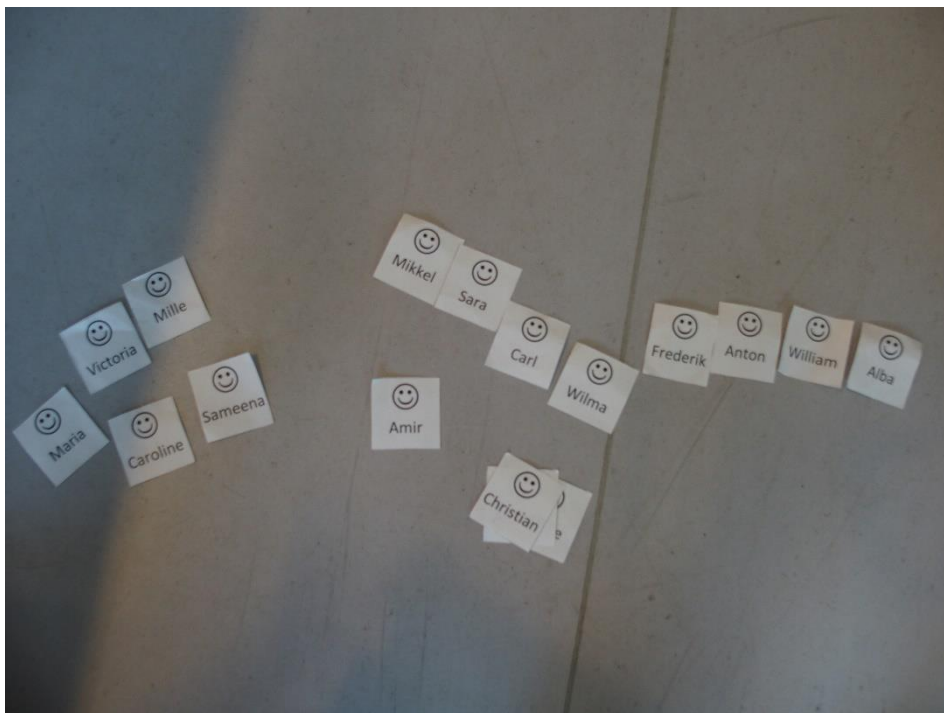
Social conflicts as both an analytical and empirical focus

In the following I will present some excerpts of empirical material, where we will follow a girl in the school class, Sara. When I enter the class, Sara is talked about as a 'popular' girl. She and her best friend Victoria is a central part of a sought-after group of girls, that seems to be a group that many wants to be a part of. Sara are organizing a lot of activities in the group and introduces the other girls to TikTok and host secret clubs etc. In my first interview with Sara, we talk about this:

Sara: I have played a lot with Victoria – a lot! At first, we had this kind of small team, me, Victoria and Sameena where we always played together. And then, Caroline, Mille og Maria joined – and now we are a big team!



The picture shows Sara's mapping and her card does not show as she is buried in the pile under Sameena's card as an illustration of her being in 'the big team'. But in the following months things changes for Sarah. She is spending less and less time with Victoria. She is more often alone both in and outside the classroom. And five months later we do a new interview and mapping:



In this mapping Sara is placing her card away from the other girls. In this interview she talks very differently about what she is doing, when she is in school. She talks about how she must 'squeeze in'.

Sara: Most of the time I must squeeze my way in.

Lærke: And how do you do that?

Sara: I listen to what they talk about and ask them what they talk about. Then they say that they plan to stay over at each other's places, and I ask if I can come too. Sometimes they let me but most of the time they say, that they have to think about it and then I'll never get an answer.

Lærke: No.

Sara: But sometimes they say yes..

Lærke: So you know how to ... squeeze in?

Sara: Yes.. but sometimes.. you shouldn't be too eager!

Lærke: Why not?

Sara: Because, if you show that you are too eager then.. I don't know.. (Pauses). Then it can come off as if you are trying to split them up and ruin their friendship.

Lærke: Okay, so it shouldn't be made into a competition?

Sara: No, I mean.. I really want to be friends with Victoria again – and that is what I am trying to do, you know.. (smiles a little)

Lærke: Okay, I see (smiles too). For how long have you been friends?

Sara: Three years

Lærke: Has there been any breaks?

Sara: Yes, some small breaks. But this one has been really long, and I don't think we will be friends again.

In the observations of Sara during these months it shows how Sara's ways of participation have changed a lot. She is involved in a lot of conflicts with the other girls, she is talked about as having excluding behaviour because she tries to arrange sleep overs where very few are invited, and she often rejects other children that tries to get access to activities that Sara is a part of. During classes she is often in opposition to the teacher and refuses to take part in learning activities. She is talked about by the grown-ups as someone making a lot of 'girl-troubles', meaning that she creates a lot of drama and conflicts in the girl group. Looking on Sara's change of behaviour from an outside perspective it can come off as bad – but when we follow Sara's perspective on the conflicts, we can see that she is actually trying to accomplish something – to be Victoria's friend again.

During my fieldwork I had an empirical focus on conflicts as processes to investigate in order to find out – from children's perspectives what the conflicts was about. Why did the conflicts arise? What was the children trying to do and accomplish? And how were these strivings connected to school practices? These questions became my analytical starting points. The reason for this focus on conflicts was based on an understanding of shared life as in itself contradictory (Ollman, 2015) and practices in institutional life as conflictual (Axel, 2011). In that way I understood social conflicts among the children as a necessary part of their lives in school and making them a central in the empirical and analytical process made it possible to work with situated analysis (Højholt & Røn Larsen, 2001). In Sara's case one could say, that what looked like bad behaviour was hard work and that her work was linked till the actual work of going to school. That in order to attend school Sara needed her access and influence with the girls group, in order to make her everyday life at school 'work' (Testmann, 2021). I will return to Sara and this point about making school 'work' later, but first I will introduce another empirical theme, that was brought into focus by following the children's social conflicts.

Children's perspectives on popularity and hierarchies

Amelie and I are moving towards the big swing outside during a break. She asks me what I am researching, and I tell her that I am interested in how a school class can be in a way, where all the children can be a part of it and be themselves. She tells me that that is not what is going on in this class. She says many of the children are being pushed out. She tells me that you can be 'up on the mountain or down in the lake. There are also children climbing up the mountain and pushing others down'. I ask, why it is good to be up on the mountain. She explains that you are central in the group, you are a part of activities and games and you have a lot to choose from. She tells me that she has been on the mountain once – a day where she was on the big swing and everyone from the class ran towards her and wanted to get on.

As I followed social conflicts among the children a lot of them seemed to revolve around the theme of popularity. The children talked about who was 'popular' and who wasn't, and this interested me as it seemed to influence on e.g. activities in the classroom where some children were a very desired working partner, and some were not. Or in breaks where some children were sought after and others seemed to stand alone. Amelie's analogy with the mountain and the lake gives the impression of a hierarchy where everybody strives for the top and push others down in the process – a form of powerplay. In order to accept this way of understanding what was going on in the children's social conflicts I would also have to consider it as a fact that some children had a more or less explicit strategy to push others away in order to gain power themselves. And that didn't seem to resonate with my other findings, where all the children could tell me about what they were trying to accomplish socially, but none of this was to gain power or hold others down. Instead they talked about choosing – as Amelie did – and about trying to broaden their modes of participation and their personal action potency.

It seems to be a common understanding of children's social worlds that they are somewhat influenced by power struggles between the children and that hierarchies are a normal social dynamic – but looking in on the social practices in school from the vantage point of the children it made it possible for me to understand personal participation in e.g. conflicts about participation, friendships and action potency. This paved the way for understanding what looked like power struggles, when you looked at it isolated, in connection to social practices in school and therefore also gave the possibility to link social conflict in school to school itself as a site of practice. In my thesis I analysed school practices in a historical perspective and connected these analyses to the conflicts among the children. Returning to the example with Sara, historical analysis gave the possibility to explore what conflictual aspects of school practices was at stake in children's conflicts and what they were working with and doing in order to attend school. Sara and the other children in the class are working with making different social and academic demands hang together in their everyday life¹. In regard to the theme about popularity, I tried to make an historical analysis that could illuminate structural conditions in school practices in regard to in- and exclusions of children in school.

Historical perspectives

In a historical perspective a part of the purpose of school has been to educate and develop children in ways that made both personal well-being and societal continuation and development possible. Linked to this purpose has always been discussions about who should be a part of the public school. Earlier gender has been a way of sorting as only boys had access to the school system (Wiborg, 2005) and as the public school system grew more comprehensive and academic standards were raised a selection of pupils in regard to academic capabilities became more common (Coninck-Smith et al., 2014). These ways of selecting must always be understood linked to what was understood as the purpose of school in general. In his thesis from 2012 Bjørn Hamre states that children who are understood as someone who does not belong in the public school system is often someone who has weak social capabilities and has troubles being a part of the social school life (Hamre, 2012). This point reflects on the present understanding of school as a place of democracy, participation and social well-being as a prerequisite for learning and developing as a child. The historical ways of organising school practices in relations to purposes for the institution of public school, influences the way we understand children as relevant pupils – both in terms of access and in terms of staying in school.

In 2017 there was a legislative add to the Danish School Act that describes the principal foundation for how the public school in Denmark should be organized, that directly addressed well-being as a part of school's purpose. It said:

It is school management's responsibility to ensure that teaching personnel plan and organize classes and teaching in such a way that all students are developing academically and personally and are thriving in both social and academic communities in school. (My translation)

This underlines the double purpose of school as a practice oriented towards both on academic and social aspects of education. Laura Gilliam discusses in an article from 2016 (Gilliam, 2016) how there has been a change in how school perceive the notion of well-being in organizations and structures toward a more learning-oriented way:

...the work with children's social behaviour has not been toned down as so far, but is now more understood and related to the purpose of enhancing academic growth and therefore gets more legitimacy and seems more important (Gilliam, 2016, p. 78 (my translation))

¹ For indept analysis on this point see (Testmann, 2021)

Where the notion of wellbeing earlier on was considered regarding general formation or 'bildung' it is now more considered a prerequisite for learning.

My assertion here is that demands and expectations towards children in school is developed within school practice, and children needs to handle and work with specific aspects of school life in order to be in school at all. In Sara's case it seems that the changes in her social situation effects the whole of her school participation as she loses some sense of foundation for her work². She has nothing to work with, so to speak. This offers an analytical possibility to link the social conflicts on popularity in Amelie's example to a much broader perspective on how children are understood as desirable and relevant as part of school and that the historical and present discussions on this matter possibly is interconnected with children's actions and understanding in everyday life conflicts. Returning to my initial point on how children do work at school in order to make their participation coherent and meaningful – the struggles in relation to being "popular" – could be perceived as a work to broaden personal action potency (Dreier, 2008). As Amelie explains, popularity means possibilities in order to choose and be chosen socially and in that sense also a possibility to work with and manage one's participation across different places in school. Looking through that analytical lens focus and conflicts on popularity in school could be understood – not as a way of climbing the hierarchical mountain – but as a way conducting school life in ways that seems relevant from the vantage points of the children in both personal and shared ways. As a consequence of this thinking one could argue that the social need for children to have friends, be a part of groups and be 'popular' in school is not (only) an existential need but a practical need – a need you need to fulfil in order to participate in school and in order to be perceived as relevant. If we connect social conflicts among children - and especially the conflicts that seems to result in marginalization and exclusion – to school's social practices in situated ways, we can go beyond looking at children's problems as linked to individual traits or relational issues. This opens a pedagogical potency for change as we can begin discussion changing practices instead of changing people.

Where does this leave me?

Dear readers.

This is a work in progress, where I try to lay down an argument based in my research as a starting point for an article. I am still not entirely sure where it will end, and I am looking forward to discussing it with you.

See you in Trondheim!

² Other researchers have likewise pointed towards the importance of children's communities or friendships as a necessity to participate in school in relevant ways, see (Poulsen, 2017; Stanek, 2011)

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