# Dialectic and conflicts – researching school as conflictual social practice

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Conflictual Practices in the Everyday Life of Children and Young adults on the margins

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## Introduction

The school as an institution for the education of future citizens is a central site for debate about how to develop a democratic society – and hence also for social conflict. Many parties participates in making school what it is. On one hand the school connects these different parties in a shared engagement to make good education for all children on the other hand the different parties are distributed into different tasks and concerns in relation to the school.

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

Conflicts in and about public education seem as an illustrative case for exploring how historical and political discussions form part of personal and intersubjective ways of making things work in social institutions.

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

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

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

In this way you could say that the disagreeing parties are not “randomly disagreeing”. Their different perspectives can be analytically linked to their different positions and their different types of responsibilities and contributions are differentiated in a complex practice structure.

In this way, the parties are related through the same ambitions, but still experience the requirements of this ambition differently. The disagreements of the participants express their shared engagement and provide an opportunity to expand our understanding of the social practice of the school.

Still, in this respect we need conceptualizations not just for the distribution of tasks and perspectives but also for the content of the conflicts – what are they conflicts about? We need to conceptualize dialectical connections between *the common matters*, the many-sided aspects of school life and the inner contradictions related to this.

## Conflict in a practice perspective

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

In social practice the participants must deal with contradictions and coordinate with each other to makes things work.

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

## Inherent contradictions of the children’s school life

Teaching and learning takes place in a social life with plenty of social dynamics at stake. It is a central condition that the children continuously must relate to the agenda of the teaching, to their personal learning processes and to the social life they share with each other in the classroom and other places.

In the everyday life of the school we see the involved relating to the many aspects of school life and in their cooperation they often discuss the contradiction between flexibility and focus. The one cannot work without the other.

Focus and flexibility appear as contradictory aspects - incompatible, as well as needed – and the participants must make these aspects go together.

This is not a question of individual competencies but of how the common activities are organized.

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

In political discussions as well as in conflicts between parents these aspects are often separated/ torn apart in conflicts about what will be best to the children.

To make thing work the children must ‘wriggle‘ and twist their attention and maneuver in relation to lots of things going on at the same time, finding their ways of keeping a plurality of foci in a flexible way. This involves collaboration but often they have different conditions in relation to solve a task and to deal with the contradictions.

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

We will try to analyze the interplay of the children as subjective ways of handling the contradictions of the school as an important context of their everyday life together with peers.

With a small example we want to demonstrate how a seemingly trivial conflict between some children in first grade illuminates this contradictory relation and how parents in their joint responsibility of supporting the school life of their children sometimes find themselves in quite dramatic conflicts.

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

Naja wants to return the milk bin at once and her friend Anna wants to help. Carl is involved in negotiations with some other boys making plans for what they are going to do together. He does not want to leave just now and seems to feel under pressure from the two girls. Anna is insisting and shouting and Carl becomes frustrated and angry and ends up threatening to hit the girls.

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

## Conflicts, analyses and development

In relation to the conflict about the milk bin you could see it as different ways to handle the contradiction between focus and flexibility in relation to the situation – and to make social life and responsibility hang together.

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

The two mothers seem engaged in the same matter: The personal wellbeing and integrity as well as learning possibilities of the children - but they have access to quite different experiences with dilemmas in relation to participate in school life…

The parents are connected through the children’s common life and in interviews they express different perspectives on the question of rules and regulation vs individual considerations and flexibility.

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

In the daily life of the school these aspects are linked but in ideologies they may be ‘torn apart’ as a question of choosing one side of the contradictions.

Such conflicts are of personal meanings to the participants – connected to their efforts of conducting their personal lives. ‘

And the conflicts are historical – connected to political discussions about general contradictions in relation to organize education to the children of society.

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

To be able to develop the practice of the school we need access to knowledge about how the matter looks like from different ways of handling it – and we need knowledge about the distribution of responsibility, tasks and influence in the historical structures build to deal with the matter.

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