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Published in:
Theory & Psychology

DOI:
[10.1177/0959354319884129](https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354319884129)

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Højholt, C., & Kousholt, D. (2020). Contradictions and conflicts: Researching school as conflictual social practice. *Theory & Psychology*, 30(1), 36-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354319884129>

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Contradictions and conflicts – researching school as conflictual social practice

Charlotte Højholt & Dorte Kousholt

Introduction

A key challenge for psychology is how to conceptualize the life problems faced by individuals in such a way as to take into account both the subjective and situated dimensions and the societal and historical character of human life. This challenge is clearly apparent in the conflicts surrounding problems in children's school lives. It is, for instance, widely discussed – politically, in research and in everyday school contexts - whether such problems should be understood in terms of an individual diagnosis, the child's family life, the competence of the teachers, the social dynamics in the classroom, or organizational or societal issues. Psychological concepts are often both embedded in and permeate understandings of problems at school, contributing to individualization, abstraction, categorization and displacement (Burman, 2017; Danziger, 1997, 1990). We suggest in this article that a theoretical development of the concept of *conflict* may support the widespread endeavors to transcend such reductionism by developing contextual and dialectical understandings of problems in children's school lives.

Through a focus on conflicts, we discuss theoretical challenges in conceptualizing the dialectic relationship between historical conditions and situated interplay in concrete everyday practice. We argue that the concept of conflict can help us move beyond the tendency within psychology to regard history and situated practice, structure and activity, and so-called micro and macro processes in isolation. In addition, focusing on social conflicts challenges understandings of social life as unambiguous or as governed through hegemony. This implies the development of

understandings regarding how political conflicts concerning societal institutions form part of inter-subjective and personal conflicts in everyday life.

First, we present key arguments for our focus on conflicts in relation to children's school lives. We then discuss different conceptualizations of conflicts in order to develop our theoretical argument. Finally, we examine examples from empirical work we have conducted as part of a recent study "Children's Inclusion as Conflictual Collaboration between Families, Teachers, School Leaders and Legislation". This allows us to illustrate how the conflicts we analyze are simultaneously both personal – related to individuals' possibilities for conducting everyday life – and historical – related to political discussions of how to deal with contradictory aspects of public education.

Why focus on conflicts in children's school lives?

Comprehensive research has analyzed the individualized representations of school problems (Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Mehan, 1996; Røn Larsen, 2018). We have also found such individualization to be widespread in our own research and encounters with school practice; however, our analyses suggest that processes leading to individualization are ambiguous. Analyzing the course of events and the interplay of different parties reveals conflicts concerning how school problems should be understood, who is responsible for what, and what the school should prioritize, include and focus on. Such conflicts are rooted in contradictions intrinsic to the organization of public education and linked to political ideologies regarding how these contradictions should be dealt with. The school is a controversial historical institution, illustrating what Jean Lave conceptualizes as historical struggles over class and other life-saturating divisions in and through the production of everyday lives (Lave, 2019; see also Holland & Lave, 2001). In addition, the school is an everyday context in which many children and educational professionals cooperate and conduct their personal lives (Dreier, 2008; Højholt & Kousholt, 2018a; Schraube & Højholt, 2016).

The involved parties (children, teachers, school leaders, psychologists, and parents) have different perspectives on school problems and on what is important in everyday school life, but in psychological investigations of the problems, such disagreements are seldom explicitly addressed – investigations often focus on students' individual behavior, and on categorizations of individual difficulties. In this way, social problems - and disagreements about them - become displaced to individualized categories.

In our previous research, we have discussed how such categorizations of individual children imply different ways of understanding them and different social conditions for their participation (Højholt, 1999, 2006; Højholt & Kousholt, 2018a; D. Kousholt, 2011, 2016). We have discussed such processes as “situated inequality” (Højholt, 2016) and as part of social exclusion. In this article, we want to focus on the conflicts that simultaneously seem to dominate these kind of processes in schools and to be absent from the psychological terminology about school problems. Illustrating how these conflicts relate to societal conflicts about the school may pave the way for conceptualizing such problems in ways that take into account the school's historical contradictions and analyze activities and participation in school as intersubjective ways of dealing with these contradictions.

In this way, subjectivity and personal perspectives are understood as anchored in common historical practice (Axel, 2011, 2002; Bernstein, 1971; Chaiklin, Hedegaard, & Jensen, 1999; Holland & Lave, 2001; Jensen, 1987, 1999; Lave, 2008, 2011, 2019; Chaiklin & Lave, 1993). This is a situated approach to structural and political issues with a point of reference in the shared societal life, where people deal with common matters from different locations and positions (Dreier, 2008; Holzkamp, 2013; Højholt & Kousholt, 2018a; Schraube & Højholt, 2016). Nevertheless, these common matters are multifaceted and contradictory (Ollman, 2015, 2003). Thus, we want to open theoretical possibilities for analyzing the broader context of school problems and how contradictory aspects of social practice are simultaneously incompatible and dependent on one another (Ollman, 2015, 2003; Axel, 2011, submitted). The focus on conflicts represents a way of approaching the

interrelatedness of psychological phenomena in social life as opposed to dualistic compartmentalization of psychological functions.

Conflicts in and about public education seem to provide an illustrative case for exploring how historical and political discussions form part of personal and intersubjective ways of making things work in social institutions. The conflicts among the involved adults appear essential in shaping the children's opportunities to participate meaningfully in educational settings (Højholt, 2006). Since 1990, we have followed difficulties related to children's everyday lives and the collaboration between the involved adults; and 'behind' every case, course of events or example, we have encountered conflicts between, with and about children (Højholt, 1999, 2006; Højholt & Kousholt, 2018a; D. Kousholt, 2011, 2016).

Against this backdrop, we have conducted a multi-perspective research project with the aim of exploring children's possibilities for participation in school through a focus on conflicts. Different subprojects have explored children's communities and parental collaboration, teacher professionalism, municipal management and organization of support, and school leadership. Through an exploration of interconnected processes seen from children's, parents', teachers', pedagogues', school leaders', psychologists' and officials' perspectives, we address how situated conflicts in everyday practices can be analyzed in light of historical and political struggles concerning the school as an institution (Højholt & Kousholt, 2018b).

To contribute to the discussions of school as a conflictual practice, we will present different ways of conceptualizing conflicts and discuss the theoretical challenges that emerge when analyzing such differences. By critically examining the shortcomings of typical ways of conceptualizing conflict, we will develop a subject- and practice-oriented approach to conflictual cooperation (Axel, 2011).

Different approaches to the concept of conflict

The concept of conflict is central in understandings of the fundamental nature of communities or societies. Conflicts can be seen as a threat to social order (as in Talcott Parsons' structural functionalist approach (1951) – also categorized as a so-called consensus theory) or as an intrinsic part of development (as in Marxist dialectical materialist approaches – categorized as a social conflict theory, Marx & Engels, 1998; Marx & Sitton, 2010). These approaches in turn constitute different foci: Social stability and shared norms vs. class struggle and change. There are likewise psychological theories that view conflicts as threatening and/or necessary part of development. Whereas Kohut (self-psychology) suggests that internal conflicts should be regarded as a sign of disturbance, in the psychoanalytic tradition conflicts are inherent in psychic development and growth, as seen, for instance, in the work of Kernberg or Mahler (this comparison is discussed in Akthar, 2014). In developmental psychology, conflicts are often linked to crises and can result in both regression and development (according to Erikson (1965), for example, conflicts are developmental turning points and how successfully they are dealt with influences the child's transition to the next developmental stage). In this way, the concept of conflict seems to be related to key theoretical problems in psychology illustrating the challenges of conceptualizing the inner connections between subjects, their lives and development and their common societal history. Often conflicts are seen as evolving from a kind of confrontation between the subject's inner needs and demands on the subject from the surroundings, but the conflicts seem to become either a driving force for individual development or a threat to psychic stability. Conflicts become "conflicts in our mind" (the title of an article by Smit (2011)) – and appear in different conceptualizations related to the internalization of cultural ideas or societal demands that nevertheless result in 'inner conflicts'. This recurring figure in psychology seems to form a kind of theoretical background for abstract understandings, decontextualization and the displacement of problems. With a point of reference in persons conducting their life through participation in structures of social practice (Dreier, 2009), we suggest replacing the understanding of 'conflicts in our mind' with analyses of conflicts *in our life*

and in this way relating historical and political conflicts to personal conflicts in people's everyday lives. However, before we return to this, we will now explore theoretical dilemmas tied to the concept of conflict.

Searching for research literature about 'conflicts' reveals a vast and heterogeneous field which spans from research regarding international (inter-state) conflicts to social conflicts between children in the schoolyard. Research about conflicts often seems to be closely related to developing *models for conflict resolution* (peacemaking, mediation models or techniques to reconcile the conflicting parties). Within a school context, conflict resolution or mediation models, such as student mediation and non-violent communication, have gained considerable ground. The focus on conflict resolution models often diminishes the focus on the basic understanding of how to conceptualize conflict.

Through a short presentation of a number of debates surrounding different approaches to mediation, we discuss the understanding of conflicts that underpins these approaches as a way to address how different conceptualization of conflicts have roots in different theories of human nature (Picard & Melchin, 2007). By examining the underlying assumptions of what constitutes a conflict and the appropriate aims for mediation in different mediation approaches, we will raise key issues related to the understanding of conflicts, and thereby clarify our approach to conflict when analyzing school practice as a many-sided matter.

There exist a wide range of methods and models for addressing conflicts. We base our discussion on the classification of approaches to mediation described by researchers at the "Center for Conflict Education and Research" (Carleton University, Canada). Researchers at this center have developed a novel approach to conflict: the "insight approach". They discuss the insight approach in relation to "narrative" and "transformative" approaches since these approaches are positioned as alternatives to the more individualistic "interest-based" approaches that have long dominated mediation practice (Picard & Melchin, 2007).

Our approach to the concept of conflict shares certain critiques of individualistic understandings with the insight approach, and there are therefore some similarities; however, there are important differences, which we will discuss in this article. Sargent, Picard, and Jull (2011) place the insight approach within what they refer to as an interactionist framework (with reference to Mead, among others) and contrast this to the interest-based approach. According to Sargent et al., the interest-based approach builds on the “assumption that humans are fundamentally self-referential actors, whose needs and desires are generated internally, rather than relationally” (p. 347-8); an assumption that can be traced back to individualist thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes. In such approaches, individuals are seen as rational, goal-directed actors and the environment as imposing constraints on each individual’s possibilities for achieving their goals. This means that the conflicting parties are understood in isolation from one another and conflicts become a struggle arising out of incompatible goals or interests. Sargent et al. state that “the conflict takes the form of a struggle in which each party seeks to achieve his or her own goals at the expense of, or in spite of, other parties” (p. 348). Therefore, resolving conflicts becomes a matter of identifying “tradable interest” and making satisfying settlements (Sargent et al., 2011). Resolving conflicts by identifying ‘trade-offs’ or compromises can be seen as a parallel to Holzkamp’s concept of “instrumental relations” where other people become “instruments” for fulfilling one’s own needs and interests. This concept is presented against the backdrop of a similar critique of individualistic approaches – Holzkamp’s point being that such human relations are not basic human nature but ways of dealing with a contradictory situation under constrained conditions (Holzkamp, 1979).

Sargent et al. point out that such individualistic approaches overlook that human actions are not merely goal-directed but responses to social situations. Based on this critique, they argue for a more dynamic relational understanding of conflict, grounded in an understanding of humans as fundamentally social beings. To understand how conflicts arise, Sargent and colleagues argue, it is important to understand that “people make meaning out of their environment and seek to realize

what matters to them — their cares” (p.345). They argue that the concept of cares includes more than the pursuit of individual interests or needs. Cares involve our expectations regarding other people’s behavior, our basic values, and the relationships and forms of cooperation we would like to build. “Our cares, therefore, are not just our own concerns but also involve us in judgments about how other people ought to behave and how the world ought to be ordered” (p.345). According to the insight approach, conflicts thus arise from a person’s subjective experience of “threat-to-cares” - situations where we experience threats in relation to what matters to us, to our values. When we defend our cares, others can in turn experience this as a threat to what matters to them. Sargent et al. underline that the concept of cares can contribute to our understanding of the intensity often connected with conflicts – even when, from an outside party’s perspective, it can seem like a small issue. Our cares are relational and involve “social identities” (Sargent et al., 2011). Through this conceptualization of cares, the insight approach emphasizes that conflicts are simultaneously both social and personal and involve ‘what matters to us’.

Drawing on the previously stated point that the underlying concept of conflict has a significant impact on conflict resolution strategies and hence on how problems are addressed, we will briefly present the different aims of mediation. To clarify their insight approach to mediation, Picard and Melchin (2007) compare this approach to narrative and transformative mediation approaches. The interest-based models focus on the conflict between opposing interests, with a pragmatic focus on reaching a settlement. The narrative and transformative approaches, meanwhile, encourage exploration of the relationship issues involved. In brief, the narrative approach focuses on constructing an alternate story or narrative that supports mutual respect and cooperation, whereas the transformative approach to mediation attempts to empower the various parties and encourages recognition of other perspectives. Both the narrative and transformative models assume that the conflict under discussion is linked to problem-saturated histories developed during the relationship between the parties. Hence, in this terminology, focusing only on the problem will keep the disputing

parties locked in the conflict. For the mediator to support a resolution, he or she must shift the focus away from the problem (Picard & Melchin, 2007, p. 37).

In the insight approach, the aim of mediation is that the contending parties gain a deeper understanding of the relational issues underlying the conflict through insight into each other's differing interests and values. This, in turn, may change their experience of the conflict and shift the conflict situation from an impasse towards greater openness to the other party's concerns (Sargent et al., 2011).

As noted, the different approaches to conflict open for different ways of dealing with the problems that are assumed to be at stake in the conflict (the 'content' of the conflict). The proponents of the insight approach criticize the narrative and transformative approaches for presenting conflict resolution as 'a new story', whereby the dynamic relationship between the person and her world is lost (Sargent et al., 2011). Picard and Melchin write:

Narrative and transformative approaches get to them [deeper relationship issues] by steering disputants away from discussing the problem, while insight mediation does it by steering disputants toward and through the discussion of the problem.
(2007, p. 50)

They argue that gaining insight into the issues related to the problem can pave the way for new perspectives and attitudes and thereby improve the relationship between conflicting parties.

Following this line of argument, we suggest that when the problem is not addressed, the opportunity to learn from it and from the different perspectives on it is missed. Even so, the insight approach seems to stick to questions of interpersonal relationships, the answers to which are to be found by identifying the correct form of communication. Without ignoring the importance of constructive and open dialogue in relation to conflicts, such focus nevertheless fails to fully address the 'content' of a given conflict. To do so involves exploring the conditions of the conflict and how these can be developed. With the insight approach, we gain a more dynamic relational approach to conflicts than

in narrative and transformative approaches. However, what is still widely overlooked is that relationships are anchored in historical practices. Hence, cares and values are connected to ways of taking part in and dealing with societal concerns. To address this, we need to develop concepts that can connect conflicts to contradictory life conditions and collective problems in a common world.

Conflicts in a practice perspective

Our approach to conflicts is based upon a concept of social practice that understands humans as connected through common tasks and endeavors (Hedegaard, Chaiklin, & Jensen, 1999; Schatzki, 2017; Lave, 2008, 2011; Stetsenko, 2008, 2017; Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Lave, 2019). These tasks and endeavors are related to what we term *common matters*. Our approach is parallel to Axel's description of common causes:

*In their historical social praxis, people arrange themselves around common causes:
in our society we find common causes like schools, companies, families, construction
projects, political activities* (Axel & Højholt, in press, p. 7).

We prefer to use 'matter' since it connotes 'what matters to us' and in this way connects subjects and situations. However, the point is the same: Common matters are not uniform or homogeneous; they are multifaceted and contradictory, and people are differently positioned and engaged in them. What does this understanding imply when we turn to the concept of conflict? In this section, we will draw on the theoretical dilemmas concerning the conceptualization of conflict that were outlined in the discussion of the various mediation approaches to unfold our approach to conflicts.

Based on a concept of social practice, we understand people as acting collectively in various social contexts that are arranged historically around certain societal concerns. As in the interactionist insight approach, people are seen as acting based on what situations mean to them - but meanings are entangled in historical processes and actions get their meaning through how others relate to them. The concept of social practice used here entails that humans are connected in a social life and are

thereby condition for on one another. In this dialectical approach, conflicts are part of historical processes as an always immanent potentiality that arises from people engaging together in a collective practice (such as the school), where there are different positions, possibilities for action, perspectives and standpoints (Dreier, 2009, 1997). Societal practices are contradictory in that they hold contradicting societal concerns and are composed in contradictory ways. Hence, in social practice, the participants must deal with contradictions and coordinate with each other to make things work (Axel, 2011).

In this way, we base our approach on an understanding of historical structures as interconnected practices arranged as ways of dealing with various common societal problems and tasks; for instance, the education of children. This means that the different perspectives on the children and on the school (on what school life should be about) can be analyzed in light of how they are interconnected. The point is that these different practices interrelate – what happens in one context influences what is going on in the other – and that the school as social practice is complex and many-sided and is related to a multiplicity of different interests and aspects (compare Axel, submitted).

In such an approach, the *different* perspectives of the parties involved are linked to *common* matters, as well as being differentiated by the different tasks the parties have in relation to the children's school lives and their part in the conflicts (Axel, 2002, 2009). Thus, conflicts are conceptualized as inherent to social practice, and exploring these conflicts can contribute to knowledge about problems and to the development of practice (Busch-Jensen, 2015). From a Marxist perspective, the common matter is contradictory, containing incompatible elements that are dependent on one another (Ollman & Smith, 2008; Ollman, 2003). Below, we will try to exemplify this point through dilemmas among participants dealing with contradictions in everyday school life. The participants relate to the contradictory relations in different ways and have different conditions

for dealing with them. Furthermore, these contradictions are potentially conflictual. Axel formulates this double possibility as conflictual cooperation:

Conflictual cooperation is thus a phenomenon, where participants striving to do something together may end up in struggles and divisions about the common cause - may be torn apart (Axel, submitted, p. 15).

When conflicts are viewed as a question of incompatible principles (or ideologies), rather than as two sides of the same coin, it becomes easy to lose sight of the common matter and its complexity. When conflicts become deadlocked, those involved may experience themselves as isolated from and in opposition to each other, and threatened by each other's incompatible interests. Our analysis thus grounds interests in a social life in another way than the previously outlined insight approach. Conflicts are tied to a shared engagement in the problems that need to be dealt with. Taking such an approach shifts the focus of investigations from individual incompetence to the *conditions* for finding workable ways of coordinating or for experiencing entrenched opposition. The attention to engagements in a social world is something we share with the insight approach and we find their concept of 'cares' inspiring – however, in a practice perspective, engagement and personal preferences are anchored in historical social activities and concerns.

As such, the different perspectives of the parties involved in the education of children can be analyzed as connected through their involvement in common matters, and conflicts become a potentiality linked to engagement in common problems. Contradictions challenge coordination: every day, the participants in school life must coordinate with one another in order to make things work.

In praxis, making things go together which won't go together maintains the contradiction, but in a form which can be handled practically (Axel, submitted, p. 12).

Observations of the situated interplay in the everyday life of the school illustrate this point: Every participant works continuously with the challenges of making contradictory and incompatible elements ‘go together’ in their activities. There is therefore a need for concepts addressing not just the distribution of tasks and perspectives, but also the content of conflicts – what are the conflicts about? Before we turn to examples from our empirical work that enable us to discuss our theoretical concerns, we will provide some context by briefly outlining some central problematics in the school’s development as a key institution in the Danish welfare society. This will provide a backdrop for the subsequent discussion of situated conflicts – the aim being to link conflicts of everyday life to contemporary political conflicts.

Historical changes and political struggles concerning the school

As an institution for the education of future citizens, the school is a central site for debate about how to develop a democratic society – and hence also for social conflict. Many parties participate in making school what it is - not only children, teachers and school leaders who lead their everyday lives at the school, but also parents, psychologists and various school counselors and politicians are engaged in developing the school. On one hand, the school connects these different parties in a shared engagement to provide all children with good education; on the other hand, the different parties are divided through different tasks and concerns in relation to the school. The school thus comprises multiple, often conflicting, interests and practices and can be understood as a conflictual matter. In this section, we will outline a number of central aspects of the historical changes and political struggles associated with the development of the school system in Denmark.

Over the years, Denmark has had a number of quite different school systems – during the 19th century, a segregated school system was developed with different schools for children from different social backgrounds (for example, separate schools for the children of farmers and of the aristocracy). The ways of differentiating between and categorizing students, and the forms of schooling they are offered, have changed over time; today, one of the characteristic features of the Danish welfare state

is a *comprehensive* public school, where differentiation is something to be dealt with via teaching strategies in the classroom (Ljungstrøm, 1984; Coninck-Smith, 2002).

The comprehensive public school has been a central trademark for the Danish welfare state. Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been critique of and dissatisfaction with the public school system and an increasing number of parents choose private schools for their children (the last 10 years have seen an increase in the number of children attending some form of private school: in 2018, the figure is 18.2% of all school-aged children).

In 2001 Denmark placed lower than expected in the PISA test (Program for International Student Assessment) - often referred to as the PISA shock - which triggered both criticism and intense debate about the quality of the Danish school (for an analysis of the affective charges, see Staunæs and Pors (2015)). The PISA results were used politically to argue for radical changes in order to raise academic standards, with more focus on individual competencies, discipline and national standardized tests (K. Kousholt, 2016). In the debate, others have responded to such arguments by emphasizing that the public school's objective is to educate democratic and self-determining subjects rather than 'soldiers in the global competition' (Holm, 2010; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2016).

Parallel to such discussions, the tendency to refer an increasing number of children to segregated special education was problematized, which led to the passing of the so-called "inclusion law" in 2012. The aim was to ensure that the vast majority of children (the stated aim was 96%) should receive their education within regular classrooms. In 2013 the parliament decided on a school reform, preceded by a great deal of political struggle and involving multifaceted changes (including extending the school day, a focus on improving academic attainment and more physical activity). The same year, a political regulation of the working hours for teachers was implemented – in spite of widespread resistance from teachers and their professional organizations. This regulation increased the requirement for teachers to be physically present at the school as well as increasing the

responsibility and influence of school leaders. Furthermore, a growing number of professional groups have become integral to the school's everyday practice (including pedagogues, consultants and inclusion teachers). Such changes illustrate political struggles and the engagements of a number of parties in the development of the school, and point to cooperation and coordination as central issues in everyday school life.

Teachers navigate in this complex landscape of conflicts in relation to how the school must prioritize, how problems are to be understood and how to promote learning in relation to a diverse group of children (Barth, 1991; Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2011; Mardahl-Hansen, 2018). In public debates, teachers' professionalism is a heated issue, as is the distribution of responsibility between teachers and parents, with the latter assigned increased responsibility for the school life of their children (as made explicit in the "Act on increased parental responsibility", 2006).

School leaders operate in conflicts and power struggles in municipal politics and their local school community. They have been given new managerial tasks in relation to inclusion in the everyday practice of the school as well as new tasks in relation to performance evaluation concerning, for example, the branding of the school. They facilitate the coordination of diverse interests - municipal agendas and budgets, teachers' working conditions, parents' demands - and are expected to safeguard the academic performance of the school in general as well as the well-being of the children (Busch-Jensen, 2018, in prep).

These changes draw attention to central contradictions and dilemmas in the school as a complex societal practice – issues of inclusion, differentiation, standardization, regulation, as well as solidarity, well-being, flexibility and collaboration, are enmeshed in the history of the school. As such, these changes highlight the school as a conflictual matter – as a common concern that comprises multiple and often contradictory aspects.

The many involved parties are, on the one hand, all engaged in developing the school (and can be held accountable for its problems), and on the other hand, they have different tasks, different

access to knowledge about what goes on at school and different kinds of responsibility connected to different aspects of the school. The described historical changes have illustrated struggles, disputes and disagreements; however, it should be emphasized that such disagreements are not arbitrary. The disagreements between different participants in school life express their shared engagement and provide an opportunity to expand our understanding of the practice in question. Their different perspectives can be analytically linked to their different positions while their various responsibilities and contributions are differentiated in a complex practice structure (Dreier, 2008; Højholt, 2011). Their perspectives on the problems are formed by the tasks they have in relation to the children and the part they take in the conflicts.

In this section, we have tried to illustrate the many interconnected issues surrounding the development of public education. The involved parties are not only distributed in terms of different responsibilities and tasks; they are also knitted together in relation to a shared but conflictual matter. To manage one's own specific tasks necessitates relating to the contradictions.

Inherent contradictions in the school lives of children

Especially in the case of children, we encounter a strong tendency to individualize conflicts – to view them as caused by individual children's psychological problems or lack of social skills. On the other hand, we also encounter conceptualizations of conflicts as relational and as linked to poor communication, a question of positioning, 'bad chemistry' between specific children or some kind of childish mudslinging. In continuation of our theoretical discussions above, we analyze the children's interplay as subjective ways of dealing with the contradictions of the school as an important context of their everyday lives with their peers.

It is a central condition of school life that children continuously and simultaneously must relate to the agenda of the teaching, their personal learning processes and their shared social life both inside and outside the classroom. Teaching and learning do not take place in isolation from

children's social lives, but are embedded in an everyday life with numerous social dynamics. To make things work, children must 'wriggle' and twist their attention, maneuvering in relation to lots of things going on at the same time and finding ways of maintaining a plurality of foci in a flexible way - sometimes more intensely and vigorously than at other times. Focus and flexibility are not only to be reconciled, they can also be varied, even quite deliberately; to take an obvious example, when transitioning between periods of solving a task in a lesson and recess. This involves collaboration with peers, but children often have different approaches to solving a given task and dealing with the contradictions.

Children are often told to work together to complete tasks where they are supposed to make sure that their peers have their say while also solving the task in what the teacher considers a correct way. In our observations, we have noted a number of situations where the children come into conflict with one another regarding the procedure for solving the tasks they have been given: one student prioritizes finding the correct answer and solving the tasks quickly while another prioritizes the rule about taking turns and ensuring everyone is involved. This can be seen in view of the intense political conflicts about how to prioritize discipline and academic excellence while still being able to cooperate and include each other referred to earlier.

Observing students being given academic tasks in the classroom illustrates how they approach the same task in different ways – seen from the children's perspectives, it is not the same challenge they confront. Some children have an open-minded and easygoing attitude, taking a flexible approach where they also pay attention to other forms of social interplay and regulate their focus on the task at hand so as to maintain timing and rhythm with their classmates. Others are so meticulous and thorough that it is difficult to solve the task in the time allotted – their approach may be considered too focused and inflexible. Others seems to concentrate too little on the task, rushing to complete it so they can turn their attention to other matters.

When acting in the social practice of the school, focus and flexibility appear to be contradictory aspects – both incompatible and necessary – that participants must reconcile. This is not a question of individual competencies, but of how common activities are organized, the possibilities for participation and the forms of collaboration. Therefore, political discussions in and about the school often concern how different parties ought to relate to, for instance, rules, discipline and disturbances, and how the children's various perspectives should be taken into account. Regulating social life is a historical and controversial issue when it comes to creating learning environments for the different children in a society.

In interviews, the children talk about the twin considerations of, on the one hand, the need for a quiet atmosphere in the class to be able to concentrate and, on the other hand, being able to discuss tasks with their peers and collaborate. They need the teacher to maintain order, but if the teacher yells at them and is too bossy, the classroom is not a nice place to be. Some children seem to be able to concentrate while engaging in multiple activities, while others experience the same situation as tumultuous and disruptive. The children hereby illustrate the challenges of integrating very different aspects of school life in terms of order, quiet, flexibility, fun, friendships, and collaboration in the classroom.

Using an example, we want to demonstrate how a seemingly trivial conflict between some children in a first grade class highlights these contradictory issues and how parents, through their joint responsibility for supporting their children's school lives, sometimes find themselves in conflict with one another. We suggest that this conflict be understood in light of the aforementioned general contradiction between focus and flexibility and the historical conflicts regarding how to deal with this contradiction.

To be able to teach, teachers have to take certain practical measures to maintain order in the classroom (Mardahl-Hansen, 2018). The students in this class are also supposed to take part in creating a pleasant learning environment. They therefore take turns in keeping order in the classroom

for a week at a time. This involves, among other things, returning the empty milk crate to the school kitchen after lunch. Two children are expected to cooperate on this task: in our example, the students Carl and Naja. Naja wants to return the milk crate straight away and her friend Anna wants to help. Carl, meanwhile, is involved in a discussion with some other boys, who are planning what to do later. He does not want to leave just now and seems to feel under pressure from the two girls. Anna keeps insisting and shouting, which leads to Carl becoming frustrated and angry before threatening to hit the girls. This frightens and upsets Naja and the school phones her mother and asks her to pick up Naja, who cries when she gets home. Naja's mother promises to talk to Carl and his mother the next day, but when she is unable to find Carl's mother, she decides to talk to Carl on his own about collaborating on tasks at school. Carl's mother is uncomfortable with another parent telling her son how to behave – from her perspective, a teacher should have been involved. Despite their intentions of collaborating and a number of attempts to resolve their differences, the two mothers end up embroiled in complicated conflicts.

How to analyze everyday life conflicts

In relation to the conflict about the milk crate, the different approaches to the task can be analyzed in terms of reconciling social obligations to friends with school tasks – a challenge of everyday school life that children and young people tackle in different ways and under different conditions (Højholt & Kousholt, 2018b). Anna and Naja are focused on completing the task Naja has been given right away, with Anna's clear show of support making it easy for Naja to focus on her classroom responsibilities while spending time with her friend. For Carl, the conditions are different: were he to shift focus to the task of returning the milk crate, he would remove himself from the negotiations planning social activities and risk not being included in such plans. He therefore feels he needs to take care of social obligations to friends first.

How to regulate between focus on the task and flexibility in relation to the children's cooperation and social interplay is a conflictual matter, and teachers, politicians and parents have different perspectives on this issue. As stated earlier, in political debates it is often formulated as a choice between discipline and attention to social dynamics in the classroom. As such, what are interrelated concerns, two sides of the same coin in pursuit of a common matter, become 'torn apart' in entrenched, dualistic opposition, which often entails certain ways of participating in school life and certain perspectives being marginalized or excluded. Reconciling the contradictory concerns that participation in school life entails represents a challenge for all children, but in some situations it becomes too difficult and creates conflicts in their personal conduct of everyday life (Højholt, 2016).

In this article, we have concentrated on discussing theoretical concepts and illustrating how everyday conflicts may be analyzed as intersubjective ways of dealing with general contradictions and historical conditions in relation to arranging school life. In previous research, we have focused on processes of individual categorization and exclusion, which we see as related to the ways social conflicts develop – the point being that social conflicts constitute conditions for processes categorizing specific children (Højholt, 1999, 2006, 2011; Højholt & Kousholt, 2018b; D. Kousholt, 2011, 2016). Ways of dealing with the inherent contradictions of the school that displace problems may therefore have consequences for how the involved participants understand one another. In such processes, some children's actions may appear groundless or without reason, and thereby mysterious, to the adults, which can lead them to experience the child as problematic. Likewise, the involved adults may find it impossible to comprehend each other's perspectives. In the story about the milk crate, for example, one of the mothers sums up her experience of the conflict as follows: "We are too different; I cannot talk to that mother anymore." It seems the mothers give up on understanding each other.

The two mothers seem to be engaged in the pursuit of the same thing – their child's personal wellbeing, integrity and learning opportunities - but their children present quite different

experiences of the dilemmas they face when participating in school life. Parents are connected through their children's common life at school and they are involved in and share responsibility for the social environment (for example, by playing an active role in solving problems that arise at school). In interviews, the parents express different perspectives on the children's social life and on how teachers should regulate the collaboration between both children and parents - regulation and discipline being a heated issue in today's political school discussions. Naja's mother explains that she appreciates that the new teacher has the class under control - that this gives a sense of security (referring to her daughter's previous anxiety regarding school). Carl's mother calls for the teachers to get more involved in regulating the children's social life (for example, by regulating the groups in which the children play) and has some concerns about Carl's situation at school that she would like them to take into consideration. As mentioned, the distribution of responsibility between school and family is another heated issue. In each their way, parents are concerned with how to balance rules and regulations on the one hand, and flexibility and attention to subjective considerations on the other. According to another mother, the flexibility with regard to rules has been a problem for her child and has led to disagreements between parents. Other parents explain that school life becomes too tough for their children if it is not possible to show consideration for the individual's needs. Such conflicts are likewise present in political debates about inclusion and how the school should prioritize in this regard – the law on inclusion has turned out to be more controversial than expected and is currently being renegotiated.

Such different perspectives could be seen as merely a question of different values - each person having their individual opinions - but we have tried to illustrate how perspectives are grounded in a social practice, in different experiences with children's personal dilemmas and in engagement in a common but many-sided matter. In their conduct of everyday life, the parents have to deal with contradictions between, for instance, consideration for their own child's interests and cooperation and solidarity with other parents and their children, who may have other interests with

regard to school life. Such dilemmas are not only a matter of values or principles, but related to how we understand ourselves as parents – to social self-understanding and to the conditions of everyday life (Holzkamp, 2013; Dreier, 2009). Conflicts may be experienced as threats to our personal conduct of everyday life since they may require new ways of understanding parenting and new understandings of how children's wellbeing and learning possibilities are connected to the communities they build in school. Different experiences of and perspectives on dilemmas and contradictions of everyday life may challenge our active struggle to make life coherent, as well as challenge the conditions for taking on the tasks and responsibilities we find significant. This highlights why many conflicts concern quite practical matters – developing conduct of everyday life is quite a practical matter and is connected to personal concerns and the possibilities for influencing the conditions relevant to such concernsⁱ. Nevertheless, developing new understandings of the distribution of responsibility between, for instance, parents, children and education professionals is part of developing school practice. The contradictions challenge those involved to rethink the understandings they act upon, and this opens possibilities for development.

Historical contradictions in the conduct of everyday life

In this article, we have tried to illustrate that conflicts (even those that are seemingly banal) can be linked to central issues in school life - issues that cannot be reduced to questions of relations, communication or narratives (even though the way we communicate of course has consequences for how we are able to deal with conflicts). Concerning the specific discussions about 'focus or flexibility', these aspects appear both incompatible with and dependent on one another. In everyday school life, they are linked but also imply a potentiality for conflict. In conflicts, such interconnected aspects may be 'torn apart' into dualistic oppositions. This seems to generate discussions about choosing one or the other - focus or flexibility.

Conflicts have personal (sometimes even existential) meaning for the participants, connected to their efforts to conduct their personal lives – *and* conflicts are historical, connected to political discussions about general contradictions regarding, for instance, the organization of education for the children in a society. As we have sought to illustrate, the history of the school is characterized by conflicts about different ways of arranging in relation to contradictory concerns, for instance, equal access to education for different children, improving academic attainment and competences in response to global competition, differentiation, inclusion, assessments, democratic citizenship and so forth. Developing schools that remain relevant for different participants in changing societies is no simple matter.

This calls for the development of theoretical concepts enabling us to anchor conflicts and personal dilemmas in the social practice they are part of, and to learn about the complexity, contradictions and multiplicity of common matters through the different perspectives and experiences. Analyzing the historical contradictions in the situated conflicts of everyday practice offers an opportunity for conceptualizing the dialectic relationship between historical conditions and situated interplay.

There are parallels here to the insight approach, as discussed previously, but also a crucial difference. While the insight approach emphasizes that working with conflicts requires curiosity and inquisitiveness regarding differences and values, the common matters, as well as the structures and contradictions of social life, do not appear to be taken into account. Therefore, there seems to be a lack of opportunity for analyzing conflicts as part of the development of practice. We contend that it is vital to learn about the substance of conflicts, as well as the social structures, *through the different perspectives* of those involved. Conflicts can offer an opportunity for insight into the many aspects of the matter at hand and the ways different aspects are simultaneously both contradictory and interdependent.

In addition, we need knowledge about the *conditions* for taking part in the social practice of the school. Perspectives and understandings are anchored in a concrete everyday life and contradictions are often experienced and dealt with in quite practical ways. Contradictions are related to acting together in the school and simultaneously creating conditions for supporting different children's learning processes, for shared and varied foci, for engagement, and for incorporating a multiplicity of perspectives. To be able to develop school practice, we need access to knowledge about how problems are perceived from different perspectives – and knowledge about the distribution of responsibility, tasks and influence in the historical structures built to deal with common questions regarding the development of education. This highlights issues of democracy in relation to societal institutions: Who is given the opportunity to have their say, to contribute with their particular perspectives and influence the development of the conditions of school life? How can we learn from differences and use them in the development of social practice? Answering these questions requires an investigation of the entanglements of deadlocked conflicts, experiences of powerlessness and resignation with processes of social exclusion. How can we as psychologists *explore* the conditions that can engender collaboration, influence and agency as opposed to unresolved conflicts, problem displacement and marginalization?

In the introduction, we problematized the role of psychology in processes of individualization, categorization and exclusion. However, theoretical psychology may also develop conceptualizations that can be used to draw connections, point to social conditions and analyze contradictions in social practice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the research group Subjectivity, Technology and Social Practice at Roskilde University and especially our research colleagues in the research project Children's Inclusion as Conflictual Collaboration between Families, Teachers, School Leaders and Legislation.

Funding

The article draws on research awarded by the Danish Council for Independent Research 2014-2018:

<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/](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/)

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest

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ⁱ In research about parental collaboration, the conflicts between schools and parents are often conceptualized as a question of institutional power and resistance. Our outset in a historical structure of interconnected practices directs focus towards distributed subjects who are connected through a common (contradictory) matter - instead of individuals resisting regulations. As stated in the introduction, the concept of conflict can help us move beyond the tendency to regard everyday practice and institutional power as separate 'levels'. Focusing on social conflicts challenges understandings of social life as governed through hegemonic power - and political questions may be

seen as part of the social life related to different aspects of multifaceted concerns. In such an approach, the question of power and influence in school is at stake as related to how conflicts about priority and distribution of resources are handled – for example through democratic exploration or in a one-sided manner (Højholt, 2016; Højholt & Kousholt, in press)