

## **Excluded from School**

Between Discipline & Marginalization

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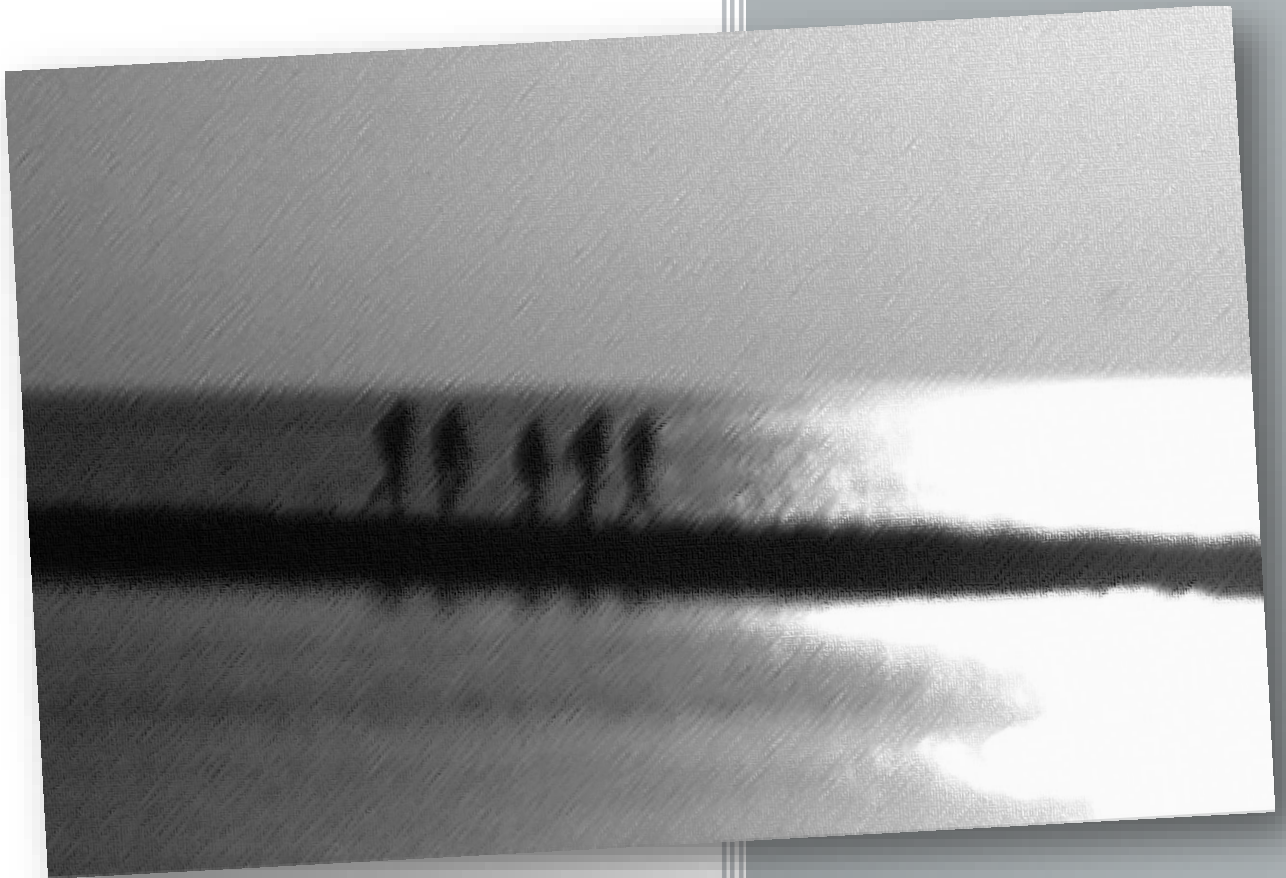
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# Excluded from School

*Between Discipline & Marginalization*



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## INTRODUCTION

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According to Danish law, the purpose of the public school is to prepare children for participation, responsibility, rights and duties in a free and democratic society. Education for every child has to be secured by the respective municipality; at the same time, however, schools are in severe cases entitled to suspend or expel a pupil<sup>1</sup>. The two types of exclusions; permanent expulsion or time-limited suspension, are here subsumed under the label *disciplinary exclusions*. The proposed study aims to gain knowledge on the current practice of these types of disciplinary sanctions in Danish schools.

From a school perspective, disciplinary exclusions can be seen as a means to keep standards for good behavior and ensure a safe learning environment<sup>2</sup>. However, disciplinary exclusions have been shown not only to fail to reduce unwanted behavior<sup>2,3</sup>, but also to come at significant societal costs<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, research has indicated a number of negative long term consequences for the excluded pupil, including higher rates of unemployment and increased susceptibility to engage in criminal behavior<sup>3-8</sup>. Most importantly for the proposed study though, social minorities have been shown to have an increased risk for being subject to disciplinary exclusions. This suggests that disciplinary exclusions contribute to social inequalities through discriminating certain groups of pupils<sup>2,9-11</sup>.

Nevertheless, indications of a rising number of disciplinary exclusions in Danish schools can be found<sup>12-14</sup>, which is also the impression of professionals within the field (communicated to me from the organization "Skole og Forældre"). Along the same line, political forces seem to move toward expanding rather than limiting the possibility to use disciplinary exclusions in school<sup>12</sup>. These political changes contrast the political goal of inclusion<sup>15</sup> and its ideal of a school with room for differences that would hitherto have caused transferal to alternative schooling<sup>16</sup>. These contradictory forces form the context of the proposed study.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

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Categorizing, sorting, and distribution of individuals in school can probably not be avoided as it is a fundamental premise for discipline<sup>17</sup>, but becomes problematic when it results in discrimination and marginalization of certain pupils. In a Danish context, the extent of *indirect or institutional discrimination* has not been investigated, but it has been shown that the awareness hereof among professionals is limited<sup>19,20</sup>. International studies show that discrimination plays a significant role in the practice of disciplinary exclusions in other countries<sup>2,9-11</sup>, however, it remains unexplored whether disciplinary exclusions also contribute to discrimination in Danish schools and *how* connections between discipline and discrimination arise.

Studies within the field typically focus on risk factors for and consequences of disciplinary exclusions<sup>8,21,22</sup>, but weaknesses can be identified in their approaches. Several studies see the disciplinary exclusion as a mere reaction to a single event of an individual's (bad) behavior<sup>2,23-25</sup>. Thereby, a deficit-oriented and functionalist approach is supported, where the central question is how to get pupils to "behave"<sup>26</sup>. I met similar reductive views in Denmark as I interviewed excluded pupils for my master's thesis; one explained to me: "*I had a knife with me in school, and then I got thrown out*"<sup>27</sup>. Focusing on such linear explanations conceals connections to the social context in which an exclusion takes place and where the "misbehavior" can be seen as meaningful and as a part of an individual's conduct of life. As a consequence, the connection between discrimination, marginalization and disciplinary exclusions cannot be accounted for by these studies. By investigating marginalization processes in disciplinary practices, the aim of the proposed study is

to contribute to the longstanding debate concerning the relation between schooling and the reproduction of social inequalities<sup>28–31</sup>.

## CONTEXTUALISING DISCIPLINARY EXCLUSIONS

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To establish a feasible contextual perspective, I will draw on a range of critical psychologist focusing on three main concepts: conduct of every day life<sup>32–34</sup>, community of practice<sup>35</sup> and ideology<sup>36–38</sup>.

### Conduct of everyday life:

The theory of *conduct of everyday life* as developed by Holzkamp<sup>34</sup> and Dreier<sup>32,33</sup> invites us to see “bad behavior” as well as the decision to expel or suspend a pupil as a moment of a person’s conduct of everyday life through various social contexts<sup>32</sup>. According to this view, the behaviors of pupils and teachers cannot be conceptualized solely through their participation in the institutional context of schooling. Rather, it must be seen as a moment in their personal trajectories through various social contexts, such as family life, leisure activities, professional careers and so forth, in which they participate in various, reasonable ways<sup>26</sup>.

### Community of practice:

Disciplinary exclusions, however, cannot be understood only in terms of individual conduct of everyday life, because exclusions are necessarily always exclusions *from something*: a community. Disciplinary exclusions can be understood as a manifestation of the always present power constituted by the mere *possibility to exclude* mediating discipline and standards for a school community<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, disciplinary exclusions are not to be conceptualized as being *outside* a particular space time as Dreier’s theory suggests<sup>32</sup>, but as constitutive of a social context as an organized community around a certain activity: *a community of practice*<sup>35</sup>. Previous research has already shown how discursive processes within a community can single out individuals as carriers of certain problems<sup>40,41</sup>, which could also be hypothesized to play a role in justifying the use of disciplinary exclusions.

### Ideology:

These discursive processes within a community of practice are by no means arbitrary or neutral. Rather, they are mediated by normativities and ideas about the purpose of the community of practice; in this case school. Discussions on whether or not to expel or suspend a pupil are therefore always also discussions on what school is about. Promising to show how normativity materializes in particular participation<sup>38</sup>, is the concept of *ideology*, understood as a *common sense* constituting a community as meaningful and thus offering a scope of possible positions to participants in the respective community<sup>45</sup>.

The theoretical focus on these three main concepts enables a contextualized perspective on disciplinary exclusion promising to explain its connections to discrimination and marginalization. With this approach it is also possible to question functionalist explanations of disciplinary exclusions and furthermore cast light on *how* these explanations become hegemonic truths in certain practices<sup>47</sup>.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODOLOGY

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The proposed study will be conducted in two parts with the following research questions:

1. How are disciplinary exclusions in Denmark distributed among social categories?
2. How is the connection between disciplinary exclusions and marginalization mediated through conduct of everyday life, community of practice and ideology?

Following the research questions, the study is designed as a mixed methods study<sup>48</sup>. This design allows a triangulation of data and provides a foundation for considering the relation between research methods and results.

### 1. Quantitative Survey

As no such statistics exist in a Danish context, I will first conduct a quantitative study to produce evidence on the occurrence of disciplinary exclusions and their distribution between social categories<sup>9</sup>. To create a realistic research design, categories that are easily accessible and have known connections to stigmatization and discrimination in a Danish context are selected; gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, grades and diagnoses<sup>16,20,36,39,49</sup>. A representative sample of schools will be selected for the collection of data about the pupils who have been subject to suspension and/or expulsion since the last school reform in 2014. To overcome a previously found bias in numbers of implemented suspensions and exclusions<sup>50</sup>, 'unofficial' suspensions, e.g. 'cool-off' days<sup>7</sup> will also be requested to be reported. The data analysis will result in a picture of the overall incidence of disciplinary exclusions, the incidence pr. year and show present overrepresentations of social categories.

### 2. Qualitative Case Study

Based on the quantitative survey, three cases where suspension or expulsion has been applied will be selected for an extensive case study<sup>51-53</sup>. The selection will be based on the ideal of reaching maximal socio-demographic variability, not only among the pupils, but also the institutional arrangements and political contexts of the schools<sup>69</sup>. In each case interviews will be conducted with the expelled/suspended pupil, his/her peers, the involved teacher(s) and the principal of the school. The interviews will focus on the particular disciplinary exclusion and concrete situations connected to it<sup>36</sup> including antecedent and subsequent events. Following the three main theoretical concepts, the interviews will be semi-structured<sup>54,55</sup> around the following research questions:

1. How can the respective person's participation in school be understood in relation to her conduct of everyday life?
2. How does the respective person participate in the given school community(s)?
3. How does the respective person discursively link her participation to the purpose of school?

The participants will furthermore be asked to comment on the interviewing procedure in order to enable the research to adapt to their perspectives and opinions<sup>32,57</sup>.

By focusing on a small number of cases, it will be possible to attain thick and complex descriptions of each case<sup>52,58</sup>. The knowledge produced in the case study can neither be seen as universal truths nor as unique instances, but must be understood as concrete realizations of an abstract idea (here disciplinary exclusions): prototypes<sup>59</sup>. The prototype of a particular practice can be relevant by offering a new vocabulary which can "objectify the subjective" and thus make it potentially

manageable<sup>57,68</sup>. Furthermore, the prototype can mediate certain simplicities and thus “economize” reflections on possible ways of participating in school practice<sup>67,68</sup>.

### “Mixing” the methods

The mixed methods design allows for the production of knowledge on different aspects of disciplinary exclusions. The quantitative survey shows how widely spread the investigated phenomenon is, whereas the qualitative study enables a thorough understanding of how categorizations and ideologies materialize in concrete ways of participating in disciplinary exclusions<sup>32,36</sup>. At the same time, the quantitative analysis forms a “mapping” of cases and thus enables an informed choice of cases for the qualitative study, securing a maximal variability among cases and thus the possibility to explore underlying moments of disciplinary exclusions.

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## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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The overall aim of the proposed study is to develop knowledge *with* and *for* the participants in the researched practice and schools in general<sup>33</sup>. When doing research on marginalization there is a risk of contributing to the reinforcement of dominant categorizations of social minorities and their impact<sup>64–66</sup>. However, the ambition is to counteract this effect in the qualitative part of the study by striving for a position as a researcher “on the margin” and in this way challenging dominant binaries of “we” and “other”<sup>66</sup>. Here, focus will be on providing all participants with a legitimate position in the research process through insistently listening for their reasons for acting<sup>62</sup>.

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## IMPACT

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The proposed study addresses the identified need for continuous knowledge production on the indirect/institutional discriminatory mechanisms in Danish schools<sup>19,20</sup>. The study will provide principals and teachers with a solid base of knowledge, from which they can develop a stance on discipline and marginalization and make informed decisions when considering a disciplinary exclusion for a pupil<sup>61</sup>. In this way the proposed study aims at producing knowledge that can cast light on connections between societal conditions like inequality and schooling and thereby restrain marginalization of children in Danish schools.



## STRATEGIES OF DISSEMINATION

The study will be communicated through various dissemination channels. I consider the following:

Possible channels of dissemination	
<i>Scientific Journals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nordic Studies in Education</li> <li>• Zeitschrift für qualitative Forschung</li> <li>• International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education</li> <li>• Review of Educational Research Educational Inequality</li> </ul>
<i>Conferences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „Wachsende Ungleichheit – gespaltene Gesellschaft?“- Kongress, Akademie für Soziologie, 2019</li> <li>• “Measured Lives: Theoretical Psychology in an Era of Acceleration” by International Society for Theoretical Psychology, 2019</li> <li>• The International Society of Cultural-historical Activity Research Conference, 2020</li> <li>• The European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction Conference, 2021</li> <li>• Nordic Educational Research Association Congress, 2021</li> </ul>
<i>Practical impact channels</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through arranging workshops at participating schools and with the organization ‘Skole og Forældre’, the developed prototypes will be discussed with pupils, parents, teachers and principals to secure relevance of the research results.</li> <li>• The research will aim at contributing to the education of teachers, both through the teacher’s education, but also through postgraduate courses offered by the municipalities.</li> <li>• Articles of relevance to schools in general will be published at folkeskolen.dk and given to ‘Skolelederforeningen’ for distribution.</li> </ul>

## COOPERATION PARTNERS

For the proposed study collaboration with the following partners is planned:

<i>Morten Nissen, Reform, DPU</i>	Exchange regarding research focusing on pedagogical leadership in today’s inclusionary schools is envisioned.
<i>Morus Markard and Leonie Knebel, Community of Critical Psychology, Berlin</i>	This connection can contribute to an orientation in the German tradition of critical psychology.
<i>The Graduate Center of the City University of New York</i>	Three months abroad hosted by Anna Stetsenko is envisioned in order to strengthen my understanding on cultural-historical theoretical perspectives and their connections to critical psychology.
<i>Puleng Segalo, critical/feminist research group at UNISA, South Africa</i>	Through this contact, established through my research internship, exchange on racial and ethnical matters can be established.
<i>‘Skole og Forældre’ &amp; ‘Skolelederforeningen’</i>	Through these connections to professionals in education the relevance of the research can be ensured and its quality increased.

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