Children's proximal societal conditions: Analysed through a case of an exclusion process in elementary school

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Abstract

In this article I argue for and unfold the conceptualisation of children's proximal societal conditions. This concept is developed through research based on the German/Danish version of Critical Psychology. Various research projects studying children's everyday life in different day care settings and in schools have made it clear that 'the societal' is not an abstraction – something above or outside the institutional settings or children's everyday life. Rather, it is something that is represented through societal structures and actual persons participating within the institutional settings in ways that have meaning to children's possibilities of participating, learning and developing.

Understanding school as (part of) children's proximal societal conditions for development and learning means, for instance, that considerations about an inclusive agenda are no longer simply thoughts about the schools' capacity for as many (different) pupils as possible (the school for all). With the concept of proximal societal conditions, we come to reflect on e.g. school not only as "a place to learn" but also as a societal meeting place where children participate in societal (re)production, hence developing as societal beings. Such a perspective has wider political and ethical implications on how we understand school and its many participants as a part of society. The aim is to clarify or sharpen the dialectic relation between the subject and the societal conditions.

Through an analysis of inclusion and exclusion processes in a Danish elementary school, I develop the concept of children's proximal societal conditions in order to emphasise how such processes not only affect the potentially singled-out child, but also have meaning to all the other children. I also show how such processes are always connected to broader societal structures such as school laws, rules for allocating professional resources and working conditions for teachers and pedagogues.

Introduction: Theoretical basis and the concept of proximal societal conditions

In this article, I argue for and unfold the conceptualisation of children's proximal societal conditions, a concept developed through various research projects in which children's everyday life in different day care settings and in schools has been studied.

The article takes its point of reference from a range of perceptions of social practice that are particularly indebted to social practice theory (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) and to Critical Psychology or the science of the subject (Dreier, 1979, 1997a, 1997b, 2008a, 2008b; Holzkamp, 1972, 1983, 1985; Holzkamp, Maiers, & Markard, 1987; Osterkamp & Schraube, 2013; Tolman, 1991, 1994). In a Danish context, this theoretical base has been incorporated into research on childhood and has been further developed by, amongst others, (Chimirri, 2014; Højholt, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2012; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; Juhl, 2015; Kousholt, 2008, 2016; Morin, 2008; Røn Larsen, 2012; Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Stanek, 2013, 2014).

The theoretical basis for the article sees people as fundamentally active *social* beings, which means, for example, that when we wish to understand the actions of an individual child, we must understand those actions by looking at what other children and adults around that child are doing (Højholt, 1999, 2012; Stanek, 2013, 2014). The concept of proximal societal conditions is an attempt to go further with this basic assumption. The concept was developed from Critical Psychology, but the word 'proximal' invites associations with Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development. The point of bringing this association into play is to provide a critique of the often very individualising understanding of ZPD, in educational practice (Chaiklin, 2003). Anna Stetsenko points out that Vygotsky developed the concepts of social interaction, cultural tools *and* ZPD, and that these three concepts may not be separated (Stetsenko, 1999). Stetsenko believes that the unification of the three concepts in analyses of what she denotes "the Germ Cell Process" is a viable way to avoid splits in the understanding of human development processes. She points to the need to conceptualise more complex processes than can be captured by concepts such as ZPD or 'guided participation' (Rogoff, 2008).

The concept of proximal societal (developmental) conditions is intended to capture the complexity of both the dialectic between the subject and the societal, and the notion that the societal is represented through actual active persons. I try to conceptualise children's learning and development as something happening through participation in the (zone of) proximal societal conditions. The concept is connected to the theoretical starting point that human beings develop and change through social participation. In this way, the word 'proximal' points to something very different than some kind of inner cognitive zone of development. A similar challenge is the one Stetsenko tries to capture with the concept "collectividual" (Stetsenko, 2013).

The subject-scientific paradigm is historically set against two basic and conflicting assumptions in the research on humans (Dreier, 2008b; Holzkamp, 1985, 2013a). The first is the notion of actions as determined by society and societal structures. This notion often surfaces in various types of sociological and statistics-inspired research on causal relationships between societal conditions and their effects on human action. The second is the more classical psychological research revolving around mankind as an entity in itself, mankind without its social contexts, mankind decontextualised. In the subject-scientific understanding, the focus is instead on the dialectic between the subject and societal structures. The subject should not be perceived as determined either by some inner drive or by external societal conditions, but as someone acting for a reason. *Reasons*, as something spawned from the decontextualised human's 'inner' assumptions, do not appear in the subject-scientific paradigm as anything 'in itself', but are always related to societal conditions. Societal conditions consistently gain meanings for the subject, depending on the subject's position within them (Dreier, 1994; Holzkamp, 1989). A theoretical point that this article focuses on is that there are in particular *some* societal conditions that significantly stand out for or are proximal to the subject, depending on and through the particular societal structures in which the subject participates. All subjects participate in the production and reproduction of society, but the individual subject does not take part everywhere. That is why some societal conditions become more significant or *proximal* to the subject. Society is not just a 'remote' state body, but must also be understood as (mediated by) you and me and the intersubjectivity we partake in. 'WE' *are* society. Society is thus also represented for (and by) children in their intersubjective interactions with their peers and their teachers or educators in institutional arrangements, which are also fundamentally social. When we understand the social world and the subjects as dialectically connected (cf. Dreier 2008), society only exists by virtue of the socially participating subjects and their endless and varying work in reproducing and changing the social world. The subject and society are linked by human

activity. The social world or society is not something located at a particular location outside of human action. The societal should definitely not be understood as something which 'floats above' or is 'somewhere out there'. Society is represented in varying degrees or ways by *all* participants in the production and the reproduction of societal institutions and societal structures. 'To be a school child' is not the same everywhere.

Wherever subjects act together, different conditions - possibilities and limitations - are created, conditions in relation to which the subject must act. Based on his/her own situated interests, the subject can always decide how it will act in relation to these possibilities and limitations (Holzkamp, 1998), but other participating subjects and thus the societal conditions, the subject's proximal societal conditions, form the conditions, possibilities and limitations of the subject's conduct in everyday life (Chimirri, 2014; Holzkamp, 2013b; Højholt & Kousholt, 2009; Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015). We should necessarily be careful to highlight the non-deterministic, to find the balance between *not* overlooking the limitations, whilst our sights are simultaneously fixed on the *possibilities*. By acting in relation to the conditions, the subject has the possibility of having and changing disposal over their life conditions and the ability to change *someone else's* conditions and thus change *other people's* possibilities and thereby take even further charge of their life conditions (or the opposite), which is a major point in relation to educational work with children in institutional contexts. In this way, we are determined by conditions, but at the same time participate in creating, maintaining and changing these conditions, both for ourselves *and for others*. On this basis, it becomes relevant to address the research question about inclusion as a societal question. The point of reference is the theory of people as social beings, but we lack knowledge about and concepts for understanding how inclusive and exclusive practice has meaning, not only for the potentially singled-out child, but for all the children's participation in and across various institutional contexts.

Empirical data

The empirical material in this article has been collected through two different research projects in particular. The specific case analysed subsequently is based on results from my PhD project concerning the meaning of children's communities (Stanek, 2011). Here, I followed a particular group of children from different day care settings into the same school. In Denmark, children attend day care from age 1-5. This is not mandatory, but 98% of all 3-5-year-olds participate in a day care setting (kindergarten). From the year children turn 6, they start

school, and the first mandatory class is called "kindergarten class" and functions as a reception class. The second class is called first class. The empirical material has taken its point of departure in a particular school class. Taking this school and the prospective class as my starting point, I could find those kindergartens that would potentially send children to that school. I observed the children during the last six months of their time in kindergarten. I subsequently followed the group of children for the first three months of their time in kindergarten class, in their classes, in the breaks and during the afternoons in their afterschool care, and repeated this for the first three months of first class.

The primary research method was to observe the children and to interview some of the children and all the primary professional adults around the children: the head of the kindergarten class and the class' primary pedagogue[1] in afterschool care, as well as the class teacher in first class and the head of the reception department. In addition, I took part in some of the meetings held by the professionals about the children and had access to minutes from other meetings.

The theoretical points in this article have been developed further through a research project financed by the Danish Ministry of Education[2]. Through qualitative research conducted in collaboration with two municipalities in Denmark and The National Inclusive Counseling Unit under The Danish Ministry of Education in 2014-2015, this project has investigated ways in which inter-professional collaboration has the possibility of supporting or underpinning an inclusive everyday practice within children's communities (Stanek, 2014). The results of this project particularly emphasise how inter-professional collaboration can (or cannot) help children avoid ending up in stigmatised social positions in day care and school.

My point of departure for researching children's lives in school is a curiosity to find out more about children's perspectives (Aronsson, Hedegaard, Højholt, & Ulvik, 2012; Morin, 2008; Schraube, 2012; Stanek, 2010) on what is meaningful, interesting and eventually difficult about school life. This interest has led me to an awareness of how our societal structures play a part in supporting processes of inclusion and, not least, exclusion in and across institutional arrangements (see also Gilliam, 2014, 2015). We have to understand that a very large proportion of children's activities revolve around their attempts to establish, secure and develop access to the communities they are (potentially)

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[1] In Denmark, afterschool teachers are referred to and educated as pedagogues. Pedagogues are employed in day care settings, in kindergarten class and in afterschool care. Teachers are employed in school together with pedagogues.

[2] I was head of a research project conducted in collaboration with PhD, assistant professor Pernille Juhl, Roskilde University, Denmark; PhD, assistant professor Mette Elmose Andersen, University of Southern Denmark; and research assistant Solmai Mikladal, University of Southern Denmark.

part of and to support the community's dynamics. When children become disruptive and lose concentration at school, the reason often lies in difficulties with their communities (Højholt, 2012; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; McDermott, 1993; Morin, 2008; Røn Larsen, 2016; Stanek, 2013). Understanding the difficulties or challenges that play out in children's communities is therefore crucial for the professional's possibilities of working with their academic agenda for the children. Furthermore, we need to understand children's actions and the development of children's communities in relation to the adult's actions, just as the adult's actions must be understood in relation to both children's and other adults' actions as well as in relation to laws, rules and political demands. Understanding school as (part of) children's proximal societal conditions for development and learning means, for example, that considerations about an inclusive agenda are no longer simply thoughts about the school having space for as many pupils as possible (schools for all) (Bricker, 1995; Tetler, 2000). Such thoughts must be supplemented by reflections about which 'version' of the societal we wish to present our children with, and which 'version' of the societal we wish to set up as the condition for children's participation and development. By this I refer back to my previous point about the societal acted out somewhat differently in different settings.

In the following section, observations and analyses of children's everyday life in specific institutional conditions in which 'an excluded child comes about' will be used to take a closer look at how the limits of the inclusive elementary school acquire meaning for children's communities. Communities that develop and become part of children's proximal societal conditions.

The case: A child comes and goes

In the kindergarten class I observed as described above, a boy I will call Ismael starts. The professionals are already talking about Ismael *before* they have properly met him. Ismael has older siblings who are or have previously been at the school, so several of the professionals who are to look after Ismael and teach him at school are already, directly or indirectly, familiar with Ismael's family. There have been a number of conflicts between the school and Ismael's parents and older siblings, and the older siblings have on several occasions been excluded from school. From his first day at school, a special focus has been directed at Ismael, both in kindergarten class and in the afterschool centre. The professionals show low expectations for Ismael's participation at school. Special procedures are swiftly put in place to ensure that there is always an adult in physical proximity to him, and he is perceived as being very disruptive. On their

first day at school, children are normally fairly quiet and restrained, but not Ismael. The following observation is taken from his first day in kindergarten class:

> The children are to sing a song. While they are singing, Ismael shoves some of the other children. When Tobias is pushed, he gets angry and pushes back. The adults interrupt the song and separate the boys. Later that day, all the children are sitting concentrating on listening to a story. Except Ismael. He starts poking the other children, pulling their hair, laying his head in the lap of those sitting close to him. Hassan appears to think that what Ismael is doing is funny – so funny that he starts laughing. This seems to encourage Ismael. He continues but disturbs the other children, who want to hear the story, and the adults have to stop the story and move Ismael away.

Looking at my observations about Ismael, I notice a preponderance of observations of various forms of 'clashes' between Ismael and other children or some of the adults. During the first few days in the kindergarten class, the professionals try to be patient with Ismael and to resolve or avoid conflicts by sitting near him. However, this quickly develops into a way of coping with Ismael where he is positioned away from the other children. As an example, the professionals place him on a chair a little distance from the others when the class is assembled – or they send him outside 'to play a bit' when he becomes too restless in class. The clashes between Ismael and the kindergarten teacher evolve rapidly during these first few days in the kindergarten class. Ismael's behaviour and restlessness, and difficulties with getting him to cease being so restless and disruptive, upset the kindergarten class teacher. On a number of occasions, the kindergarten teacher almost carries Ismael out of the classroom and all the way down to the office. On the third day, the kindergarten class teacher initiates a discussion with the head of the school to negotiate having Ismael moved out of her class.

I should add to the story about Ismael that he had been out of the country for 18 months prior to starting school. His parents are not Danish-speakers, and his own Danish is not well developed. When he starts school, the teachers are in some doubt as to whether Ismael understands or speaks Danish at all, and they do not hear him say much. This doubt about his language ability comes to play its part in the negotiations about which form of schooling he should be offered. During a break on the third day at school, the kindergarten class teacher comes back from a meeting with the principal with the message to the kindergarten class assistant teacher that they only need to "stick it out" for one month. From the middle of the second school month, Ismael will be moved over to the school's

language class. It is decided that Ismael is the only pupil at the school who will attend language class full-time, while the other bilingual children only go there for short language courses. When Ismael starts in the language class, new negotiations about Ismael's placement come into play. The professionals in the language class disagree with his full-time placement here. The principal makes the decision that Ismael has to be placed in the language class (in the first instance). Negotiations regarding Ismael's possibilities for participation continue on many levels. The principal works on having Ismael transferred to a completely different school. The language class supports this, using the argument that Ismael's problems are primarily social in nature and not about language. The mainstream class keeps insisting that he does not belong there either. The only people *not* involved in the battle of having Ismael removed are the staff at the afterschool centre, but they note that they could use extra resources to look after him in the afternoons. These negotiations continue throughout Ismael's time in kindergarten class (See similar analyses of how professionals work together around children in difficulties in Højholt, 2006; Morin, 2008; Røn Larsen, 2012).

At the beginning of the school year in first class, a third option is arranged for Ismael. The school appoints a support teacher to look after Ismael and his classes for two hours a day from 10-12, after which he will continue his school day in the afterschool centre without extra support. Ismael is not supposed to come to school before 10 am, but he still arrives together with all the other children at 8 every morning. During the first few days, the class teacher takes Ismael down to the school office, but he cannot be there either, so Ismael is placed in a small room in the corner of the classroom. The room is meant to be a workstation for smaller groups of children whenever suitable. Ismael sits alone in this small room until the support teacher comes and fetches him.

My theoretical point in the following analysis is related to the notion that development and learning take place through proximal societal conditions. The concept of proximal societal conditions points towards issues regarding both the possibilities open to Ismael for societal participation and the learning amongst the other children about what they are participants in, in other words, what their proximal societal conditions are. In the example with Ismael and his class, the children are learning that the class community is a place in which certain children can *be a part* and at the same time *cannot be a part*. The children learn here that both the children's community and the community of the class are places where *you* can potentially be sorted out.

Moving Ismael to the language class does settle things down in the kindergarten class and there is more peace and quiet in teaching situations. However, even when Ismael does not receive any teaching in kindergarten class, he still plays his part in the children's shared everyday life. He forms a

continuous element in the children's proximal societal conditions. Ismael continues going to the afterschool centre and is still a part of the class's afterschool community. While being taught in the language group, he is together with the other bilingual children when they attend their shorter Danish courses, but he is also outside with the other children during their shared breaks. So, the children experience that there are places where *all* children can or have to join in. It might be said that the exclusion processes have a powerful influence on Ismael's participation possibilities in school, but that there are nevertheless gaps and cracks in the fabric where processes of inclusion can come into play.

The analysis shows how processes of inclusion and exclusion are not solely about, nor solely have meaning for, the included/excluded individual. They also have meaning for the community to/from which the individual is included/excluded. In addition, the story about Ismael paves the way for a discussion about *when* inclusion takes place. Is Ismael included, for example, when he is allowed to stay at school and go to the afterschool centre?

The children's perspective

For the other children, Ismael is one child amongst many who are starting in the kindergarten class. For them, Ismael is part of the circumstances and a part of the school class they are starting in. Ismael's way of participating is both irritating and disruptive for many of the children. They often get irritated and angry with Ismael when he disturbs the teaching and the attempts by other children to follow the class, but Ismael is also an addition to the school day that is different, interesting and entertaining. Ismael often manages to get his classmates to laugh as a group at all the 'naughty' things he does during the course of the school day, and it is not unusual for some of his classmates even to encourage him to do some of the things the adults do not approve of. I regularly hear children saying during the breaks that it was fun to see how angry Ismael could make the teachers or the pedagogues. At the same time, I observe the children repeatedly trying to include Ismael in games and football. Occasionally, this goes on without problems or conflicts.

As mentioned, after Ismael is moved out of the class over to the language class, he continues to go to the afterschool centre with the rest of 'his' class, and in the afterschool centre he is counted as a child from this class. He continues to eat lunch with his 'old' classmates and the class's main pedagogue, for example. In the language class, the professionals often allow Ismael to have his breaks at the same time as the other children from the kindergarten class. This means that Ismael continues to form part of the other children's everyday life at school. The

only time when Ismael is not part of his regular class is in situations where the children are involved in the school's teaching.

In the kindergarten class, I often hear the kindergarten teacher or her assistant do sums using the number of children in the class. When the school year started, there were 21 children in the class, but after Ismael is moved, they try to get the children to sum up the number of children in class to a total of 20. However, it is not easy to get the children to let go either of the number '21' or of Ismael.

> The school day starts with counting the children.
> Kindergarten teacher: We are usually 20.
> Michael: 21 with Ismael!
> Kindergarten teacher: Yes, but if Ismael isn't here, then we're 20. If I say that one of you is missing today, is there anyone who can work out how many we are?
> Christian: 19.
> Kindergarten teacher: That's right. The one who's not here is Aida.

Perceptions of who and how many 'we' are in the class are different, depending on whether it is seen from the children's or the teacher's perspective. Confusion is only aggravated by the fact that some of the children in class are also attending language class for some of their classes but are still supposed to be counted amongst those who belong to the 'we' of the regular class. Similarly, it seems confusing to Ismael that in some contexts he is not allowed to join in with the other children in the class, and in others, such as breaks and in the afterschool centre, he still belongs to the 'we'.

In previous work, I have addressed (Stanek, 2013) issues concerning the relation between children's participation possibilities within children's communities and the ways in which they take part in the school agenda. Here, too, I have made analytical points about the meaning of institutional structures and the professional's ways of thinking about children's possibilities for participation with one another. With this as a starting point, it is not difficult to understand that Ismael's possibilities for participation in children's communities in the afterschool centre and break-times do *not* become less conflictual after he has been moved out of the class. Ismael is continuously struggling with the issue of being 'one of us' amongst what are now his *former* classmates. He alternates between doing more and more things he is not allowed to, which I interpret as an attempt to be recognised by the other children, and becoming angry and frustrated over their rejections, and thereby becoming involved in more and more fights. The task of working in an inclusive way in the afterschool centre becomes more difficult, in line with the increasing practice of exclusion from teaching.

If we look at starting school from Ismael's first-person perspective (Osterkamp & Schraube, 2013; Schraube, 2012), we are looking at starting school from a child who has been out of the country and not registered at his kindergarten for 18 months, which means he has been away from former friends for a relatively long time. We are looking at starting school from a child whose family has a history that means that the professionals who are to welcome him to school have particular expectations of him and his participation in school even before meeting him as a person. When he starts school, he meets children he once went to kindergarten with, whose parents have said that their children should not play with him, due to their acquaintance with his family. In addition, he meets a wide range of children whom he does not know. Many of the children he does not know are already fed up with his attempts to make contact on the very first day.

When I observe Ismael's actions in school and the afterschool centre, I see a boy who persistently attempts to make contact with the other children and who really wants to join in, but I also see a boy who seems to draw on experiences with making contact through teasing, challenging others' boundaries, etc., and who occasionally experiences a form of success in the plaudits of other children by doing precisely those things that the other children know they should not do. In particular, the other children with whom Ismael once went to kindergarten laugh when Ismael does things he is not allowed to. It looks as though Ismael's reasons for being disruptive are closely linked to his attempts, often inappropriately, to make contact with and become a part of the other children's communities, and to be allowed to join in. However, his conditions for joining in are already much more difficult from the start than those of the other children and it could be said that what he needs extra support for is precisely these participation difficulties. However, the social challenges he faces are left primarily to the children to deal with themselves, and when things do not work socially, Ismael is physically removed from the other children and has to sit by himself. During the break times, Ismael's participation with the other children alternates between being rather conflictual, occasionally ending up in fights, and being relatively harmonious, as Ismael takes part in the children's lives in an unremarkable way:

> On the football pitch, Ismael is playing football with four other boys from the class and two boys from another class. The situation is quite free of conflicts. Occasionally, the rules are debated, but they quickly reach an agreement. They have divided into two teams and are playing against each other. The boys are engrossed in the game and are having fun. When the bell rings for class, two of the boys run in straight away – the rest run in after them.

There *are* occasional opportunities for Ismael to participate together with the other children, but there is a strong tendency for conflicts and problems to overshadow the picture of everything that is *not* full of problems, and those small areas which it might make sense for the professionals to work on. Particularly in the afterschool centre, the children can be observed playing in ways that let Ismail in, in ways that seem to work for both Ismael and the other children.

However, in the school teaching and leisure areas, Ismael rarely receives support from the professionals in his attempts to join in with play, as in the following example:

> A large group of boys from the class want to play football during their break. Ismael wants to join them, but Hassan doesn't want him to. For the kindergarten teacher, there is no problem in Hassan not wanting to have him join in, so she gets hold of Ismael and says that the others don't want him to join in and that he has to go and sit still at the playground 'garden table'. Ismael sits there watching for the remainder of the break.

In this situation, Hassan and the other children are supported by the adult professional in their sense that it is acceptable to exclude some children from their games. As a consequence, Ismael learns that his possibilities for participation are different from those of the other children. Ismael's possibilities for participation vary considerably, and often incline towards what might be described as participation-*im*possibilities. Maja Røn Larsen has analysed referral processes in relation to special education institutions. She shows how children's professionals, in their struggle to allot resources to special needs teaching, often experience a necessity of describing individual children as 'little monsters' (Røn Larsen, 2012). It appears as if something similar might be at work around Ismael, and that this attempt to describe Ismael as 'a monster', which is intended to be grounds for moving him to another school, becomes so convincing that (several of) his professionals occasionally perceive him only as such. Moreover, it seems that this picture is transferred from the school's teaching side to the afterschool centre, which, as has been said, has greater difficulties in attracting extra resources to deal with and support Ismael than the teaching side. Episodes like the following only serve to harden the analysis in this direction:

> In the afterschool centre, Ismael comes travelling through the room on a scooter. He crashes, falls and clearly hurts his foot. A pedagogue comes to him and asks him whether it is his scooter. A girl says that it isn't Ismael's, and the pedagogue tells Ismael that he should stop taking the other

> children's scooters. She goes out with the scooter. Once the pedagogue has
> gone, Ismael gets up from the floor and limps outside.

In the process of getting Ismael reallocated to a special school, it looks as though a picture of him develops in which he figures solely as the child who steals the other children's scooters, while the picture of the six-year-old boy who has crashed and hurt his foot fades into the background or even fades away.

When the problems overshadow

It looks as if the primary focus on Ismael's disruptions casts a shadow over those minor incidents when Ismael does in fact attempt to participate in the school's agenda.

> In the class, the day's teaching starts with the kindergarten teacher decorating the blackboard with two artificial sunflowers. While the assistant talks to the children about why the flowers are being put up and what a sunflower is, Ismael gets up and goes and fetches a large (beautiful) artificial rose that stood in the same place as the sunflowers before the kindergarten teacher put them up on the blackboard. He says, "This is beautiful!" with a broad smile on his lips. Almost all the children laugh. The kindergarten teacher gets angry and takes the rose away from Ismael and puts him in his place. The assistant continues with her teaching.

In the above example from the kindergarten class before Ismael is moved to the language class, we can choose to see Ismael as a child who is trying to obstruct the class. He fetches the wrong flower (roses and not sunflowers). He gets up when he is supposed to remain seated. He attracts the other children's attention and gets them to laugh at him when they are supposed to be quiet and listen to the kindergarten assistant. However, we can also see Ismael as a child who demonstrates the desire to participate in the day's class teaching and appreciates that the teaching theme is about flowers. He also says in fairly well-articulated Danish "Den er flot", which means "This is beautiful". The articulation is relevant to note, since the professionals are discussing whether he even understands Danish.

The following is another example from the kindergarten class where Ismael takes part in the school's agenda without problems:

> That day, the class is responsible for arranging the morning assembly, which is held every morning with the other kindergarten classes. The

kindergarten assistant asks who would like to present the songs they are to sing. Jamila, Mikkel and Ismael want to. Ismael also presented a song yesterday, so initially the kindergarten teacher and her assistant would rather find someone else, but no one else volunteers (it seems to be a slightly frightening task), and Ismael is very keen on doing it. The kindergarten teacher lets him. Ismael presents 'his song' loud and clear – exactly as he is supposed to (in contrast to Jamila and Mikkel, who both get stage fright once they are standing in front of the other children and don't dare say anything).

In this example, Ismael carries out his task with no difficulty and better than most of the other children, but these small successes are not the things that are emphasised around Ismael. One of the reasons for these successes not being emphasised could be that they are irrelevant to the negotiations about where Ismael ought to be placed in the Danish school system. In this context, it seems to be impossible to see Ismael's successes and to ask for help at the same time. The problem is that it is very difficult for the teachers to get help with children who disturb the teaching. If there is a tiny sign of hope for the teachers to manage to overcome the difficulties, they are expected to do so. This situation seems to underpin the one-sided view of Ismael's ways of participating in which the problems overshadow the rest.

Over the decades, working in inclusive ways has been an issue in Danish elementary schools, and even the name of the school, "folkeskole", which means "school of the people", indicates that elementary school is a school for everyone. This is not always the case in real life, though. It seems as if there are contradictory forces at play in schools. While requiring the schools to work inclusively, there is a steadily increasing political wish that schools ensure that school children get "smarter", "faster" (Retsinformation, 2003; Skolestartsudvalget, 2006; Undervisningsministeriet, 2006, 2014, 2017). This last part could be analysed as a reason for Ismael's teacher's quick reactions to his ways of participating in disruptive ways from the very first day at school. A child like Ismael challenges the possibilities of the kindergarten class teachers to achieve professional success with regard to academic achievement. The fact that the number of children referred to some kind of special educational programme has been increasing since the middle of the 1990s, starting just after the first PISA results in which Danish children did not perform as the best readers in the world, supports this analysis.

In an interview, the head of the kindergarten class and I talked about how the kindergarten class as a whole compared to previous classes the kindergarten class teacher has taught. She put words to the fact that removing Ismael from the class has been good for the professional academic work with the class.

> Teacher: Well, this is indeed a fine class compared to what else we have had to work with, right? This is going to be such an ordinary functioning class, no doubt about it!

One that has also been thinned out? (With reference to Ismael having been moved out of class)

> Teacher: Well, yes yes yes yes, that has definitely not been a bad thing for getting work done (laughs). It didn't make it harder ... no, not at all! Couldn't you see that we would have been having special needs education in here at the same time? That was where we were, right?

When the teacher talks about an "ordinary functioning class", she comments on the knowledge of the meaning of the social life amongst the children. To be a 'functioning' class, the children need to behave well with regard to both the teaching and one another. When we understand that children's possibilities for participation in the social context are important for their possibilities for participation in the school's agenda, and vice versa, and when as a result we try to teach and encourage children to get their social learning communities to function inclusively, then the example of Ismael reveals a paradox. It looks as though an ongoing political pressure on the school to achieve higher academic results – along with the requirements for acquiring extra resources for working with children in difficulties – presents a set of conditions for the professionals that end up seeing their professional input effecting precisely the opposite of what we ask children to do, namely, excluding children from both the teaching setting and from their social community. The aim of the requirement to work inclusively is the opposite of the above.

As mentioned above, in line with the increasing demands for better academic results (measured with PISA) over two to three decades, the number of pupils referred to special educational settings in Denmark has been increasing as well. For various reasons – economic, social and educational – it has become a goal for the Danish Ministry of Education (Ligestillingsudvalget, 2014) to decrease the number of children being referred, and instead order schools to develop ways to include more children with different difficulties within the general school arrangements. As it has been possible to spot different reasons for the wish to decrease the number of referrals, it has also been possible to spot different ways to work towards the goal of decreasing the number of referrals. One of the ways to work towards the numeric goal is to change the concepts for when to speak about special education programmes. It is decided by law (Inklusionsloven, 2012) that children only count as special education children when they are assessed as being in need of a special education programme for

nine hours a week or more. Paradoxically, my latest research points to the fact that these rules seem to make it even harder for the professionals at school to argue for support and extra resources, understood as extra hands to help with children who, for various reasons, are difficult to include in everyday practice in school.

At the same time, politicians have implemented a new school reform (Undervisningsministeriet, 2014) whereby schools are obliged to offer children more teaching in Danish, maths and gym, along with homework support. It is not the aim of this article to go into the details of this school reform.

Even though politicians may wish that school should primarily be about children developing skills in an academic sense, from the children's perspective school is about many other things than academic achievements. For them, school is also to a large extent about living their everyday lives amongst other children, for better or for worse (Højholt, 2008b; Morin, 2008; Røn Larsen, 2011; Stanek, 2013, 2014).

When we focus on inclusion, we need to focus on the complex practice which includes more than just the ways the children are being thought (the didactic) and the present curriculum. What goes on in children's communities has meaning for the way children participate within teaching (Stanek, 2013, 2014). Break times and afterschool centres seem to be good places to work with children's communities and, from this viewpoint, it is problematic that exactly the time where it is possible and relevant to work with children's communities is being shortened due to the school reform.

Through the analytical example in which we followed the exclusion process of a boy, this article shows the meaning of the tension that exists between the framework within which teachers and pedagogues operate in supporting inclusion in school and the children's perspective of the possibilities for participation in school.

The push towards inclusion announced by politicians raises and emphasises demands on when it might be relevant to apply for extra resources or refer children to special needs education. Negotiations about the perceptions and placement of children, like those we have seen played out around Ismael, will continue to be conducted in the future. Ismael's difficulties in participating in starting school do not disappear because the laws have changed. Results from the second research project this article is based on shows that the tighter agenda for inclusion might only lead to black-and-white pictures and descriptions of children with difficulties becoming starker in the future.

At the same time, there is a tendency for the controlling themes in the inter-disciplinary cooperation between pedagogues and teachers to become the school's teaching function and its academic learning agenda. It seems as though

the consequence will be that pedagogues in afterschool centres are caught up in the dominant agenda of the teaching function in ways whereby the potential for breaking with stereotypical perceptions of children is simply lacking.

As far as the children's community that I followed for the first two years at school goes, the story of Ismael's *im*possibilities of participation concluded a couple of months into his first year, when the head of the school managed to move Ismael to another elementary school in the town, which also meant that he moved to a new afterschool centre and therefore no longer formed part of the daily lives of the other children in the class. However, Ismael was not consigned to oblivion, for he formed part of the class's common history. Ismael was an element in the proximal societal conditions through which the children took part in school, and he continued to be a feature of those proximal societal conditions by confirming that "our class does not have room for everyone".

The perception of school as constituting the children's proximal societal conditions for development takes on meaning when we come to consider the 'inclusive school'. Such considerations lead to reflections about which version of 'the societal' we wish to present to children, and which version we wish to apply as children's conditions for participation and development. To be concrete, through examples like Ismael's, children in schools are confronted with a societal model in which children are weeded out for various reasons. It is the children who play both the conflictual games of football and others that are (more) conflict-free – and they play *together with* those children who are weeded out. During the course of this interplay, they learn that if they do not play the game in the right manner, they, too, might be weeded out. In relation to the development of children's communities, children learn that, even though the aim may be to have everyone on board and to be kind to one another, there are nevertheless children whom it is acceptable to exclude. It is important to bear this in mind during the entire interplay that unfolds in the attempt to acquire more resources for working with children with difficulties, whether these resources are to be brought into the class or whether the child is to be removed from the class. This whole interplay in which those children who become centres of difficulty are seen as 'little monsters', as Røn Larsen puts it, turns into a part of everyday life not only for those that are singled out but also for the rest of the children. The fact that it is difficult to acquire the necessary support and extra resources becomes an element in the proximal societal conditions for the whole class.

Conclusions

The contribution of professional pedagogical work can scarcely resolve the paradox presented above, but professional work involves particular opportunities for confirming and for countering the processes of exclusion. To a significant extent, the difficulties around Ismael's presence in school arise out of his attempts to gain access to the social life of children, and the way his attempts are met by children and professionals. Yet, it is also precisely in this social life of children's communities that Ismael can regularly be observed being included. Ismael and pedagogical efforts made in relation to him need a nuanced eye for Ismael's engagements and where he seems to be participating in ways we would like to encourage. Both teachers and pedagogues need a nuanced eye for the conditions that have to be in place if Ismael is to join in at school. In the pedagogical practice in the afterschool centre, it is possible (and part of the job) for the pedagogues to join in with the boys' football games (or through other types of pedagogical activities) to help them find solutions that avoid situations where Ismael is asked to sit alone on the sidelines at a garden table. There is the potential here to build up knowledge of Ismael's personal engagements that is relevant for adults who have to deal with the class and at the same time juggle an academic agenda.

This is not to be done by shielding him or isolating him from social participation, but by inviting him in to take part in relevant activities and by supporting and guiding any participation that is moving in an expedient direction. As regards interdisciplinary work at school, analyses of Ismael's participation in a Danish elementary school point out the need to see possibilities for participation rather than the *im*possibilities. The support and extra resources that are devoted to the school's teaching side (like individual lessons) could have been used differently in both the pedagogues' and the teacher's investigation of Ismael's concrete difficulties in participation, and inclusive ways of supporting Ismael's participation, both in teaching and in the afterschool centre, might develop.

A conceptual development such as children's *proximal societal conditions* distinctly points out that the communities within schools are of great importance for children's learning and development – both academically and as persons. By comprehending communities of practice such as children's proximal societal conditions, we place the focus on the fact that children – in addition to learning how to read, write and count – also learn about their position and possibilities for participation in society through their participation in Danish public schools. For the children, it is very much here that the dialectic between themselves as subjects and the societal structures unfolds or takes place. The point about

communities of practice representing the children's proximal societal developmental conditions is particularly evident for children who are designated in elementary school as children with special difficulties or needs, that is to say, children who either must be helped in special ways (e.g. through relocation to special classes) or who are quite simply designated as someone who does not belong in a Danish public school. Communities of practice pose as the children's *common* proximal societal conditions, where those children who *are not* designated also participate in the societal conditions in which some children may take part, but where others may not. In many ways, parallels can be drawn between the societal conditions that children find themselves in and the conditions for participation that children develop together – one could point to a certain form of reproduction. This does not imply that children simply reproduce societal structures. Instead, the point is to show that the adults' categorisations of children, as well as the processes of segregation that adults set in motion at school, affect children both directly and indirectly: directly in the form of e.g. specific classmates being relocated, and indirectly by the children thus learning that the ways we are together and the ways we establish communities, amongst other things, undergo segregation – there are some who can be here and some who cannot.

As I previously argued, the societal should be understood as ubiquitous and definitely not something which 'floats above' or is 'somewhere out there'. Societal structures must be seen through the participants' production and reproduction of the social institutional bodies. That is how I view the children's communities of practice as their "proximal societal conditions". What can be included in a community of practice, and what can be understood as the most proximal societal conditions must be determined in a concrete and situated way, and not in the sense that there should be sections of society which children are not a part of. The point of the concept is to demonstrate that the children's proximal societal conditions, and thus their most important scope for possibility and limitation, is the community of practice in which the children participate, e.g. in their institutional contexts. By focusing our attention on proximal societal conditions as being significant to children's learning and development, it will become evident that processes determining *who* may participate in Danish public schools and who *cannot* become an essential part of the children's learning about (*participation in) Danish society.*

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